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Report

What next for Turkey in Syria?

*Galip Dalay**

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [AFP/Getty Images]

Abstract

Turkey's policy on Syria has been undergoing a dynamic transformation, particularly in recent times. Negative security externalities generated by the Syrian crisis have played a primary role in this transformation, which in return has paved the way for Turkish military intervention in Syria. However, this transformation has taken several different twists and turns. First, Turkey scaled down the geographic limitations of its policy towards Syria to an almost exclusive focus on northern Syria. Later, particularly after Russian direct involvement in Syria and the fall of Aleppo, it seems that the scope of Turkish policy has shifted from a regime-change agenda to a regime-reform agenda, if not mere face-saving measures. This transformation is taking place in the background of an ongoing military operation, the primary declared goals of which are met with the recent capture of Al Bab. At this stage, Turkey will have to make new decisions, and of the options that it has, none seems particularly palatable.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis has come to represent different things for different actors: a national tragedy, devastation and destruction at an utmost level for Syrians; a hotbed for extremists; a scene of arm-twisting and power play for regional actors; an opportunity for actions of global salience for some (i.e. Russia) and a theatre of inaction or of largely inconsequential actions for others (i.e. the United States). Arguably, however, of all the major regional and international powers involved, the Syrian crisis has proven to be the most consequential for Turkey.

Turkey's approach towards and understanding of the Syrian crisis has been dynamic. The country has had different priorities and used different tactics at different stages of the crisis.

A single goal in Syria: Regime change (1)

At the earliest stage, Turkey had a Syria policy directed towards the whole of Syria. At this stage, the Turkish reading of the Syrian crisis was straightforward. As in other countries in which there had been Arab uprisings, the Syrian crisis was also situated within a discourse of newly emboldened people versus dictators, who in this period seemed destined to lose power. As Turkey threw its full support behind the opposition, its primary goal was the toppling of the regime.

Multiplication of threats and goals

Yet the longer the Syrian crisis continued, the more protracted and militarized it became, and the more threats emerged. From mid-2012 onwards, the Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis emerged as the PKK-affiliated PYD emerged to fill the void created by regime forces retreating from the mostly Kurdish-majority northern Syrian towns. This caused concern in Turkey, but didn't change its priorities in Syria at that time. A new threat emerged, yet the main focus remained the toppling of the regime. The idea was that once this was achieved; it would be relatively easier to tackle other newly-emerging threats. The announcement of the Turkish state's engagement with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in pursuit of a political settlement of the Kurdish issue by then-Prime Minister Erdogan in the closing days of 2012, and later the official announcement of the Kurdish peace process by Ocalan on March 21, 2013(2), lessened Turkey's threat perception from the PYD taking over some border towns in northern Syria.

Fast forward to 2014, and ISIS have become more central to the Syrian crisis, particularly during policy formulation for outside (largely Western) powers, adding a new element of threat for Turkey's Syria policy. With ISIS's quick victories both in Syria and Iraq, the understanding and conceptualisation of the Syrian Crisis underwent a major transformation. The Syrian crisis progressively turned into yet another "war on terror" phenomenon. Starting with the United States, the fight against ISIS has formed the major part of Western countries' foreign policies towards Syria. Moreover, the same process emboldened the PYD. The PYD's fight against ISIS provided it with more international salience, legitimacy and support, and its territorial expansion in northern Syria now began ringing alarm bells in Ankara. Developments during the ISIS siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane between September 2014 and January 2015 confirmed how real Turkey's concerns were. Pro-HDP and pro-PKK demonstrations in Turkey that took place between October 6-8, 2014 to protest Turkey's perceived lukewarm response to the prospect of the fall of Kobane left 50 dead(3) and put the peace process on the brink of collapse. Though the fall of Kobane was averted as a result of U.S. aerial and intelligence support, the participation of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga in the fight on the ground and the YPG's pushback, and the official termination of the Kurdish peace process was also avoided, the peace process then remained on life-

support until it collapsed in July 2015 with the outbreak of a fight between Turkey and the PKK.(4)

The PKK then attempted to implement a Syrian-crisis inspired urban warfare strategy in Turkey's Kurdish-majority east and south east regions, which elicited a heavy urban and rural military response.(5) This period also coincided with ISIS increasing its activities in Turkey, in fact first by carrying its fight against the PYD in Syria to Turkey by targeting pro-Kurdish and left-wing sections of society and disturbing Turkey's ethno-sectarian fault lines.(6) Moreover, at around the same time, in September 2015, Russia adopted its game-changing policy of directly intervening in Syria to stave off the regime's collapse. Its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, has since stated in a press conference that "Damascus was two or three weeks away from falling to terrorists when Russia intervened in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad."(7)

Moreover, the PYD was further emboldened in its actions when Turkey was effectively left out of the Syrian picture after it shot down a Russian jet violating Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015, hence bringing Turkish-Russian relations to a low point.(8) On top of this, Turkish-American relations had already begun fraying, particularly over their disagreements in Syria.

This process has increased the number of threats to Turkey stemming from Syria, and hence multiplied its policy goals in relation to the crisis. At the same time, the same process has rendered regime change even less tenable. To deal with the negative security externalities and threats from the Syrian crisis, Turkey has scrambled to patch up relations with Russia, which it achieved in the second half of 2016(9), and which in return has once again paved the way for Turkey to more effectively deal with threats stemming from Syria.

In addition to this, one of the guiding principles of Turkey's current Syria, or Northern Syria, policy is that it strives to create fait accomplis on the ground so that it can later leverage this in bargains with the Americans in particular. If it does not continue for too long, the current uncertainty and confusion in the U.S. is a boon for this policy.

Reordering Turkey's priorities

To be more explicit, at this stage Turkey primarily had three goals in Syria: preventing the establishment of a territorially contiguous PYD-dominated Kurdish region along its borders; pushing back ISIS from its borders; and the toppling of the Assad regime. It has become clear that Turkey will be unable to attain all three of these three goals, and it has to reorder its priorities in Syria. It has put the prevention of the emergence of a PYD-administered contiguous Kurdish region on the top of its agenda, while more or less dropping regime change from its priorities, at least for the time being. The Russian and

Iranian presence on the ground coupled with the fall of Aleppo to the regime forces have further confirmed this decision.

This reading of events has formed the background to Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operations in Syria. While the operational goal of Euphrates Shield was to push back ISIS from the Turkish-Syrian border, its strategic goal was primarily to curb the territorial expansion of the PYD and prevent the creation of a contiguous PYD-held territory along the Turkish-Syrian border in order later, if possible, to roll back PYD gains. The facilitating factor for this operation in the first place has been Turkey's rapprochement with Russia with the tacit understanding of Iran and also the regime. As such, the nature of the operation renders its future trajectory dependent on the political and strategic calculations of these powers (and primarily Russia), hence leaving it very fragile.

Regime reform or face-saving measures?

Just as the Turkish-Russian rapprochement has opened the way for Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operations (while also putting limitations on the operation's scope and target) the same partnership plus Iran has also paved the way for recent diplomatic initiatives aimed at revitalising the political process after the fall of Aleppo to the regime. Turkey's position and the nature of the Turkish-Russian deal and Astana process indicates that Turkey is moving away from a regime-change agenda towards a regime-reform agenda, a major policy overhaul. While the diminishing opposition capacity to overthrow the regime and half-hearted support to the opposition from anti-regime powers have played their part in this seeming change of policy, it also appears to have been partially motivated by the belief that Turkey now has graver dangers in Syria to tackle than regime change and that scrapping the idea of regime change will help Turkey better deal with these threats; a policy that seems to be driven more by short-termism than being a well thought through long-term policy. Given that regime-reform is an unlikely goal for Syria, it seems that face-saving measures for the pro-opposition camp, instead of a real regime-reform agenda, are more likely to be on the agenda of any Russian-led political process to end the crisis.

Points of concern: The draft constitution and safe zone

The search for a political settlement by Russia, Turkey and Iran has more or less coincided with the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration in the U.S.

During this period, two issues have caused particular concern in Ankara. First, the draft constitution that the Russians disseminated to the participants in the Astana Meeting and later meetings that they convened in Moscow, also inviting PYD figures, has caused concern and consternation in Ankara.⁽¹⁰⁾ The defining characteristics of these draft constitutions have been power devolution/sharing and significant cultural/political rights

for identity/minority groups. The concern in Ankara is that this will pave the ground for the legitimization of the PYD's enclaves and open the way for power-sharing arrangements along identity lines, a scenario that Ankara is striving to avoid with little success thus far. Second, Trump's idea of a safe zone has received mixed reactions from Ankara. On the one hand, Turkey has been the champion of the creation of safe zones in Syria for several years. From this perspective, it is a welcome development. Yet on the other hand, the ambiguous nature of the proposed safe zone has created anxiety. The location of this safe zone, the groups that will be covered by this prospective zone, the nature of this initiative and similar questions have raised concerns. The fear is that the PYD might emerge as the main beneficiary of this idea. This fear partly relies on the memory of the 1990s, during which time the U.S.-initiated no-fly zone in Iraq was one of the most important ingredients leading to the emergence of today's Kurdistan Regional Government. The repetition of a similar experience in Syria would cause concern in Turkey.

Post-Al Bab scenarios

While the diplomatic track is gaining momentum, Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation has made further inroads into Syria, by taking over Al Bab. As it stands, Turkey has achieved the primary goals of this operation. It has cleared ISIS from its borders and staved off the PYD's push to bridge the last remaining gap between its Afrin and Kobane cantons (putting aside the partial corridor created through the regime-held areas by the regime's capturing of areas south of Al Bab, which brought the regime to the edge of SDF-held areas south of Manbij).⁽¹¹⁾ At this stage, it will have to make new decisions. Ankara has thus far sent mixed messages as to what will be its new policy and priorities after Al Bab. Three scenarios are on the horizon.

First, Turkey may stop any further territorial expansion and instead focus on consolidating its gains and establishing a governance structure for allied opposition groups in the areas that it has liberated from ISIS. This task in itself is important, because, in a conflict or civil war context, the main source of legitimacy is not democracy, but effective governance. Turkey needs to help its allied opposition groups to retain or increase their legitimacy through putting in place an effective governance structure in the areas under their rule. One of the caveats for the opposition groups taking part in the Euphrates Shield Operation is that they might be seen as implementing an exclusively Turkish agenda, and hence losing ground to other contending opposition groups in terms of legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Syrians. An effective governance structure in the liberated areas will help mitigate these challenges.

Second, Turkey may continue fighting against ISIS with the goal of having a major role in liberating Raqqa from the group, and hence reducing the YPG-dominated SDF's role and salience in the liberation of Raqqa. To liberate Raqqa, two options come to the fore.

First, after Al Bab, Turkey can continue the same operation with the aim of reaching Raqqa. Putting aside the US dimension, two issues are likely to prove thorny in this scenario: The geographical distance from Al Bab to Raqqa is over 200 km and the regime forces are likely to pose direct challenge to Turkey-backed forces as they have already reached the lines between Al Bab and Raqqa. Second, if Turkey can get the US support, the Tal Abyad option will be Turkey's preference as it will break the PYD's lines between Jazira and Kobane cantons. But this is likely to cause a multi-front fighting between Turkey - PYD and PKK, a scenario that US prefers to avoid.

In any scenario, the liberation of Raqqa will require significantly more time, planning and manpower than Turkey currently has on the ground in Syria. Sorting out the logistics of such an operation will not be easy. Moreover, the caveat here will be the danger of this operation turning into mission creep. Once you are on the ground, the conflict dictates its own terms and realities. The more you go deeper inside Syria and become involved in the war, the harder it becomes to scale back, due to greater risk exposure. Turkey started the ongoing Euphrates Shield Operation with a few hundred soldiers accompanied by FSA army fighters, but at present, Turkey's military presence on the ground has already reached several thousand troops, partially due to the ineffectiveness of Turkey's partners on the ground. The early swift success of the operation has been replaced by protracted urban warfare with higher casualty rates at the later stages.

The further Turkey goes into Syria to neutralise the threat, the more it will be exposed to a varieties of threats including a multi-front fight, be it with the YPG, ISIS, or possibly the regime as well. The stances of the U.S. and Russia on this scenario will also be crucial for the fate of such an operation.

Third, Turkey may direct its attention to its real target in Syria, the PYD, by either pushing towards Manbij or Afrin. A move towards Tal Abyad should not be completely ruled out either. Unless Turkey cuts a deal with the United States (which seems to be unlikely), then such a move will highly likely lead to a fierce battle between Turkey and YPG/PKK, and cause friction with the United States and Russia. As the regime has already reached to the edges of the SDF-held areas south of Manbij, it is reasonable to expect that the PYD will seek to cut a deal with the regime, if it sees a serious possibility of the Euphrates Shield Operation turning its fire-power on itself.

All in all, at this stage Turkey has to make new choices, but none of its options seem to be very palatable.

*Galip Dalay is the Research Director at Al Sharq Forum, Senior Associate Fellow on Turkey and Kurdish Affairs at Al Jazeera Center for Studies & a Columnist at the Middle East Eye.

Endnotes

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