



The Domestic-Regional Nexus in Turkey's Counterterrorism Policy

By Şaban Kardaş

Turkey's policy in Syria and in the region generally has relied increasingly on coercive instruments, which it justifies with the requirements of counterterrorism. As part of this policy, the army – utilizing local proxies – has undertaken the Euphrates Shield operation since 2016 to clear the Syrian border from the Islamic State terrorist group (ISIS) and the Olive Branch operation since 2018 to end the control of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG) military wing in Afrin in northern Syria. Turkey has continuously threatened to eliminate the presence there of the PYD, which it considers an extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is also listed by the United States as a terrorist organization.¹

Meanwhile, Turkey has come under pressure from its transatlantic partners to find a modus vivendi with the PYD. There are many justifications for a political rather than military approach – sometimes dubbed as the “KRG model” because of Turkey's accommodation to realities on the ground in Iraq by choosing political engagement in its dealing with the Kurdistan Regional Government. They include that military instruments cannot solve such problems, that Turkey will alienate its Kurdish-speaking population, that it should invest in instigating divisions between the PYD and PKK, and that aggressive rhetoric will further undermine its ties with the West.

Turkey has ignored such calls and resorted to the threat or use of force to alter the status quo in northeastern Syria. Its brinkmanship has even put its relationship with the United States under stress, throwing doubts on the sustainability of the country's most vital security partnership. President Donald Trump's decision to gradually end the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria has changed the calculations of all local and international parties drastically, but Turkey remains determined to rely on military power.

Why has Turkey not engaged politically with the PYD to transform it, an approach that is hardly alien to it? Why has it insisted on militarizing its Syria policy? It is often argued that Turkey's military posture is driven by domestic political calculations, chiefly electoral pressures or diversionary concerns. Such factors play a role, yet a closer look into the domestic context reveals that a more complex set of factors drive its counterterrorism policy.

The Domestic Context of Counterterrorism

Most discussions of Turkey's insistence on militarily eradicating the PYD's position along its borders are undergirded by the assumption that it contains the PKK at home while it fights the PYD in Syria. This assumes further that domestically the government handles the PKK as a political phenomenon so that

¹ On the U.S.-Turkish disagreements stemming from different approaches to the PKK and PYD, see Galip Dalay, *Breaking the Turkey-U.S. Deadlock in Syria*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, On Turkey, April 16, 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/breaking-turkey-us-deadlock-syria>



the government will go back to a “peace process” as was the case between 2013 and 2015 when the next opportunity arises. So why not engage with the PYD to transform it, as the government did before with the PKK, and even with the PYD between 2012 and 2014?

However, developments have unfolded differently from this narrative on the domestic front. Turkey has waged an aggressive campaign against the PKK, the success of which, as seen by the government, has drastically narrowed the space for restarting the “peace process.” Since the collapse of talks with the PKK and the resumption of violence in 2015, Turkey has reversed the gains the organization had made in the political and civilian realm earlier during the “peace process.” The core features of its new counterterrorism policy that has been taking shape since 2015 include comprehensive economic, social, and political pressure as well as year-round operations to delegitimize and de-territorialize the PKK, i.e., end its attempt to claim de facto control over certain urban neighborhoods and rural areas, with the eventual objective of degrading and destroying it. By reinstating the state’s authority over population and its dominance over territory, Turkey seeks to deny space to PKK in urban settings and to suppress its presence in rural areas, severely scuttling its finances, recruitment, and logistics.

This policy benefits from a permissive political environment, which includes the securitization of domestic politics and the changes to the legal framework governing anti-terror operations after the failed coup attempt of 2016. It also benefits from Turkey’s advances in locally procured arms systems that facilitate greater surveillance and intelligence gathering. There has been a qualitative breakthrough in the efforts to undercut the PKK’s operational effectiveness.

Proactive counterterrorism at home and in the region feed back into the domestic political processes. The new security culture centered around the concept of “national survival under threat,” which also guides counterterrorism, has been an important component

of the governing Justice and Development Party’s (AK Party) identity-building process to redefine Turkey’s political center. Moreover, the narrative of a fight for survival has provided the AK Party with a platform to build a new governing coalition as well as bridges to the state establishment. Its coalition with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), under which they ran jointly in the 2017 constitutional referendum as well as the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, and agreed to cooperate in the coming local elections in March, owes a great deal to their converging views on security policy.

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The counterterrorism policy also enjoys support beyond the AK Party and MHP core constituencies. Secular nationalists have come to view the instability in Syria and a PYD-controlled corridor on the border as a threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity. They view the current coercive posture as a justified and long overdue step to reposition the country in the Middle East. They, however, go further in claiming this policy has to be complemented by full normalization with the Assad regime. Furthermore, the policy enables the AK Party’s desire to unify the bureaucratic and security establishment around a sense of shared mission, which has been highly instrumental in post-coup context.

The Domestic-Regional Nexus in Counterterrorism

Turkey’s counterterrorism and regional policy have been intertwined in myriad ways, but three factors particularly lead to its coercive posture. First, belief in the success of the offensive counterterrorism approach at home drives its militarized regional policy. Undoing the PKK’s gains since 2015 has bolstered the narrative that the resolute application of force makes a difference.

This has been translated into a coercive extra-territorial military posture. Just as with the PKK at home, Turkey's main concern in Syria, Iraq, and beyond is to de-territorialize and delegitimize the PKK and its regional extensions.

Second, since cross-border military incursions are seen as extensions of Turkey's domestic fight against terrorism, the related material, and human costs are justified and accepted as normal. Framed in counterterrorism terms, costly regional policies that would otherwise be questioned enjoy broader public support.

Third, the consolidation of gains at home also necessitates a proactive presence in Iraq and Syria, given the cross-border nature of the PKK threat to Turkey. For instance, although PKK and YPG militants may be involved in the fight against ISIS, Turkey thinks they will turn against it when conditions change. Especially considering the arms, training, and experience they have gained, Turkey feels it is too big a risk to bet on the transformation of PYD. The experience with the PKK misusing the "trust" Ankara has invested into it during the peace process amplified the government's aversion to any investment in another political process with the group and its affiliates, including the PYD.

The Way Forward in Northeastern Syria

Turkey's fight against terrorism at home and abroad rests on a belief that it holds the upper hand. Various factors ranging from technology to regional geopolitics support this, but most of these cut both ways. As far as the possibility of an imminent military campaign in northeastern Syria against the PYD is concerned, a few considerations are in order.

The PYD has over-stretched itself in Syria and it increasingly feels the pressure generated by the gap between demographics and territory, whereby it controls a vast area disproportionate to the share of Syrian society that is Kurdish.

Geography, population, and firepower will work to Turkey's advantage in its long game against the PYD. Yet, Turkey is also overextended as it has to fight in various theaters in Syria, each with unique characteristics and vulnerabilities: in Idlib, in Afrin, in the Euphrates Shield area, against the PYD, and against ISIS. Since these fronts are far from stabilized, their dynamics are ripe for manipulation by different state and non-state actors to complicate Turkey's military offensives against the PYD.

Turkey commands technological advantage and it has gained enormous experience in urban warfare against the PKK since 2015, which was demonstrated in the Euphrates Shield and Afrin operations. These will definitely be repeated against the PYD. However, like other terror groups, the PKK and its regional extensions will learn its lessons and search for ways to adapt to and to offset Turkey's advantages.

The latest phase of the Arab uprisings, in which nation-states are empowered at the expense of non-state actors, creates favorable conditions for Turkey's objectives of de-territorializing and de-legitimizing the PKK and its affiliates. The end of ISIS's territorial "khalifate" with its quasi-state structures is a hopeful precedent for Ankara. However, even if the PYD's gains are rolled back and it is "degraded" into a terror-insurgency group, it is far from certain it can be destroyed totally. Given the enhanced capacity it has accumulated in recent years in terms of materiel, manpower, experience, and alliances, it will remain a formidable threat to Turkey even in a de-territorialized condition. Moreover, the way to a total degrading of the PYD probably goes through restoring ties with the Assad regime, which runs against other priorities of Turkey's Syria policy.

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Given the broad national convergence around the counterterrorism agenda and the portraying of the military campaigns abroad as extensions of domestic counterterrorism, Turkey feels empowered in its regional policies. Yet, as fighting the PKK and its regional gains has been framed as a first-order national priority and a life-or-death issue for the country, it has become harder to realize this objective. Because it viewed the unfolding of separatist Kurdish geopolitics as an existential threat to be thwarted at any cost, Turkey reached a new accommodation with Russia and Iran, its archrivals in Syria and Iraq. Despite favorable domestic conditions, sustaining its leverage against the PYD in the altered regional strategic environment will require Turkey to spend enormous political capital on alliance politics, which will create vulnerabilities on other issues.

Lastly, Turkey feels emboldened as a result of having established a new understanding with the United States thanks to the special channels it has established to President Trump, whose decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria has arguably reshuffled the deck to its advantage. However, this decision has sparked a new alignment and proxy dynamics among state and non-state actors, not all of which are to Turkey's liking. The PKK and affiliates will also adjust to the new regional politics after the U.S. decision in terms of tactics and alliances, building new ad hoc coalitions to counter Turkish pressure.

These considerations, among others, will factor into Turkey's calculus as it designs its next steps in northeastern Syria. As the different reactions to President Trump's withdrawal announcement underscore, the game is far from over. In any case, a key component of Turkey's policy will remain to degrade the PKK and its affiliates in the region, and for this, it seems braced for an extended period of cross-border military engagements.

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