

## Report

### **Drivers of Turkish Foreign Policy: Part II Imperative of regional politics, not personality or ideology, drives Turkish policy**

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**Erdogan's AK Party has been ruling Turkey for 15 years [Presidential Press Service]**

## **Introduction(1)**

As argued in the Part I of this series, three dominant views about the nature of Turkish foreign policy have emerged in recent years. Under the first view, during the premiership of Ahmet Davutoğlu Turkish foreign policy was ideological, expansionist, and adventurous, which ultimately generated tension between Turkey and regional and international powers. The second view focuses on the AK Party's 2014 change of leadership and President Erdoğan's declaration that Turkey must increase the number its friends and decrease the number of foes.(2) This conciliatory declaration was portrayed as Turkish foreign policy returning to its cautious, pragmatic, and risk-averse roots. The fact that Turkey publicly repaired relations with Israel and Russia during this time gave credence to this reading.

Yet this reading soon reached its limits. Particularly after the failed coup in June 2015, the conciliatory tone of the Turkish leadership all but disappeared. At the same time, Turkey's military posture toward northern Syria and northern Iraq became more assertive. This trend was further enforced by Erdoğan's declaration of Turkey's new pre-emptive security doctrine to deal with both domestic and foreign threats.(3) In announcing this new doctrine, Erdoğan said that Turkey will not wait for the security threats to reach Turkey's borders, instead tackling them wherever they emerge. This newly announced pre-emptive security doctrine harked back to Turkey's previous pro-active foreign policy, particularly under Davutoğlu's stewardship.

However, these characterizations of Turkish foreign policy at best can be described as partially accurate. The shortcoming of these characterizations is that they each place excessive emphasis on a primary actor, be it Erdoğan or Davutoğlu.

In fact, the main driver of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in recent years, has been neither the worldview of certain personalities nor the ruling party's Islamist ideology. Instead, the larger imperatives of regional politics, coupled with Turkey's domestic political challenges, have shaped the main contours of Turkish foreign policy.

The three main drivers shaping Turkey's foreign policy are: (1) the consolidation of Kurdish military and political power in northern Syrian and Iraq, (2) rivalry with Iran, and (3) the security and policy challenges posed by ISIS terrorism.

### **Kurdish consolidation— “the PKK belt”**

As the civil wars in Iraq and Syria have weakened the control of Baghdad and Damascus over the provinces, a significant outcome has been the ascent of Kurdish independence. Turkey has viewed with growing alarm the consolidation of Kurdish military power along its southern border. In Syria, the PYD has emerged as the predominant force.

Concern over the PYD's expanding clout and territorial control has become, arguably, the principal driving factor of Turkish regional foreign policy. Turkey does not see much difference between the PYD and Turkey's perennial foe, the PKK; the PYD is by and large a PKK creation. However, while the US, EU, and Turkey all consider the PKK a terror group, only Turkey views the PYD as a terror group. As Western allies increasingly turn to the PYD for help in the fight against ISIS, this poses a challenge for Turkey.

Turkey's main objectives are to prevent the PYD from acquiring further international legitimacy and to thwart the PYD's goal of connecting the non-contiguous zones of territory it holds across northern Syria, which it organizes into three cantons: Afrin (north-west of Aleppo); Kobani (west of Tal Abyad); and al-Jazira (northeast Hasakeh province).

With these objectives at the forefront, Turkey's Syria policy has been essentially reduced to concerns over northern Syria. Indeed, Turkey's regional policy mostly has narrowed its focus to northern Syria and northern Iraq. This is reflected in a number of recent positions: Turkey's stance towards the ill-fated Geneva III Syria peace talks, Turkey's increased military activity in northern Syria, Turkey's insistence to be included in the international operation to liberate Mosul, and Turkey's insistence to control the composition of the alliance to liberate Raqqa.

In the run up to Geneva III, Turkey's principal priority was not peace in Syria, but preventing the PYD from participating in the talks in order to prevent the group from further expanding its international acceptance and legitimacy. Turkey succeeded on this point.<sup>(4)</sup> Yet this hasn't stopped the PYD from forging further ties with regional and

international powers, and establishing a presence in many capitals including Moscow, Berlin, and Paris—all to Turkey's dismay.

Likewise, Turkey has constantly stressed that the PYD should not participate in the liberation of Raqqa.<sup>(5)</sup> From Turkey's perspective, the PYD's fight against ISIS has always resulted in the expansion of PYD's territorial control and its international legitimacy. Furthermore, if the PYD is allowed to lead the fight against Raqqa, it will receive advanced Western weaponry. To stifle this, Turkey has voiced its readiness to take part in the operation and bring its allied opposition forces into the fold for the operation.

Conscious of Turkey's concerns and objections, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford visited Ankara to hold talks with his Turkish counterpart.<sup>(6)</sup> The Raqqa and Mosul operations were high on the agenda. Apparently, the US wanted to alleviate Turkey's concern over the level of Kurdish involvement in the liberation of Raqqa. From Turkey's responses and later developments on the ground, it seems that this visit achieved a modest result.

On the issue of Kurdish territorial continuity in Syria, two spots have been particularly important for Turkey. First, the PYD's drive to link its three cantons by capturing the remaining area between Jarablus, Azez, and Mare compelled Turkey's military intervention through its allied Syrian opposition forces. This intervention achieved its initial aim of preventing the PYD's westward expansion to connect the cantons of Kobani and Afrin. However, these forces have a tenuous hold on the territory and are very dependent on Turkish support; they have yet to put in place a political-security structure or governance model to sustain their hold.

Across the border in Iraq, Turkey's main concern lies in the area of Mount Sinjar, west of Mosul, and the possibility of the PKK expanding its influence and territorial presence. During the ISIS blitzkrieg in northern Iraq, the PKK carved out a place by situating itself as a committed fighting force against ISIS. This was contrasted with the Iraqi army's impotence and the Kurdish peshmerga's initial retreat. Moreover, the PKK emphasized its secular ideology and championed the defense of non-Muslim religious minorities such as Yazidis, which helped the group earn international sympathy and a bigger role in northern Iraqi politics. Capitalizing on its defense of the Yazidis around Mount Sinjar, the PKK established Sinjar Resistance Units, largely composed of Yazidis. In January 2015, the PKK attempted to declare a cantonal administration in Sinjar, replicating the experience of the cantonal administrations in northern Syria. Moreover, it also sought a foothold in the disputed, oil-rich city of Kirkuk. These PKK activities irritated the local Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Turkey, but the PKK maintained good relations with the KDP's arch-rival the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and cultivated relations with

local Shia militias and the central government in Baghdad. The Iraqi government's support for the PKK-organized Sinjar Resistance Units was seen as a move to undermine the influence of the KDP and Turkey in Iraq.

Turkey's objections to the PKK's presence in Iraq are multi-pronged. First, the PKK's activities in Iraqi Kurdistan tip the balance of power away from Turkey's ally KDP towards the Iranian allied PUK. Second, in the larger Iraqi scene, Turkey is concerned that the PKK is prone to ally itself with anti-Turkish forces, particularly the Shia militias backed by Baghdad and, by extension, Tehran. Third, Turkey is concerned that the PKK or Shia militias may attempt to alter the demographic composition of northern Iraq. The areas where the PKK has gained a foothold are close to the areas where Turkey's ethnic kinsmen, the Turkmens, live. The distance between Mount Sinjar and the Sunni Turkmen-dominated Tal Afar is 55 km. The possibility of Iraqi Shia militias capturing Tal Afar as part of the operation to liberate Mosul has led Turkey to threaten military intervention. Fourth, given the proximity of Sinjar to the PYD administered Jazira canton in Syria, Turkey fears that if the PKK entrenches itself in Sinjar it might pave the way for an PKK-PYD belt from Sinjar in Iraq to Afrin in northwestern Syria, which Turkey sees as threatening its southern border and cutting its connections to the Arab Middle East.

### **Iranian factor**

Turkey's concern over PKK-PYD ascendance overlaps with its concern over Iran's expansionist policy in the region.

The rise and retreat of ISIS, particularly in Iraq, has proved to be a boon for the expansion of Iranian influence. Iran has deeply influenced Iraq's foreign and security policy through its close and intimate links with Iraq's now dominant security, political, and religious establishment. It has supervised the establishment of Shia militia groups as a parallel security structure, most famously the Hashdi Shaabi as the umbrella organization of different Shia militia groups, to fight ISIS. This parallel security structure has now become an official part of the Iraqi armed forces, further cementing Iranian influence over Iraq's security sector.

Likewise, the rise of ISIS breathed life into the Assad regime, as the regime was able to position itself internationally as the lesser of two evils. Many international observers lumped the moderate Islamic groups with ISIS extremists, ultimately delegitimizing a large chunk of the Syrian opposition.

Similar to the fate of the mainstream Syrian Islamist opposition, the rise and decline of ISIS has further exacerbated the marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis, one of Turkey's major allies. The issue of terrorism and extremism are being depicted as a Sunni phenomenon, which in return helps the Iran-backed central Iraqi government to delegitimize the

demands and grievances of the Sunnis. This process further aggravates the already acute Sunni crisis in Iraq and across the region.

To counter Iran's clout in Iraq, Turkey tries to enlist the support of Iraqi Kurds, mainly the KDP, and Iraqi Sunnis. In fact, KDP's close relation with Turkey has been a cause of friction between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government, and the KDP and Iran. In November 2016, Gen. Yehia Rahim Safevi, the senior military advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, accused the KRG of aiding Iran's enemies. His speech implicated Turkey.

The common grievances of the Kurds and Sunni Arabs resulting from the central government's sectarian policy and its attempt to centralize power has yet to prove sufficient to form a solid alliance between the Kurds and the Sunni Arab. Kurds' continue to view the Sunni establishment as complicit in the Saddam Hussein era, and the unresolved issue of disputed territories between KRG and Baghdad poses a challenge to the emergence of any alliance between the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs. Though legally the issue of disputed territories is a point of friction between the KRG and the central government, in practice, this issue will test the limits of the Kurdish-Sunni Arab relations, as vast majority of these lands lie in between Kurdish and Sunni Arab dominated areas.

### **The supremacy of regional politics**

Though Turkish-Iranian relations are shaped by developments in Iraq and Syria, the rivalry isn't limited only to these countries. This rivalry in different intensity and scale plays out in other regional conflicts, and contributes to regional instability. In March 2015, Erdoğan placed the blame of regional instability on Tehran: "Iran has to change its view. It has to withdraw any forces, whatever it has in Yemen, as well as Syria and Iraq and respect their territorial integrity."<sup>(7)</sup> This shows the geographic reach of this geopolitical rivalry.

Similar to America's other Middle Eastern allies, Turkey blames some US policies for Iran's resurgent, confrontational, and expansionist policies. From Turkey's perspective, the folly of the Iraq invasion and the US's half-hearted support for the Syrian opposition have all emboldened Iran. Moreover, Turkey believes that for too long the US has misread the causes of, and offered ill-considered solutions to, the Iranian question.

For the US, Iran's nuclear program has been seen as the root cause of all ills. Solving Iran's nuclear crisis took priority over taming its regional politics and ambitions. For the countries of the region, particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Iran's expansionist politics rather than its nuclear program is the primary concern. This reading and shared concern

partly accounts for the rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in spite of their divergent vision of the regional upheaval and the Arab Spring phenomenon.

As Iran has been reduced to the nuclear file by the West, an agreement on the file has largely been presented as a solution to the Iranian crisis. In return, this has further emboldened Iran in its regional ambitions. But for many Sunni Arab countries, the Iranian question is about Iran's expansionist regional politics, which they believe the US overlooks.

Another factor that aggravates the Turkish-Iranian rivalry is the perception that the US is withdrawing from the region and is no longer as receptive to its traditional allies. The perception that the US security umbrella might not be in place fuels the regional rivalry. Unless some level of balance of power is established between these major regional powers, the destructive rivalry will intensify, exacerbating regional turmoil.

## Conclusion

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Turkey had a vision that underpinned the general contour and the principles of its regional policy. Likewise, Turkish leadership believed it had clear foresight about how the regional context would evolve, believing that the future had arrived in the shape of unstoppable popular uprisings that were destined to topple the old regimes and bring in friendlier governments. This is not the case today. Instead, the old regional order has collapsed, without a new one replacing it.

In the absence of a status quo and firm security architecture in the region, increasing geopolitical threats, and a turbulent domestic political scene, Turkey's foreign policy, its regional policy, has and will remain reactive and subject to constant change. As the foreign policy has become reactive, it lacks an overall and overarching vision that frames its foreign policy undertakings.

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## Endnotes

- (1) Portions of this piece were first published in Foreign Affairs magazine
- (2) "President Erdoğan Addresses the Opening Session of the 13th Islamic Summit," 14 April 2016, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, [www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/42577/president-erdogan-addresses-the-opening-session-of-the-13th-islamic-summit.html](http://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/42577/president-erdogan-addresses-the-opening-session-of-the-13th-islamic-summit.html)
- (3) "Turkey takes on a new anti-terror strategy, Erdoğan says," Daily Sabah, 19 October 2016, [www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/10/19/turkey-takes-on-a-new-anti-terror-strategy-erdogan-says](http://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/10/19/turkey-takes-on-a-new-anti-terror-strategy-erdogan-says)
- (4) "Syrian Kurds leave Geneva after being rejected by peace negotiators," Middle East Eye, 1 February 2016, [www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-946965384](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-946965384)

- (5) "Turkey wants to ensure 'wrong groups' do not participate in Raqqa operation: minister," Reuters, 8 November 2016 [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-minister-idUSKBN1330TS](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-minister-idUSKBN1330TS)
- (6) Elwazer, S. & Hume, T., "US, Turkey agree to develop long-term plan to seize, govern Syria's Raqqa," CNN, 7 November 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/07/middleeast/syria-raqqa-us-turkey-plan/index.html>
- (7) Pamuk, H., "Erdoğan: 'Iran is trying to dominate the region'," Al Arabiya English, 27 March 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/27/Erdogan-Iran-is-trying-to-dominate-the-region-.html>