

Making (Non)Sense of Turkey's Policy on Kobane

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Turkey is pursuing three goals in Syria: eliminating Bashar al-Asad, weakening the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The snag is that these three goals are incompatible, at least in the short term. If Turkey is serious in its opposition to ISIS as its role in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition would warrant, it cannot simultaneously counter the Syrian regime and the Kurdish movement. Absent Western boots on the ground, the only way to defeat ISIS¹ militarily lies precisely in the role played by the Kurds and the Syrian regime, unpalatable as this may be for Ankara. The “moderate” Syrian opposition (whoever that may be) is hardly decisive. In the Syrian border town of Kobane, where one of the key battles is being fought, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), the military arm of the PKK-affiliated Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), are key. Taking a deeper look into Turkish foreign policy, where should Ankara’s priorities lie?

Of Turkey’s three foreign policy goals in Syria, two appear to be genuinely linked to Turkish national security interests. ISIS represents a fundamental threat to Turkey, arguably a greater threat than the Turkish government cares to admit. Not only because of the alleged presence of ISIS cells in Turkey, but also and perhaps mainly because of the latent support the group receives in pockets of Turkish society. True, a recent survey revealed that only 1.3 percent of the Turkish public actively supports ISIS. But the government, heading into an election year in 2015, may feel that a proactive stance against ISIS could alienate

a far larger segment of Islamist-leaning public opinion. Yet beyond short-term electoral gains, ISIS’s Wahabism poses an existential threat to Turkey and to the “soft Islamism” the AKP implicitly espouses.

Next comes the PKK. Here too, the Kurdish nationalist movement represents an existential national security challenge for Turkey. The battle for Kobane has already heightened tensions in Turkey’s decades-long Kurdish question, putting Turkey’s courageous attempt at pursuing peace with the PKK on life support. The demonstrations in Turkey’s southeast in protest against what Kurdish citizens viewed as the government’s tacit support for ISIS in Kobane resulted in tens of deaths and many more casualties. Turkish military forces bombed PKK targets in the southeast, in the first major military confrontation since the beginning of the Kurdish peace process two years ago. The PKK killed three off-duty soldiers in the southeastern province of Hakkari on October 25. And although Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asserted his determination to pursue the peace process with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, he also quixotically defined both the PKK and the PYD as terrorist organisations to which Turkey would not bow. At this juncture, Turkey feels in a bind. If ISIS wins in Kobane amidst Turkish passivity, the Kurdish peace process could be irredeemably shelved. If the PYD prevails militarily, it may become difficult to secure the disarming of the PKK in the context of the peace process. Turkey may have hoped for a standstill between ISIS and Syrian Kurdish forces, but with growing

1 Mustafa Akyol, “Turks dislike Islamic State, but would leave fight to others”, *Al-Monitor*, 25 September 2014, <http://almon.co/281i>.

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public outcry both in Turkey and in the West, coupled with the US decision (over and above Erdoğan's head) to support Syrian Kurds through air bombing and air dropping of weapons and ammunition, Turkey's position became increasingly untenable. It appeared that Turkey would step up its role in the anti-ISIS coalition by opening its territory for the transit of weapons as well as Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces. From Turkey's vantage point, altering the make-up of the battle for Kobane between the bad (PYD/YPG) and the worse (ISIS) by introducing in the mix its peshmerga allies appeared a rational strategy. And yet days after Ankara's decision, peshmerga forces are only now beginning to enter Kobane.

Third and finally comes Bashar al-Asad. Beyond Kobane, ISIS cannot be defeated by the Kurds alone. In fact, while the media limelight is turned on Kobane, ISIS is making headway in the arguably more strategic stretch of towns and cities along the Euphrates river. When it comes to the broader struggle against ISIS, in light of the debilitated state of the Free Syrian Army and Western determination to keep boots off the ground, the hard truth is that the Asad regime and Hizbollah in Syria (and Lebanon) and Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq are essential ingredients of the fight. Indeed an anti-ISIS coalition worthy of the name would have ideally brought together in a necessary marriage of convenience regional and international adversaries spanning from Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East to the United States and Russia at the broader global level, mandated by a UN Security Council resolution. This was not so, largely due to the not-so-cold war raging at both regional and global levels. In particular, Saudi Arabia is trying to transform the anti-ISIS coalition into an implicit anti-Asad/Iran grouping.

The reasons underpinning the Saudi strategy may not be agreeable to all, but are, from Riyadh's vantage point, understandable. Far less comprehensible is why Turkey insists on toeing the same line. Turkey, in principle, should not be ideologically bent on countering Iran nor, for that matter, Bashar al-Asad. It has coexisted for centuries with



the former, while it has taken issue with the latter only after the Syrian regime turned against its own people. Turkey rightly argues that ISIS cannot be defeated politically until the root causes of Sunni disenfranchisement are addressed. This is correct. But the best cannot become an enemy of the good, and the bright new democratic future for Syria that many dreamed of in 2011 is not around the corner. In fact, what UN Special Representative Staffan de Mistura is pursuing is a gradual transformation of the local ceasefires, from the localised victors' peace which they are, into a broader political process. But few are under the illusion that such a process, were it to start, would see an immediate departure of the Syrian president. To think we still live in a Geneva I world is fantasy.

Turkish foreign policy in the past was characterised by a degree of caution and pragmatism, key ingredients to navigate a complex neighbourhood. Why has Turkey seemingly abandoned this course? Approaching the Syrian regime and Iran with pragmatism does not mean hurrying into ironclad alliances with unpalatable partners, nor does it mean abandoning principles. Arguably, diversifying from Sunni-only alliances can but represent value added in a sectarianised Middle East. Moreover, countering ISIS and pursuing Kurdish peace are highly principled goals, the only ones which truly touch on the deepest national security interests of the country.