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Turkey, Syria, and the Islamic State

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ABSTRACT The Syrian crisis has become a test case for Turkey's foreign and domestic policy. Determined to find a balance between its global expectations and regional objectives, Turkey aimed towards the downfall of the Assad regime, relying on its strength in the Arab streets and support to rebels to ensure a rapid outcome. This tolerance for the radical opposition in Syria, along with the failure in finding a resolution to the Kurdish issue, has contributed to the spillover of the Syrian conflict into the country. This has been further complicated by shifting patterns in global geopolitics, the fragmentation of the state in Syria and the resultant refugee movement into Turkey, resurgent sectarian interests in the region, and the recognition of the Kurds as the only force capable of confronting the Islamic State. All of this has created undoubtable impact on Turkey's image, not only in the immediate region but globally.

INTRODUCTION

On 17 February 2016, 28 military personnel were killed when a car bomb exploded at a busy intersection in Ankara as their buses stopped for the red light. The Turkish government immediately blamed the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG)—the armed force aligned to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian Kurdish group—for the attack, specifically naming Salih Necar, a Syrian national and member of YPG. It would later be revealed that the man responsible for the blast was Abdulbaki Somer, a Turkish citizen who had joined the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Syria. Subsequently, an offshoot of the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) claimed responsibility.[1] TAK has made several attacks in major Turkish cities, including shelling Istanbul's Sabiha Gokcen Airport in December 2015. TAK announced that the February attack was in retaliation for the massacre of civilians in basements in Cizre; they also declared that they would act on every attack on the Kurdish people[2] and warned foreigners against traveling to Turkey.

It is in this background that the bomb blast on 12 January 2016 in Istanbul's historic Sultanahmet district assumes importance. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reaction was to say that the suicide bomber was "of Syrian origin."[3] The following day, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu announced to the media that the

bomber has been identified as Nabil Fadli—a Syrian national of Saudi origin who had links with the Islamic State.[4] The Syrian origin of the bomber—who entered Turkey as a refugee and had therefore gone undetected as an IS militant—is a significant detail. As are the location of the bombing, and the fact that the incident killed and injured mostly German tourists.[5]

Turkey today is host to more than 2.2 million Syrian refugees. Indeed, the country's migration identity has shifted from being a country of emigration and transit, to becoming a destination for immigrants and people fleeing conflict in their homelands. This phenomenon has required an entirely new regime of legislation to deal with people who are identified, according to Turkey's current legal definitions, as 'guests'.[6] The Syrian refugees, however, are increasingly becoming a political liability especially near border towns where they are beginning to outnumber the locals. A bomb blast in the frontier town of Suruc in July 2015 that killed at least 30 and injured a hundred, and not too long after, an attack on a peace rally in Ankara's central train station in October 2015, this time killing nearly a hundred and wounding some 250 others—both of which were attributed to Islamic State militants—have heightened concerns that Turkey's open-door policy towards Syrian migrants has made it easier for militants to enter the country undetected. Other than security worries, however, there are also largely unresolved issues of integrating a significantly large population into mainstream society, including the process of securing for them legitimate work permits.[7] Thus the 'refugee'—likely, 'Syrian' refugee—has come to be identified as problematic and is mostly only tolerated as a political leverage vis-a-vis the dynamics of the European Union. The identification of the Istanbul bomber as 'Syrian' therefore impacts not only Turkey's security policies but those for refugees as well.

The EU now recognises that Turkey is the key to controlling refugee flows into Europe. In what was widely perceived as an act of support for the Turkish president and the ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) the EU had delayed the publication of its annual report—which spoke of criticisms of Turkey—until after the November 2015 snap polls. This crucial leverage was reflected in President Erdogan's interview with the CNN on 12 November 2015 where he threatened to increase migrant flow to the EU and criticised the lack of cooperation from the other member states. "What would happen," the President asked, "if the 2.2 million Syrian refugees all march to Europe?" He voiced his rhetoric in the background of an increasing number of European states closing their borders to refugees.[8] The Turkish payoff came in the form of 3 billion Euros to help the refugees, a broadening of Turkey's long-stalled EU membership talks to include economic policy and, crucially for many Turks, more visa-free travel to Europe. In return, the EU expected Turkey to curb the transit of Asians seeking to reach Europe.[9]

The January bombing in the heart of Istanbul has called for Turkey's tourism sector to make drastic reductions in its income projections. The attack, after all, hit the area of Istanbul that houses not only the prized destinations of Hagia Sophia, the Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, the Basilica Cistern, and the Hippodrome—but also a number of archeological museums and carefully preserved heritage houses. Moreover, the majority of casualties were tourists from Germany, the country that sends the largest numbers of visitors to Turkey. The attack also came in the face of Germany pledging increased action against Islamic State; it may be recalled that the Paris attacks of November 2015 had also followed French bombing of IS targets. Later that same month, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet which it said violated Turkish airspace near the Syrian border. Turkey did not apologise, and some 4.5 million Russian tourists were expected to cancel their holiday plans to Turkey. The impact of these events on tourism, according to many local analysts, is that 2016 is already deemed a 'lost year'.[10] This third major blast in Turkey since July reflects not only on the increasing global extremist activity but also, and more significantly, on the failure of Turkish policy in the neighbourhood, one that its framers had named, 'zero problems with neighbours'.

TURKEY'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

The failure of the Arab Spring and the Muslim Brotherhood in maintaining its authority, shifts in the geopolitical landscape with Russia getting increasingly involved in the Middle East and the trajectory of the Syrian conflict itself has meant that from being identified as one of the major players in the post Arab Spring Middle East, Turkey is now faced with a failed foreign policy, an economy in doldrums and a failed peace process in its southeast. Turkey has also been unable to integrate strategic shifts on the political and military front into its policymaking, particularly in Syria, as it has equated the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) with its armed wing the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) and the insurgent Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). While this serves domestic Turkish politics, it also means that Turkey is now at odds with both Russia and the United States, who recognise the usefulness of the Syrian Kurdish fighters in the war against the Islamic State. Sending ground troops into Syria would mean confrontation with Russia with no guarantee of support from its own allies. On the other hand, shying away from intervening would mean the creation of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria and the defeat of the opposition that Turkey has been supporting. Turkey has also sought to revive demands for the creation of a safe zone in northern Syria to protect civilians who otherwise enter Turkey as refugees.

At the same time, Turkey has yet to make major advances against the Islamic State. Complicating the issue are allegations that Turkish middlemen are engaged in oil trade with the Islamic State. In a piece, "Is Turkey Buying Oil from the Islamic State?" analyst, Bilge Yabanci argues that the Islamic State today is the richest terrorist organisation in the world, principally because of the illicit trade in oil that generates anywhere from $1 to 3 million a day.[11] This has also become a strategic weapon and, interestingly enough, among the buyers are rebels fighting the Islamic State in the north of Syria. While there have been suggestions about the involvement of Turkish middlemen in the transport of this oil, it was Russian President Vladimir Putin who voiced the accusation in the aftermath of the shooting down of the Russian jet by Turkey on the Syrian border. Within Turkey itself, a restricted press has not been involved in this debate; the opposition MP Eren Erdem—who raised the issue in the Turkish Grand Assembly—has been branded as a member of Fethullah Gulen's illegal "parallel structure". Turkish President Erdogan responded to Russia's claims by noting that the largest consumer of this oil was Syrian President Assad, propped by the Russians. While accusations continue to be hurled from both sides, the trade proceeds not only through middlemen but also as an attractive source of income for the people living along the porous border areas.

Indeed, the Syrian crisis has become a test case for Turkey's foreign policy. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, Turkey not only served "as a source of inspiration" in Syria but had wanted to play a more active role in the process, revising its policies in response to emerging circumstances. Between March 2011 and May 2012, Turkey's policy towards Syria changed—from exerting pressure on the Bashar al-Assad government for constitutional reform, to attempts at unifying dissident groups under a single roof and promoting international sanctions, to a return towards efforts for a UN-based solution (or the Annan Plan). In terms of rhetoric, the change was from, "Syria is not a foreign affair but a domestic affair for us"— to this: the "Annan Plan is an opportunity for Syria."[12] Turkey's policy, based on the rhetoric of being a "playmaker country in the Middle East", however, encountered strong resistance in Syria. And Turkey's objective of establishing an EU-like Union in the Middle East, which began with its 'zero problems' discourse and its claim of being a 'model' for the countries of the region, suffered because of the Syrian crisis. Determined to balance its global expectations and regional objectives, Turkey aimed towards the downfall of the Assad regime, relying on its strength in the Arab streets and support to rebels including radical groups like the al-Nusra Front, to ensure a rapid outcome. This tolerance for the radical opposition in Syria, which is believed to have contributed to the growth of Islamic State

sleeper cells within Turkey, is now being identified as one of the reasons for the spillover of the conflict into the country.[13]

When the Syrian conflict began with pro-democracy protests against President Bashar al-Assad, there was a general belief, shared by Turkey, that the fall of the regime had already become imminent. Nearly five years down the line, with hundreds of thousands dead and 11 million displaced from their homes, that reckoning has been proven incorrect. The conflict has also acquired sectarian overtones. To this conundrum was added the possibility of a US-trained force of "moderate rebels" to fight the Islamic State on the ground, the fact that Iran and Russia have helped and called for support for the al-Assad regime while Turkey and Saudi Arabia have called for the making of a Sunni army.[14]These lines are unlikely to be blurred by the nuclear deal reached between Iran and six major world powers in July last year. One of the first signs of this is the fact that the Syrian President referred to the deal as a major turning point in the history of the region and sought greater support from Iran in the regime's conflict with the opposition.[15]

In the wake of the Suruc terrorist attacks, Ankara gave permission for the use of the Incirlik Air Base by Washington in the anti-Islamic State coalition.[16] Washington, in turn, agreed to the formation of a so-called 'buffer zone' within Syria. The US administration was careful not to use the term 'no-fly' zone because of legal and geo-strategic complications with Russia and Iran; it was referred to instead as the 'Islamic State free zone'.[17] This makes the fight against the Islamic State the priority, rather than the targeting of the Syrian regime. Further, the US continues to support the Syrian Kurds, that is, the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) on the ground. The 'Kurdish question' also needs to be taken into account, given that the Syrian Kurds now control parts of northern Syria, bordering Turkey.

THE KURDISH QUESTION

Developments in the Syrian civil war would also have an impact on the ongoing peace process with the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). When the Syrian crisis started in March 2011, Syria's Kurds adopted an ambivalent position. However, in July 2012 they took control of several cities in the north where Kurds are in the majority. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) which governs this region, bordering Turkey, is affiliated with the PKK and has clearly expressed an interest to form an autonomous zone in Syria comparable to Iraqi Kurdistan, a move being opposed by Ankara. Turkey's Syrian policy, in which President Erdogan had sought President Bashar's overthrow, proved counter-productive when it contributed to bringing Syrian Kurds into the fray.

Turkey, which has battled domestic Kurdish insurgency for decades and has only recently begun negotiations for conciliation, fears the domestic consequences of the creation of a contiguous area under Kurdish control.[18] In a sense, of course, it was Turkey's anti-Assad policies and support for anti-Assad groups that generated the pro-Kurdish outcome. This was compounded by the results of the June 2015 election in Turkey where the pro-Kurdish HDP (Democratic People's Party) crossed the 10-percent threshold for the first time. President Erdogan was aware that the 13 percent votes that the HDP received was a principal reason why the AKP failed to get a majority. Anti-Kurdish policies were renewed both domestically and in the neighbourhood and, quite predictably, there followed attacks on Turkish soldiers and police officers in the Kurdish dominant south-east and clashes between Kurdish militants and Turkish forces that left casualties on both sides. The result has been a campaign of violence that culminated in the bombings on a procession in Ankara on 10 October (subsequently blamed on the Islamic State) which was calling for the resumption of peace talks between the PKK and the Turkish state.

In the last weekend of June 2015 it was reported by a number of news dailies that President Erdogan was planning a military intervention in northern Syria to prevent Syrian Kurds from forming an independent state on the Turkish border. In a speech on 26 June, Erdogan

vowed that Turkey would not accept a move by Syrian Kurds to form their own state in Syria following gains by Kurdish fighters against the Islamic State.[19] That Turkey was uncomfortable with the Syrian Kurdish victories in northern Syria was evident in a number of reports that indicated that Turkish air strikes were targeting Kurdish strongholds rather than the Islamic State.[20] It was reported that the military had been given orders to take measures, including an incursion into Syria, to stem possible advances by the Islamic State or the PYD and prevent changes in the demographic composition of the Syrian provinces near the Turkish border.[21] The Turkish military, however, urged the government to work out diplomatic avenues before the incursion and argued that Turkey should present reasons for the deployment that are stronger than the possible emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Syria. Military officials were concerned that if done without prior consultation with states like Russia, the military action would be brought into question and this could also spark military confrontation with the PYD, Islamic State and government forces. They also argued that the Syrian regime should be consulted so that the operation does not violate international law.[22]

Domestically, recent attacks on the HDP and PKK have been explained in terms of the 'nation under threat' argument, and to encourage voters into supporting President Erdogan's 'security first' agenda. The justification for change was couched in terms of an effective executive state more capable of facing terrorism, civil war, economic decline, and corruption. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stressed on what he referred to as a 'terror cocktail' of the PKK, the Islamic State, and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party Front—all of which wanted chaos in Turkey, thereby appealing to nationalist elements.[23] The AKP election campaign for the November polls was based on the looming crisis and the slogan, "after us there is chaos", and its subsequent victory hailed as "victory for democracy" and the fact that democracy and terrorism do not mesh well. Predictably enough, President Erdogan in his first major speech prioritised discussions among Parliamentarians for a completely new Constitution which would introduce a presidential form of government, since the current one has "lost its relevance and become full of details." He also underlined that Turkey would keep up its fight against the PKK until the rebel group is "eliminated."[24]

Turkey's predicament is partly due to shifting patterns in global geopolitics, where Russia is today increasingly involved in the Middle East and US interest is waning. It is partly the result of miscalculations in foreign policy and the challenges that President Erdogan's policies faced domestically. The fragmentation of the state in Syria and the salience of ethnic and sectarian organisations is another factor that complicates the situation. To this has been added the emergence of the Kurds as the only recognised force capable of confronting the Islamic State. The current imperative is for more holistic solutions that are based not on any national paradigms, but rather, a more focused, regional vision. ORF

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ENDNOTES:

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