

Turkey lines up for military role in Syria—Part 2

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In a second foreign policy shift, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan abandoned his hostility towards autonomy for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, signing energy deals that bypassed the central government in Baghdad, and incurring the wrath of the, at that time, US-backed government of Nouri al-Maliki. In return, he hoped that the KRG would act to marginalize both the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Syria. This was part of his broader plan, begun in 2008, to reach a deal with the Kurds and isolate the PKK.

All this came unstuck when ISIS seized swathes of Iraq, advancing towards Erbil, the KRG capital, and the Iraqi-Turkish border. This threatened Turkey's energy and construction corporations in the KRG, its crucial energy supplies from Kurdistan, and its \$12 billion in exports to Iraq, where hundreds of Turkish companies operate.

ISIS and the KRG are now at war, with the US backing the KRG. The Obama administration has simultaneously hinted at the possibility of recognising the KRG as an independent state, to bully Baghdad, while forcing the Kurdish parties to join the fragile new government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The Kurds say that their support for Baghdad is conditional upon unfreezing the KRG budget allocation, settling disagreements over oil exports, arming the Kurdish forces, implementing the constitutional arrangements for resolving the status of territories disputed by Baghdad and Erbil, and granting the KRG full control over their airspace for civilian flights. This does not augur well for the Abadi government.

The KRG has turned on Turkey, with the Kurds accusing Ankara of backing ISIS against them.

Likewise, ISIS has turned on its Turkish sponsors. In May 2013, ISIS carried out twin car bombings in Rehanli, killing 52 people, and in September 2013, threatened the government with a spate of suicide bombings in Ankara and Istanbul. Following a number of attacks, the government tightened security along its border with Syria, with the authorities drawing up a no-entry list of 6,000 people. It has deported more than 500 this year.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu downplayed Ankara's concern over the ISIS advance into Iraq in June, while Erdogan warned the Obama administration against launching aerial attacks on ISIS.

At the time, the AKP was preoccupied with the fate of 49 of its diplomats and staff taken hostage by ISIS from the Turkish consulate in Mosul. In a separate incident, 31 Turkish truck drivers were captured last June in order to stop Turkey joining any military action against ISIS in Iraq. ISIS is now using the consulate as its headquarters in Mosul.

While the truck drivers were released a month ago, the consular staff was only just released under a deal that involved Turkey's intelligence agency and the hostages' transport through Syria rather than a handover to the KRG—indicating the fraught relations between the KRG and Sunni tribes. The deal coincided with the release of 50 ISIS members by another Syrian rebel group, Liwa al-Tawhid.

Ankara has still not designated ISIS as a terrorist group or closed down its bases in Turkey, even after the kidnapping of its consular staff, as it was reluctant to weaken the Islamist insurgents in Syria or jeopardize relations with Qatar, the leading financial backer of ISIS, and one of Ankara's few remaining allies and investors in the region. Since becoming president at the end of July, Erdogan has made four visits to Qatar,

which has likely played a key role in securing the hostages' release.

Turkey has already been greatly isolated by the ouster of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Mursi, with whom Erdogan had close relations, in July 2013 by General Abdul Fatah al-Sissi with the backing of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Its relations with Tel Aviv soured after Israel's bombardment of Gaza in 2008-09, its seizure of the Turkish-funded aid flotilla and the killing of 10 Turkish citizens (the tenth died recently after being in a coma for years), and the recent genocidal war on Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot.

Ankara's reluctance to join Obama's coalition was also, in part at least, the result of the AKP's profound distrust of Washington, exacerbated by the sudden and frequent shifts in US Middle East policy.

Washington criticized the AKP government for its brutal crackdown on the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul that sparked mass demonstrations throughout the country in June 2013. Its eventual approval of Egypt's President Mursi's ouster in July, and later, the postponement of its war plans against Syria—which the Erdogan government had pushed for aggressively—were bitterly resented by Ankara. The Syrian civil war now threatens the security of Turkey's southern borders, partly as the result of the AKP government's decision to back right-wing Islamist groups and allow them to operate from Turkey.

Erdogan has blamed Washington for being behind an attempted coup against him. When the corrupt activities involving himself, his son Bilal and four cabinet ministers were exposed last December, leading to investigations, Erdogan removed thousands of police officers, investigators and state prosecutors. He claimed that they were part of a conspiracy being led by Washington and his former political ally, now in exile in the US, the Islamist preacher Fethullah Gülen.

Washington's sanctions on Iran severely disrupted Turkey's growing oil and gas trade with Tehran, which it circumvented by paying for the oil and gas in gold via Turkey's state bank. US support for the right-wing coup in Ukraine cut across Turkey's growing links with Russia, under conditions where one of Turkey's key economic policies has been to position itself as a transit hub for oil and gas from the Middle East, Russia

and Central Asia to Europe. Erdogan has sought to join the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in return for abandoning any attempt to join the European Union, and the Eurasian Union that Russia is seeking with the former Soviet republics.

Erdogan fears that Washington's renewed offensive against Syria will fail to unseat Assad without US ground troops and a political alternative opposition movement acceptable to the US. It may at the same time spark a wider conflagration that will bring the war ever closer to home, just as the US-led war on Afghanistan has destabilized Pakistan.

Concluded



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