

Analysis

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Summary: The Turkish government was taken by surprise by ISIS' victories. Ankara had no sympathy for the sectarian politics of Maliki government, but it had little appreciation of how weak it was in the face of ISIS. The unpleasant outcomes of ISIS' success became evident quickly. The success ISIS has enjoyed first in Syria and then in Iraq, and the slow and incoherent Allied reaction, raises the possibility of the emergence of a political entity in Iraq that tries to export its ideology to Turkey and recruit militants. Second, ISIS has invaded provinces where major Turkmen communities reside, causing popular indignation among the Turkish public. Third, any concerted action against ISIS may force Turkey to answer the difficult question of how it is to cope with the Syrian Kurdish challenge. Fourth, because of the alleged divergence between the words and deeds of the Turkish government, its credibility has been undermined. It is imperative that both Turkey and other members of the Western Alliance reconsider the state of their relationship, trying to repair the erosion of the sense of community.

Turkey's Iraq Policy: Problematic Policies Have Produced Problematic Outcomes

by Ilter Turan

Introduction

The victories in Iraq of the fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an entity founded in Iraq to fight against the U.S. forces but recently operating mainly in Syria against the government of Bashir al-Assad, has produced a new condition in the *Mashrek*, which no regional or global actor can ignore. ISIS forces, a combination of indigenous Sunni radicals and Jihadist recruits from over the world, have succeeded in taking over several Iraqi cities, most notably Mosul, thereby establishing control over a territory that runs north-south, and driving a radical Sunni wedge between Syria and Iraq. Iraqi troops have proven to be incapable of arresting the onslaught. The government of Nouri al-Maliki, in desperation, has asked the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to help counter the emergency. While the Kurdish *Peshmerga* have had some success in halting ISIS advances toward Kirkuk, the government of Nechirvan Barzani has achieved control over the province, a coveted goal it had not been able to realize because of Arab and Turkmen claims.

The Turkish government was also taken by surprise by ISIS' victories.

Ankara had no sympathy for the sectarian politics of Maliki government, but it had little appreciation of how weak it was in the face of ISIS, which moved quickly and took over large chunks of territory. The unpleasant outcomes of ISIS' success became evident quickly as radical irregulars took dozens of Turkish truck drivers hostage, probably for ransom, disrupting Turkish exports to Iraq and putting the Turkish government in an embarrassing position of having to find ways to liberate its citizens from captivity.¹ Then came the most severe blow: ISIS forces surrounded the Turkish Consulate in Mosul (apparently the only diplomatic mission in town) and took everyone, from the security guards to the consul general and their families, including an eight-month-old baby, hostage. The embarrassment was confounded by the information that the Foreign Ministry had been alerted to the pending danger, but misjudging the conditions, had ordered all to stay. As a result, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was forced to direct staff to surrender when the consulate was surrounded and threatened with destruction. At the time of this writing, the hostages

¹ They have recently been released, but the conditions of the release are not known.



had not yet been released; the government in Ankara had managed to get a judge to order a news blackout on the matter, ostensibly to protect the captives.

Turkey and Iraq: The Changing Relationship

Ever since the founding of the second Maliki government in December 2010, almost a year after the Iraqi national elections, Turkey-Iraq relations have been problematic. The Turkish government made no secret of its dislike of Maliki's performance as prime minister, finding him to be strongly sectarian, excluding all but Shia Arabs from the government. Benefiting from the inconclusive nature of the 2010 elections, Turkey actively promoted the establishment of a government by Iyad Allawi, also a Shia politician but with a more secular bent, but this failed. Later, it hosted an Iraqi vice premier, Tarik al-Hashimi, whom the Maliki government had condemned to death, and provided him with opportunities for propagation of his anti-Maliki government views. The return of Maliki to power in this April has meant the continuation of these problematic relations. It is in this context that Turkey, without waiting for Baghdad and the KRG to reach an agreement, allowed the shipment of oil from northern Iraq to Ceyhan in Turkey to be loaded to tankers and sold to unspecified buyers.

Turkish policy toward Iraq has changed over time from favoring Baghdad to favoring Erbil. Initially, Turkey seemed to attach high priority to the maintenance of Iraq's territorial integrity. Aware of the desire of the KRG for ever higher levels of autonomy possibly culminating in independence — an outcome that it saw as presenting a challenge for its mainly Kurdish-populated contiguous provinces where a separatist organization, the PKK, was operating — Turkey favored Baghdad as it had always done in the past. Furthermore, sensitive about Kirkuk's Turkmen past, Turkish leaders, along with Baghdad, were unreceptive to Kurdish claims that the province is in the Kurdish heartland and now had a Kurdish majority.

The initial premiership of Maliki, however, proved to be disillusioning. He set out to establish exclusive Shia dominance in politics and displayed cruelty toward Sunni dissent. He ignored criticism and failed to mend his ways, a characteristic he has continued to this day. Under these circumstances, Turkish policy began to shift and became

highly critical of the Baghdad government. In the meantime, the Turkish government had changed its policies regarding its own Kurdish population, now acknowledging that there were ethnic and cultural differences that had to be accommodated within the framework of national unity. Under this new approach, the KRG was no longer seen as a threat that would instigate local Kurdish population to act against the Turkish state, but rather as a friendly power with whom cooperation would be possible to prevent difficulties that might emerge in Southeastern Turkey.

The positive atmosphere that gradually emerged after the shift in Turkey's policy in favor of the KRG was buttressed by the expansion of economic relations. Many Turkish businesses opened branches in Erbil, while Turkish Airlines and others initiated flights between major Turkey's cities and the KRG capital. Turkey became a popular tourist destination for Iraqi Kurds while cultural contacts multiplied. The change was epitomized in a concert in Diyarbakir, Turkey, where Shiwan Parvar, a Kurdish singer born in Turkey but in exile in Erbil sang Kurdish songs with İbrahim Tatlıses, a Turkish singer of partly Kurdish origin; Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offered complimentary remarks to both singers afterwards.

The Syrian Connection

Turkey's relations with Syria influence Turkey's relations with Iraq in two major ways. To begin with, the continuation of an Iran-backed Assad regime and an Iraq allied with Syria and favorably disposed toward Iran presents a challenge not only to Turkey's security but also its aspirations to be the regional leader. As is known, Turkey has implemented intensifying efforts to bring Assad down, however it has not only failed but has also become isolated

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because of insisting on such a policy. Some observers have suggested that Turkey began to extend support to radical Islamist movements including possibly ISIS when it became clear that the moderate Syrian opposition was fragmented, ineffective and incapable of bringing Assad regime to an end. The truth of such allegations is difficult to establish but some circumstantial evidence may be offered. First, many of the radical fighters appear to have flown to Turkey, before crossing into Syria. Until recently, Turkish authorities have been lax in monitoring this traffic. Second, there is evidence that radical elements entered Turkey from Syria, at a minimum for medical treatment and possibly for relief breaks. Third, newspaper accounts show that radical movements were actively engaged in recruiting among the Turkish youth, which should (could!) not have escaped the attention of local authorities. Fourth, the government's unusually harsh reaction to the stopping of trucks destined for Syria, by law enforcement authorities who had received a tip off that the cargo might contain more than humanitarian aid raises suspicions of some sort of a cover up. In conclusion, by failing to exercise enough care, Turkey may have been inadvertently too accommodating to radical movements, contributing to the emergence of an environment that has enabled ISIS to enjoy success in Iraq.

The close relations of both Syria and Iraq with Iran, as already indicated, gave birth to the possibility of an Iran-led Shia bloc projecting power all the way to the Mediterranean, a scenario that neither Turkey nor its allies in the Atlantic Community would find acceptable. That Russia might also establish links with this bloc serves only to intensify such concerns. Preventing such outcomes depended on bringing about change in Syria, a need Turkey may have appreciated somewhat better than its allies, leading it to turn to less orthodox measures to achieve security.

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Conundrum Variations

The developments in Iraq have confronted Turkey with a number of conundrums. First, the success ISIS has enjoyed first in Syria and then in Iraq, and the slow and incoherent Allied reaction, raises the possibility of the emergence of a political entity in Iraq that tries to export its ideology to Turkey, recruit militants, raise money, and develop effective political movements. This is extremely problematic for Iraq, whose stability already appears fragile in the face of growing political polarization along secular-religious lines. While ISIS may undermine the Iranian projection of power toward the Mediterranean, its own presence may be equally destabilizing both for the region and Turkey.

Second, ISIS has invaded provinces where major Turkmen communities reside, causing popular indignation among the Turkish public. More worrying, however, is the possibility of a wave of Turkmen migration into Turkey at a time when more than 1 million Syrian refugees, and more coming, already present Ankara with a daunting challenge.

Third, while its policy toward the KRG has evolved in a positive direction, Turkey has been adamantly opposed to aspirations of autonomy of Syrian Kurds. In the Kurdish majority sections of Syria, an ideological relative of the PKK prevails. Islamic radicals constituted a check on Kurdish assertiveness, a factor that may partially explain Turkey's relaxed approach toward them. Any concerted action against ISIS may force Turkey to answer the difficult question of how it is to cope with the Syrian Kurdish challenge.

Fourth, throughout this ordeal, because of the alleged divergence between the words and deeds of the Turkish government, its credibility has been undermined. While all allies recognize the importance of working with Turkey to cope with the emergency, it appears that it is the necessity of cooperation rather than the spirit of belonging to the same security community that drives the relationship.

A Time for All to Reconsider

In the business world, it is often argued that crises are also opportunities to review performance and bring about changes that seem difficult to affect under ordinary circumstances. The current situation in Iraq may serve to remind all members of the Atlantic Community how important



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their relationship has in fact been, and that the end of the Cold War has not eliminated the *raison d'être* of the alliance. When Syrian missiles were seen to be a threat, it was German, U.S., and Dutch Patriot missiles that assured Turkey of security. When Iranian missiles were seen to be a threat for European allies, Turkey allowed the installation of a radar station for a new anti-ballistic missile system despite Iranian warnings that Turkey itself would become an Iranian target and Russian protests that the system was really aimed at them.

The current developments in Syria and Iraq only go to show that with no immediate end in sight to the turmoil in the Middle East (and not just Syria and Iraq), and the reappearance of a competitive relationship with Russia both in general and with respect to the Middle East, it is imperative that both Turkey and other members of the Western Alliance reconsider the state of their relationship, trying to repair the erosion of the sense of community. The key is Turkey's relationship with the EU. Germany must take the lead and mobilize others in assuring Turks that membership under a reasonable timeline is a real possibility. In return, Turkey must intensify its efforts to conform with the EU conditionalities. Part of this effort will have to include a solution to the Cyprus problem, the major impediment to defense cooperation between NATO and EU. But whether the current and anticipated difficulties will constitute sufficient grounds for reconsidering and rebuilding the relationship remain to be seen.

About the Author

İlter Turan is an emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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