



## AFTER THE JARABULUS OFFENSIVE

### *How Far Will Turkey Shift Its Syria Policy?*

SONER CAGAPTAY



THE JULY 15 attempted coup, which exposed rifts within the Turkish military, coupled with the August 9 meeting between Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian president Vladimir Putin, and the Turkish incursion into Syria on August 24, appear to signal a change in trajectory for Turkey's Syria policy. Since Erdogan's ouster of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in May 2015, Turkey has already implemented some significant foreign policy shifts, including normalization with Israel and a desire to mend ties with Russia.

And perhaps even more important, on August 24, Turkish troops entered into northwest Syria, capturing the town of Jarabulus from the Islamic State (IS), and establishing a bridgehead for Ankara-backed anti-regime rebels there. In fact, Turkey's three objectives in Syria's civil war have now found a common ground in the Jarabulus offensive: the incursion allows Ankara to push IS away from the Turkish border and prevent the Kurdish Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) from taking over this area. Furthermore, it establishes a "mini homeland" for anti-Assad rebels in northwest Syria. In light of these developments, how far and in which direction will Turkey change course in the Syrian civil war? This depends on three future developments:

- Turkey and Russia continue to normalize relations, bridging their differences regarding Syria
- Moscow and Washington—with Qatari and Saudi acquiescence—strike a deal to end the Syrian war.
- Erdogan changes his domestic agenda, including the end of his fight with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and, by extension, conflict with the PKK's Syrian franchise, the PYD.

Even then, those expecting the Erdogan administration to completely recalibrate its Syria policy and come to friendly terms with the Assad regime may have a long time to wait.

### Failed Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has challenged Turkey's traditional foreign policy doctrine since coming to power in 2002. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has argued that, instead of working with the West, Turkey should become a standalone power so it can rise as a Middle East star—an argument that was supported by Ahmet Davutoglu, a professor of international politics who entered politics as Erdogan's advisor, became foreign minister in 2009, and finally took office as prime minister in August 2014.

Ironically, the Erdogan-Davutoglu team not only failed to make Turkey a Middle East star; it created more foreign policy problems for Turkey than had been seen in the country's modern memory. With Davutoglu acting as the concept producer, the two tried to make Turkey a standalone power in the past decade by breaking with the United States when necessary and taking

an active role in regional conflicts. Unfortunately, that policy failed on virtually every front and ruptured Turkey's ties with Egypt, Israel, Russia, and Syria.

Syria is a case in point. From the very early days of that country's uprising, Ankara threw its lot behind the rebels, confronting Russia, its historical nemesis, and Iran, a regional hegemon. Having failed to receive solid backing from its allies, such as NATO and the United States, before launching this policy, it exposed the country to grave threats. These included a meltdown, until recently, of its ties with Russia, and the vengeance of the Assad regime, which is connected with at least one terror attack in Turkey—the 2013 bombing in Reyhanli that killed fifty-one people.

At the same time, Turkish policy in Syria failed to predict threats. Starting in 2012, for instance, Ankara turned a blind eye to the jihadists who were going into Syria to fight the Assad regime, willfully ignoring them because its primary goal was ousting the regime. Turkey probably never intended to support the jihadists. Rather, Ankara believed (and still hopes) Assad would fall, “good guys” would take over, and the “good guys” would clean out the “bad guys.” Of course, this did not happen. In the interim, at least some of the bad guys who had crossed into Syria morphed into the Islamic State (IS).

Turkey is now mired in Syria's civil war, backing rebels who are being crushed by the Assad regime and its regional allies, Iran and Russia. Ankara also faces an IS threat from Syria, as well as being at loggerheads with the Kurds. For its own part, IS has targeted Turkey a number of times in the past months in devastating attacks, including an attack at Istanbul Ataturk Airport that killed 45 people and injured more than 250 others. Moreover, on August 21, an IS suicide bomber targeted a wedding in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep, killing 54 people, many of them children. Altogether, nearly 400 Turks have died in IS attacks.

Turkish foreign policy faces problems not only in Syria, but across the region. Ankara has found itself unwelcome in Baghdad over its aggressive courting of Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs, which has also contributed to the tenuousness of its ties with Tehran. All of this has left Turkey with few friends in the Middle East, except for Iraqi Kurdistan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Since Doha and Riyadh also back anti-Assad rebels, they have become Turkey's closest allies in Syria.

Even more threatening until recently was Ankara's opposition to Russia in Syria. Since November 2015, when Turkish forces shot down a fighter plane involved in Russia's military campaign there, Erdogan has been on the outs with Russian president Vladimir Putin. Russia has now effectively encircled Turkey with a troop presence in Armenia, Crimea, and Syria.

A decade of dramatic foreign policy misadventures under Erdogan and Davutoglu, then, has created a sense of isolation and failure for Turkey in the Middle East and increased Ankara's desire to improve ties with various neighbors. Reconciliation will be an uphill battle, although, having forced Davutoglu's resignation, Erdogan now has wiggle room for a charm offensive.<sup>1</sup> The prospects of its actually succeeding vary depending on the target country. The normalization effort with Israel has worked out, but Ankara will likely continue compartmentalizing ties with Iran by improving economic bonds while disagreeing on regional issues, such as the Syrian war.<sup>2</sup> Turkish-Egyptian ties, which took a nosedive in 2013, will probably remain limited by the mutual animosity between Erdogan and President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. And, in Syria, a shift depends on a number of factors, ranging from ties with Russia to Erdogan's domestic agenda to defeat the PKK at home. Even then, Ankara is unlikely to recalibrate completely its policy toward Syria and come to friendly terms with the Assad regime.

## Normalization with Russia

Turkish-Russian normalization is driven in part by history, with Russia having defeated the Ottomans over a dozen times in the past. Its return as an adversary has concerned not only Erdogan but the broader foreign policymaking community in Ankara.

This concern prompted Erdogan's decision, after having ousted Davutoglu, to publicly express his regrets to Moscow on June 27 for the downing of the Russian

---

1. Soner Cagaptay and James F. Jeffrey, “Turkey's Regional Charm Offensive: Motives and Prospects,” *PolicyWatch* 2638, The Washington Institute, June 27, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-regional-charm-offensive-motives-and-prospects>.

2. See, for example, James F. Jeffrey, “Possibilities for a Turkish-Iranian Rapprochement,” *Cipher Brief*, May 1, 2016, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/possibilities-for-a-turkish-iranian-rapprochement>.

military jet that had crossed into its airspace.<sup>3</sup> This was five days after recently appointed Turkish prime minister Binali Yildirim declared that “Turkey would work to expand cooperation with Iran,” adding that the relationship holds “special significance for the Turkish government,” and that “all capacities should be utilized in advancing the two countries’ ties.”<sup>4</sup>

The failed coup on July 15 helped speed up the normalization process, as a growing perception of U.S. responsibility for it prompted some in Ankara, for the first time in recent memory, to question Turkey’s NATO membership and discuss whether the country should, instead, move toward becoming a “friend” of Russia.

The coup was probably the most traumatic political event in Turkey since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, with Erdogan himself targeted and surviving only because he fled the hotel where he was staying fifteen minutes before the assassination squad arrived. The bombing of Ankara, including the targeting of Parliament, deeply shook residents of the city and, in fact, of the entire country: the Turkish capital had not come under a military attack since 1402, when the armies of Tamerlane occupied it. Istanbul, too, was profoundly destabilized by an action in which F-16 planes operated by coup plotters flew at low altitudes and high speeds over the city, creating supersonic booms that produced the illusion that the fifteen-million-person metropolis was being bombed. Another fundamental blow from the factional plot involved its flouting of long-established notions of Turkey’s hierarchical military and history of bloodless coups. It was previously an article of faith that the military would not fire on its own people, but this time the plotters did fire, killing more than two hundred citizens; many putschists died along with them.

Accordingly, the country’s mood has become nervous, angry, and dark. Many in the capital share the view that Washington was behind the coup attempt because the Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen lives in the United States. Although Turkey has not yet presented evidence to Washington that Gulen himself ordered

the attempted overthrow, many analysts agree Gulen-aligned officers formed the core or the backbone of the plot. Meanwhile, prominent columnists in newspapers supportive of the ruling AKP have aired allegations about a U.S. role, and at least one cabinet member, Labor Minister Suleyman Soylu, has publicly charged the United States with responsibility. Under these circumstances, Erdogan, who already has some Eurasianist foreign policy impulses, could conceivably accomplish a pivot from NATO to Russia, especially since the Turkish military—the strongest link between NATO and Ankara—is disfigured following the coup plot.

Russia has grasped this opportunity. On June 29, Erdogan and Putin spoke by telephone to calm tensions that had been festering since the plane was shot down, and, finally, on August 9, the two met in Moscow, signaling their desire to normalize ties between their countries. Although Putin agreed to lift economic and financial sanctions he had imposed on Turkey after the plane incident, however, whether Ankara and Moscow will come to full terms in the Syrian civil war where they support opposing sides remains to be seen. At the same time, the removal from their posts of those Turkish generals implicated in the coup plot—around a third—has limited the country’s ability to project power in Syria in the short term.

In light of these developments, and taking into account its ongoing foreign policy charm offensive, is Turkey likely somehow to yield to Russia and a potential U.S.-Russia deal, changing course in Syria where Ankara has had one policy objective since 2011—the ousting of the Assad regime at any cost?

### What Drives Ankara’s Syria Policy?

By several measures, Turkey’s Syria policy is in shambles. Russian airstrikes have decimated the rebels Ankara supported against the Assad regime, and the Islamic State has killed and wounded hundreds of people in terror attacks on Turkey in recent months. Turkey is also fighting the PKK, a close ally of the Syrian Kurdish PYD, which is helping the United States in Syria against IS. Turkey has a dim view of U.S.-PYD cooperation, and this issue remains a sticking point in U.S.-Turkish ties. Most recently, following the Turkish incursion into Jarabulus, clashes broke out between Turkish forces and Turkey-backed rebels and the People’s Defense Units (YPG), the military wing of the PYD, raising concerns

3. Nick Tattersall, “Turkey’s Erdogan Expresses Regret over Downing of Russian Jet: Spokesman,” Reuters, June 27, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-erdogan-idUSKCN0ZD1WQ>.

4. “Iran, Turkey Bear Heavy Responsibility in Keeping Region Stable,” Mehr News Agency, June 22, 2016, <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/117572/>.

in Washington about the potential risk of a full-blown conflict between the Syrian Kurds and Turkey.

Erdogan broadly shapes Turkey's options against both the Assad regime and the PYD. The president's perception of the results of Turkey's involvement in Syria's civil war appears to be mostly self-righteous and uncritical. The AKP elites see supporting fellow Sunni Muslims and political Islamist movements (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) or Islamist Syrian rebels (such as Ahrar al-Sham) as not only a political choice but also a moral one. In October 2013, when Davutoglu was foreign minister, he said Turkey's involvement in the Syria conflict constituted doing the "morally right thing" by striving for "democracy for neighboring Arab people."<sup>5</sup> Erdogan, too, has shrouded remarks in moral references. "Turkey is with the people and among the righteous in the Middle East," he declared in 2014.<sup>6</sup> This fusion makes the AKP highly unlikely to dial back completely its support to Sunni rebels in Syria (or to the Muslim Brotherhood movement across the Middle East). In its view, doing so would be akin to doing something evil or at least wrong.

This moral-cum-political view of foreign policy has distorted Turkey's Syria policy. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, Turkey did not build bridges with the diverse ethnic and political groups fighting across its border. It has no peaceful Sunni allies in Syria, nor friends among its Alawite, Christian, Druze, or Kurdish minorities. Turkey's proxies are Sunni fighters, many of whom identified with the Muslim Brotherhood movement in 2011. The conflict in Syria has evolved from a prodemocracy uprising to a civil war involving jihadists who have directly targeted Turkey; still, Turkey's stated goal, anchored in its moralistic *weltanschauung*, has remained ousting the Assad regime.

The effect of this outdated policy has been to empower Islamists, some of which have morphed into radical jihadists, particularly in Syria. Since the Arab uprisings began in 2010, Ankara has backed political

parties aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. These parties were ousted from power in Egypt, lost elections in Tunisia, and sidelined by jihadists on the battlefield in Libya. Ankara bet heavily on one faction in the Middle East and repeatedly lost. The conflict has displaced millions of Syrians, and Turkey has taken in many refugees.

Erdogan also shapes Turkey's options regarding the PYD. As president under the current Turkish political system, Erdogan sees limitations to his future: according to the country's constitution, he is head of state, but not head of government. Since becoming president in 2014, he has had to leave the ruling AKP to comply with the constitution's stipulation that the president be a nonpartisan figure. To change the constitution, Erdogan wants to win a popular referendum or have his AKP cross the 50 percent threshold in snap elections, either of which would allow him to make amendments to the country's charter that would allow him to become an executive-style and partisan president, thereby consolidating his power.

The AKP has twice achieved 49.5 percent in elections: in 2011 and 2015. To cross the 50 percent threshold comfortably, Erdogan needs to expand the AKP's base, and to this end he has set his sights on voters from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), a right-wing party like the AKP. Delivering a military victory against the PKK would make him popular in the eyes of MHP voters, bringing some of them into his and the AKP's fold. That, in return, would reward him with the referendum win or the 50-percent-plus victory in snap elections he needs for the AKP to open a path to an executive-style and partisan presidency. To this end, Erdogan needs to defeat the PKK at home and, by extension, the PYD in Syria.

## Bundling of Turkish Objectives

To Erdogan, "Turkey's stance in Syria has saved humanity's common dignity," as he put it in February.<sup>7</sup> Davutoglu's exit is unlikely to shake his perception that Turkey has the moral high ground in its support of Sunni rebels in Syria against the Assad regime. Accordingly, Turkey's priorities in Syria remain as follows:

5. "Information about Steps Taken by Our Missions Abroad after the Coup Attempt (as of 31 August 2016)," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/information-about-steps-taken-by-our-missions-abroad-after-the-coup-attempt.en.mfa>.

6. "Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı ve Başbakan Erdoğan Açıklaması," *Haberler*, <http://www.haberler.com/cumhurbaskani-adayi-ve-basbakan-erdogan-aciklamasi-6287655-haberi/>.

7. "Erdogan: Türkiye İnsanlığın Onurunu Kurtardı," *Habertürk*, <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1199632-cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-aciklamalar>.

- oust the Assad regime
- block advances by the PYD
- push IS away from the Turkish border

The latest Turkish incursion into Syria, however, suggests that Ankara now views taking territory from the Islamic State while simultaneously blocking PYD advances in northern Syria as important an objective as ousting Assad. By inserting troops into the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor in northwest Syria, Ankara is also ensuring that the PYD does not take control of this region, a development that would allow the Syrian Kurds to connect their already conjoined Kobane-Jazira cantons east of Jarabulus with their third canton, Afrin, which lies west of Azaz. PYD control would thus create a nearly 400-mile-long, PKK-friendly belt enveloping Turkey from the south. The Turkish incursion also aims to allow Ankara to create a mini homeland for Turkey-backed rebels inside northwest Syria, one which could be used against the Assad regime. In other words, all three Turkish objectives are now bundled together under the “Jarabulus offensive.”

### Could Turkey Come Aboard a Potential U.S.-Russia Deal in Syria?

Foreign diplomats have been pushing for a cease-fire in Syria, and many have come to accept that Assad may remain in power there. Turkey’s first instinct will not be to abide fully by a negotiated deal that maintains the Assad regime. Instead, leaders will publicly support a U.S.-backed deal recognizing Russian stakes and Assad regime gains while, behind the scenes, continuing efforts to arm anti-Assad rebels. At the same time, Turkey is unlikely to desist from its efforts to block PYD advances; Ankara will do everything it can to prevent the PYD from connecting Kobane-Jazira to Afrin while simultaneously pushing IS away from its border.

As mentioned, Turkey’s position effectively tries to ignore the jihadist threat in Syria; nevertheless, to Erdogan and other AKP elites who identify with political Islamists, they are on the right course. Unless Washington convinces Qatari and Saudi backers of the Syrian rebels to cut financial support and fully acquiesce to the deal, Turkey—guided by its sense of “doing the morally right thing”—is unlikely to completely stop funneling such support to the rebels. (This is especially the case if

Turkish efforts to capture and hold on to territory along the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor succeed). Saudi Arabia will take a dim view of a U.S.-Russia deal in Syria, seeing it as handing Syria over to Iranian (“Shiite”) control. Even if Riyadh officials come aboard a potential U.S.-Russia deal, the full backing of it by amorphous Saudi elites is unlikely. At least some will continue to support the Syrian rebels in undermining Assad’s regime and his patron, Iran. This, in turn, will allow Turkey to continue to funnel some weapons and money to the rebels, violating the spirit of any U.S.-Russia deal.

### The Kurdish Angle, Russia’s Blessing, and Erdogan’s Presidency

Beyond any interest in a potential U.S.-Russia deal in Syria, Erdogan has his own reasons for wanting to make up with Russia, related to the Kurds. Russian military support to the PYD threatens to block Erdogan’s political agenda, which greatly worries him.

Erdogan knows that to defeat the PKK in order to become executive-style president, he has to delink Russia and the PYD. Erdogan is aware it is not a matter of “if” but “when” the Russian weapons provided to the PYD will end up in the PKK’s hands. When the PKK becomes Russia’s security client, it will become impossible for Erdogan to defeat the group. His effort to delink Russia and the Kurds will find support across the non-partisan policymaking community in Ankara, including the secular-minded and erstwhile Erdogan adversary, the Turkish military. Policymakers in Ankara across the board want to defeat the PKK, and they are aware this is not possible if the group has Russia’s backing.

The issue here is that Turkey could not really send troops into Syria following the plane incident in November, after which Russia effectively declared northern Syria a no-fly zone. Moscow has set up an air defense bubble in this area, indicating it is ready to shoot at any Turkish planes or ground troops entering northwest Syria. Accordingly, during his August 9 meeting with Putin in St. Petersburg, Erdogan seems to have secured Russia’s blessing for the Turkish incursion into Jarabulus. Still, for Russia to agree to delink itself from the PYD, Turkey would have to agree in return to downgrade its support to the anti-regime rebels fighting for Aleppo, as well as to those in the nearby Idlib province.

Putin could further reciprocate Turkish overtures for reconciliation. Since the end of the Cold War, Russian

policy toward Ankara has had one guiding principle: never completely alienate Turkey. Especially since Putin's rise, Russia's strategy has been to keep Turkey close to Moscow and away from NATO. Putin knows that, at this stage, further alienating Turkey will push the country closer to NATO.

Putin also knows Russia will suffer more than Turkey under a regime of sustained Russian sanctions. The Turks have many customers for their cheap but high-quality wares, and the Russians, already suffering under European and U.S. sanctions and collapsing oil prices, ultimately need access to their markets.

In the coming days, therefore, Russia will offer more gestures, following the lifting of economic sanctions put in place after the plane incident. He will also likely offer Erdogan financial incentives linked to boosting tourism, trade, and construction and pipeline deals, which will help the Turkish president consolidate his economic power base at home. Perhaps in anticipation of Putin's next move, Erdogan has already reciprocated, voicing during the meeting support for Turkish Stream, a joint Turkish-Russian natural gas pipeline put on hold after the plane incident. Revitalization of this project, which would allow Russia to bypass Ukraine in exporting gas, would be central to rejuvenating Turkish-Russian ties.

The extent to which Turkish-Russian ties will change in Syria as a result of recent developments will remain unclear for some time, though. Russia may decide, for instance, that it needs assistance from the PYD's militia, the YPG, to help keep western Aleppo in the Assad regime's hands and move more slowly than Turkey expects in abandoning them. Likewise, Erdogan may come under domestic pressure for jettisoning the anti-Assad rebels fighting to keep eastern Aleppo. To bring Erdogan on board, Putin might use the Gulen card, offering Turkey intelligence assistance against the Gulen movement and using his influence

over Central Asian republics so they shut down the oldest and strongest Gulen-aligned networks outside of Turkey.

## Conclusion

Erdogan knows that if he wants to punish the Islamic State in Syria, block PYD advances there, defeat the PKK at home, and inflict damage on Gulen overseas, he needs to take any steps necessary to normalize relations with Russia, including in Syria. The United States, for its part, would welcome better relations between Putin and Erdogan, as they would, first, help the overall campaign against IS and, second, help manage the political negotiations currently underway between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition.

Ultimately, once Erdogan militarily defeats the PKK, securing a win for the AKP in snap elections or a referendum victory for himself—in both cases thanks to nationalist votes—Turkey is likely to become less hostile toward the PKK, and by extension the PYD in Syria. At this stage, Erdogan could relaunch peace talks with the PKK through the group's jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan, as well as take a less hostile stance toward U.S. cooperation with the PYD and the YPG.

Normalization with Russia will come with a *sine qua non*: forcing Turkey to cease, or at least decrease, its support to the anti-Assad rebels in Syria. A U.S.-Russia deal in Syria could also help usher in Turkish-Russian normalization. But, ultimately, given Erdogan's ideological stance in the Syrian civil war, unless Washington convinces Qatar and Saudi Arabia to end completely their support to the rebels—an unlikely scenario—Turkey will continue to let aid flow to the anti-Assad rebels while formally standing behind a U.S.-Russia deal, especially if the Turkish incursion into northwest Syria manages to create a mini homeland for the Ankara-based rebels against the Assad regime.

---

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Follow him @SonerCagaptay.*

