

SYRIA'S DARK SHADOW OVER US-TURKEY RELATIONS

Like all conflicts, the Syrian civil war has given rise to its share of unintended consequences. Among them are the emergence of the Syrian Kurds as a force to contend with and the resulting discord between Turkey and the US. Bashar al-Assad's resilience has frustrated Turkey while the rise of ISIL as a global jihadi threat, has caused the US to re-evaluate its priorities. Turkey remains focused on Assad and preventing the consolidation of the Syrian Kurds whereas the US has allied itself with the same Kurds to defeat ISIL. In this article, the author argues that the longer the Syrian stalemate continues the greater the chances are that the US-Turkish discord will deepen.

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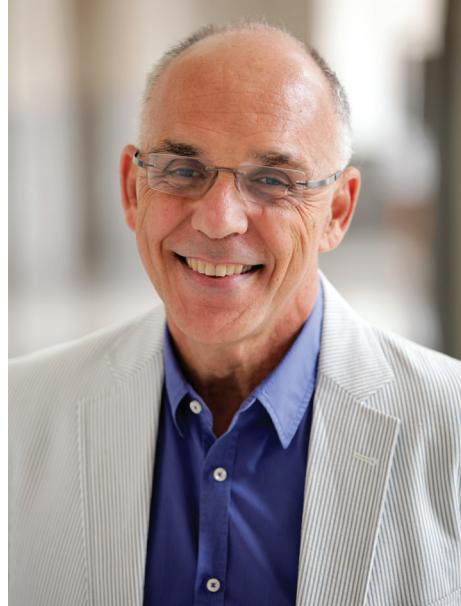


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The Syrian conflict, primarily because of its duration and ferocity, has upended much of the Middle East in ways in which few would have imagined back in 2011. It has been far more consequential than in the early days of the Arab Spring when a number of Arab strongmen were toppled by massive mobilization efforts of the citizenry. In Syria, the regime, contrary to expectations, resisted and what is more resorted to massive and disproportionate use of force to quell the rising unrest. The resulting civil war has drawn in regional and global powers. Two allies, Turkey and the United States, soon found themselves expressing the same general viewpoint: that Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad should be replaced by a government reflecting the collective will of the people. This initial consensus was ultimately undermined by the length, severity, and endlessness of the unfolding conflict, as well as by how each government interpreted the other's policy actions.

As the Syrian conflict enters its sixth year, Turkey and the US are finding themselves simultaneously collaborating and bickering, yet also working at cross-purposes. Frustration with existing outcomes, failure to achieve stated aims, complications resulting from the presence of far too many consequential actors – ranging from Russia and Iran to Saudi Arabia – have complicated matters further. For the US, which has to balance other global interests and factors, the entry of Russia and the nuclear deal with Iran have added a layer of policy difficulty on top of the legacy bequeathed by the Iraq (mis)adventure.

The conflict has also metastasized; it no longer is a simple struggle between a poorly armed citizenry and a regime determined to hold on to power no matter what the cost. The opposition, far from being unified, is a hodgepodge of groups, some of which are diametrically opposed to each other while others such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Al Qaeda offshoot, Jabhat al-Nusra, are only interested in their own total victory. The situation has morphed from a point at which the US and Turkish governments seemed to closely coordinate their respective approaches both at the outset of the Arab Spring in general and during its Syrian variant to the current situation where a great deal of acrimony has built up as the



two sides seem to have lost confidence in each other. At the heart of this change in fortunes are changing strategic calculations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Washington has become increasingly focused on the global menace represented by ISIL – a policy emphasis that was further accentuated with the Paris bombings in November 2015, which had the unintended effect of shifting the attention away from ensuring the demise of Assad's Baathi regime in Damascus to defeating ISIL. In contrast, the rise of jihadist groups in Syria, viewed by Ankara as the natural by-product of the continuation of Assad's rule, has not diminished Turkey's insistence on bringing Assad down first. Underlying Ankara's unease are also the gains made by the Syrian Kurds who are closely affiliated with the Turkish Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with which a putative peace process came to a screeching halt in 2015. The process became victim of Turkish domestic politics at a time when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), was fighting for political supremacy in an increasingly polarized society.

In the Beginning

For Erdogan, Syria had been the litmus test of the “zero problems with neighbors” policy enunciated early in the AKP's ascendancy to power. After all, Ankara and Damascus had been at odds over the PKK and a slew of other issues, and had almost come to blows in 1998 over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's presence in Damascus. Yet within a few years after the AKP had come to power, Syria and Turkey were engaged in the most cordial of relationships with Ankara acting as a middleman between Damascus and Jerusalem, supporting Assad in Lebanon at a time when the United Nations, France, and the US in particular were pressuring the Syrians to vacate their troops from Lebanon. Turkey and Syria would hold symbolic joint cabinet meetings extolling the virtues of what they called “two peoples, one government.”

The revolts in Syria caught the Erdogan government by surprise. Not wanting to see its new ally Assad share the fate of presidents Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, Ankara engaged the Damascus leadership, urging it to implement reforms that would take the wind from the revolt's sails. It was to no avail as Assad refused to go along with even the most minor of reforms insisting instead on suppressing

the uprising at all costs. Erdoğan dramatically broke with the Syrian regime and began to side with the opposition, helping it organize on Turkish territory. Initially peaceful, the opposition to Assad soon shifted and assumed a military dimension that would also be supported by Turkey and ultimately a large number of countries including, most prominently, the US. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerged as the primary instrument of the new policy direction.

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The differences over support for Al-Nusra reached a crisis point during a May 2013 Washington visit by then-Prime Minister Erdoğan. The Obama administration, fearing the consolidation of Al Qaeda-like organizations, pressured Turkey to end its support for Al-Nusra. While it would take some time for Turkish authorities to declare Al-Nusra a terrorist organization, the growth of an infrastructure supportive of jihadists in Turkey meant that large numbers of foreign fighters continued to use Turkish territory en route to Syria bolstering the ranks of not just Al-Nusra but ultimately ISIL as well. Border control and other types of support for the jihadists would remain a point of contention between the two countries.

Turkey had from the early days of the Syrian stalemate expected the US to take the lead in overthrowing the Syrian regime. Suffering from large numbers of Syrian refugees and alarmed at the extent of civilian casualties, Ankara was disappointed with the Obama administration’s reluctance to get involved. Washington also spurned Turkish demands for a safe zone in Syria principally because such a zone would need to be protected by ground troops that no country, including Turkey and the US, were willing to provide. Obama’s decision not to bomb Syrian chemical installations after his “red line” statement was particularly distressing to Ankara. For some, Obama’s last minute change of heart was perceived as a sign of weakness and lack of interest in the outcome of the Syrian war.

The Rise of Syrian Kurds and the Deepening of the US-Turkey Discord

Undoubtedly, the issue at the heart of the current Turkish-American dispute is American support for the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) that is

closely affiliated with the PKK. In fact, the PYD's military cadres had been trained by the PKK. Following ISIL's sweep across northern Syria into Iraq and the routing of the Iraqi army in Mosul and elsewhere, the US found itself in an accidental alliance with the PYD. Following its spectacular conquests, including Mosul, ISIL decided in October 2014 to also overrun the Syrian Kurdish border town of Kobani. In so doing, it massed large numbers of its fighters as well as large quantities of American-supplied arms captured from the Iraqi army. This proved to be a critical ISIL mistake and provided an opportunity for the US administration to inflict significant damage on ISIL in what was a target rich environment. Erdogan, however, was profoundly disturbed by this decision, making it clear that he would rather see the Syrian Kurds defeated and ISIL victorious than the other way around. For Turkey, the success of PYD, an ally of the PKK, in uniting much of northern Syria under its banner constituted a strategic threat. This is despite the fact that the Ankara government and the PKK were conducting peace negotiations following a unilateral 2013 PKK ceasefire.

Erdogan's angry rhetoric against both the PYD (it is worse than ISIL) and the US (why is America interested in Kobani, oil, gold, diamonds?) not only alienated Turkish Kurds, religious and non-religious, but it also complicated collaboration with the US.¹ As the Turkish government railed against the Syrian Kurds, the US-PYD collaboration proved very fruitful as the PYD not only held on to Kobani, but also allowed the American air force to inflict heavy losses on ISIL in the process. The Syrian Kurds demonstrated that they were not only willing and able to fight ISIL, but they also proved to be the only ones skillful in inflicting successive defeats on the jihadist organization. The collaboration between the US and the PYD quickly deepened to the point where the two would plan joint operations, such as the capture of the border town of Tal Abyad. Since then, the US and the PYD have mounted a number of successful joint operations as the Syrian Kurdish organization has gained the respect not just of the Pentagon but also of many American political leaders from across the political spectrum. The battle for Kobani would become an important symbol, akin to Halabja, of Kurdish identity, nation building, and self-respect.

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¹ "Turkey's Erdogan says will use Daesh for ISIL," Today's Zaman, 31 October 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/anasyfa_turkeyes-erdogan-says-will-use-daesh-for-isil_363219.html

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's forces massacred some 5,000 Kurdish civilians in the northern Iraqi town of Halabja in a well-documented and massive attack with chemical weapons.

While no one denied the PYD's deep connections to the PKK – an organization listed as a terrorist group by the US, Europe, and Turkey – the US chose to make a legal distinction between the PYD – which is not listed as a terrorist group – and the PKK. For Turkey, the PYD's newly won respect in the West has been difficult to accept; the government and its press organizations in Turkey have mounted a vilification campaign against the PYD. In the run up to the first of the 2015 parliamentary elections in June 2015, Erdoğan's anti-PYD and anti-Kobani stand backfired: arguably it was an important, if not critical, factor in the defection of Kurds from the AKP. In turn, this caused a deterioration in the AKP's relations with the Kurdish movement, but primarily with the legal Turkish Kurdish Party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

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For two reasons the Syrian crisis has in effect become a domestic political question for Turkey. First, it has had ripple effects through Kurdish politics. Kobani and the PYD's battleground successes galvanized the Kurds throughout the region and provided a shot in the arm and a source of great pride for the Kurds. Second is the emergence in Turkey proper of an infrastructure supportive

of the likes of both Al-Nusra and ISIL, which gave government policy a sectarian bent: it became pro-Sunni and anti-Alawite (the ruling minority sect in Syria), but in Turkey, where some 15 percent of the population claim to be Alevi (like the Alawites another offshoot of Shiite Islam), this contributed to internal tensions. The growth of the infrastructure was the direct result of the earlier government decision to look the other way and sometimes even facilitate the transfer and recruitment of foreign fighters through trusted NGOs. Relaxed border controls meant that ISIL could use Turkish territory as its strategic depth, transferring its wounded, establishing moneymaking businesses, and deploying its enforcer squads in Turkish border towns that, when needed, killed anti-ISIL Syrians. One of the more dramatic byproducts has been a series of three bombings in Diyarbakır, Suruç, and Ankara targeting young activist Turkish Kurds that killed over 130 in total.

At the end of 2015, the Turkish state – under pressure from the US and others – started to clamp down on the ISIL infrastructure by rounding up supporters and

tightening border controls. This will be a difficult task complicated by the resumption of hostilities between the Turkish state and the PKK, which together with other dissidents, have been a priority for Turkish security services. The January 2016 bombing of one of Istanbul's most important touristic locations by an ISIL suicide bomber is an indication that Turkey may pay a heavy price for its lackadaisical approach to the threat of jihadist violence.

Despite the bifurcation in conflict zones (PKK-Turkey and PYD-ISIL), the US-PYD collaboration continued as new territories were captured from ISIL. One of the more significant results of this collaboration was the Turkish decision to open up the mammoth Incirlik air base and three others in southern Turkey for American air operations against ISIL, which hitherto were being conducted primarily from bases in Qatar and aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. If Ankara, after a long period of recalcitrance, has decided to reverse course on this issue, it is because it found itself marginalized by the expanding and successful anti-ISIL US-PYD alliance and unable to influence the course of events; it is, in other words, an attempt at damage control. Ankara got one important concession in return: Washington promised that it would prevent the PYD from crossing the Euphrates river westward towards Jarablus in an effort to link up with the isolated Kurdish canton, Afrin, and thereby establish one continuous belt from the Iraqi border all the way to Turkey's Hatay (Alexandretta) province. Ankara announced that a PYD intrusion west of the Euphrates would be its red line.

The unpredictability of the Syrian conflict once again altered the calculations of the parties when in November 2015 Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber over an incursion into its airspace. The Russian response has been swift and quite damaging to coalition efforts combatting ISIL in Syria. In addition to direct economic and political sanctions on Turkey, the Russians brought S-400 top-of-the-line anti-aircraft missiles into Syria. As a result, the Turkish air force has stopped flying over Syrian territory. More importantly, the Russians have made it clear that they reserve the right to interfere in Kurdish matters in both Turkey and Syria.² Unconfirmed reports of Russian arms deliveries to the PYD could have provided the Syrian Kurds with a patron other than the US and with it, additional maneuvering room. Perhaps the first indication of this came with the capture of the Tishrin Dam by the PYD with American help. The capture of the dam has already entailed a nominal crossing of the Euphrates River though not in Jarablus. Arguably, the US has in effect been party to this transgression of the Turkish "red line" although this currently has more psychological rather than military importance. Yet, at the time of writing, all indications were that the PYD,

² Dorian Jones, "Turkey: Is Russia Ready to Play the Kurdish Card?," *Eurasianet*, 21 December 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76621>

again with American air support, could be preparing to take the town of Manbij, this time a town unmistakably on the western side of the Euphrates.

Another area of American-Turkish discord has ironically manifested itself in Iraq. While Turkey has gotten closer to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, it has found that when it comes to sovereignty issues, Washington has sided with Baghdad rather than with Ankara and Erbil, which it had worked hard to protect and prop-up. This was the case for KRG oil exports to Turkey in violation of agreements with the Iraqi government; admittedly Baghdad had also failed to live up to its side of the bargain with the Kurds. The US worried that KRG moves, encouraged by Ankara, were a harbinger of an effort to lay the foundations for independence. When Turkey decided to reinforce its positions in northern Iraq in December 2015, ostensibly used to train Kurdish *peshmerga* forces and Sunni forces to combat ISIL with artillery and tanks, the Iraqis made a fuss. Iraqi concerns may have had to do more with Turkish intentions to train Sunnis as opposed to Kurds. Clearly, they were encouraged and supported by Russia, which offered to put the issue before the UN Security Council. Ankara had erred by not seeking prior Iraqi permission. Turkey's seeming disregard for Iraqi sovereignty provided an opportunity for Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar Abadi's challengers, including former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, to take advantage of the crisis to undermine his power and legitimacy. Unwilling to see Abadi weakened because of a domestic political crisis, the US forcibly and repeatedly called on the Turks to remove their troops.

Future Pitfalls

The growing divergence between Turkey and the US over Syria has mostly to do with differing strategic calculations. While the US does not want to see Assad remain in power, its priorities have shifted considerably with the advent of ISIL. For Washington, ISIL is the first and preeminent priority. For Turkey, by contrast, ISIL is a by-product of the Assad regime, hence its focus is on Assad's demise rather than ISIL's. Equally important to Turkey as Assad is the need to prevent further gains by the PYD, and if possible reverse them.

The US-Turkey relationship is an enduring one; it will not be derailed by disagreements over Syria. The two countries have many complex sets of interests over which they exchange information, argue, bargain, and more often than not work on together. Nonetheless, the Syrian crisis is proving to be a particularly challenging one for both countries because of what is at stake: the possible dissolution of the conventional borders in the Middle East, and the reconfiguration of not just Syria but also Iraq.

Paradoxically, the US and Turkey simultaneously hold common and conflicting positions on these issues. The US, a status quo power par excellence, would very much prefer if both Iraq and Syria remained intact after having found acceptable solutions to representation and the sharing of resources by the differing parties. Yet, the US, willingly or unwillingly, is the party most responsible for the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq even if it does not want it to become independent. For many years, Turkey resisted providing assistance to the KRG, but today finds itself the country most willing to consider its quest for independence. By contrast, in Syria, Ankara has been resisting efforts by the Syrian Kurds to achieve a modicum of autonomy and recognition after decades of being denied some of the most elementary attributes of citizenship.

More importantly, distance and interests naturally shape perceptions of the Syrian crisis. Syria was a distant land for the US; it was first and foremost a struggle over who should rule Syria: Assad or a more representative form of government. With the evolution of the crisis, the focus became the humanitarian calamity with mounting pressure on the US, reinforced by global expectations that it was up to Washington to find a quick solution. It then metastasized to and refocused on ISIL as the latter assumed all the facets of a global movement capable of threatening not just the region but also the US and its allies in the West. For Turkey, of course, the issue has always been about Assad and Syrian Kurdish empowerment. The latter has assumed an even larger profile because the Turkish-Kurdish conflict has re-emerged with a vengeance. The Obama administration has failed to articulate a coherent strategy, and therefore it lurks in the shadows on multiple issues. Even its greatest successes, which came as a result of collaboration with the PYD, had an opportunistic start and, despite Turkish fears, it had no ulterior motive regarding Syrian Kurds. It was simply the only policy that produced results. By contrast, Turkey has been far more constant, though willing to take certain risks that have not served its interests well. It not only wants Assad out, but also wants to use this as a means to emerge as the dominant power in the region.

Initial Turkish openings to the region and beyond faltered primarily due to the Arab Spring and its unpredictable consequences, but also because Erdogan and his

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then-Foreign Minister now Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu overplayed their hand. The Syrian crisis represents both a setback and a new opportunity; a setback because so much had been invested, first in Assad, and then in the opposition, and an opportunity because Turkey, as the most important neighboring country, has much to gain from the ashes of Syria in terms of future influence and simple reconstruction efforts.

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The entry of the Russians, especially the disastrous decision by Ankara to shoot down the Russian plane thereby providing Russian leader Vladimir Putin an opening to weaken the Turkish position in Syria, has complicated Turkey’s plans. The Russians will also provide the Syrian Kurds – already buoyed by their tactical alliance with the US – new bargaining power and even arms. It is difficult to see how the Syrian conflict will end without the Syrian Kurds gaining more than just simple recognition.

In the short-term, the Turkish red lines are about to succumb to the PYD’s new push to capture territory West of the Euphrates, first in the south and then in all likelihood in the north around Jarablus, despite America’s preferences to the contrary. At this point, Ankara will be confronted with an unpleasant question: does it intervene to uphold its red line and risk getting sucked in a conflict beyond its boundaries while also facing the prospect of exacerbating its domestic Kurdish crisis because of the Turkish Kurds’ strong attachment to Rojava, Kurdish Syria? To date, Erdoğan has been quite capable, when convenient, of reversing key policy positions with minimum political damage. This is primarily due to his ability to dominate the Turkish media. His U-turn on opening the bases to the US or his decision to reconfigure the much-damaged relations with Israel are key examples.

The critical position Turkey occupies in the American policy quandary over Syria has shielded Ankara from any criticism of its conduct in its Kurdish regions. In Turkey’s urban southeast, the Turkish army has employed tanks and heavy-handed methods against the PKK, which has resulted in large civilian losses.

Going forward, three interrelated issues will determine the severity of the US-Turkish discord over Syria. First, as the US increasingly focuses on ISIL at the expense of Assad and collaborates with Russia, how will Turkey respond? For Turkey, there is a real danger ahead. The Assad-Russian-Iran axis will, in all likelihood,

try to re-conquer the rest of Aleppo and surrounding areas which will force many more Syrians to seek asylum in Turkey. By mid-February 2016, the signs of a major Syrian/Russian/Iranian push towards Aleppo were evident with more refugees flowing towards Turkey. Already shouldering an unprecedented refugee burden and under fire from Europeans for allowing refugees traverse to their territory, Turkey will be in a bind.

Second, the military stalemate in Syria in the form of a consolidated north-south line of government control in the western part of the country is not a stable equilibrium from Turkey's perspective. The Syrian Kurds are likely to benefit from this because the presence of ISIL will allow them to receive continued support from the US and the absence of any military force to challenge them in Syria will allow them to consolidate their hold in the north. Provided they do not make mistakes in how they treat non-Kurdish minorities in their midst, these gains will be hard to reverse. Now that the Syrian Kurdish issue has become a domestic Turkish issue over which the government and Turkish Kurds violently disagree, any move Ankara undertakes in Syria and even Iraq risks having repercussions at home.

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Third, the Turkish leadership has become increasingly authoritarian and erratic; in fact, this authoritarian bent is likely to result in them making many more mistakes. From major decisions, such as escalating problems with Turkey's own Kurds to shooting down the Russian bomber, to lesser ones, such as sending heavy armor into Iraq without first consulting Baghdad, Erdoğan has made demonstrably poor decisions. While the Russian retaliation after the jet downing incident forced Turkey to seek Western support, Erdoğan and his entourage's fundamental distrust of the West does not make for a productive relationship.

Erdoğan's strident rhetoric against Washington – challenging the Obama administration to choose between Turkey and the PYD – risks damaging relations further, especially because the US heeded Turkey's call to prevent the PYD from being invited to the Geneva talks.³ In a similar vein, Turkish authorities were quick to blame the PYD for a 17 February 2016 bomb attack in the heart of Ankara; it soon became apparent that the act had been perpetrated by a renegade PKK outfit, the Kurdistan

³ Erdoğan to US: Choose either Turkey or the PYD as your partner," *Today's Zaman*, 7 February 2016, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_erdogan-to-us-choose-either-turkey-or-the-pyd-as-your-partner_411628.html

Freedom Falcons (TAK). Erdoğan pushed the envelope by arguing also that the PYD ought not be part of the 27 February 2016 ceasefire the opposition forces and the regime agreed to. While possibly calculated to put Obama on the defensive to extract concessions from the US, the rhetoric not only exacerbates anti-American feelings in Turkey but also increases the prospects for a Turkish miscalculation. Not unlike the downing of the Russian plane, Turkey's February bombardment of PYD positions across the border in Syria, though designed to show that Ankara can stand up to the US, is precisely the kind of brinksmanship that without well-defined political goals, especially in a very fluid conflict situation, can cause far more problems down the road than anticipated.

The combination of the three factors could prove to be quite harmful to US-Turkish relations. The US is not immune to extreme reactions either; more jihadist terror on American soil or the election of a nativist/populist leader would also contribute to further discord. At the moment though, it is painfully apparent that the leaderships no longer trust each other.