



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Turks in Syria and the Kurds in “Rojava”: Prelude to Tragedy or Reasonable Compromise?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As Turkish forces pursue their long-overdue campaign in northern Syria, it is increasingly clear that their main goal is to reduce or destroy the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, largely Kurdish in composition, rather than fight IS. A far preferable alternative would be if both sides – backed by a strong and coherent US policy – overcame their long history of hostility and struck a compromise under which the Kurds give up their dream of a long Western territorial arm reaching the Mediterranean, while Ankara accepts the reality of Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria.

Better late than never? The region, and the world, would have benefitted significantly had Turkish forces, by far the strongest in the eastern Mediterranean, been ordered long ago to take extensive action against "Baghdadi's" so-called "Caliphate" or Islamic State (IS). Many lives, not only in Iraq and Syria, would have been saved, and Yazidi girls rescued from fates worse than death, had Turkey moved at a much earlier point, either before or soon after the fall of Mosul.

Instead, Erdoğan chose to preside over a highly cautious policy, perhaps as payoff for the unexplained release by IS of 48 Turkish agents caught in Mosul when it fell in June 2014. Turkish policy, moreover, seemed to be colored by more than a touch of sympathy towards radical Islamist Sunni forces, whether identified with the Muslim Brotherhood (such as Hamas) or with more virulent strains.

This has now changed, with dramatic consequences for IS forces. They have lost their hold on much of northwestern Syria (and are losing ground elsewhere, from Sirte in Libya to western Iraq).

Several main factors apparently played a role in Erdoğan's decision to reverse his policy:

- Above all, the growing concern in Ankara about substantial territorial (and moral) gains made by US-backed SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) operating west of the Euphrates River. These gains are significant because they seemed to open before the Kurds of Syria – in the lands they call the "sunset" (west), or Rojava – the prospect of establishing a corridor to the Mediterranean. This would cut Turkey off from the rest of Syria and the region.

This would clearly be an intolerable outcome from Ankara's point of view. The YPG – the armed wing of the local Kurdish movement, the PYD, and the backbone of the SDF – has longstanding links with the PKK and its subversive activity inside Turkey. Still, naked action aimed directly against US allies would be dangerous now that many in the West have come to see IS as the embodiment of evil. The need therefore arose to "package" Turkish action so as to target both the SDF and IS.

- Turkey's need to act against IS became sincere. The IS fight is no longer simply a useful mask behind which to conduct anti-Kurdish operations. The attack at Istanbul Airport took a huge toll on Turkey's economy, substantially harming both the extensive tourism industry and Istanbul's growing role as a global airline hub. The subsequent horror at a wedding in Gaziantep would not have happened had better measures been taken long ago to curb IS penetration into the border areas. Turkey's first duty – to keep its citizens alive – is now at stake.
- A less urgent but nevertheless increasingly important imperative is to build control zones within Syria, south of the border, where displaced persons can be taken care of. This measure is meant to alleviate the already unmanageable numbers of refugees in Turkey.
- A final factor is internal post-coup dynamics. The Turkish government must prove that the huge purges and tense post-coup atmosphere have not fatally disabled the Turkish military. Moreover, Erdoğan is now in a better position to impose his will on the high command, which has tended in the past to resist any plans to send it over the border. (Such

action contradicts Ataturk's old dictum warning his soldiers never again to entertain imperial and religious ambitions beyond Turkey's nation-state borders.) The military high command, too, is eager to demonstrate that it is still a force to reckoned with. Hence the scope of the military's actions.

All this has been translated into rather effective action so far. Large areas in the northwest have fallen into the hands of Turkish-backed rebel groups.

Following US Vice President Biden's visit, and his blunt message to the Kurds to let go of their gains west of the Euphrates River, the question now arises whether or not this new Turkish assertiveness in Syria can be compatible with US and Western policies. (US Secretary of State Kerry has been trying, as yet to no avail, to come to some workable understanding with the Russians. That agenda was also at the core of Obama's meeting with Putin at the G-20 summit in Hangzhou.)

Turkey's new policy could be covertly in line with Russian designs to help Assad weaken his most effective enemies, and then regain control of large parts of Syria hitherto considered irretrievably lost. This could be translated into further military pressure on the Kurds, with the ultimate object of destroying their hold everywhere in northeastern Syria.

That outcome would have tragic results. Above all, of course, it would harm the Kurds, whose heroic stand at Kobani and elsewhere should have earned them a better outcome. But it would also harm the Turks, who would bleed badly and may encounter very stiff resistance. It would also be bad for all members of the anti-IS coalition, who would see their efforts derailed just as real prospects are opening up for a decisive push on Raqqa and Mosul.

What will Erdoğan choose to do next? The options are open. There is reason to believe that Turkey still seeks to remain a member in good standing of NATO. Amid the present tensions in Europe, Erdoğan may conclude that Turkey's true interests still lie with the West, despite the short-term benefits of his recent reconciliation with Moscow.

One option that would benefit both Turks and Kurds would be for the US and other coalition allies to impose a workable compromise on both parties. The terms should be straightforward. The Kurds, painful though it would be for them, would forgo all claims west of the Euphrates and would recognize the dominance of Turkish-backed Sunnis there (and in areas to the south and east, which will be regained from IS as it is pushed back). The Turks, even in the face of the history of PYD-PKK links, would accept the reality of Kurdish

autonomy east of the Euphrates, with the tacit expectation that this entity would eventually drift into the political orbit of the KRG state-in-being in northern Iraq.

Such an arrangement would probably cement the three-way partition of Syria. There would be a regime state in the west, under Russian and Iranian auspices (a "condominium" of uneasy partners); a Sunni space, which after the collapse of IS would come to be dominated by Turkish-backed forces; and a free Rojava east of the Euphrates that may one day be part of a larger Kurdish state.

This would not be the unitary state, presumably to be led by some putative moderate rebel group, that US policy has long envisioned but has no way of creating. Nor is it the reunified centralized state that Assad may still be dreaming of, but that neither the Russians nor Iran can deliver. It would represent the end of the Sykes-Picot lines in the sand as we have known them for a century.

It would be neither elegant nor morally uplifting. But it would be a workable scheme, one that can bring down the horrifying levels of death, destruction and destitution. It may offer some hope, both to Syrians and to the many others who now face the consequences of the immense Syrian tragedy.

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