

Amid mounting political crisis, Turkey shifts policy on Syria

Isaac Finn
17 January 2014

Confronted with a deepening government corruption scandal and growing instability on the Turkish-Syrian border, Turkey's president, Abdullah Gül, has pushed for a major shift in Ankara's diplomatic and security policies.

The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government is in crisis over an expanding corruption scandal implicating the sons of government ministers, the State Bank, and potentially Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son.

At the same time, Turkey is jeopardized by instability in Syria as the Islamist State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS), an Al Qaeda-linked militia, has recaptured territory in Syria's Raqqa province near Turkey's border over the past few weeks.

Since fighting broke out on January 3 between the ISIS and other sections of the Western-backed Islamist opposition, more than 1,000 people have been killed, including hundreds of civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported Thursday.

Abdallah Farraj, a member of the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition, told *Reuters*, "The rebels lack the organization and the firepower to win. It will be difficult to defeat the ISIS without military strikes from someone like Turkey."

In light of these developments, Gül stated to an annual conference of Turkish ambassadors, "I am of the opinion that we should re-calibrate our diplomacy and security policies given these facts in the south of our country."

"Developments in Syria, the unfolding menaces and potential threats are becoming more serious," he added in his January 14 address to the ambassadors. "The very radical movements, groups clashing with each other and the new emerging realities related to the terrorist organization in our south and due to the

authority gap in Syria all closely concern us. The Iraq-Syria-Lebanon axis has almost become a single front. We are witnessing proxy wars, which are the extension of this front as to geopolitical competition and rivalry for regional influence."

Gül counseled "calmness, insistence and when necessary silent diplomacy."

The speech constituted a thinly veiled critique of the policy pursued by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Erdoğan in relation to Syria and more generally. Differences between the president and the prime minister have surfaced repeatedly, particularly during last year's mass protests, when Erdoğan denounced demonstrators as "terrorists" while Gül warned against the threat of political polarization to the regime.

The Islamist AKP government had rejected any negotiations that included Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his representatives and had banked on "regime change" being achieved by means of a direct US-NATO military intervention, despite the overwhelming opposition to war by the Turkish people.

However, confronted with massive popular opposition at home and the refusal of its closest ally, Britain, to join any attack, the Obama administration called off intervention at the last minute, pivoting toward a negotiated settlement both in Syria and with Iran. In the process, it has distanced itself from some of the Islamist "rebels," whose victory is seen by Washington as inimical to US interests.

Turkey's relationship with the US became strained as a result of the Obama administration's decision not to invade. Gül had warned in an interview with the *Guardian*, last November, that without intervention by the US or UN, Syria could become "Afghanistan on the shores of the Mediterranean."

The Turkish government also antagonized

Washington and the other Western powers by buying a Chinese missile system that is incompatible with NATO's weaponry. More recently, Erdoğan has labeled the corruption scandal enveloping his government as a conspiracy, while implying that the US ambassador to Turkey and other Western forces are behind it.

In his own remarks to the ambassador's conference, Erdoğan told them that they should stress in the countries where they serve "that what's going on is not a corruption operation but a coup in the form of a corruption operation." He likewise denounced charges that Turkey is supporting terrorist organizations inside Syria, insisting: "Al Qaeda or al-Nusra; they are all against us and we are against them. Turkey is a country that has proven itself in the fight against international terror."

But the growth of extremist forces on Turkey's borders come as a direct result of the AKP government's policies. For nearly three years, right-wing Islamist groups—many of which are linked to Al Qaeda—were allowed to use southern Turkey as a base of operations. The Turkish government, along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the CIA, was also active in arming the "rebels" in Syria.

A truck suspected of carrying weapons was stopped by Turkish police in Hatay province near the Syrian border on January 1, but the government forbade a search of the vehicle, claiming that its mission was a "state secret" and that its cargo belonged to the National Intelligence Organization (MIT). A prosecutor who pressed to search the truck was threatened at gunpoint and subsequently forced to resign. Interior Minister Ertan Arslan publicly claimed that the truck was bringing supplies to ethnic Turkmen inside Turkey, but the area to which the vehicle was headed contains no such population.

These policies have sucked Turkey into an unfolding nationwide catastrophe. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has estimated that as many as 1 million Syrian refugees have fled into Turkey.

On the same day Gül advocated the shift in Ankara's foreign policy, Turkish police carried out raids against Al Qaeda members and supporters. The raids took place in six provinces simultaneously and resulted in the detention of 28 people including two senior Al

Qaeda members identified as Halis B. and İbrahim ?.

The Kilis branch of the Turkish-based charity organization Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH) was searched by police as part of the raid, with some of the organization's computers temporarily confiscated. Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç has responded by retracting allegations that İHH had connections with Al Qaeda.

Within hours of the raids, Devlet Çiğdem and Serdar Bayraktutan, the Kilis province and Van province anti-terror department chiefs, respectively, were relocated by the Governor's Office. It is unclear if their relocation is tied to the recent raids and crackdown on Al Qaeda-connected elements or to the nationwide shakeup of police departments carried out in the government's response to the recent corruption scandal.

Whatever the tactical differences between Gül and Erdoğan, there are definite indications that the AKP is attempting to reconcile itself with the foreign policy of the US and other Western imperialist powers to save the regime from the current crisis.

The Turkish government has come around to supporting the so-called Geneva II talks, which will involve Assad's representatives, and has urged that Iran be allowed to participate.

Gül also stated that Turkey would renew its determination to join the European Union (EU), an apparent shift from a previous policy of pressuring the EU by pursuing membership in the Chinese-Russian-based Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Implicit in the shift in the AKP's policy is the belief that by bowing to the Western powers it can gain leverage to restabilize the regime, and the Turkish economy, which has been in free fall since the announcement of the corruption scandal.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact