



On Turkey

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey's role in a coalition against the Islamic State group has not yet been determined. This brief discusses the dynamics that really matter in the decision-making process regarding Turkey's participation in coalitions in order to provide insight into the current parameters of Turkey's approach to the coalition against ISIS. After outlining the factors that determine Turkey's participation in any coalition, it analyzes the recent debates about Turkey's contribution to the current coalition.

Parameters of Engagement and Turkey's Limits in the Coalition Against ISIS

by Mehmet Yegin and Hasan Selim Özertem

Introduction

In response to the deteriorating security environment in Iraq and Syria, a U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State group (ISIS) is forming. Turkey, a NATO member with a Muslim majority population and a 565-mile border with Syria, is crucial for the coalition in terms of both legitimacy and operability. Nonetheless, its role in the coalition has not yet been determined.

Turkey's general coalition policy has become a matter of concern after the rejection of a bill on March 1, 2003, that would allow the country to open its territory to the "Coalition of the Willing." This brief discusses the dynamics that really matter in the decision-making process regarding Turkey's participation in coalitions in order to provide insight into the current parameters of Turkey's approach to the coalition against ISIS. After outlining the factors that determine Turkey's participation in any coalition, it analyzes the recent debates about Turkey's contribution to the current coalition.

Factors that Determine Turkey's Engagement

Military coalitions by nature refer to the use of force. Yet, members of a coalition might contribute to the central cause in different ways, by taking on the role of a fighting power, providing logistics, sharing intelligence, and so on. In this sense, Turkey has assumed diverse roles in various coalitions to bring peace and stability to a wide geography, from Korea to the Balkans. A close look at these operations reveals certain principles that determine Turkey's level of engagement. These can roughly be discussed under the headings of legitimacy and Western identity, risk-interest assessment, and the roles of domestic decision-makers and public opinion.

Legitimacy and Western Identity

The legitimacy of a coalition in Turkey is specifically related to managing the image and perception of Turkey at the international level as well as the positioning the Turkish value system in world politics. Thus, a UNSC resolution or a NATO decision is regarded as an important prerequisite to action.

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Turkey has enlisted itself in operations under the banner of the UN in such far-flung places as Somalia (UNOSOM) and East Timor (UNMISET). Yet, Turkey does not automatically participate in all UN-backed operations, and the lack of such a resolution does not outright bar the country from joining a coalition either. Given this, it could be argued that UN legitimacy plays only a facilitating role.

The positions of Turkey's allies and partners are more influential for decision-makers in Turkey than a UNSC resolution as they provide legitimacy to the operation itself and the actions of the members participating therein. As such, NATO decisions to act are more influential than UNSC resolutions. The position of NATO allies is also important for Turkey not only as it relates to alliance solidarity, but also considering that the bulk of these allies represent the West. Thus, the legitimacy issue is also related to Turkey's self-identity. Especially after critical turning points, such as the end of the Cold War and September 11, 2001, Turkey's participation in coalitions has been regarded as a matter of reaffirming its place within the Western world and its commitment to Western values. Here, the First Gulf War and the 2001 War in Afghanistan serve as important examples in which Turkey participated in coalitions to reinvigorate its position in the West. Nevertheless, the question of legitimacy alone is not sufficient in addressing what factors play into the ultimate decision for Turkey to join a coalition. For this, it is also vital to consider risk-interest assessments.

Risk-Interest Assessment

When it comes to joining a coalition, Turkish decision-makers assess the risks of joining and the interests at stake if it were to opt for nonparticipation. The risk assessment is two-fold. First, the possibility of attack or reprisal by the target country or actor is considered. This is the tangible cost of coalition participation. The second risk is related

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more to Turkey's image. Being a part of a coalition that targets a neighboring country or, in another way, being a part of a Western coalition that engages in operations against a Muslim country may have effects on the image of any Muslim-populated country.

Since Turkey is located at a juncture of conflict zones with diverse ethnic and religious identities, it is exposed to these risks more than any other Western country. However, forming a multinational coalition structure that also includes Muslim populated states can mitigate these risks. In other words, not only the objectives of the operation, but also the structure of the coalition determine Turkey's position.

When it comes to interests, a coalition enables participants to influence and shape trends during and after warfare. This being the case, the stakes are extremely high for non-participant countries as they are excluded from the post-war balances. Direct security challenges emanating from a proximate geography, ethnic, historical and cultural links with social groups on the ground, and economic expectations can be stated as the factors that increase a country's interest in participating. However, these assessments do not always focus solely on rational factors. Political cleavages and ideological dynamics are also important throughout this process.

Public Opinion is Important, but Who Decides Matters More

In Turkey, the political process itself and the power balances are the factors that play a role in the final stage before the country makes its ultimate decision. The differentiations between executive and legislative powers as well as the stance of the security elite particularly complicate the decision on whether or not to participate in a coalition.

Turkey's parliamentary system holds the government responsible for its decisions, but the parliament still has the power to draw the limits of its maneuverability. This is related to the political leader's control over his/her party and the level of cohesion within the government. Even if ruling parties hold a majority in the parliament, MPs tend to act more independently with a relatively weak leader. The March 1 Bill is the paragon of this situation. Yet, in cases of



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a strong executive or close coordination between the influential actors, the final decision is up to the executive power.

Alternately, despite all the noise it may make, public opinion has limited influence on the process. The Turkish people are generally against their nation's involvement in coalition warfare. Only the coalitions that act for protecting groups who have ethnic or cultural affinities with Turkey are publicly supported. The interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo are representative of such a case. All other interventions have been opposed due to their risks and the overall pacifist stance of the society.

The Coalition against ISIS and Turkey

There is more valuable insight on the dynamics of Turkey's participation in the coalition against ISIS available by making an analysis based upon the framework outlined above. Looking at the question of legitimacy, there is neither a UNSC resolution that enables the use of force nor a NATO decision. NATO plays the role of a coordination platform for its allies, but looking at Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statements in Ankara, there appears to be no clear signs that NATO will be engaging against ISIS.

Even though NATO is avoiding embroiling itself in the conflict as an alliance, ten NATO countries, including Turkey, declared their political will to fight ISIS at the NATO Wales Summit. This can be viewed as Turkey synchronizing its movements with its Western allies. However, Turkey later abstained from signing the final communique during the meeting in Jiddah, where ten Arab countries agreed to support the coalition. The meeting was of symbolic importance as these countries also supported the Western-led coalition against ISIS, but a change in Turkey's tone triggered some questions.

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This change can easily be explained when seen through a risk-assessment lens. At the time of the Jiddah meeting, ISIS fighters were still holding 46 Turkish citizens hostage. Naturally, this increased the perception of risk in Turkey. Any beheadings of these people would have been especially unbearable at the domestic level. For these reasons, Turkey chose to remain silent in Jiddah. After the release of the Turkish hostages, Turkey changed its low-profile position and during the UNSC meeting on counterterrorism, Erdoğan openly declared that ISIS was a terrorist organization. Moreover, on another occasion, he stated that Turkey might contribute to the coalition in terms of providing political, logistical, and military support.

Yet, several security risks still linger for Turkey. Despite the measures taken to reinforce security, it is still hard to prevent ISIS fighters from crossing the long border. Considering previous experiences, such as the al Qaeda HSBC bombings in 2003, this poses immense risk for Turkish cities. Furthermore, Syria is an important neighbor and developments there may have spillover effects both in the region and inside the country as radical groups remain intact. In spite of the short-term risks, it is important for Turkey to retain influence over the developments south of its borders. In other words, the fact that Turkey's interests are enmeshed with security challenges helps to better illuminate Turkey's hesitance vis-à-vis the coalition.

Turkey's public is against engaging in a fight against ISIS since people there do not look favorably on getting involved in other countries' affairs. According to a Metropoll survey, on Turkish foreign policy released in October 2014 only 22.5 percent of the population supports Turkey's participation in the fight against ISIS.¹ Nevertheless, Erdoğan seems to be quite powerful and have control over both his constituency and the government. The final decision will be up to him. In fact, he now has the necessary tools as the parliament gave Ahmed Davutoğlu's government free reign by approving a October 2 bill that gives permission to the government, if necessary, to use Turkish military in the territories of Syria and Iraq, and to open Turkish soil to foreign troops.

¹ <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/upload/content/files/1774-turkiyenin-nabzi-ekim-sunum.pdf>



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Erdoğan and Davutoğlu insist that the use of this authority would only be employed in concert with a comprehensive engagement plan in Syria that includes an ultimate goal to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. This position entails a certain degree of vagueness as to Turkey's role in the coalition. Furthermore, the developments on the battlefield complicate the picture for Turkey as it tries to avoid further engagement. For instance, ISIS attacks on Kobane, a town near the Syria/Turkey border, led to both domestic and international pressure on the Turkish government. As a result, Ankara decided to open a corridor to Peshmerga forces from Iraq via Turkey for Kobane's defense. Yet, Turkey maintains its reservations about the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which it regards as an offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization, even as the United States and others decided to support the organization militarily.

Turkey's participation in the coalition against ISIS is already settled. Besides, it has also already decided to open corridors on its territory that allow for the passage of foreign elements to participate in the fight against ISIS in Syria. However, Turkey's role within the coalition and the limits to the share of the burden that it is willing to shoulder continue to be part of the main debate. It seems that Turkey is ready to share its intelligence with its allies and increase security measures on its borders. The next stage in this debate is linked with opening *İncirlik* airbase to allied air forces, training opposition elements, and establishing safe zones in coordination with boots on the ground. These possibilities would require further engagement, and pose additional risks to Turkey.

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About the Authors

Hasan Selim Özertem and Mehmet Yegin are researchers at an Ankara-based think tank, International Strategic Research Organization (USAK). Özertem's areas of interest are Turkish politics, energy security, and foreign policy. Yegin's areas of interest are Turkish politics, Turkish-American relations, and security.

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