

Turkey's role in ISIS conflict threatens to reignite civil war

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Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has responded ferociously to angry demonstrations that have taken place throughout the country, in protest over the government's refusal to aid Syria's Kurds in Kobani. The Kurdish enclave on Turkey's south eastern border is about to fall to forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Riot police went out in force against protestors, using water cannon, tear gas and live fire as demonstrations, called by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the banned guerrilla movement, spread throughout the country, including in Istanbul, Ankara and cities in south eastern Turkey.

Security forces killed at least 19 people, 10 in the city of Diyarbakir alone, injuring many more. The government ordered curfews in two provinces and some of the most affected cities with a predominantly Kurdish population, notably Mardin, Siirt, Batman and Mus.

Turkey's Interior Minister Efkani Ala denounced the protests as "treason," accusing those involved of "betraying their own country" and warned them to stop protesting or encounter "unpredictable" consequences.

The explosive situation is testimony to the incoherence and cynicism of the government's policy in the Middle East that could well spark a far wider conflagration in the region. This could lead to a renewal of civil war with Turkey's own Kurdish population, under conditions where the majority of the Turkish people are opposed to any military intervention in Iraq or Syria, and are increasingly angry over the rising cost of living.

Last week, the Turkish parliament voted to authorise Turkey's armed intervention in Iraq and Syria as well as to allow the deployment of foreign forces on Turkish soil for the same purpose. Turkey is the only NATO

ally that borders on Syria and Iraq and its defence could be used to justify NATO military intervention under NATO's Article 5 without a UN Security Council resolution.

While the parliamentary vote appeared to indicate that Ankara had fallen in line with Washington, Defence Minister Ismet Yilmaz said that no one should expect any immediate steps.

The resolution however specified that any military intervention was to be directed at "terrorist organisations," mentioning the PKK with which the AKP government has been engaged in peace negotiations, but not ISIS, in that context.

Moreover, President Erdogan set out three conditions for participation in Washington's coalition: the toppling of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—which means, in practice, supporting Islamist militant groups because no other fighting forces exist in Syria, and an internationally enforced buffer zone of 25 square kilometres within Syria adjacent to the Turkish border that would also be a "no fly zone," or off-limits to Syrian planes, a blatant infringement of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Ankara is determined that the anti-ISIS operations do not strengthen Kurdish forces in either Syria, where they have set up an autonomous zone known as Rojava, or in Turkey itself. It is anxious that Washington's de facto collaboration with the PKK against ISIS, particularly in support of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the semi-autonomous entity in northern Iraq, and its capital Erbil, not lead to a US delisting of the PKK as a terrorist group or enhance its prestige.

Turkey has so far deployed troops and tanks on the border, in sight of Kobani, but refrained from taking any action against ISIS forces besieging the town. Its

chief purpose is to block the crossing of Kurdish—both Syrian and Turkish—fighters and armaments to relieve the city, thereby blockading Kobani on the only side which is not under siege from ISIS. More than 400 people have died in the three-week battle for Kobani, causing 160,000 Syrians to flee to Turkey, which is already providing refuge for at least a million Syrian refugees.

Ankara's blockade of the Kurdish enclave has enraged the PKK and its supporters. The fate of Rojava is widely seen as bound up with the survival of the peace process with Turkey and threatens the resumption of the 30-year war that led to the loss of 40,000 lives. The imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, speaking from his Imrali prison cell, said "If Kobani falls, the process will end." Similar messages to the effect that "war will start" have come from other Kurdish parties.

If ISIS captures Kobani, jihadists will control a long stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border, thanks to the support lavished on them by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf States, the CIA, and Turkey itself, which has long provided them with bases, intelligence and logistical support.

It is in this area, once the Kurds have been vanquished, that Ankara proposes to set up an international buffer zone, thereby eliminating any threat of a Kurdish autonomous zone allied to the PKK on Turkey's borders, while at the same time appearing to contain ISIS by declaring ISIS-controlled territory a "safe haven" for the Syrian Kurds.

The buffer zone would probably also encompass the tomb of Suleyman Shah, a tiny Turkish sovereign entity 30 kilometres inside Syria, guarded by Turkish soldiers and now surrounded by ISIS. This would set the stage for attaching it to Turkish territory, and thus a de facto redrawing of the border with Syria.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the main opposition party, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) which voted against the parliamentary resolution, opposed Erdogan's proposals for military intervention to unseat Assad.

Turkish officials said that US and NATO air forces will only be allowed to use its military base near Incirlik in southeast Turkey to enforce a no-fly zone over Syria, to "protect" a future international buffer area. Incirlik is much closer to ISIS-controlled territory

than the US bases in the Gulf and Jordan.

No less than US Vice President Joe Biden spoke publicly about Ankara's support for ISIS, which in any event has been an open secret. Referring to Islamist militants crossing into Syria from Turkey, Biden said, "President Erdogan told me ... 'You were right, we let too many people through,'" adding that Turkey was now trying to seal its border. While it was widely reported that he had been forced to apologise to an angry Erdogan—to keep him on board with the coalition—this was not so much to recant what the Turkish President had said but for revealing a supposedly private conversation between himself and Erdogan.

This week, following multiple phone calls from the US State Department to Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, President Obama is sending General John Allen, his envoy to the global anti-ISIS coalition, to Ankara for discussions about Turkey's role in the coalition. His difficult task is to keep Ankara in the coalition along with the Kurds, who are being asked to provide the "boots on the ground" to fight on Washington's behalf against the myriad militias now vying for control of the region's vast energy resources.

Erdogan's cynical use of the ISIS "threat" as both a mechanism for crushing the Kurds and a casus belli for a wider war in the region in its own and Washington's interests is a dangerous manoeuvre that threatens to unleash forces within Turkey itself that he may prove powerless to control.



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