

Turkish Boots Will Remain on Turkish Ground. Why is Turkey Reluctant to “Do What it Takes” at Kobane?

Sinan Ekim*



**Stiftung
Mercator**



IPC

ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

A Kurdish enclave along the Syrian-Turkish border since July 2012, Kobane now stands at the epicentre of the international struggle against the Islamic State (IS) – the latest manifestation of Sunni militant extremism and an al-Qaeda splinter group. For roughly a month now, the Syrian People’s Protection Units (YPG) have been waging a fierce struggle to prevent the city from slipping under Islamist control. YPG is tenacious in its defence, but lacks the resources to bring the battle to a successful culmination. Until the week of October 20, 2014, outside ammunition came only in the form of US-led airstrikes and airdrops, which have been insufficient to release the IS grip on Kobane. These fighters need additional boots on the ground – preferably from the neighbouring states of Turkey that has chosen to stand on the sidelines, and Iraq that has only recently sent Peshmarga forces into the conflict zone, despite the battle raging just across the border. Why is the Turkish President unwilling to “do what it takes” in Kobane – or in other words, why is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, despite his country’s proximity to the conflict zone, steering clear from the US-led military coalition against the IS?

Turkey’s Ambiguity Towards IS

The argument that runs through Western media and the anti-AKP factions in Turkey is that Turkey actually supports the IS, and therefore wishes to maintain its working relationship with the group by keeping its distance from the conflict. The leader of the German Green Party, Claudia Roth, projects one of the loudest voices against Turkey’s ambiguity vis-à-vis the Islamists,

condemning the alleged existence of IS training facilities and recruitment centres across the country. The Chairman of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has also put forward that Ankara has previously supplied arms and munitions to the militants against Syrian President Assad – an accusation for which no reliable evidence has hitherto been produced. Some developments, however, do insinuate the existence of a working relationship between Turkey and the IS: despite its fanatical iconoclasm, the IS did not destroy the tomb of Suleiman Shah, the progenitor of the Ottoman dynasty in Syria. Furthermore, the IS’s release of 46 Turkish hostages in September 2014 raised newer questions on the relationship between Ankara and the Islamic State.

Erdoğan had put forward the hostages as the reason behind Turkey’s reluctance to play too active a role in the anti-IS coalition out of fears of retribution. However, even after their release, the Turkish President remains wary of joining the fight against the extremists and expresses his disquietude with the military alliance formed under President Obama’s guidance. For instance, Erdoğan stated last week that Washington had not yet clarified what role it expected Turkey to play. Tolga Tanış, an investigator-journalist based in Istanbul, reported following his conversation with the Pentagon spokesperson that Washington had been specific in its request for the use of 2 airbases – one in Incirlik for the airstrikes against the IS and the naval base in İskenderun.¹ It is unlikely that Erdoğan has been kept in the dark on this matter.

* Sinan Ekim is Research Assistant at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

1 Tolga Tanış, “Erdoğan’ın yüksek riskli oyun planı”, in *Hürriyet*, 26 October 2014.

Turkey, Kobane and the Struggle Against Assad

It is not difficult to see why the US wants Turkey to come onboard: not only does Turkey have the second largest army in NATO, but it has already deployed tanks to the border, and could easily tip the balance in the battle by firing its first shot. It is also worth remembering at this juncture that Ankara is part of the anti-IS coalition; its membership, though, has several preconditions attached to it, one of which demands an American commitment to bringing Assad's time in office to an end.

This lies at the core of the dispute between Turkey and the United States, since these two countries have different priorities at the moment. Whereas Washington is conveying its efforts towards "degrading and ultimately destroying" the IS in Kobane, Ankara points to regime change in Syria as its main objective. Officially, Turkey maintains that the conflict in Kobane is directly connected to the war against Assad in Syria; it views such extremist threats as a symptom of the Assad regime and the broader disenfranchisement of the Sunni majority in Syria, which will continue to generate fundamentalism even after an eventual military defeat of the IS forces. Unlike Obama then, Erdoğan is adamant that pushing the IS out of the region will provide but a temporary relief to the crisis, which could be brought to a permanent resolution only by removing the Syrian President from office.

Turkey, Kobane and the Kurds

The concerns over the Assad regime hold validity, but do not thoroughly elucidate Turkey's stance on the matter. Erdoğan's disinclination to have "Turkish boots on the ground" has more to do with the long-simmering question of Kurdish autonomy.

The battle for Kobane is currently spearheaded by the PYD – an entity that shares the ideology of the PKK. Should the PYD walk away victorious from the battlefield, the success of their brethren might embolden Turkish Kurds to seek greater autonomy, and could engender the formation of a united Kurdish front that encompasses southeastern Turkey, western Iraq and northern Syria. The Turkish President has taken precautions against seeing this scenario unfurl. At a secret meeting with PYD leader Saleh Muslim on 5 October 2014, Erdoğan's ministers stipulated that Turkey's support would be contingent on several factors: PYD forces are to become a part of Turkey's buffer-zone project; they are to join the Sunni coalition against the Syrian government, and dissolve their autonomous enclaves. It is easy to decipher the coded message behind this ultimatum: either surrender to Ankara at the negotiating table and join Turkey in the struggle against Assad, or face defeat at the hands of IS militants on the battlefield.



As days passed, Turkey's position changed for reasons closely related to Kurdish dynamics. Previously, Ankara had refused passage to the Iraqi Kurds en route to the battle, thereby blocking off the only land channel for outside fighters and ammunition to reach anti-ISIS forces in Kobane. In a remarkable reconfiguration on 20 October 2014, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey would open up its territory for Peshmarga forces to transit Turkey in order to reach Kobane. Some hopefuls have interpreted this shift in policy as a harbinger of Turkey's willingness to cooperate; yet, there are many reasons why the international community should be wary of such optimism. This could as well be a strategic move for Erdoğan to relieve some of the criticism directed at his handling of the crisis: if examined carefully, the announcement contains more empty rhetoric than substantial promises. Çavuşoğlu even held back any detailed commentary on how the Peshmarga units would make their way into the Syrian territory or whether they would receive any logistical/practical support from Turkish forces at the border. The allocation of Massoud Barzani's Peshmarga forces could also supplement, and reinforce, Ankara's strategy, as the Kurdish Regional Government President maintains a close working relationship with Erdoğan. The leader of the PYD has already expressed his scepticism regarding the real motives behind deploying these fighters, who might disrupt the Kurdish gains at Kobane.

This lack of activism runs the risk of derailing the admirable peace process initiated roughly two years ago between the PKK and the Erdoğan government. The PKK's operational commander Cemal Bayik, as well as the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish resistance Abdullah Öcalan, stated that the peace process would be automatically terminated at the fall of the besieged town. Kurds are already loud with their anger: violent protests erupted in Istanbul, Ankara and Germany in the past weeks; overwhelmingly Kurdish towns of Batman, Diyarbakir, Muş and Siirt have witnessed clashes between IS sympathisers and Kurds, causing severe casualties and several deaths – and prompting the administration to impose curfews on Kurdish cities along the southeastern

border.

Yet, the question to be posed at this juncture is: does Erdoğan care? What does he hope to gain from this conflict? His reluctance certainly does not stem from mere stubbornness, but is guided by considerations of Realpolitik. In this respect, his main objective is to weaken the PKK. As the geographical lynchpin of the Kurdish region, Kobane lies between a swath of Kurdish-controlled towns, collectively known as the canton of Jazeera, and the town of Afrin; if IS gets pushed out of Kobane, these two cantons will be linked in a chain of Kurdish-controlled towns, bringing the Kurdish ideal of an autonomous state into the realm of the possible – or at the very least, furnishing the Turkish Kurds with enough leverage to demand the type of quasi-independence the Syrian Kurds snatched from Assad in northern Syria in the summer of 2012.

Kobane's fall could trigger the successive collapse of Kurdish strongholds, enabling the IS to move westward towards the region north of Aleppo, and even to cement its grip on a broad strip of land – roughly stretching from the Syrian border in the west to the outskirts of greater Baghdad in the east, and from the Babel province in the south to Mosul in the north. Fighting at Kobane has already weakened the Kurdish rebels, and if weakened further to the verge of neutralisation, they may be less able to resist the political demands made by the Ankara government at the negotiating table. By contrast, it will be more difficult to achieve the disarming of the PKK, should the Kurds win at Kobane. More than anything else, the Turkish President is motivated by the politics of opportunism – and is keeping the peace as a bargaining chip for his other political goals. Perhaps the support will arrive, when the Kurds have realised that quasi-independence is not a viable option.

There is also mounting internal pressure on Erdoğan. With the upcoming elections in sight, the President has to watch his electorate, and an overwhelming percentage of the population would not throw its support behind aiding the PYD that is linked too closely with the PKK. Ankara will not extract any political or territorial gains from becoming involved in the conflict; only the Turkish-Kurdish peace process runs the risk of being derailed, and it is far from certain whether aiding the Kurds will set the conditions for lasting peace with Ankara. In this sense, “doing what it takes at Kobane” is above all a humanitarian concern – and according to Erdoğan, one that is not worth the risk of opening the borders to retaliatory attacks or stiffening the morale of the Kurds.

No Easy Way Out

If the struggle against Assad is Ankara's official motivation to remain idly on the sidelines, then the Kurdish problem

is the real driver of its action or lack thereof. Erdoğan clearly has his own vision for the region, and the conflict offers him an unconventional opportunity to see it unfurl.

In addition to their disagreement on whether Assad is the root cause of radicalism in the region, Erdoğan finds Obama's thinking to be devoid of any operational logic from another perspective. Granted, the Western response may be effective in achieving the short-term objective of curbing the IS's military capacity; yet, what about the state-building measures that will follow in its aftermath? Obama has mentioned that NATO forces will be working with the Syrian opposition; yet, this opposition is currently organised into 1500 groups of various leanings, and Washington is now providing arms and funds to 14 militias in southern Syria as well as 60 groups in the northern stretch of the country. The Free Syrian Army is also experiencing a power struggle in its top echelons, where three military commanders have professed to be the “rightful supreme leader” of the resistance force. The fact that none of these opposition forces are secular or democratic poses another problem. Which one of these forces on the ground will then assume a leadership role, after the IS has retreated into the background?

Unlike the US, Turkey is looking at the mess that will remain in the post-conflict Levant. For instance, what if Assad regains control over the northern territories? There is no guarantee that he will not follow an aggressive policy against Syria's neighbours, especially having secured the backing of Russia and Iran. In this regard, Davutoğlu and Erdoğan are not entirely at fault in their preferred international solution: the formation of a no-fly zone over Syria and creation of a humanitarian corridor along the Turkish-Syrian border, a proverbial “safe haven” to accommodate the refugees that are fleeing Syria, and now near 1.5 million. In short, this is a “request” to see a clear indication that the border will be safe – and this means Assad toppled and Kurds disarmed.

As Akin Ünver eloquently put it, intensifying the air campaign will provide only a “band-aid solution” for the wounds that in reality run far deeper and wider.² Resolving this conflict rather requires a political commitment to a post-IS settlement, drafted and agreed upon by the key players in the region. This means that Obama will have to factor in the interests of the local powers in order not to set himself up for another failure after the debacle in Iraq. Turkey may be committing a humanitarian faux-pas through non-involvement; however, its concerns about the future of the Kurdish problem and fate of the region could not be dismissed as unreasonable. Simply put, Erdoğan is actually doing “what it takes” at Kobane – just not what Obama wants him to do.

2 Reza Akhlagi, “Candid Discussions: Akin Ünver on Turkish Foreign Policy Challenges”, *Foreign Policy Blogs*, 27 October 2014, <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/?p=90160>.