

Turkey lines up for military role in Syria—Part 1

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Turkey may be willing to take a military role in the US war in Iraq and Syria, following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's speech at the United Nations Friday. The country has long borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran and is the only NATO member in the Middle East.

Erdogan called for “no-fly” and “buffer” zones in Northern Syria. According to the daily *Hurriyet*, he told journalists on the plane home, “It's wrong to say that Turkey will not take any kind of military position. Turkey will do whatever is its duty to do.”

“You are not going to be able to finish off a terrorist group just with air strikes,” he added. “At some point ground forces will be fundamental.”

Following the approval of a government resolution in parliament Thursday, “all the necessary steps” would be taken for Turkey's involvement in the coalition, he said, although Parliament's approval is by no means assured, as indicated by its refusal to back the 2003 war against Iraq.

Erdogan has come under enormous pressure from Washington to give his full support to President Barack Obama's coalition for a new war of aggression in the Middle East, one in which the Turkish leader has thus far refused to participate in a frontline role. It is a shift that could extract a heavy political price.

Washington is using the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) beheading of Western hostages and its barbaric treatment of its opponents as a cover for its military plans to unseat the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. While last year's proposed US attack on Assad would have assisted ISIS and similar jihadist groups, this year the war is ostensibly being conducted in opposition to them. The US is to send in \$500 million worth of weapons and equipment to build up what are in reality non-existent “moderate” forces as a counterweight to ISIS in Syria.

On Wednesday, Erdogan had said that Turkey's support for the coalition would take a humanitarian and logistical form, but Ankara would not be sending troops to fight against ISIS or hitting its targets. As in the US-led war against Iraq in 2003, it would not allow either its airspace or the US air base at Incirlik in southeast Turkey to be used for US-led air strikes against ISIS insurgents in Syria. It earlier refused to sign the joint

communiqué issued by 10 Arab states in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia stating their “shared commitment to stand united against the threat posed by all terrorism.”

On one level, Erdogan might have been expected to be a more willing member of such a coalition. After all, Turkey, along with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf petro-states, with additional support from Jordan and Israel, has been a fervent supporter of Washington's bid to unseat Assad and thereby weaken Iran, Russia and China. Erdogan had long called for Washington to mount air strikes against Syria in support of “rebel” groups in Syria and was furious last September when the Obama administration called off its planned attack.

But now ISIS, having seized much of eastern Syria and with its sights set on Iraq's vast energy resources, threatens Washington's commercial and strategic interests in Iraq, the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the wider region. The ISIS offensive coincided with the rebellion of Iraq's Sunni population, leading to the disintegration of the US-trained Iraqi security forces and loss of control over much of the country.

The Obama administration has therefore been forced to turn on its former clients, while at the same time using this shift to reactivate its plans to target Assad for regime change. As well as sending in arms, the US has deployed military “advisers,” along with France, Germany and Italy, to train the Iraqi Army and some of the KRG's Peshmerga fighters, which it hopes to use as its proxy force on the ground in Iraq.

It is also using the KRG as a pawn in its dealing with Baghdad. Peshmerga forces are being joined by Kurds from both Syria and Turkey, including from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been branded as a terrorist group by the US and Turkey, and against which Turkey fought a bitter civil war between 1984 and 2008.

The PKK units based in Iraq's Qandil Mountains have fought ISIS and other Islamist “rebels” in Syria. They were decisive in supporting the Peshmerga and pushing back ISIS in northern Iraq.

By joining the war coalition for regime change in Syria, Erdogan is positioning Turkey against its former protégé and ally, ISIS, and alongside the banned PKK. But any perceived support, let alone arming, of the PKK, which the military and

nationalists view as their main enemy, is a bitterly divisive issue. According to the daily *Cumhuriyet*, it was initially agreed that Ankara's support for the coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria "should be behind the scenes" because of the dilemma in which it finds itself.

Turning against ISIS is far easier for Obama and Washington than it is for the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of Erdogan and his prime minister and former foreign secretary, Ahmet Davutoglu. The decision draws Turkey into the war in Iraq and Syria and may destabilise the political, economic and security situation within Turkey.

Three years ago Turkey abandoned its longstanding policy of "zero problems with its neighbours" in the Middle East, and pursued an aggressive two-pronged and inherently contradictory foreign policy. First, Ankara backed the "rebels" in Syria, including the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist groups such as the al-Qaeda offshoots al-Nusra Front and ISIS, against Assad, with whom it had previously developed close political and economic relations. Second, it established closer relations with the semi-autonomous KRG in Iraq, antagonising Baghdad but securing vital energy resources and building pipelines that would make Turkey an energy hub for Europe.

The AKP government hosted the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and sponsored the Syrian National Council (SNC), later the Syrian National Coalition, made up of exiled regime dissidents, Muslim Brotherhood members and assorted CIA assets. But the SNC is now in disarray, having announced that it is dissolving the FSA's military leadership after key coalition members resigned.

The FSA refused to join the US-led coalition against ISIS unless the US guaranteed that Assad's overthrow is the main objective, given that it has been in a *de facto* though troubled alliance with ISIS and other Islamists for years. The most effective fighting forces in the Syrian opposition are the Sunni jihadist groups.

Turkey, while maintaining the fiction that the FSA was in charge, served as the conduit for weapons for the Islamist forces, providing bases, training, intelligence, free medical facilities and unfettered passage across the border. Much of the border with Syria is now under ISIS control, leading to a sizeable Islamist presence in border towns and villages. The AKP government also provided artillery and air cover for the insurgents.

This support prompted Turkish citizens to enlist in ISIS and other jihadist groups and fight in Syria. It is believed that up to 10 percent of these forces are Turks. AKP supporters were "encouraged" to contribute to Turkey's Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), an Islamic charity that has provided ISIS and others with funds.

Turkey's intelligence agency MIT played a key role in supporting the Sunni armed movement and IHH operations. The government even discussed launching a false flag operation in Syria to provide the pretext for a full-blown

invasion in support of the insurgents.

As well as using the Islamists to seek Assad's ouster, Ankara also sought to use them to fight the Syrian Kurdish militant groups in the northeast of Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which have established a semi-autonomous enclave with the tacit support of the Syrian regime as a means of securing Kurdish support against the insurgents. This was an anathema to the AKP government, which feared that it would fuel a similar autonomy movement among Turkey's Kurds.

There have been numerous clashes between the Turkish-backed jihadists and the Kurds in northeastern Syria, most recently around the town of Kobani, resulting in the flight last week of 140,000 civilians into Turkey. The UN refugee agency UNHCR expects up to 400,000 Syrian Kurds, many deeply hostile to Turkey, to cross the border. Turkey is home to about 1.5 million Syrians who have taken refuge from the vicious sectarian civil war. This has pushed up rents and lowered wages, leading to riots and attacks on refugees in the southeastern province of Gaziantep last month.

The present offensive is the second attempt by ISIS to take Kobani and the surrounding villages. The previous attack in July was fought off with the help of Kurds who crossed the border from Turkey. Angry demonstrations have now broken out in support of the Syrian Kurds, with protesters accusing the AKP government of aiding ISIS.

The PKK has called on its supporters to fight ISIS. Hundreds have crossed from Turkey, and security forces responded by firing tear gas and water cannon and closing some of the border crossings. These developments may in turn jeopardise the moves Erdogan has made since 2008 to resolve the long-running conflict with the Kurds and isolate the PKK.

To be continued



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