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Turkey’s Interests in The Syrian Civil War

Today the mention of the name Islamic State, IS, ISIS or ISIL scares most people worldwide even though most of us never have and never will be direct targets of this terrorist group. In Turkey, the fear is much more real than in the United States because of Turkey’s proximity to the Syrian Civil War. The war has become much more than just a civil war because over 60 countries are currently engaged in the war in some capacity along with multiple rebel groups and terrorist organizations. Turkey plays a key role in this conflict because it shares a border with both Syria and Iraq, but its strategy is in stark contrast with its ally the United States as well as other countries such as Russia. While the United States-led coalition’s main goal is to defeat ISIS, Turkey has a more complicated goal in the Syrian conflict (Harrison 3). Turkey is currently using the conflict to promote Sunni interests in Syria but, more importantly, is attempting to contain the Kurdish fighting forces in Northern Syria. Turkey has continually attempted to control Kurdish forces within its borders as well as in Syria because they fear the Kurds will attempt to create an independent Kurdistan. This fear is called the Sevres Syndrome because after World War I, the main European powers divided Turkey into many territories to be ruled by Italy, Greece, France and Britain among others. To this day Turks are afraid of the disintegration of their country (Lider). Almost every major decision Turkey has made since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, from allowing terrorists to pass through its country to joining the United States coalition, has been to control the Kurdish fighters and the Assad regime and not to combat IS. This will have long-term consequences for Turkey’s domestic security and has strained their relationship with the United States and Russia. In order for there to be a resolution in Syria, Turkey should concentrate on controlling IS and developing a plan with their allies to instill a new Syrian government instead of fighting with their Kurdish neighbors.

Turkey has been in conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a terrorist organization waging periodic guerilla warfare within Turkey, since the Soviet Union backed this organization during the Cold War. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is an offshoot of this organization operating as a rebel group in Northern Syria fighting IS and is thus seen as a threat to Turkey’s territory and safety (Totten 2). Turkey’s main goals in Syria are to remove the Assad regime, prevent the Kurds from making more gains in Northern Syria and crossing the Euphrates, and establishing an IS and Kurd-free safe, no-fly zone in Northern Syria. Turkey wants to stop the PYD from crossing the Euphrates because they do not want the Kurds to join with PKK members or other Kurds in the Southeast of Turkey ("Erdoğan's Dangerous Gambit: Turkey and Syria"). Even so, Turkey has attempted to work with the PYD and demanded the organization renounce the Assad regime and not declare an autonomous Kurdish region inside Syria as stipulations to work together. The PYD rejected these demands, so their relationship remains strained (Kanat and Ustun 4). The establishment of an independent Syrian Kurdish state, Turkey fears, would help Kurds in Turkey wage war to create an independent Turkish Kurdistan (Totten 2). These aspirations are a reality in Southeast Turkey where Kurds have faced oppression from the government since Ataturk instituted nationalist reforms forcing everyone to identify as Turkish in the late 1920s. Kurds in Iraq are autonomous and function independently from the government in Baghdad, so an independent Kurdistan is viable in Syria and Turkey because it is almost a reality in Iraq (Totten 1).

Surprisingly Turkey has a good relationship with the Kurds in Iraq who call themselves the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) because they sell oil to Turkey. The KRG is viewed positively as compared to the PKK and the PYD because it has not killed thousands of Turks in terrorist attacks and perpetrated violence within Turkey like the PKK has nor is it trying to fill the power vacuum that exists in Syria like the PYD is attempting (Kanat and Ustun 8). The PYD has also been accused of trying to change Northern Syria’s demographics in preparation of creating an independent Kurdistan by expelling Turkmen and Arabs (Kanat and Ustun 6). This exacerbates the refugee crisis in Turkey and has been called a form of ethnic cleansing by some human rights organizations (Kanat and Ustun 8). Turkey’s cooperation with the KRG indicates that Turkey is open to working and negotiating with Kurds in general. Even though the PYD and PKK pose a significant threat to Turkey, IS poses an even larger threat to Turkey because the PYD and PKK are groups with clear goals who Turkey can negotiate with. Turkey cannot negotiate with IS because it is a decentralized terrorist organization which will stop at nothing to realize its unclear goals. While Turkey has every reason to distrust the PKK for its very violent history, the PKK is a group that wants to establish its own state to end the discrimination its people often face. The PKK appears to be a more rational group with less extreme views than IS which is why Turkey should continue to protect itself against violence from this group but should also take more actions to make Kurds feel less marginalized in Turkey to stem the violence.

Turkish political officials, most notably the President, have also used the Syrian crisis to attack Kurds and use them as a political tools in recent years to seize more power. The PKK began fighting Turkish forces again in 2015 after a brief respite from violence, and Erdoğan, Turkey’s President, responded with increased violence before the Fall elections in order to discredit the pro-Kurdish party: the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) (Tisdall 1). Erdoğan has also used terrorist attacks to spread hate speech against the Kurds including after the bombing in January in Istanbul by IS members. He stated that Turkey would fight the killers, and he referenced the PKK as the killers in this attack even though IS claimed responsibility (Tisdall 1). Furthermore, it was suggested by some news sources that Turkey’s bombing of PKK bases in Iraq was an attempt to gain support for the AKP party before the Fall 2015 elections and undermine the HDP party. The violence perpetrated by the PKK as well as the hateful rhetoric by the AKP party negatively impacted the success of the HDP in the Fall, and they were unable to make the 10% threshold necessary to be represented in the government (Lider). The United States has criticized Erdoğan for propagating hate speech and nationalist sentiment because they believe it weakens the fight against IS by attacking the ethnic group that comprises the PYD (“Erdoğan’s Dangerous Gambit: Turkey and Syria”). The United States has also stated that Turkey and the PKK need to stop fighting and use their democratic tools in place to end their conflict (Sprusansky 1). Politics have been used as well as military action to curtail Kurdish influence within Turkey because the Kurds are seen as more of a threat than IS. Instead of scapegoating Kurds for the escalation of violence in Turkey, political leaders such as Erdoğan should be using these tragic events to garner more support to fight the people who are actually killing Turks: IS members.

Turkey’s policy towards the Kurds puts it in direct conflict with the United States. The United States backs the PYD because they believe it is the only rebel group large enough and organized enough to combat IS effectively. The PYD is also the most pro-American group out of the rebel groups vying for power within Syria which makes it the most logical choice for the United States to support (Totten 2). Because the United States is actively backing the PYD, they are upset with Turkey’s rhetoric against Kurds and attempts to attack PYD positions. Besides disagreeing on the PYD, Turkey was also reluctant to enter into the Syrian conflict and did not allow the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States to use Turkish air bases including Incirlik. Turkey worried about the 49 hostages IS was holding in June of 2014 and believed that opening air bases to the United States would prevent them from negotiating their hostages back (Kanat and Ustun 2). Furthermore, Turkey demanded the United States attack Assad and the Syrian Army as many times as it attacked IS because they believe both groups are equal threats (Barkey 5). Then after IS’s attack on Suruç in July of 2015 as well as an escalation of violence by IS in Turkish cities, Turkey opened Incirlik, Diyarbakir, and Malatya air bases to the United States coalition, but one of the stipulations Turkey had in opening these air bases was the United States would create a no-fly zone in Northern Syria which has yet to be realized (Kanat and Ustun 1). The escalation of violence by IS as well as the PKK in 2015 convinced Turkey to join the United States-led coalition to defeat ISIS. Turkey’s involvement in the coalition is a huge asset because Turkey has a large army, is strategically placed, and allows better surveillance of IS (Kanat and Ustun 2-3). Even so, Turkey’s fight is against the PKK as well as IS, and because the PYD is an offshoot of the PKK, the United States worries their relationship with the PYD will be strained because they are now cooperating with Turkey (Kanat and Ustun 4). The United States worries that if the PKK is preoccupied with fighting Turkey then the PYD might not be as efficient, and Turkey will not contribute to the coalition as fully as hoped (Sprusansky 1).

The United States and Turkey also differ in their future political strategy for Syria. Immediately before the Arab Spring and the ensuing Syrian conflict, Turkey was attempting to assert itself in the Middle East as an important power and diplomatic force (Barkey 15). The Syrian conflict has threatened this position Turkey was attempting to fill because Turkey has made many enemies in the Middle East for joining the United States coalition as well as attacking the Kurds. Also, the United States wants an Arab coalition to help with the war and determine Syria’s future when the war is over. Turkey wants to be the leader in the Middle East and resents the United States for insisting on an Arab coalition (Harrison 4). Furthermore, the United States has no broad strategy when it comes to Syria. Its only focus is on defeating IS, while Turkey has a larger view for Syria and wants the Assad regime to be replaced by a pro-Sunni government (Kanat and Ustun 4). Both the United States and Turkey agree that the Assad regime has allowed terrorist cells to grow which threatens national security around the world. Additionally both the United States and Turkey believe the best way to combat IS is through training and supplying Syrian rebels but diverge on which rebels to train and supply (Kanat and Ustun 5-6). The United States has empowered and supported the PYD by sending them fifty Special Forces which has given the group a new legitimacy internationally (Kanat and Ustun 7). The PYD, and tangentially the PKK, also have more political power internationally because of their victory at Kobane and their ability to protect minorities that IS targets including the Yezidis and Turkmen (Barkey 13). The United States has very different aspirations for Syria than Iraq as well. In Iraq the United States is trying to combat a much more political IS threat because IS in Iraq is exacerbating the Sunni and Shia conflict by recruiting disenfranchised Sunnis to wage war. Furthermore, because the United States has spent a massive amount of money in Iraq since it invaded, it is more concerned about preserving Iraq than Syria (Harrison 2-3). Turkey and the United States have different objectives and interests in the region, but now Turkey is relying more on its NATO allies including the United States for help to combat the economic and political problems they are facing because of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, Turkey must be more responsive to the goals of the United States (Arango 1). Even so, Turkey should demand the United States create a comprehensive plan for Syria and its future political stability because this could potentially be a catastrophe for Turkish security if there is no plan. Turkey not only faces this future problem, but it also faces pressing problems today because of its policies at the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

At the beginning of the conflict, in order to combat the PYG and the Assad regime, Turkey assisted terrorist organizations such as al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Turkey did this because Assad, running a pro-Shia regime, stayed in power, the United States refused to establish a no-fly zone in Northern Syria, and they were frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Turkey supported extremist groups in the hopes that they would be able to change the tide of the battle, but shortly after supporting al-Nusra the group was eclipsed by IS (Barkey 5). Turkey also helped IS increase its dominance in the area because its economic support made no distinction between extremist Islamic groups and moderate groups. Turkey was accused of directly helping IS with logistics, treating IS members in Turkish hospitals, and supplying them with weapons in January of 2014 when a Turkish weapons truck was stopped on its way to Syria. Turkey claimed these weapons were going to aid Turkmens in Syria, but many states were unconvinced with this explanation (Karakoç and Doğruel 353-354). Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) was implicated in this supplying of weapons to Islamic extremists among Syrian rebel groups who were tied with al-Nusra and eventually IS (Taşpınar 2). Also, Turkey allowed individuals to pass through its country and border into Syria which inadvertently weakened the FSA and helped IS grow (Barkey 10). A side effect of keeping the Syrian-Turkish border relatively open was that IS sold oil to Turkey and used the open border to send oil elsewhere. IS sells around 40 million dollars of oil per month, so, by turning a blind eye, Turkey facilitated the funding of IS (“ISIL Oil is going to Assad, Some to Turkey, U.S. Official Says”).

Allowing IS to thrive has put Turkey into a difficult position. It is now a serious security threat to Turkey and has attacked metropolitan areas on multiple occasions. In order to combat the threat IS poses, Turkey has increased border security in an attempt to make it harder for individuals to join IS or other radical Islamist rebel groups in Syria and joined the United States coalition fighting against IS. It also launched a movement to secure the border in order to make it difficult for IS to smuggle oil through Turkey which will adversely affect IS’s finances (Barkey 14). Even with these new security measures, Turkey still sees the PYD as more of a threat. Turkey’s recent air strikes in April of 2016 have mainly focused on PYD targets and have killed at least 29 members of the PYD and halted their advance North of Aleppo. Turkey is concerned with keeping Aleppo out of the hands of the PYD as well as IS because if these groups take control of Aleppo then the Turkish border will be lined by enemies (Akyol 1). This policy is short-sighted because IS poses a more imminent threat than the creation of an independent Kurdistan. It is very possible that by bombing the PYD, IS will gain more power because their primary enemy will be weakened. This could have a negative consequence on Turkish security because if IS is able to gain enough power it could realize its goal of creating a caliphate extremely close to the Turkish border, therefore Turkey should divert their airstrikes to IS targets instead of PYD targets.

Not only has Turkey been directly bombing the PYD, they have also been using Turkmen forces to combat the PYD and IS in Northern Syria because these individuals are ethnically related to Turks. They immigrated to Syria during the Ottoman Empire period and are concentrated in Northwest Syria and the Turkish border. Most Turkmen oppose the Assad regime because it discriminates against Sunni Muslims. These groups received arms from Turkey and are generally split into two groups: rebel groups who are fighting the Syrian Army and Hezbollah and rebel groups who live near Kobane who are fighting IS with the help of Kurdish rebel groups (“Who are the Turkmens of Syria”). The Turkmen have been a major source of contention between Turkey and Russia because Russia bombed Turkmen areas. Russia was a late-comer to the Syrian war and officially entered the fray in 2015. Russia supports the Assad regime because having Assad remain in power allows Russia to preserve its presence in the Mediterranean for trade reasons and to keep Chechen terrorists out of Russia (Buchanan 1). So, while Russia claimed they would be helping to defeat IS, their main goal was to keep Assad in power which is why they targeted Turkmen forces. They built two military bases in Syria and sent antiaircraft missiles, tanks, and some navy soldiers to assist the Syrian army ("Russian Involvement in Syria Bad News for Turkey"). Only two out of the fifty-seven air strikes Russia conducted hit IS positions and, 70-90% of Russia’s airstrikes hit moderate rebel groups and bypassed IS and al-Nusra almost entirely (Souleimanov 1). This has led to a worsening of relations between Russia and Turkey and many fear their relationship will backslide towards tense Cold War relations. Russia continuously violated Turkish air space and challenged Turkey’s role as leader in the Middle East during their air strikes in Syria (Amos 1). Furthermore, this temporarily ended Turkey’s hopes for a no-fly zone because, to get this wish, they would have to challenge Russia which could lead to a conflict between the two states (Sprusansky 1).

Russia partially left the war in March of 2016 because helping Assad solidify control of the entire Syrian territory would be massively expensive (Souleimanov 1). Russia wants to preserve a Syria that is relatively stable and keeps Russia’s interests at heart which they feel like they have accomplished in weakening the moderate Islamist groups that the United States and Turkey support (Souleimanov 2). Furthermore, Russia’s support of Assad has solidified his legitimate claim to being in the peace process after the war is over (Souleimanov 3-4). Recently Russia began moving more military equipment into Syria indicating that they might be reinforcing Assad before he attempts to seize Aleppo, so Russia’s current and future involvement in the conflict is unknown (Millership). Around the same time Russia decided to scale down its military support in Syria, Iran also pulled the majority of its troops it sent to assist Assad (Souleimanov 3). Russia also began its air strike campaign after a visit from Iranian diplomats. This indicates that Russia and Iran are working together to preserve the Assad regime and Russia required assurance from Iran that it would be sending troops before it began bombing rebel groups (Souleimanov 2). Along with sending soldiers, Hezbollah sent fighters from Iran to assist the Assad regime and about 1,000 Shia volunteers have joined the Iran-Russia-Assad alliance from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries (Souleimanov 2). This poses a threat to Turkey because now air strikes in Syria could be hitting Iranians, rebel groups, or even the United States’ Special Forces working with the PYD. Not knowing who might be a casualty makes combatting the PYD or IS much more difficult because Turkey does not want to become embroiled in a war with one of the other countries involved in Syria over accidently killing one of their soldiers. The situation in Syria is also concerning because now there are at least three terrorist organizations very close to the Turkish border: IS, al-Nusra, and Hezbollah, and any of these groups have the potential to enter Turkey. Also, the PYD has stated that it will consider making an alliance with Russia and Assad if the United States and Turkey prevent the unification of Kurdish areas and prevent a road to the Kurdish district of Aleppo: Sheikh Maqsoud (Balanche 1). This alliance would be potentially contradictory though because IS and Assad have a symbiotic relationship because IS sells Assad oil and both avoid each other militarily (Harrison 2). The PYD’s main objective is to defeat IS, so an alliance with Assad and Russia would not help them realize this goal. This alliance would also threaten Turkey because it would ally almost all of Turkey’s enemies in Syria and pose a major threat to Turkish interests in the conflict. There would be little chance Turkey could defeat the PYD and Assad and protect the Turkmen in Syria if this alliance came to fruition.

Turkey’s policies that allowed IS to grow and inadvertently led to Russia involving itself in the conflict will have long-term detrimental effects for Turkey because Russia now has a large sphere of influence close to Turkey’s border. Assad is indebted to Russia for its support and Russia now has “vast geostrategic opportunities” ("Syrian Impasse and Russian Siege”). Through air strikes and creating military bases Russia now has a strong hold in the Middle East it never had before which it could potentially use to increase its oil trade. Russia was also able to turn the incident where Turkey blew a Russian air craft out of the sky into an effective political tool by portraying Turkey as the aggressor. Russia can now fly wherever it wants within Syria in the name of defeating IS, and Turkey cannot fly into Syria airspace without fear of Russia’s enmity. The power Russia has seized has been in the name of defeating IS, so there has been no international backlash ("Syrian Impasse and Russian Siege"). This will prevent Turkey from being the leader of the Middle East like it wanted before the Syrian war. Another long-term problem Turkey may face stems from the Turks who have entered into Syria as fighters for extremist groups. They could potentially return from the conflict with weapons and indoctrinated by radical Islamist groups, so after the war Turkey may continue to face attacks from fundamentalist groups (Barkey 10). Furthermore the conflict has increased political polarization within Turkey and more discrimination against minority populations such as the Alevi and Kurds (Barkey 11). This will most likely continue after the war is over because political polarization within the country will not disappear overnight and the Syrian refugees who have contributed to the polarization will most definitely not disappear overnight. Not only has the conflict caused social discontent, Turkey has also incurred a significant financial cost by allowing IS to thrive. The Syrian refugees have cost Turkey billions of dollars and adversely affected the economy (Barkey 12). Even so, Turkey’s leaders and certain businesses benefit from this conflict. Erdoğan has become more dictatorial within Turkey without much international backlash because he presents himself as the only power preventing refugees from flooding Europe. He has been given more leeway by the United States and Europe because he is using the refugee crisis and fight against IS as a political tool to get into the European Union and better his relations with the United States. Furthermore, the conflict presents a positive economic opportunity for some Turkish businesses because weapons companies have high demand, and, when the war is over, many Turks will find themselves with contracting jobs within Syria to rebuild the state (Saraçoğlu).

Turkey’s policies in Syria has resulted in unintended consequences. By funding terrorist organizations and allowing individuals to pass through Turkey into Syria Turkey has fueled the very organization that now attacks them: IS. Even though Turkey believes the PYD is more of a threat to its sovereignty than IS, it is evident this is not the case. IS is far reaching and has attacked Turkey multiple times, and the PYD is attempting to dismantle this organization. In the short-term it would make more sense for Turkey to attack IS instead of the PYD, but an independent Kurdistan is a real threat to Turkey and cannot be overlooked. In order to maintain its borders and protect Syrian refugees the best solution would be to create a safe-zone which is protected by the United States-led coalition and is an IS-free and a no-fly zone. This way Turkey would have the assurance the PYD would not facilitate an independent Kurdistan by working with the PKK, and it would help relieve the refugee crisis Turkey is facing. It would also help improve relations with the United States because Turkey would be less concerned with fighting the PYD and could invest its resources in defeating IS. Furthermore, Turkey needs to convince the United States to develop a viable plan for Syria in regards to Assad and what a future government would look like. Assad is working with Russia and Iran to maintain power and oppresses and kills his people; this makes him an unfit leader of Syria. Turkey deserves to have a plan in place for when the war is over, so they do not have to deal with a state that has no government or an ineffective government. This could create a very unstable country and contribute to an even larger refugee crisis than Turkey is already facing. It is especially important for the United States and Turkey to coordinate on instituting a different government because Russia will go to great lengths to maintain its influence in Syria which could pose a serious problem to both countries. Turkey wants to be the leader of the Middle East and the United States does not want Russia to be a major player in the Middle East, so both countries need to realize having a realistic plan for Syria’s future is essential.

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