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Not Really a Coalition: The U.S.–Turkey Deal on the Fight against the Islamic State

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Turkey's decision to open Incirlik airbase to the anti-IS coalition could offer a significant advantage in the fight against the Islamic State, including cutting it off from outside supplies, and changing the regional parameters. However, statements from the U.S. and Turkey still contradict each other, and their divergent priorities could hamper their operational capacity. Turkey's contribution to the coalition may potentially reduce cooperation between the U.S. and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the anti-IS zone. In addition, the absence of a ceasefire between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the domestic polarisation provide a permissible environment for potential provocations that may escalate the violence in Turkey, potentially diminishing its contribution. The U.S. and Turkey still have to overcome their differences in order to become effective coalition partners.

After months of negotiations with the United States, Turkey announced on 24 July that it had agreed to allow the anti-Islamic State coalition led by the U.S. to use its Incirlik airbase for airstrikes against the group. Turkey has also agreed to open its other airbases upon request, namely those in Diyarbakir, Malatya and Batman, to be used for non-combat objectives and as logistic hubs for the coalition members. Joint air operations against the IS (a.k.a., ISIL/ISIS) will be conducted by Turkey and the United States, potentially with support from France, the UK, Australia and later, perhaps, from the Gulf countries. At the same time, Turkey has been requested to curb IS access to military and commercial materials and supplies, and to prevent the flow of foreign fighters, which it had often been accused of facilitating.

The airstrikes on the ground and the use of Turkish military capacities along the Syrian border will be aimed at limiting the zones controlled by the IS. Pushing the IS off the Turkish border to create an IS-free zone in the areas between Azaz and Jarablus is among the top objectives of the deal between Turkey and the United States. It would cut the IS off from its outside supply sources.

Yet the details of the deal have still not been settled. Ankara has been requested a no-fly zone to move 1.9 million refugees back to Syria, prevent new refugee flows, and provide a safe zone for rebels fighting against the Assad regime, while preventing it from gaining territories near the Turkish border. The U.S. is rather cautious about the Turkish request for a no-fly zone, which would present a challenging logistical task and could be fraught with tremendous risks. As the negotiations between the U.S. and Turkey continue, Turkey insists on denying IS, PYD and regime forces entry to the IS-free zone. In turn, the U.S. would like to limit the scope of the air strikes so that they target only the IS.

Amid negotiations with the United States, Turkey bombed IS and the PKK targets in Northern Iraq from the air, on 24 July. In addition, the security forces launched an extensive raid against the IS, PKK and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C) in several towns in Turkey. At the same time, Turkey has evoked NATO Article 4 to consult with the Alliance on the military operations the country has undertaken against the IS and the PKK targets, following attacks on its security forces. By evoking Article 4, Turkey aimed to gain international backing from NATO for its anti-IS operations and fight against the PKK outside its borders. NATO gave Turkey its full political support, condemning the "terrorist attacks against Turkey" and affirming "the indivisible security of the alliance."¹ At the same time, however, several nations are reported to have urged Turkey to show restraint in its action against the PKK.²

Turkey's Motives

Turkey's motives in joining in the U.S.-led coalition are various. Indeed, the IS has been a threat since the beginning (Turkey has been targeted by the IS several times, including the Nigde attack of 2014, the kidnapping of Turkish personnel at the Mosul consulate in the same year, and bombings in Istanbul and Diyarbakir in 2015). The IS bombings in Suruc and Diyarbakir were carried out by Turkish citizens, and have shown the reality that IS was no longer only an external threat to Turkey.

The most explicit factor prompting Turkey's policy change has been the PYD's crossing to the west of the Euphrates, and its move to unite its self-declared cantons of Jazira and Kobani. The move rang alarm bells in Ankara, as it would allow the PYD to expand its military influence and to de facto establish a PYD-controlled zone. Ankara is concerned that the PYD may create an autonomy on Turkey's doorstep, thanks to its effective fight against the IS with support from the United States. For a year, the U.S. has been frustrated over Turkey's refusal to play a robust role in the coalition. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's president, and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have invested too much political capital in the removal of Assad, and they failed to adapt their Syria policy to the new conditions. Ankara has actively neglected the flow of foreign fighters into Syria from the Turkish border, and not prevented the transfer of weapons and ammunition across the border. In recent months, Turkey has started to make border crossings relatively tighter regarding foreign fighters, but IS access to the internet was not blocked, so it was able to carry out recruitment, PR and economic activities in Turkey with relative ease.

Ankara's Syria policy has strengthened the IS in Syria and in Turkey, exposed Turkey to domestic and external threats from various groups fighting in Syria, damaged its international image, failed to provide further support for the 1.9 million refugees, and in turn helped the PYD to gain political and military influence in Northern Syria.

Ankara has realised that it needs to boost its cooperation in order to protect its interests in Syria. With contentious relations with the U.S. and Western partners, and Turkey's "loneliness" in the region due to poor diplomatic relations with other powers in the neighbourhood (such as Egypt and Israel), Ankara has also come to face the limits of its own capacity and of its confrontational foreign policy.

Diverging Priorities

The U.S. and Turkey differ in their favoured strategies and priorities, which may hamper the effectiveness of their cooperation and the expected result, and also opens the door to unexpected risks.

Turkey still wants the establishment of a no-fly zone, as it has been insisting since the beginning of the conflict. It runs the risk of importing the Syrian conflict onto its territory (IS has already attacked Kurdish targets in Turkey, which triggered a PKK response against Turkish security forces) and it faces grave socio-

¹ www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_121926.htm.

² "Turkey urged to show restraint in attacks on Kurdish militants," *The Financial Times*, 28 July 2015, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4a9cd402-3503-11e5-bdbb-35e55cbae175.html#axzz3ifl8ofYT.

economic and security challenges caused by the Syrian refugees such as food insecurity, difficult access to education and health services, and unemployment. The U.S. wants to focus on fighting the IS and, thus, helping the anti-Assad moderate opposition; but preventing Assad from gaining new territories in the IS-free zone is not the focus of the anti-IS operations. Unlike the United States, however, Turkey still believes its interests lie in a quick power transition in Damascus, preventing Assad from gaining territories near the Turkish border, and the establishment of a PYD-controlled zone. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already announced that it will not allow Assad forces, IS or the PYD into the “safe zone.” In contrast, the U.S. statements only mention the IS. A Turkish strike on Assad forces could trigger retaliation, which may have consequences for the entire NATO Alliance.

Different American and Turkish priorities also affect their selection of favoured partners on the ground. Currently, ground strikes are the weakest part of the deal between Turkey and the United States. Air strikes against very mobile groups such as the IS need to be conducted in coordination with ground offensives.

For the Pentagon, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the armed branch of the PYD, is the best partner for the coordination of anti-IS airstrikes. The YPG has emerged as the most effective fighter against the IS since the Kobane battle of October 2014. Washington’s earlier concerns about the PYD do not prevent it from tactically partnering with the PYD in combating the IS. Western allies have already failed to convince the PYD to join the anti-regime forces, and to stop its cooperation with the regime.³ However, it should be noted that there are limits to the PYD’s friendliness with Assad, and the organisation had been fighting the regime constantly before 2011.

Turkey, however, considers PYD to be a terrorist organisation due to its ties to the PKK, its move across the Euphrates to unite its self-declared cantons, and its bid to build a de facto PYD controlled region in northern Syria, friendly to Assad. Preventing the PYD and the Assad regime from retaining the anti-IS zone have been critical reasons for Turkey’s engagement with the coalition. The Assad regime declared that it will move together with the PYD in the fight against the IS. In the initial strikes, the U.S. appeared to stop helping the PYD at the proposed anti-IS zone.

Turkey has announced that the PYD will be fired on by Turkey and the U.S. if it crosses the Euphrates. For the United States, the PYD remains an effective, yet only tactical partner on the ground, and on the conflict between the PYD and Turkey, which has the second largest army in NATO, will be a dilemma.

The dilemma is even greater since the Ankara-supported Free Syrian Army and the “moderate forces” against the Assad regime do not present a united front. In addition, there are doubts on their reliability as “moderate” forces. Concerns have already been raised, during the selection of the U.S.–Turkey lead “train and equip,” programme over their nature, and only 60 militants who were considered suitable to the programme, far fewer than the initial target of 5,400 rebels annually.⁴ These differences seem to have been overcome in the new U.S.–Turkey deal, as the U.S. has now agreed to include more groups in its support. However, the opposition forces still don’t provide a reliable alternative for a post-Assad Syria or for the country’s unity.

Ankara’s Domestic Calculations and Its Double Fight against Terror

The lack of a Turkey–PKK ceasefire creates the potential for provocations to increase the intensity of the violence in Turkey. The government’s response to terror attacks will be automatic in the absence of a ceasefire. However, the Turkish president interrupted the peace process prior to elections, due to domestic political ambitions. In preparations for snap elections, the AKP and the president need to push the Kurdish-led Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) below the 10% parliamentary threshold to win a

³ “Turkey Uneasy as U.S. Support of Syrian Kurds Grows,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/world/middleeast/turkey-uneasy-as-us-support-of-syrian-kurds-grows.html?_r=2&referrer.

⁴ “Ash Carter’s unwelcome news: only 60 Syrian rebels fit for training,” *Politico*, 7 July 2015, www.politico.com/story/2015/07/ash-carter-syrian-rebel-training-119812.html.

sufficient majority. They have therefore aimed to falsely link the party to the terror group, in order to win back conservative Kurdish and nationalist votes. The HDP has succeeded in transforming itself from a strictly Kurdish ethnic/nationalist party into a Turkish party addressing the problems of much larger segments of the Turkish electorate, and of Turkey's Kurds, who voiced their will to resolve the Kurdish problem within Turkish unity. The AKP's attempt to weaken the HDP puts the prospects of a healthy parliamentary solution to Turkey's decades-old Kurdish problem at risk.

Furthermore, it also weakens its capacity to communicate to its allies its concerns about northern Syria. Turkey's targeting of the PKK camps in northern Iraq has drawn attention in Washington, which has warned Turkey over its disproportionate response. The PKK contributes heavily to the YPG forces in their fight against the IS. Washington fears that the fight between Turkey and the PKK may affect the PYD's capacity to fight the IS. The PKK has already mentioned that it prefers to fight against Turkey than against the IS. Turkey's contribution to the anti-IS coalition may exclude the role of the PKK in the fight against the IS.

Turkey's fight against the PKK is an asymmetrical, low intensity war in which a third party, public opinion, matters. By ending the peace process for electoral reasons, the AKP and Erdoğan have lost the support of international public opinion and have shown a lack of political will to resolve the PKK threat. Despite NATO declaring its support for Turkey's fight against the PKK, Ankara risks being unable to convince its allies of the scale of the terror threat posed by the PKK, and to mobilise them.

Not Really a Coalition

Turkey's decision to finally join in the fight against the IS can have a significant impact on curbing the latter's capacities. However, there are still a number of issues that need to be settled for the effective cooperation of the coalition strikes, and in order to prevent scenarios that may have negative consequences for NATO allies. With differing goals, an efficient policy, even operationally limited, can prove impossible. Statements from the U.S. and Turkey already contradict each other almost on a daily basis.

Turkey's fight against the IS in Syria will be a long-term policy, but its fight against the radical groups inside Turkey still needs to be observed. Any escalation in the conflict with the PKK may affect Turkey's contribution to the coalition, but it could also have other consequences for the EU: the EU's energy supply projects may be damaged, as the PKK attacked the Shah Deniz gas pipeline on 4 August.

Erdoğan interrupted the peace process prior to elections, but the current operations are more than just an electoral investment. As Turkey becomes the main base of the fight against the IS, there is a high risk of provocations against Turkish security forces and the PKK. The decades old conflict has shown that military means are not sufficient to fight against the terrorist group, and political reforms are necessary. However, accusations by the president and interim government of HDP and PKK violence damage the legitimate and successful political force that the HDP has become, and the prospects for a healthy, parliamentary resolution to the Kurdish problem. There is also an urgent need to address domestic polarisation, as public fear and frustration pose the risk that tensions could escalate.

Turkey's Syria policy has exposed the country to crucial internal and external security risks. At the same time, its confrontational foreign policy and the poor international image of its leadership have left the country isolated and unable to defend its national security, political and economic interests in Syria. The deal with the U.S. signals positive change in Turkish foreign policy, and Ankara may develop better relations with its allies and regional capitals. However, the Iranian minister for foreign affairs has already stated his discontent over Turkey's Syria policy, and postponed his trip to Ankara scheduled for 10 August.

For the EU, the proposed IS-free zone could become a desired outcome should it facilitate the return home of some of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Many of them are heading for Greece and other EU countries through the Balkans. For the time being, there are limited prospects for such an outcome since the zone could still see fighting among different rebel groups, is open to attacks from the Assad regime, and has a need for a local structure coordinating assistance for the Syrians. These risks can only be averted if Turkey and the U.S. cooperate closely and effectively.