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The Turkish Attacks in Syria: An About-Face by Ankara?

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The strikes by the Turkish air force in Syria, which began on July 24, 2015, along with Turkey's intention to establish a safe zone in northwestern Syria, inspired the headline "Turkey Joins the Coalition against the Islamic State," even though Turkey has already been a member of this coalition since it was founded in 2014. However, Turkey's partners in the coalition, particularly the United States, have thus far been dissatisfied with Ankara's contribution to the campaign, and with the fact that until now, volunteers joining the Islamic State have been able to cross the border between Turkey and Syria fairly easily. Furthermore, the Islamic State has been aided by private parties in Turkey (there may also have been more institutionalized cooperation) that have bought oil from it and assisted in the supply and transport of the Islamic State's logistical needs.

In addition to the change in Turkish policy, the question arises of Turkey's long term commitment to the coalition. Another question is whether Turkey is not already giving precedence to the struggle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its branch in Syria, while regarding the struggle against the Islamic State as of lesser importance.

In tandem with the Turkish air strikes against Islamic State targets, the Turks allowed coalition airplanes to use the Incirlik base – an act of approval carrying with it great significance. The use of this base for the struggle against the Islamic State, which was a longstanding bone of contention between the United States and Turkey, has now been resolved to the satisfaction of the Americans. Moreover, already during the visit to Ankara in early July by General (ret.) John Allen, the Special US Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State, signs of a change in Turkish policy could be detected. Following the visit, the number of arrests of individuals in Turkey identified with the Islamic State rose, the number of parties denied entry into Turkey increased, and supervision of the border crossings intensified.

An analysis of the factors that prompted the Turkish turnaround indicates the key importance of events in Tell Abyad, conquered by Syrian Kurds from the Islamic State in mid-June. This development enabled the Syrian Kurds to link the autonomous

northeastern Kurdish canton of Jazira with the autonomous north-central canton of Kobani, while threatening to advance westward and link the northwestern canton of Afrin with the territory under their control, thereby creating territorial contiguity under Kurdish control in northern Syria. Beyond that, the persistent pressure exerted by the Americans on the Turks to show greater resolution in the struggle against the Islamic State has now borne fruit. The attack of July 20, 2015 in the town of Suruc in southeastern Turkey, in which 32 people were killed by a suicide terrorist identified with the Islamic State, was both a catalyst and sufficient grounds in the eyes of significant portions of the Turkish public for a change in foreign policy.

Along with the developments in northern Syria, relations between Ankara and the Kurdish minority in Turkey have worsened. The Turkish Kurds accuse elements in the government of cooperating with, or at least paying insufficient attention to, activity by the Islamic State on Turkish soil. The PKK cast the recent attacks against Turkish policemen and soldiers as “retaliatory attacks” in response to the attack at Suruc. A renewal of the air strikes against PKK militants finding shelter in northern Iraq brought the ceasefire declared in March 2013 to an end. The fact that the suicide terrorist in the attack at Suruc was apparently a Turkish citizen of Kurdish origin demonstrated the complex situation in the predominantly Kurdish regions, in which religiously zealous young Kurds are now finding the Islamic State an attractive option. Furthermore, the lack of success thus far by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in forming a coalition government is aggravating Kurdish anxiety about early elections, in which it would be difficult to repeat the unprecedented success of the pro-Kurdish party – the Peoples’ Democratic Party – in the recent elections, when it succeeded in exceeding the high election threshold in Turkey and winning 13 percent of the vote. Elements in the AKP are even threatening to close down the Peoples’ Democratic Party because of its links to the PKK, thereby presenting the leaders of this party with a dilemma between their loyalty to the Kurdish cause and their abjuration of terrorism and desire to maintain progress in the political path. It therefore appears that the external developments are feeding the internal developments and vice-versa in a cycle that at present is working against the goal of promoting a peaceful solution to the problems of the Kurdish minority within Turkey.

The current agreements between Turkey and the United States concerning the struggle against the Islamic State indicate that the relations between the two countries were eulogized prematurely. At the same time, it is nonetheless clear that there are problems with the new strategy formulated by the two countries. For the Americans, cooperation with the Syrian Kurds has been successful, since it has helped halt the Islamic State’s progress in northern Syria, but the Turks are now demanding that the Americans take action to halt the Kurdish progress toward control of northwestern Syria. This means the Kurds will mostly focus on defensive battles with the Islamic State, which thereby

detracts from their deterrent. With all the importance of the ability to conduct air attacks from the Incirlik base, the question arises of whether the damage to American cooperation with the Syrian Kurds is a price worth paying for the use of the base. Furthermore, while the Turks regard the Islamic State issue as a “temporary problem” related to the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad, it appears that the Americans regard it as a grave and longer term strategic problem.

It also appears that the Turks have softened their position on the need to consider an overall strategy for overthrowing Assad before expanding their cooperation with the Americans. For their part, the Americans are supporting the Turkish line that the PKK militants finding shelter in northern Iraq are terrorists, and that Turkey has a right to self-defense in this context. As the Turks themselves assert, however, the distinction between Kurdish fighters in northern Syria and the PKK is to a large extent artificial, so that in the triangle existing between Turkey, the Kurds, and the Islamic State, it is not clear how the current policy of fighting the PKK and the Islamic State simultaneously can be translated into the effort that the Americans believe is necessary to cope with the challenges presented by the Islamic State.

