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Turkey's Unpalatable Choices in Syria

By GALIP DALAY

Multiplication of Threats and Goals

Turkey's interpretation of and approach toward the situation in Syria has been dynamic, as the nation has shifted its priorities and used different tactics throughout each stage of the crisis. At the beginning, the main goal was regime change. Yet the longer crisis continued, the more protracted and militarized it became — and additional threats started to emerge.

From mid-2012 onward, the Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis developed as the PKK-affiliated PYD began to fill the void created by regime forces retreating from the mostly Kurdish-majority northern Syrian towns. This caused concern in Turkey, but did not yet change its priorities in Syria. The search for a political settlement of the Kurdish issue, which began in the closing days of 2012, played a role in decreasing Turkey's threat perception of this new development.

Fast forward to 2014, and self-proclaimed Islamic State group has become more central to the Syrian crisis, particularly during policy formulation for outside powers, adding a new element of threat for Turkey's Syria policy. With ISIS's quick victories, both in Syria and Iraq, the understanding and conceptualization of the Syrian crisis underwent a major transformation. It progressively turned into another "war on terror" phenomenon. The emergence and spread of ISIS has proved to be a boon for the PYD's expansion of territory and gaining of international legitimacy and military equipment. At this stage, Turkey's Kurdish peace process was already on life support due to the divergent visions for a solution, mainly over Syria and the PYD-dominated Kurdish enclave in the north. The peace process collapsed in July 2015 with the resumption of the fight between Turkey and the PKK.

The PKK then attempted to implement an urban warfare strategy inspired by the Syrian crisis in Turkey's Kurdish majority east and south east regions, which elicited a heavy urban and rural military response. This period also coincided with increasing activities by ISIS in Turkey. Moreover, Turkish-Russian row over the downed Russian jet coupled with Turkey's fraying relations with the United States has further emboldened the PYD and the PKK. To break this cycle, Turkey has scrambled to patch up relations with Russia, which it achieved in the second half of 2016, and which in return has once again paved the way for Turkey to more effectively deal with threats stemming from Syria.

In addition to this, one of the guiding principles of Turkey's current Syria, or Northern Syria, policy is that it strives to create *fait accomplis* on the ground so that it can later leverage this in bargains — with the United States in particular. If it does not continue for too long, the current uncertainty in the United States will benefit this policy.

Reordering Turkey's Priorities

At this stage, Turkey had three primary goals in Syria: preventing the establishment of a territorially-contiguous PYD-dominated Kurdish region along its borders, pushing ISIS back from its borders, and toppling the Assad regime. It has become clear that Turkey will be unable to attain all three of these goals, and it must reorder its priorities. Preventing the growth of a PYD-administered contiguous Kurdish region is now at the top of its agenda, while regime change from its priorities have dropped in importance, at least for the time being. The Russian and Iranian presence on the ground, coupled with the fall of Aleppo to the regime forces, have further confirmed this decision.

This reading of events has formed the background to Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operations in Syria. While the

operational goal of Euphrates Shield was to push ISIS back from the Turkish–Syrian border, its strategic goal was to prevent the creation of a contiguous PYD-held territory along the Turkish–Syrian border. The goal being to roll back PYD gains, if possible. Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia has allowed for this operation, with the tacit understanding of Iran and also the regime.

Regime Reform or Face-saving Measures?

Just as the Turkish–Russian rapprochement has opened the way for Turkey’s Euphrates Shield Operations (while also putting limitations on the operation’s scope, target, and evolution), the same partnership, plus Iran, has also paved the way for recent diplomatic initiatives aimed at revitalizing the political process after the fall of Aleppo. Turkey’s position and the nature of the Turkish–Russian deal and Astana indicate that it is moving away from a regime-change agenda toward a regime-reform agenda — a major policy overhaul. While the diminishing capacity of the opposition to overthrow the regime and the half-hearted support to the opposition from anti-regime powers have played their part in this apparent change of policy, it also appears to have been partially motivated by the belief that Turkey now has graver dangers in Syria, and that scrapping the idea of regime change will help Turkey better deal with these threats — a policy that seems to be driven more by short-termism than being a well thought through long-term policy. Given that regime-reform is an unlikely goal for Syria, it seems that face-saving measures for the pro-opposition camp, instead of a real regime-reform agenda, are more likely to be on the agenda of any Russian-led political process to end the crisis.

Points of Concern: The Draft Constitution and Safe Zone

Russia, Turkey, and Iran’s search for a political settlement has more or less coincided with the change of administration in the United States. During this period, two issues have caused particular concern in Ankara. First, the draft constitution that the Russians disseminated to participants in the Astana meeting and later meetings that they convened in Moscow, also inviting PYD figures, has caused concern and consternation in Ankara. The defining characteristics of these draft constitutions have been power devolution/sharing and significant cultural/political rights for identity/minority groups. The concern in Ankara is that this will pave the way for legitimizing the PYD’s enclaves and open the way for power-sharing arrangements along identity lines, a scenario that Ankara is striving to avoid with little success thus far. Second, U.S. President Trump’s idea of a safe zone has received mixed reactions from Ankara. On the one hand, Turkey has been a champion of the creation of safe zones in Syria for several years, so it seems a welcome development. Yet on the other hand, the ambiguous nature of the proposed safe zone has created anxiety. The location of this safe zone, the groups that will be covered by this prospective zone, the nature of this initiative, and similar questions have

raised concerns, with fear that the PYD might emerge as the main beneficiary. This fear partly relies on the memory of the 1990s, during which time the U.S.-initiated no-fly zone in Iraq was one of the most important ingredients leading to the emergence of today’s Kurdistan Regional Government. The repetition of a similar experience in Syria would cause deep concern in Turkey.

Post-Al Bab Scenarios

While the diplomatic track is gaining momentum, Turkey’s Euphrates Shield Operation has made further inroads into Syria by taking over Al Bab. As it stands, Turkey has achieved its primary goals for the operation. It has cleared ISIS from its borders and staved off the PYD’s push to bridge the last remaining gap between its Afrin and Kobane cantons (putting aside the partial corridor created through the regime-held areas by the regime’s capturing of areas south of Al Bab, which brought the regime to the edge of SDF-held areas south of Manbij). At this stage, it will have to make new decisions. Ankara has thus far sent mixed messages as to what will be the post-Al Bab Syria policy. Three scenarios are on the horizon.

First, Turkey may stop any further territorial expansion and instead focus on consolidating its gains and establishing a governance structure for allied opposition groups in the areas that it has liberated from ISIS. This task in itself is important because, in a conflict or civil war context, the main source of legitimacy is not democracy but effective governance. Turkey needs to help its allied opposition groups retain or increase their legitimacy by putting in place an effective governance structure in the areas under their rule. One of the caveats for the opposition groups taking part in the Euphrates Shield Operation is that they might be seen as implementing an exclusively Turkish agenda, and hence losing ground to other contending opposition groups in terms of legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Syrians. An effective governance structure in the liberated areas will help mitigate these challenges.

Second, Turkey may continue fighting ISIS in order to have a major role in liberating Raqqa, therefore reducing the YPG-dominated SDF’s role and salience. To liberate Raqqa, two options come to the fore. First, Turkey can continue the same operation with the aim of reaching Raqqa. Putting aside the U.S. dimension, two issues are likely to prove thorny in this scenario: The geographical distance from Al Bab to Raqqa is over 200 km and the regime forces are likely to pose a direct challenge to Turkey-backed forces as they have already reached the lines between Al Bab and Raqqa. Second, if Turkey can get U.S. support, the Tal Abyad option will be Turkey’s preference as it will break the PYD’s lines between Jazira and Kobane cantons. But this is likely to cause fighting between Turkey, the PYD, and PKK on multiple fronts — a scenario the United States prefers to avoid. In any scenario, the liberation of Raqqa will require significantly

more time, planning, and manpower than Turkey currently has on the ground in Syria. Sorting out the logistics of such an operation will not be easy. Moreover, there is a danger of this operation turning into mission creep.

Once you are on the ground, the conflict dictates its own terms and realities. The deeper Turkey goes inside Syria and more it becomes involved in the war, the harder it will be to scale back due to greater risk exposure. Turkey started the ongoing Euphrates Shield Operation with a few hundred soldiers accompanied by FSA army fighters. Currently, Turkey's military presence on the ground has already reached several thousand troops, partially due to the ineffectiveness of Turkey's partners on the ground. The early swift success of the operation has been replaced by protracted urban warfare with higher casualty rates in later stages.

The further Turkey goes into Syria, the more exposed it is to a variety of threats including a multi-front fight, be it with the YPG, ISIS, or possibly the regime as well. The stances of the United States and Russia on this scenario will also be crucial for the fate of such an operation.

Third, Turkey may direct its attention to its real target in Syria, the PYD, by either pushing toward Manbij or Afrin. A move toward Tal Abyad should not be completely ruled out either. Unless Turkey cuts a deal with the United States — which seems unlikely — then such a move will probably lead to a fierce battle between Turkey and YPG/PKK, and cause friction with the United States and Russia. As the regime has already reached to the edges of the SDF-held areas south of Manbij, it is reasonable to expect that the PYD will seek to cut a deal with the regime, if it sees a serious possibility of the Euphrates Shield Operation turning its fire-power on itself.

Now is the time for Turkey to make new choices regarding its Syria policy, but none of the options seem very palatable.

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