Turkey in Face of the Threat from the Islamic State: Finally in Sync with its NATO Allies?

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Relations between Turkey and the Islamic State in the various incarnations of the entity reveal that notwithstanding the gains that both derive from the silent understanding between them, the Islamic State poses a significant threat to Turkey. What appeared for a long time to be Ankara's disregard of the scale of this threat perplexed Turkey's NATO allies. The country's initially hesitant policy toward the Islamic State, which could be summed up as "live and let live,"[1] is, however, attributable to several factors. First, the goal to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria made Turkey willing to cooperate with extremely radical groups that were willing to assist it in doing so. On this issue, the Turkish government has regarded – and still regards – United States policy as mistaken, and contends that the Islamic State is merely a symptom of the broader problem of Assad's retention of power. Furthermore, the Turks believe that the priority assigned to fighting the Islamic State while ignoring the horrors committed by the Syrian regime strengthens the Islamic State, especially its attractiveness among foreign volunteers eager to enlist in its ranks.[2]

Another consideration behind Turkey's cautious policy and reluctance to engage in conflict with the Islamic State is that the entity serves as a restraining element on the Kurds in Syria. An additional important matter is that shortly before the declaration of the establishment of the Islamic caliphate in June 2014, the organization abducted a number of Turkish citizens – a crisis that Ankara successfully resolved without harm to the hostages. The 46 civilians kidnapped from the Turkish consulate in Mosul following the city's conquest were freed in September 2014 after being held prisoner for over three months – in sharp contrast to citizens of other, often

distant countries, such as Japan, who were beheaded. Thirty-two Turkish truck drivers kidnapped by the Islamic State were likewise released after a month of imprisonment.

Turkey's hesitant and cautious policy toward the Islamic State is reflected in part in its inadequate effort to obstruct the flow of volunteers crossing the border from Turkey into Syria, and its agreement to allow the Islamic State to use its territory as a center for its logistical needs. The city of Gaziantep in southeastern Turkey, for example, has been described as a "shopping center" for Islamic State fighters; according to some reports, the wounded are treated in Turkish hospitals.[3] Although most of the rumors about the transfer of supplies from Turkey to radical groups, including apparently the Islamic State, remain unconfirmed in open sources, there have been occasional reports implying that such aid is indeed granted. In January 2014, for example, the Turkish government imposed a news blackout on information regarding a convoy of trucks loaded with weapons that had been seized by the Turkish police in Adana. The convoy turned out to be an initiative by the Turkish secret service, which had organized it for the purpose of sending it to Syria.[4] On July 26, 2015, *The Guardian* reported that a raid in eastern Syria by US special forces on the stronghold of the person responsible for the Islamic State's oil smuggling had uncovered hundreds of documents and files linking Islamic State members to Turkish officials.[5]

In 2015, and especially after the July 7 visit to Ankara by General (ret.) John Allen, at the time the coordinator of the international coalition against the Islamic State, Turkey seemed to step up its campaign against the Islamic State, primarily by reinforcing its control of border crossings and increasing its arrests of Islamic State operatives in its territory. By mid-August 2015, 700 Islamic State personnel had been arrested and expelled from Turkey, compared to 520 in all of 2014.[6] Since October 2013, when Turkey first declared the Islamic State a terrorist organization, over 1,500 people linked to it were expelled from Turkey, while over 15,000 have been denied entry.[7] The most significant shift in Turkish policy, however, occurred after a terrorist attack in Suruc on July 20, 2015, which killed 32 people and was attributed by the Turkish government to the Islamic State. Following a telephone conversation between US President Barack Obama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 22, 2015, Turkey finally agreed – after months of refusal – to allow US and international coalition warplanes to operate against the Islamic State from the Incirlik airbase in Turkey.

To be sure, the Suruc attack was not the first terrorist attack in Turkey ascribed to the Islamic State. In May 2013, the Turkish government accused parties linked to Syrian President Assad of the car bombing in the town of Reyhanli that killed 53 people, but reports in the Turkish press stated that the Islamic State was behind the attack. In addition, on June 5, 2015, two days before the Turkish parliamentary elections, two bombs exploded at an election meeting of the pro-Kurdish party in the city of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey, and the leading suspect in planting the bomb was a member of the Islamic State.

Nonetheless, a number of factors may have prompted the change in Turkey's policy toward the Islamic State after the terrorist attack in Suruc. First, what had been perceived as an inadequate Turkish contribution to the struggle against the Islamic State had become a bone of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies, especially the United States. Second, the defeats suffered by the Islamic State at the hands of the Kurds, especially in Kobani and Tel Abyad, created positive momentum for the Kurds and aroused concern in Turkey, which hoped to disrupt this momentum through measured cooperation with the United States. Turkey is in fact making use of the Incirlik airbase conditional on specific approval for every operation departing from its runways. It also wanted warplanes from countries other than the United States to use the base, so that it appears to be a NATO operation.[8] Furthermore, though the Turks had apparently given up on United States cooperation toward a general solution to the Syrian problem, they expected at least the creation of a safe zone in northwestern Syria – with all that this implies – including protection against the forces of the Assad regime (the United States, on the other hand, only intended to create an area that is free of Islamic State presence; but these ideas have in any case become less relevant since the Russian military intervention in Syria after September 30, 2015). A fourth factor was the Turks' growing awareness of the magnitude of the threat posed by the Islamic State. In this case, the point of departure was the prior refusal by President Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to publicly and clearly declare the Islamic State a terrorist organization.[9] Following the attack in Suruc, however, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin stated, "The fact that Turkey is completely against any terrorist organization, including Daesh, is self explanatory…Along with that, there are also those trying to legitimize the PKK terrorist organization."[10]

Already in September 2014, the US shared information with Turkey about the existence of Islamic State sleeper cells in Istanbul, Ankara, Konya, and, apparently, other Turkish cities.[11] According to a Turkish government report prepared in 2015, approximately 1,300 Turkish citizens have joined the Islamic State (for the sake of comparison, 1,500 Turkish citizens joined the PYD – the PKK branch in Syria – during the same period).[12] Turkish authorities are also concerned about significant recruiting potential for the Islamic State among the two million refugees Turkey has absorbed from Syria. It was reported in August 2015 that Turkey had established a special unit for collecting information about these refugees.[13]

The Islamic State has also undertaken propaganda efforts at the Turkish public. In May 2015, it published a 46-page electronic magazine in Turkish for the first time; the main purpose of the publication was to recruit operatives and raise support. The magazine also contained veiled threats against the Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party.[14] The Islamic State likewise operates a Turkish-language website and Twitter accounts (which are closed from time to time, but then reopened with similar names). Following the airstrikes by Turkish warplanes against Islamic State targets, warnings were published on the social media operated by the Islamic State, including threats that the Turkish public would soon be punished. Note that in contrast to the PKK, whose attacks target primarily soldiers and police personnel, the Islamic State attacks primarily civilians. The Islamic State warned Turkey that it would be easy to undermine stability in the country with a few bombs laid in municipal and tourist areas, and even easier to launch attacks in Turkey than in Tunisia.[15] In addition, the social media operated by the Islamic State cast the Turkish leaders as "apostates," Turkish President Erdogan as "Satan," and Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu as "Little Satan." The Islamic State alleges that the Turkish government is in effect supporting the PKK "atheistic gang," and that this "gang" is spreading the "lie" that Erdogan supports the Islamic State in order to recruit greater support for itself.[16]

A survey conducted by Metropoll in August 2014 found that a decisive majority of the Turkish population regarded the Islamic State as a terrorist organization. At the same time, 11.3 percent did not hold this opinion.[17] Another survey by the same company conducted in July 2015 found that most of the Turkish public would prefer to see northern Syria controlled by the PYD, rather than the Islamic State. Among supporters of the Justice and Development Party, however, 21 percent of those questioned answered that

they preferred control by the Islamic State (compared with 35 percent who preferred control by the PYD).[18] It therefore appears that there is support among part of the Turkish public for the idea and activity of the Islamic State. Significant progress was achieved in Turkey's struggle against the Islamic State doctrine when Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) – the official state religious body – published a report summarized by the Diyanet Head as follows: "It would be a major insult to Islam to claim all such terrorist activities stem from Islamic interpretation."[19]

It is still too early to assess the significance of the campaign by the international coalition (Turkey included) against the Islamic State. It does seem, however, that the Turkish attacks against PKK operatives in northern Iraq, which are conducted in parallel with attacks against Islamic State targets, are much more frequent and hence overshadow Turkish efforts vis-à-vis the Islamic state. Despite the tendency in the West to criticize Turkish policy as motivated solely by internal considerations (especially against the Kurdish minority), Turkish arguments about the international coalition's strategy and methods against the Islamic State can be regarded as legitimate criticism. On the other hand, it is no surprise that the contradictions in Turkish policy have made it a target of the Islamic State today,[20] which manifested itself most clearly in the Ankara bombings on October 10, 2015 that killed more than 100 people and were attributed to the Islamic State.

In view of the difficulty experienced by Turkey and the United States in cooperating on the issue of the Islamic State, it is doubtful whether the same issue can constitute potential for cooperation between Turkey and Israel, despite the threat to Turkey posed by the Islamic State. The level of suspicion between Turkey and Israel is even greater than between Turkey and the United States. Along with its offensive against the Islamic State, Turkey is continuing its cooperation with other radical groups in Syria – a matter that poses a problem for the United States and Israel alike. Furthermore, while both the United States and Israel see potential for cooperation with the minorities in Syria (the Kurds for example, and for Israel, also the Druze), Turkey regards this cooperation as problematic, and is likewise emphasizing the territorial integrity of Syria.

Turkey has a complicated array of considerations with respect to events in Syria, resulting not only from the fact that its neighboring country is involved, but also because the Kurdish issue transcends borders. From this perspective, Turkey's cooperation in the struggle against the Islamic State

should not be taken for granted and needs ongoing maintenance, informed by an awareness of Turkish concerns about events in Syria in general, and especially those occurring in the proximity of the Turkish-Syrian border.

Notes

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4 Burak Kadercan, "What's Eating Turkey? Ankara and the Islamic State," *War on the Rocks,* July 30, 2015.
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13 "Government to Launch Separate Intelligence Unit for Syrian Refugees," *Today's Zaman*, August 10, 2015.
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