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Turkey's Euphrates Shield: Mission Creep?

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For nine decades, the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey mostly steered clear of any sort of adventurism — including attempting regime change in neighboring countries. After the Arab uprisings in 2011, however, Turkey largely abandoned this founding principle with regard to the Middle East and, in particular, Syria. Six years later, and not for the lack of trying, Turkey has utterly failed to overthrow the Assad regime.

There are two main reasons for this failure. First, Ankara miscalculated the Assad regime's domestic and foreign support, leading to a belief that it would be toppled in a short period of time, like the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Second, detrimental to the Turkish expectations, the Muslim Brotherhood (which Ankara hoped would come to power in a "Muslim Brotherhood Belt" from Tunisia to the Levant) was particularly weak and inconsequential in Syria. Following the Arab uprisings, Turkey has relied on working together with its Sunni Arab counterparts, principally Saudi Arabia. However, the Saudi monarchy has long perceived the Muslim Brotherhood — which sought to build formidable social networks and, when it did, mainly tried to come to power through elections — as a threat, reasoning that it would function as an ideological lodestone for the Saudi people. The Saudis' role in ousting Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood affiliated President Mohamed Morsi (for whom AKParty had entertained great hopes) from his office by way of a military coup and proclaiming the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization were early indicators that Riyadh and Ankara could face a similar conflict of interest over Syria.

A Series of Unfortunate Miscalculations

As things stand, and owing much to Turkey's own political choices, the current security problem posed by Syria is of vital interest to Turkey. Following the Arab uprisings,

the AKP government initially viewed Syria as a stepping-stone in Turkey's journey to achieve greater influence in a Muslim Brotherhood governed Middle East and to assume a leadership role in the Muslim world. Yet instead, Syria has functioned as a portal through which regional hazards are able to get back at Turkey.

Ankara's initial priority was to ensure that change in Syria would take place as swiftly as possible and through peaceful means. But when, contrary to Turkey's expectations, the Assad regime did not fall within weeks or even months, Ankara quickly adopted a new strategy, calling on the West, and especially the United States, to intervene militarily in Syria as it had in Libya. Ankara then reconfigured its alliances accordingly, establishing close ties with anti-Assad forces and allowing them passage through Turkey. Paradoxically, AKParty contemplated that Turkey would achieve leadership of the Muslim world through U.S. and Saudi support, but this aspiration never came to fruition. As of 2017, it became clear that Ankara made a costly miscalculation. The Saudis saw the establishment of a Muslim Brotherhood Belt under Ankara's leadership as a threat to their own interests. Particularly after 2013, the United States decided that Ankara's Muslim Brotherhood affinity had gone out of control and fallen into the hands of radical groups, and openly started to oppose it.

In addition to Turkey's disagreements with its allies, the AKP government has been unable to rouse domestic support for its ambition of regime change in Syria, also due to the costs associated with hosting the large Syrian refugee population in Turkey that now exceeds three million people. Over the past 15 years, the AKP has been largely successful in its strategy of casting foreign policy in terms of domestic policy, yet it was unable to position the overthrow of the Assad regime as a question of national

interest. Large portions of the Turkish public have regarded this as pure adventurism.

The Republic of Turkey is the product of a century's worth of experience of the nation-state. The same is mostly true of Syria. While the idea of uniting the Muslim world may produce euphoria among Islamist circles, it has become evident that, over time, Arab and Turkish nationalism has been entrenched beyond being just products of "lines on the sand." It seems that at one point the AKParty itself became cognizant of this, given its frequently stated emphasis on the interests of Syria's Turkmen population.

Starting in 2014, ISIS's raid on Turkey's consulate in Mosul, along with the Kobani crisis, altered Turkey's perception of its own vital interests and the threats it faced in Syria. Turkey got caught up in the rising Sunni-Shia polarization in the Middle East. By codifying an ideological matter as a question of vital interest, Turkey has turned it into a survival issue.

Euphrates Shield

It is striking that the term "shield," rather than "lance" or "arrow," was chosen to name Turkey's military intervention in Syria, demonstrating that Turkey's military operations in Syria are essentially of defensive character. Euphrates Shield became possible as a result of two developments: the resignation of PM Ahmet Davutoğlu (the original architect of Turkey's assertive foreign policy) and rapprochement with Russia following almost eight months of a "mini Cold War" after Turkey shot down a Russian military plane. Ankara felt threatened by PYD's acquisition of a significant part of Turkey's border with Syria and by the possibility that this might cut Turkey off from the Sunni Arab Middle East. Without a doubt, Ankara's concerns were due in large part to the fact that the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK, a separatist organization that the U.S. State Department designates as a terrorist group, with which Turkey has been fighting for more than 30 years. The fact that the PKK also controls a long stretch of the Iraqi-Turkish border has only increased the perceived threat. Nevertheless, Euphrates Shield is by no means an assured solution for Turkey's troubles, but a way to keep already-incurred foreign policy costs under control.

The key question is how Turkey can now redeem the sunk costs of its 2011-2016 Syria policy. Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş has stated that many of the crises currently afflicting Turkey are a result of the situation in Syria and of Turkey's Syria policy. Resetting this policy now will inevitably come at a price. It is conceivable that Turkey may encounter serious problems with at least some of the armed groups in Syria that it has supported for the past six years now that it is withdrawing its support. However effective Turkey may be at curbing the PYD in a 40-kilometer deep pocket of Syria, Euphrates Shield's

lack of a clear end goal and exit strategy only exacerbates the uncertainty. Furthermore, Turkey cannot maintain a military presence in Syria without Russia, which controls Syrian airspace. Thus, the success of Euphrates Shield — and of Ankara's Syria policy in general — is somewhat in the hands of the Kremlin.

Syria has become the posturing stage of two great powers, and a hotbed of regional geopolitical rivalries, as well as a home base for the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS. This has necessarily reduced the room for maneuvering by a regional, midsize power like Turkey. It has also given rise to the possibility that Turkey may get caught between U.S. and Russian priorities. This was not entirely unforeseen in Ankara. Soner Polat, head of the Turkish General Staff's Intelligence Department (2005-2007), has gone on record that military intelligence warned Turkish decision-makers that foreign attempts to impose democratization upon Syria were certain to lead to "destabilization," with a risky outcome for Turkey: "We will not be able to control events there; powers from outside the region will arrive on the scene... A democratic Syria is impossible. Either Syria will be partitioned, or there will be a continuation of the system you observe at present."¹

...Beyond

Initially Euphrates Shield was declared a defensive military operation to ward off perceived threats originating from a certain territory. In this sense, it is similar to the 1974 Cyprus operation, but there are considerable differences between the two. The Cyprus question did not arise due to mistakes on the part of Turkey: under international agreements, Ankara had the right to act as guarantor, and there was a Turkish community on the island which was conscious of its own identity and which had its own leadership. Nonetheless, the Cyprus question has been an ongoing liability in Turkish foreign policy for the past 45 years.

Unlike Cyprus, the great powers have a presence in Syria. Syria is not an island like Cyprus but a contiguous territory. Under international law, Turkey cannot act as a guarantor in Syria as it did in Cyprus, and ethnic Turks are not among the key actors in Syria. Today, the emerging power vacuum in northern Syria, along with the lack of any clear plan about how to fill it, is a cost generator and a liability for Ankara. Undertaken with the aim of eliminating threats from Syria and providing strategic depth, Euphrates Shield is simply a manageable liability for Turkey that should be framed as a tool for defensive strategy. To the extent that it is successful at warding off external threats, this liability is worth the cost. In fact, Turkey's traditional foreign policy has never lost sight of this reality in Cyprus. However, if

¹ Soner Polat, "Ne Oluyor" Programı, CNNTurk, Broadcast on August 25, 2016.

Ankara regards it as an asset — as an actuator of a “springboard” for an ambitious Middle East policy similar to the one it pursued after 2011 — then Euphrates Shield could inevitably suffer from mission creep. A “shield” cannot turn into a “lance.” No amount of pragmatic or opportunistic management can transform Euphrates Shield into an asset. At best, it will remain a case of defensive liability management.

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