



INSS Insight No. 568, July 3, 2014

Turkey Drifting in the Middle East Winds of Change

Gallia Lindenstrauss and Süfyan Kadir Kıvam

The abduction of some 80 Turkish citizens in Iraq – diplomats, their families, and truck drivers – by Islamic State (IS, formerly known as ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) militants and their affiliates symbolizes the major potential dangers of the current turmoil in the Middle East to Turkey’s security, economy, and trade relations, as well as to its regional influence. The ban imposed on the Turkish media regarding coverage of the hostage crisis, even if it would assist in the release of some of those abducted, does little to hide these negative ramifications.

While Turkey’s emphasis in its foreign policy in recent years has been to a large extent on challenging the status quo, or at least raising criticism of it, the capture of Mosul by IS has been another, if unexpected, reminder that Turkey has much to lose from destabilizing processes in the region. Turkey’s greater economic interdependence with Middle East states, as well as growing energy needs, translates into little tolerance for events that in all likelihood will result in a sharp decrease in regional trade (adding to the already closed transportation routes in Syria) and rising energy prices. Iraq is the second largest export market for Turkey after Germany, and it is estimated that one quarter of this trade and even more will be affected if the fighting in Iraq continues. Nine thousand Turkish workers have already fled Iraq, and of the 2,000 trucks that used to pass daily through the Habur Border gate transferring goods from Turkey to Iraq, now only 1,000 do so. The fear of the breakup of Iraq also adds to the Turkish dilemma whether to allow the continued flow of oil in the pipeline from northern Iraq to Turkey, following an agreement between Erbil and Ankara but without the consent of Baghdad. In all likelihood Turkey will not stop the oil flow, but as the pipeline is critical for the Iraqi Kurds and figures in their complicated considerations on whether to declare independence, Turkey may have to rethink its policies.

The question of how and to what extent Turkey has cooperated with IS in its struggle in Syria is an issue of fierce debate in and out of Turkey. Some claim that the goal of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad was so important to the Turkish government that it overshadowed other calculations. The Kurds in northern Syria have also accused the

Turks of cooperating with jihadist elements in order to curb their growing autonomy. Turkish officials have strongly denied these accusations. However, even if Turkey has only turned a blind eye to IS militants moving to Syria and Iraq through its borders, it is quite clear that Turkey can no longer afford not to have a clear policy regarding this group.

In the current strange twist of history in which US and Iranian interests seem to converge regarding Iraq and both share the goal of restraining IS advances, Turkey presents as a potential partner of both countries. Immediately before the events in Mosul, Turkish-Iranian rapprochement was steadily progressing. The official visit to Ankara by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on June 9-10, 2014 was the first Iranian official presidential visit to Turkey in 18 years. One issue that was on the agenda in this visit was cooperation against radical Islamist terrorist organizations and regional stability. Immediately following this visit, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen came to Turkey and demanded IS release of the Turkish hostages. However, contrary to the US and Iran, Turkey has in recent years been on a collision course with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, and Turkish policies vis-à-vis the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) have encouraged Kurdish demands for growing independence from the Iraqi central government.

On the one hand, Turkey wants Iraq to remain a unified state. On the other hand, it cannot afford the strengthening of IS in Iraq, since it threatens Turkey's dominance in northern Iraq. Turkey also has gained much from the burgeoning relations with the KRG in recent years, but has not yet accepted the notion of a completely independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. In addition, while the Kurds in northern Iraq are seen as one of the winners of the most recent developments in Iraq, the KRG has in fact absorbed many Arab-Sunni refugees from Mosul and the surrounding areas, making it much less ethnically-homogeneous than before and hence making it more difficult for it in this respect to declare independence.

Thus, Turkey has no good options with regard to Iraq. Contrary to its very activist policies in the years preceding the Arab Spring, Turkey is now, at best, muddling through. However, when this ambivalent policy concerns the hostage crisis, it is not clear that Turkey has the luxury of indecision. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc has expressed his hope that the hostages will be released during the month of Ramadan. It is highly likely that their release will also be used as part of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidential campaign (the first round of presidential elections is scheduled for August 10, 2014). Still, even if the hostages themselves are released, the Turkish dilemmas with regard to its position vis-à-vis Iraq remain. While constantly repeating the hope that Iraq remain unified, Turkish decision makers have little faith that this is indeed the likely scenario.