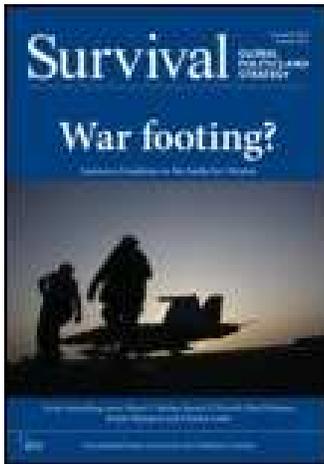


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Turkey's Syria Predicament

Henri J. Barkey

In the first weeks of October this year, an array of tanks waited on Turkey's southern border, their commanders watching carefully as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) fought to capture the nearby Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobane. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the force defending the town and an offshoot of Turkish insurgent group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), sought help from the powers allied against ISIS: the European Union, NATO, the United Nations, Turkey and, above all, the United States. But Ankara was reluctant to directly intervene in Kobane; it refused to allow help to reach the defenders and denied Washington permission to fly offensive operations out of the US Air Force base at Incirlik, in southern Turkey. Despite the threat that ISIS posed to the country further down the line, Ankara's preference appeared to be for the town to fall, thereby dealing a heavy blow to the Syrian Kurds.

The battle for Kobane began shortly after the release of 49 hostages captured by ISIS as it overran the Turkish consulate in Mosul, along with the rest of the city, on 10 June 2014. Those held included the consul general, other staff and their families, two children and a number of security personnel. The Iraqi Kurds warned Ankara of Mosul's imminent collapse five days in advance, but the Turks took their time evacuating the consulate in the belief that ISIS would not dare to invade the building. In securing the safe release of the hostages, Turkey appeared to have struck a deal that involved

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the release of 50 ISIS fighters held by another jihadist group.¹ The episode proved to be not just embarrassing for Ankara, but emblematic of Turkey's fortunes in the Middle East.

The predicament

Ankara finds itself on the horns of a dilemma. The Arab Spring, the Syrian crisis and the dramatic rise of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria have undermined years of effort in constructing a new foreign policy, upending its relations with states in the Middle East and the West, particularly America. Turkey also has to worry about how its own Kurdish population will be affected by both Kobane and the emergence of jihadist sympathisers within Turkish territory, some of whom have supplied ISIS with fighters and materiel.

Ankara and Washington were for the first two years oblivious to the regional transformation caused by the war in Syria, which has spilled over into Iraq and Lebanon. The sectarian, ethnic and political conflicts precipitated in Turkey's neighbourhood will persist for years, if not decades. The Syria–Iraq border ceased to function as a meaningful boundary soon after the Syrian insurrection began. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates added fuel to the fire by providing funds and other support to jihadist groups willing to take on Damascus. The Kobane crisis has added a new element, the Kurds, who have a presence in all of the countries in which the conflict is occurring, and whose nationalist aspirations have been boosted psychologically.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's continued hold on power is a major setback for Turkey, after three years of civil war and all the effort to oust him. Ankara put its reputation on the line by jettisoning Assad, as improved Turkey–Syria relations had been the quintessential success story of early foreign-policy initiatives by Recep Tayyip Erdogan (who was then prime minister, and is now president). Assad's resilience and America's refusal to establish no-fly zones in Syria ultimately led Erdogan to bet on jihadist opposition groups. The breakdown of this approach has cascaded into Turkey's wider foreign policy, damaging Ankara's relationships with neighbouring powers, as well as allies such as Washington. Still, Turkey's Syria predicament has been caused by more than its own mistakes, and is linked

to developments such as the souring of the Arab Spring; the collapse of new Middle East regimes, such as the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt; continued unrest throughout the region; and the Arab Gulf regimes' minimal efforts to countenance change, fearing its ramifications for their own societies. (Turkey has received little blame for the failures of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose Shia-dominated government was often criticised by the increasingly pro-Sunni Ankara.)

Frustrated with the military weakness and internal bickering of the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its political allies, the Turkish government began to surreptitiously support al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra. Despite Ankara's vehement denials of involvement with the group, Turkey became a conduit for jihadists travelling to Syria from all over the world. This created problems in the relationship with Washington, as the Obama administration pressured Ankara to declare Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organisation and curtail its unofficial support of the group. But by the time Turkey agreed to do so, it was too late: ISIS had eclipsed Jabhat al-Nusra, renaming itself the Islamic State.² While the two organisations have often been at odds with one another, they are nonetheless cut from the same cloth. The main precursor of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq, established Jabhat al-Nusra as a subsidiary to fight the Assad regime, before the success of its creation in attracting large numbers of followers led to distrust between the groups.³ By capturing Mosul, declaring an Islamic caliphate and allowing mercurial leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to emerge from the shadows, ISIS stole a march on just about everyone. The group's ambitions are far more grandiose than those of al-Qaeda's Afghan-based central leadership, which has never publicly declared a desire to acquire and hold territory on its own. By gaining access to a wide variety of resources, the majority of which have been pillaged from captured towns and army units, ISIS has forced many jihadists to take notice and even defect to the group.

All of this complicates Turkey's immediate policy options and long-term strategy on Syria and Iraq, a fact underlined by the American and allied airstrikes on the group following its occupation of Mosul and combat successes against Iraqi and Kurdish forces. Out of concern for the fate of the Turkish hostages held by ISIS, Minister of National Defence Ismet Yilmaz went to

great lengths in explaining that none of the American combat aircraft that attacked the group's positions in Iraq had embarked on the mission from the base at Incirlik.

When the Obama administration put together a coalition of Middle East powers to confront ISIS, the Turks were unwilling to join it. Ankara refused to cooperate even after aircraft from Saudi Arabia and the UAE participated in bombing runs against ISIS positions close to the border with Turkey, instead demanding that America target the Syrian regime as many times as it had the terrorist group.

The long-term consequences of the ever-expanding conflict do not augur well for Turkey. Wars of all kinds, international and civil, can cause huge social, economic and political disruption by giving rise to new and often unintended alliances, groups and environmental changes. Even if Assad is deposed soon, the effects of the war will prevent the establishment of a stable order in Syria. Ankara is already faced with a much-altered strategic geography on its borders. The Syrian Kurds may have incurred military losses in the fight against ISIS, but their efforts have bought them political power that could further their attempt to carve out a second Kurdish autonomous zone in the Middle East, an initiative that the Turkish government opposes. The defence of Kobane has not only won recognition and respect for the PYD, but led to the group actively cooperating with the US military in the fight against ISIS. The PYD's newfound popularity is also likely to force an improvement in its relations with Masoud Barzani, who as president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq, forged strong links with Ankara at the expense of his Syrian brethren.

Uncertainty is the greatest challenge facing the Turks and other parties in the conflict; there is very little either Ankara or other powers can do to produce pre-determined outcomes. The war will eventually burn itself out, but in the process the region will become unrecognisable, comprising a hotchpotch of ill-defined political and military jurisdictions.

Turkish policy on Syria and Iraq

In its approach to the Syrian conflict, Turkey appears to have suffered a self-inflicted wound. Ankara's relationship with Assad had been the high

point in its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, the signature initiative of the Erdogan administration and particularly Ahmet Davutoglu (who was then foreign minister, and is now prime minister). Erdogan and Assad had become good friends, leaving behind the tension in Turkish–Syrian relations of the 1990s, which stemmed from Syria's support for the PKK and Turkish construction on the Euphrates. Both Ankara and Damascus invested heavily in the relationship, and conducted multiple 'joint cabinet meetings'.

After the Arab Spring began, Ankara saw the swift collapse of the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian governments as caused by a historic tide that would also sweep away the Ba'ath regime of Syria. But before giving up on Assad, Erdogan insisted that he placate his opponents by instituting domestic reforms. Davutoglu and Hakan Fidan, head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), were on many occasions sent to Damascus as part of the effort. Ankara went so far as to suggest that it would support the Syrian president if he were to introduce cosmetic changes in his approach to governance. Assad would have none of it, however, and subsequently stepped up the violence against peaceful demonstrators. The Turks at this point had no choice but to call for Assad's immediate resignation, if not ouster. Erdogan and Davutoglu therefore overestimated their ability to effect change in Syria. Once the opposition took up arms against the regime, Ankara, like Washington, assumed that Assad would be gone in six months. Although he has ceded significant territory to various insurgent groups – ranging from jihadists to the 'moderates' supported by the West – Assad has held on to the crucial western parts of Syria.

The Turks were quick to help organise the opposition to Assad; they hosted conferences in Istanbul and elsewhere, and eventually assisted in the formation of its armed wing, the FSA, which established its headquarters in Turkey. Erdogan lobbied energetically for Washington to set up no-fly zones or protected areas along the Turkish–Syrian border, just as it had done in northern Iraq during the 1990s. But he was unsuccessful, as the US resisted calls for its involvement in another Middle East war.

As the conflict in Syria wore on, Ankara looked for a more effective means to fight Assad. It eventually chose the jihadists flocking there from all corners of the world, who had proven far more able to take the fight to the

Syrian army. Whether out of short-term pragmatism, some greater ambition or sheer impatience, Turkey turned a blind eye to the movement of these fighters, before actively helping them to reach Syria. It also provided the jihadists with materiel. The MIT was implicated in attempts to move arms; and, most importantly, groups such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, or IHH, were enlisted to smuggle fighters and weapons into Syria.⁴

Turkey's developing strategy must be evaluated in the context of Ankara's goals and ambitions. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) upended traditional Turkish foreign-policy calculations by abandoning decades of ambivalence towards the Middle East and an inward-looking, defensive approach in favour of a more aggressive attitude. This new assertiveness won Ankara plaudits at home and in the wider region, particularly because it was perceived as tinged with anti-Westernism.

The AKP's foreign policy aimed to build Turkish influence in the Middle East and beyond, and was built on four pillars: a vibrant economy capable of trading with everyone; strong (if unheralded) links with both Europe and the US; an increasingly dominant posture in the region, in the form of close links with Middle East regimes; and a historical and cultural affinity with neighbouring states. The party has long sought to make Turkey a global power. Although its earlier incarnations aimed to lead only the Muslim world, today's AKP is more ambitious. Initially, its strategy focused on the Middle East, primarily because proximity gave Turkey an advantage, and the area was perceived as low-hanging fruit. (Facing little competition, Ankara could penetrate and make inroads there, especially economically.) Turkey historically shunned the region in favour of European and other markets, but more recent efforts to strengthen economic ties with its southern neighbours have benefited the country in two important ways: a large rise in exports has boosted Turkish influence abroad, while fuelling growth and prosperity at home.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Syria and Iraq. In 2005 Erdogan claimed credit for convincing Assad to withdraw Syrian troops from Lebanon (much to the consternation of the French, who had orchestrated the requisite UN Security Council resolution). Ankara hoped that the change in Turkish policy on the KRG would have economic advantages (especially

in the Kurdish-dominated regions bordering Iraq) and help in the push for a peace deal with Turkish Kurds.⁵ Iraq subsequently became Turkey's second-largest market for exports. Erdogan understands that the domestic Kurdish problem must be resolved if Turkey is to avoid scaring away investors, which would undermine economic and political stability, and limit the country's international influence. In light of this, Ankara helped the KRG to prosper. By facilitating oil exports out of, and encouraging Turkish investment in, northern Iraq, it fostered dependence on Ankara's largesse for both energy sales and access to more distant markets.⁶

While the AKP came to power in 2002, it was not until after the 2007 elections that it consolidated its position. The contest set the party against the powerful military establishment, which initially blocked a bid for the presidency by then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül. But after the generals suffered a major electoral defeat and were sidelined, Gül became president. From that moment on, Erdogan's foreign policy became far more bold; he seemed to take the Americans and the Europeans for granted, correctly assuming that Turkey's importance to Western governments would prevent them from restraining his more assertive, at times counterproductive, policies. This was most evident in the failed Iranian–Brazilian–Turkish nuclear deal, which aimed to scuttle the American-led initiative for new UN Security Council sanctions on Tehran. Underlying the overall approach was an exuberant self-confidence and self-righteousness, which was exacerbated by the early successes of the Arab Spring, and by Erdogan's ability to win election after election, establishing himself as the uncontested leader of Turkey. Yet for all the increase in influence, this self-importance led Erdogan to use needlessly harsh rhetoric against leaders and countries that provoked his ire. (Paradoxically, Iran was spared such criticism, despite serious disagreements between Ankara and Tehran over policy on Syria.⁷) On issues ranging from the initial plans for Western intervention in Libya and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt to supposed US interference in domestic Turkish politics and, of course, his pet peeve, Israel, Erdogan's inflammatory discourse often restricted his room for manoeuvre.

*Assertiveness
won Ankara
plaudits*

In Iraq, the Turks were taken aback by Maliki's overtly sectarian policies, which alienated the country's Sunni and Kurdish minorities. Erdogan initially tried to adopt a non-sectarian posture on Iraq, visiting important Shia shrines in the country. But he veered away from this neutral approach in response to Maliki's more divisive actions, which included the hounding of Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi and, later, former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, as well as support for Assad. Despite sharing many of Washington's concerns about Maliki, and having been an active and influential participant in Iraqi politics, Turkey was by 2013 isolated and largely inconsequential.⁸

The unintended effects of war in Syria and Iraq

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has direct consequences for Turkey, on many different levels and with varying degrees of complexity. The most obvious of these is the influx of refugees. Like Lebanon and Jordan, Turkey is overflowing with Syrians who have fled the war: it is estimated that one million people have escaped to Turkey, among whom 747,000 were registered as of June 2014.⁹ Ankara has done well in responding to this crisis, providing refugee camps that received the approval of the international aid community. Many of the facilities it provided have been of a high quality, and hence expensive to set up. They are mostly full, and the majority of refugees have preferred to settle all around Turkey. Some Syrians have successfully integrated with Turkish communities, opening their own businesses, while others have eked out a marginal existence by working as low-paid day labourers or even begging. As the International Crisis Group reports, Turks have also done well in distributing aid in Syria.¹⁰

The refugees pose four distinct sets of problems for Ankara. The first is the sheer cost of hosting them. Turkey has expended \$4 billion so far, and claims to have received \$250m in contributions from various countries and UN agencies.¹¹ Secondly, tensions between refugees and long-time residents have increased, leading to demonstrations against the displaced Syrians and, occasionally, their eviction from homes and businesses. The influx of refugees also appears to have fostered a rise in anti-Arab sentiment, which is problematic due to the fact that some Turkish provinces bordering Syria and Iraq are home to large numbers of citizens who speak Arabic.¹² This is

politically challenging for the government, as opposition to allowing more refugees in and caring for those that have arrived crosses party lines. At the beginning of the crisis, Davutoglu suggested that Ankara would be willing to accommodate no more than 100,000 refugees within Turkey's borders.¹³

Thirdly, many refugees are unlikely to go home even if there is a political settlement in Syria. Those that remain in Turkey will include both successful individuals, such as business owners and professionals, and people for whom a devastated Syria offers few options. In any event, a settlement would not imply the rapid return of refugees, and the majority of them are there to stay. Assad is well served by the displacement of part of Syria's population: if he survives the conflict, many of those who fled will never be accepted back. Fourthly, the refugees pose a security threat because they might unwittingly provide cover for the movements of ISIS fighters or agents of the Syrian government, acting as a fifth column within Turkey.

The fighting in Syria, and to a lesser extent in Iraq, has damaged Turkish trade routes, as commercial trucks can no longer traverse Syria on their way to the Gulf. While overland exports to Iraq continued, several Turkish truck drivers were kidnapped at the time of the consulate takeover by ISIS, only to be released (after ransoms were paid, according to some press reports).

The heaviest reverberation of Turkish policy on the Syrian conflict has been felt in Ankara's regional and global position. Turkey finds itself aligned with Qatar against myriad states that oppose Muslim Brotherhood organisations in the Middle East (for a variety of reasons), one of which is Syria. And Ankara's support for Jabhat al-Nusra has angered the US; during a May 2013 visit to Washington, the Obama administration confronted then-Prime Minister Erdogan over his support for the group. The relative ease with which jihadists crossed into Syria from Turkey also alarmed many of the country's other allies, leading them to question the AKP's motives. Ankara allowed wounded jihadists to use its medical facilities, and many fighters who traversed Turkey to join Jabhat al-Nusra defected to ISIS, following the latter group's victory in Mosul and declaration of an Islamic caliphate. Ironically, the open-door policy on jihadists may have contributed to the weakening of the FSA and the rise of ISIS. European and American concern over Turkey's lackadaisical approach continued to increase, especially after

the May 2014 murder of three people in Brussels by a jihadist who had returned from Syria.

Ankara's relations with Washington have reached a particularly low ebb, despite the fact that the sides need each other to manage these crises. Their approaches are diametrically opposed. While Turkey's foremost concern is the removal of Assad, the US prioritises the fight against ISIS because the group threatens Iraq, which has received significant American investment and is seen as far more important than Syria. As a result, Ankara has refrained from joining the anti-ISIS coalition that includes many Middle East countries, some of which have participated in air-strikes on the group.

ISIS came back to haunt Ankara

After the Americans announced that Turkey had agreed to the use of the base at Incirlik for the attacks, they were rebuked by Ankara. This issue is particularly vexing for Washington because it is far easier to launch air-strikes on ISIS from Incirlik than from the Persian Gulf or the American base in Doha.

Turkey prefers that the US establish a buffer zone in Syria, as this could be used to increase military pressure on the Assad regime.¹⁴ The dispute came to a head when, in an unguarded moment, US Vice President Joe Biden expressed frustration with Turkey's support for jihadists (aside from ISIS) and its stoking of sectarianism in the region.¹⁵

Baghdadi's group has come back to haunt Ankara, and it constitutes a real threat to Turkish security. Many Turkish citizens heeded the clarion call in Syria and entered the war, often by joining Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS.¹⁶ Some of these fighters will one day return home, becoming an armed, dangerous and battle-hardened element of Turkish society. Advanced logistical and support networks for ISIS have sprung up all over Turkey, and are beyond government control. There is always the possibility that both they and the returned fighters will move against their own government or their opponents at home.¹⁷ Allies of ISIS and sleeper cells set up by the group are making life uncomfortable, if not dangerous, for both anti-Assad Syrian activists and members of the international aid community based in Turkey.¹⁸

Then there is the question of the Turkish troops stationed near Lake Assad, who guard a tomb purported to be that of Suleiman Shah, grand-

father of the Ottoman dynasty's founder. The site is around 30 kilometres inside Syria and is recognised as Turkish territory; the troops there are resupplied every two weeks.¹⁹ After ISIS threatened the lives of the soldiers and fighting around the tomb intensified, Turkish officials engaged in a heated discussion over options to secure the site. With much of the territory around the outpost having fallen to ISIS, it is likely that the troops are now behind a blockade of sorts. It is hard to see how Turkey could resupply the soldiers without discussing the matter with the group, suggesting that Ankara may face a second hostage crisis.

Another unintended effect of the conflict is that on the Turkish political scene, which has also experienced a degree of sectarian polarisation. There has been greater alienation among Turkish Alevis, who comprise as much as 15% of the population and follow a form of Islam similar to Shi'ism (although not identical, as they are often quite liberal in their religious customs and in their approach to the role of women). Alevis have historically been mistreated by the Turkish state, and Erdogan's perceived Sunni bias in domestic politics has exacerbated their distrust of the AKP. It might be expected that they would naturally side with the oppressed Sunni majority in Syria, but growing sectarianism has meant they have instead tended to put their faith in the rhetoric coming out of Damascus.

Erdogan inflamed matters first by insinuating that the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition group, was pro-Assad, primarily because of its leader's Alevi background and the fact that Alevis have consistently voted for it. Then came his pronouncement, in the wake of a March 2013 terrorist bombing in the border town of Reyhanli, that '53 Sunni citizens have been martyred'.²⁰ There is no precedent for such an overtly sectarian statement by any political leader, let alone a sitting prime minister, in modern Turkish history. For the time being, Erdogan has not had to pay a political price for this increased polarisation – he was elected president in August 2014 with almost 52% of the vote – but future sectarian clashes in Turkey cannot be ruled out.²¹

The Syrian conflict has so far claimed the lives of 75 Turks. They include the 53 who died in Reyhanli; two pilots in a reconnaissance plane that crashed off the coast of Syria in 2012; those killed in the occasional shelling

of Turkish border towns; and a soldier and a police officer slain in an attack in Nigde Province reportedly carried out by ISIS fighters from Syria.²²

But considering the financial costs, refugee influx, hostage crisis and casualties, Erdogan has until now succeeded in managing the internal tensions and domestic political consequences of his policy reversals. Always on the offensive, with its overwhelming control of the Turkish media and speed to capitalise on the opposition's mistakes, the AKP has dominated the narrative on Syria. The fact that the CHP has been unable to articulate a clear and consistent policy on the conflict has not helped matters. The AKP's control of all the levers of state power means that, when the narrative is about to shift against it, the government can easily impose news blackouts and issue gag orders. This was the case with the Mosul hostages, as well as the leaked recordings of Davutoglu, Fidan and other Turkish leaders discussing policy on Syria.

A far more serious consequence of the war has been the rise of the Kurds in the Middle East, which undermines one of Turkey's fundamental strategic objectives. Ankara had hoped that the Syrian Kurds would not coalesce under the leadership of the PYD. Not only has it been disappointed in this, but the region has once again witnessed a burgeoning of pan-Kurdish ideas and imagination. Despite Erdogan's risky, revolutionary attempts to negotiate and reconcile with the Kurds at home, Turkey has been eager to check the formation of another autonomous Kurdish territory in the region, modelled on that in Iraq.

Ankara failed in its efforts to prevent the emergence of the PYD as the most important Syrian-Kurdish group. The PYD militia had been trained by the PKK well in advance of the Syrian civil war, and it refused to join the Barzani-inspired Syrian-Kurdish National Congress, which was formally part of the Syrian opposition. Moreover, it stated its intent to declare an autonomous region in northern Syria composed of three 'cantons', perhaps heralding the shape of things to come in a post-Assad era. Turkey's response was to accuse the PYD of collaborating with the Assad regime, and to dismiss attacks on the group by Jabhat al-Nusra. Ankara naturally sided with Barzani, who saw the PYD as a rival in the struggle for supremacy among the Kurds.²³ That contest even led the KRG to begin construction on a trench between its territory and that controlled by the PYD, despite the

fact that many Syrian Kurds took refuge in the former area at the height of the jihadist attacks.

The advance of ISIS during summer 2014 radically changed the situation on the ground. After the group routed the Iraqi army in Mosul and elsewhere, it proceeded to attack the KRG forces that had been dispatched to fill the void. Unprepared, badly led and poorly equipped, the peshmerga faced defeat. In Sinjar Province and later in the town of Amerli, Yazidis and Turkmen Shi'ites were forced to flee ISIS. The group executed many Yazidis, whom it saw as devil-worshippers, and sold women into slavery. As the outside world learnt the plight of these refugees, especially those on Mount Sinjar, the US engaged in limited air-strikes, but both the PYD and the PKK were instrumental in lifting the siege.

The outcome of these and other battles involving the PYD and the PKK, who worked in tandem with regular peshmerga units, has dramatically altered the strategic picture for the Kurds. Syrian and Turkish Kurds who came to fight were also joined by units from the Iranian-Kurdish forces based in the KRG, which have been inactive for most of the last decade. This moment of solidarity rekindled the Kurds' sense of unity and national purpose. Given their internecine feuding in recent decades, this rejuvenation should be viewed with caution. However, in an apparent attempt to move past such antagonism, Barzani travelled all the way to Makhmour, a town in the KRG proper at which the PYD and other Kurdish forces had repelled ISIS. He and some of his lieutenants had been critical of Erdogan's refusal to help the KRG during the onslaught by ISIS, and he used the opportunity to pointedly thank the Iranians for their help in the fight against the group.²⁴

The peshmerga faced defeat

First in Sinjar and then in Kobane, the PYD received an important boost from Washington, as limited cooperation in the former battle blossomed into an alliance of sorts. Mindful of the Turkish reaction, the US initially hesitated to engage in the defence of Kobane. But it changed tack following the spirited efforts of PYD forces there, the international mobilisation to save the town and, most importantly, the emergence of an opportunity to inflict significant damage on ISIS, which in its zeal to capture Kobane concentrated

many of its fighters and much materiel.²⁵ Cooperation between Washington and the PYD assumed a more formal dimension after the Americans began to rely on the group for targeting information as they stepped up air-strikes. In an even more dramatic move, the US carried out airdrops for the PYD, bringing it arms and materiel provided by the Iraqi–Kurdish authorities. This came about despite a strong warning from Erdogan, who stated that the PKK and the PYD were terrorist organisations, and that he could not understand why a NATO ally would supply arms to such a group.²⁶

These developments have two sets of consequences for Turkey. Firstly, even if the momentum towards greater acceptance of the PYD is reversible, the fact is that both the group and its parent organisation are in a far better political position than they were at the onset of the crisis. The defence of Kobane has won the respect of many in the region and further afield, and once again raised questions about the Kurds' role in the international arena. This improves the PKK's bargaining position with the Turks. More importantly, it strengthens the PYD's claim for autonomy in a post-Assad Syria. The group will have the Iraqi Kurds on its side as well. Barzani may have little sympathy for the PYD, but he has to contend with Kurdish public opinion.

Secondly, in the aftermath of the Iraqi army's withdrawal, the Kurds took over territories that had been contested by Erbil and Baghdad since the 2005 adoption of the new Iraqi Constitution, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its environs. The document called for the normalisation of these territories, which Baghdad controlled but the KRG claimed, by reversing the gerrymandering of former President Saddam Hussein (carried out to reduce Kurdish population proportions in certain areas), before holding referendums at the end of 2007. Neither of these conditions was met, but the Kurds are unlikely to withdraw from the territories anytime soon. This is another setback for Turkey, which in the past has drawn a 'red line' at Kirkuk's acquisition by the Kurds. Access to Kirkuk's hydrocarbon resources appears to have put the KRG in a far stronger position to declare independence, should it choose to do so, but relations between Ankara and the Iraqi–Kurdish government have significantly improved since Turkey declared that red line. In fact, the Turks sided with Erbil against Baghdad in the dispute over Kurdish oil revenues, drilling and exports. While independ-

ence was still an outcome far too problematic for Turkey to accept – mainly because of the demonstration effect on Turkish Kurds – Ankara's attitude towards the Iraqi Kurds had undergone a transformation. However, the events that followed the ISIS attacks this year undermined even the strong Turkey–KRG relationship.

The ISIS advance in northern Iraq and Kobane mobilised the Turkish Kurds in support of their brethren across the border. Violent demonstrations broke out in Turkey as the government and the Kurds once again exchanged fiery rhetoric. And even before this, the peace process undertaken by Ankara had moved slowly, burdened by a busy electoral calendar. The fear in Turkey is not that the Turkish Kurds will demand independence, but rather that they will seek some kind of autonomy in provinces that have a Kurdish majority. That prospect elicited an unusual warning from Necdet Ozel, chief of the armed forces' general staff, during a 30 August 2014 celebration of the victory over Allied armies in the Turkish War of Independence. Ozel invoked vague red lines, widely assumed to have been drawn at Kurdish autonomy, which if crossed would provoke some undefined response by the army.²⁷

If Kobane falls, the peace process in Turkey could swiftly collapse. The siege, Turkish reluctance to help out and the violent demonstrations have deepened the divisions between the Turks and the Kurds.²⁸ The latter have been embittered by Ankara's acrimonious rhetoric against the PKK, which has gone so far as to equate the group with ISIS. Still, Erdogan calculates that Kurds have few options other than to work with him and his party, given that the CHP has failed to develop a strategy that attracts Kurdish support.

Finally, the Iraqi Kurds have benefited from increased international awareness of the problems they face: Germany, France and Britain have all pledged arms shipments to Erbil, to improve its position vis-à-vis ISIS.

Damage limitation

Where does Turkey go from here? Although the Mosul hostage crisis was successfully resolved, the country's room for manoeuvre is severely restricted. The Suleiman Shah tomb remains a potential flashpoint; the new government in Baghdad could prove to be beneficial to Ankara in the

medium term, but not immediately. Americans and Europeans have been alienated by Turkey's reluctance to join the coalition (of sorts) against ISIS established at the September 2014 NATO summit. This is not to say that Ankara has not helped, as it has allowed the US to conduct intelligence flights from Incirlik.²⁹ As the ISIS threat comes into focus, the US and its allies will increasingly pressure other states to be more proactive in the fight against the group. Irrespective of the need to collaborate in Syria and elsewhere, however, there has been a deep rupture in Turkish–American relations. As well as making it harder for jihadists to cross over into Syria, Turkey has started to respond to American pressure by disrupting smuggling that finances ISIS activities, especially that involving oil.³⁰

Ankara has decided to limit the damage caused by discord with the US, stating disingenuously that Turkey advocated the American bombing of ISIS.³¹ One should not underestimate the impact of the US decision to resupply PYD forces in Kobane; it is perhaps the first time that Washington has broken so dramatically with Ankara on a matter relating to Kurds. Erdogan has had a difficult time accepting US action.³² However, following the US resupply decision, Turkey abruptly announced that it would allow the Iraqi peshmerga to cross into Syria from its own territory, in order to help break the siege. (Washington had earlier made this demand of the Turks, only to be turned down.³³)

Once a symbol of Davutoglu's 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, Syria has become a graveyard for Turkish ambitions of regional hegemony. Not only has Assad confounded the AKP by surviving, but the conflict in Syria and Iraq has deprived Ankara of an important claim: that it alone has the ability to shape and influence both the Arab Spring and developments in the wider region. Speaking before parliament in 2012, Davutoglu self-assuredly argued that Turkey would own, lead and serve the new Middle East.³⁴ Instead, as Turkey's coordinating governor in charge of Syrians said,

there was once one enemy in Syria, but there are now three enemies [the Assad regime, the PYD and al-Qaeda affiliates]. Until one or two years ago, there was an oppressor regime and a people seeking their rights. Now ... we no longer know where the bullet comes from.³⁵

The Turkish dream of a sphere of shared prosperity is clearly not achievable in the immediate future.

In the meantime, the Syrian and Iraqi crises not only remind people of the instability and danger of Turkey's neighbourhood, but also that the prospect of violence spreading to the country is quite real. The one silver lining for the Turks is that they and the Iranians have managed to agree to disagree, despite the high stakes and their opposed interests in concluding scenarios for Syria.

How much longer can Turkey manage the twin crises on its borders? And will Ankara reach breaking point as it is squeezed by the refugee problem, pressure from allies, loss of stature and the Kurdish issue? The Turkish leadership faces the real danger that, contrary to its interests, these factors will combine with ISIS-generated violence in Turkey to draw the country into the morass across the border. For all the importance Ankara has attached to Syria, it has been unable to generate a long-term strategy that includes cooperation with the US and other Western states. Instead, it has relied on Qatar and, to a lesser extent, the KRG. In part, this has to do with their fundamentally different approaches to the issue of Islamic militancy. Ankara is seen as being too sympathetic to some of these groups, and as a result has poor relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

One aspect of Turkey's problem is domestic. Erdogan's unchallenged rule has made the country less flexible because his government is deeply suspicious of its Western allies and feels betrayed by them. But for all the acrimony generated by the Syrian conflict, Turkey remains a central player. Although neither Washington nor European capitals can ignore this fact, the tension between them and Ankara is likely to continue for a long time, as the effect of the war will be felt far more deeply in Turkey than in the West, and there does not seem to be a magical bullet to rid the Middle East of Assad. Ankara has few choices but to rebuild its relationship with Washington before together seeking a region-wide consensus on the next steps, which will undoubtedly put the fight against ISIS before efforts to depose the Syrian president. For Turkey, this will be hard to swallow. Erdogan will, to paraphrase Churchill, try everything else before sitting down with the US and the rest of his allies.

Notes

- 1 Murat Yetkin, 'Türkiye'nin ISID'i Vurdugu Gün', *Radikal*, 25 September 2014, http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/murat_yetkin/turkiyenin_isidi_vurdugu_gun-1214673. There may be more to this deal than has yet been made public.
- 2 Sam Jones and Daniel Dombey, 'Western Focus Turns to Home-grown Jihadis as Terror Threat Grows', *Financial Times*, 6 June 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/cf5b3b6a-ed84-11e3-8a1e-00144feabdco.html>.
- 3 Cole Bunzel, 'Understanding the Islamic State (of Iraq and al-Sham)', Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, 8 July 2014, <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Publications/Understanding-the-Islamic-State-of-Iraq-and-al-Sham>.
- 4 Guillaume Perrier, 'Pourchassés Par les Rebelles Syriens, les Djihadistes se Réfugient en Turquie', *Le Monde*, 11 January 2014. Perrier interviewed two jihadists from Britain, whose scheduled transfer to Syria in an IHH ambulance was cancelled at the last minute. In December 2013, the Turkish gendarmerie stopped 35 trucks belonging to the organisation on their way to Syria. Although they were laden with munitions, the group claimed that the vehicles contained humanitarian aid. The Turkish press also revealed that the MIT was implicated in smuggling operations. This last charge became a focal point for domestic polemic, as the pro-Erdogan press levelled charges of treason and other crimes at the president's enemies, who included prosecutors, police officers and rival press organisations.
- 5 Henri J. Barkey 'Turkey and Iraq: The Making of a Partnership', *Turkish Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, December 2011.
- 6 'Turkey "Urges" US to Permit KRG Oil Sales', *Hürriyet*, 14 August 2014. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-urges-us-to-permit-krq-oil-sales.aspx?pageID=238&nID=70438&NewsCatID=348>.
- 7 On Turkish–Iranian relations, see Henri J. Barkey, 'Turkish–Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring', *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 6, December 2012–January 2013. In October 2014, Erdogan lashed out at Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for arguing that Assad was the only leader standing up to Israel. 'Erdogan'ın Marmara Üniversitesi Konuşma Metni', *Gazetesiz*, 14 October 2014, http://www.gazetesiz.com/haber_yazdir.php?detayID=106208.
- 8 Interview with Murat Özçelik, former Turkish ambassador to Baghdad and Turkey's special Iraq representative. Cansu Camlibel, 'Murat Özçelik: Irak'ta Seyirciyiz', *Hürriyet*, 18 August 2014.
- 9 Soner Cagaptay and Bilge Menekse, 'The Impact of Syria's Refugees on Southern Turkey', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2014, p. 1, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-impact-of-syrias-refugees-on-southern-turkey>.
- 10 International Crisis Group, 'The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian

- Quagmire', 30 April 2014, pp. 13–14, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/230-the-rising-costs-of-turkey-s-syrian-quagmire.aspx>.
- 11 Cagaptay and Menekse, 'The Impact of Syria's Refugees on Southern Turkey', p. 2. The Turkish interior minister said 'we spent \$4 billion, the UN has spent \$160 million on aid [in Syria] and other countries in total spent \$244 million on aid'. 'Turkey Calls on World to Help with Syrian Refugees', Anadolu Agency, 29 September 2014, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/397164--turkey-calls-on-world-to-help-with-syrian-refugees>. Erdogan claimed that Turkey received only \$250 million. 'Cumhurbaskani Erdogan: 'Bati'nin Derdi Petrol'', *Aksam*, 23 October 2014. However, the UNHCR budget for 2012–14 alone shows an expenditure of \$450 million. UNHCR, 'Turkey', <http://www.unhcr.org/528a0a34a.html>.
 - 12 Pinar Tremblay, 'Anti-Arab Sentiment on Rise in Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 21 August 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/turkey-syria-anti-arab-sentiment-tremblay.html>.
 - 13 'AFAD: Suriyeli Siginmacilarin Sayisi 100 Bini Gecti', *T24*, 15 October 2012, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/afad-suriyeli-siginmacilarin-sayisi-100-bini-gecti,215242>.
 - 14 'Basbakan Davutoglu, Türkiye'nin Istedigi Güvenli Bölgenin Sinirlarini Açikladi', *Hürriyet*, 16 October 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/27394703.asp>. The US responded that it would not contemplate such action.
 - 15 Tolga Tanis, 'Joe Biden: Erdogan Bana "Siz Hakliydiniz" Dedi', *Hürriyet*, 4 October 2014. Although Biden had to apologise to Erdogan for his comments – primarily because he had cited the Turkish leader admitting to this support – the fact remains that the vice president simply stated on the record a fact known to all.
 - 16 There may be as many as 1,000 Turks fighting among the ranks of ISIS. Ceylan Yeginsu, 'ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey', *New York Times*, 15 September 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/middleeast/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html>.
 - 17 There have already been clashes between pro-ISIS groups and university students in Istanbul, who were protesting against the organisation's actions in Syria. 'Istanbul Universitesi'nde ISID Karsiti Standa Saldiri', *CNN-Turk*, 26 September 2014.
 - 18 Liz Sly, 'Attempted Kidnapping in Turkey Shows Reach of the Islamic State', *Washington Post*, 22 October 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kidnapping-of-abu-issa-a-syrian-rebel-shows-islamic-states-reach-into-turkey/2014/10/21/aac04b3b-aoa7-4f34-aob4-faf9c-249ce5e_story.html. Some aid organisations have sought to relocate staff away from the border towns due to ISIS surveillance.
 - 19 The tomb's real origin has been questioned by some historians. See Ayse Hür, 'Süleyman Sah Türbesi hakkında Yanlis Bildiklerimiz', *Radikal*, 24 August 2014, <http://www>.

radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/ayse_hur/suleyman_sah_turbesi_hakkinda_yanlis_bildiklerimiz-1208616. The tomb was actually moved because its prior location was flooded due to the Syrian's construction of a dam on the Euphrates. The tomb was recognised as Turkish territory by the French Mandate authorities, as part of the 1921 Ankara Agreement. It is unclear how many Turkish soldiers are now stationed there. Hür claimed 11, the International Crisis Group claimed 25 and some news sources have suggested that, while there were 15 before the onset of the civil war, the number has since been increased. See 'Caber Kalesi'nde Türk Askeri Sayisi Artirildi', *Bugün*, 20 July 2014, <http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/turk-askerinin-sayisi-artirildi-haberi/200383>. In a leaked conversation at the foreign ministry, Fidan said that 22–8 soldiers were stationed at the tomb. 'Suriye'ye Savas Hazirligi Yapilan Konusmanın Tam Metni', *Karsi Gazete*, 28 March 2014.

²⁰ 'Erdogan'dan Sünni Vurgusu', *Taraf*, 15 June 2013, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber-erdogan-dan-sunni-vurgusu-126288/>.

²¹ Nick Tattersall and Orhan Coskun, 'Erdogan's Presidential Win Starts Race for New Turkish Government', Reuters, 10 August 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/10/us-turkey-election-idUSKBN-oGA05X20140810>.

²² Although Turkish officials claimed that the plane had been shot down, circumstances surrounding the event remain murky at best. According to a former senior Turkish official, it is quite possible that the plane came

down as a result of a risky manoeuvre by the pilot.

- ²³ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, 'Rival Kurdish Parties Battle for Power in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 28 May 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2014/05/kurdistan-kdp-pyderbil-barzani-ocalan-syria.html#>.
- ²⁴ Hevidar Ahmed, 'Senior Kurdistan Official: IS Was at Erbil's Gates; Turkey Did Not Help', 16 August 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/16092014>; Isabel Coles, 'Iran Provided Weapons to Iraqi Kurds; Baghdad Bomb Kills 12', Reuters, 27 August 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/26/uk-iraq-security-kurds-idUKKBN0GQoUL20140826>.
- ²⁵ Helene Cooper, 'U.S. Commander Reports Heavy ISIS Losses in Syrian City of Kobani', *New York Times*, 17 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/18/world/middleeast/isis-isil-islamic-state-kobani-syria.html>. General Lloyd Austin said that the Kurdish defenders had done 'a yeoman's work in terms of standing their ground'.
- ²⁶ 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: "PYD Bizim İçin PKK İle Estir"', *Hürriyet*, 20 October 2014.
- ²⁷ 'Necdet Özel: Kırmızı Cizgiler Asılırsa Geregini Yaparız', *Radikal*, 30 August 2014.
- ²⁸ Rusen Cakir, '(IS)ID'in Türkiye'ye Ettiği ve Edebileceği Kötülükler', *Vatan*, 8 October 2014, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/rusen-cakir-684867-yazar-yazisi--is-id-in-turkiye-ye-ettigi-ve-edebilecegi-kotulukler/>.
- ²⁹ Tolga Tanis, 'Sorun Askeri Degil Ideolojik', *Hürriyet*, 19 October 2014, <http://sosyal.hurriyet.com.tr/Yazar/197/>

Tolga-Tanis/77867/Sorun-askeri-degil-ideolojik. Paradoxically, the US had flown such intelligence-gathering missions from Incirlik at Turkey's request, to monitor the PKK in Iraq.

- ³⁰ Daniel Dombey, 'Turkey's Clampdown on Isis Bearing Fruit in Border Areas', *Financial Times*, 3 September 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/910e190c-3363-11e4-9607-00144feabdco.html>.
- ³¹ Verda Ozer, 'A Conversation with the Deputy Prime Minister', *Hürriyet*, 18 October 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/a-conversation-with-the-deputy-prime-minister.aspx?pageID=449&nID=73135&NewsCategoryId=466>.
- ³² In a presentation in Paris one week after the resupply operation, he continued to criticise Washington's decision. 'Cumhurbaskani Erdogan'dan Paris'te Onemli Aciklamalar', *Hürriyet*, 31 October 2014.
- ³³ Tolga Tanis, '10 Soruda Kobani Silahlari', *Hürriyet*, 20 October 2014, <http://sosyal.hurriyet.com.tr/Yazar/197/Tolga-Tanis/79146/10-soruda-Kobani-silahlari>.
- ³⁴ 'Yeni Ortadogu'nun Sahibi Biziz', *Vatan*, 27 April 2012, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/-yeni-ortadogu-nun-sahibi-biziz--446394-gundem/>.
- ³⁵ 'Turkey Says ISIL Convoy Hit Necessary as "Threat Comes Near Us"', *Today's Zaman*, 2 February 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_openPrintPage.action?newsId=338305.

