

# Turkey: Military Action in a Strategic Void

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2016 turned out to be quite a traumatic, transformative and troubled year for Turkish foreign policy. This was particularly true of Ankara's policies towards the MENA region. In the Mashreq, these were intimately tied to its relations with the United States and Turkey's overpowering northern neighbour, Russia. Turkish policy in Syria had to take into account the interests of the two powers and bear the constraints imposed by the two on Turkey's aspirations and actions, at times to the detriment of declared Turkish interests.

Under such circumstances, the year saw a further weakening of Turkey's autonomous power inside Syria and a more assertive stance in Iraq. This, paradoxically, in spite of the fact that Turkey was a signatory to the Moscow agreement of December 2016 and undertook a military incursion inside Syria, ostensibly to clean its border areas from ISIS, but mainly to check the advance of Kurdish forces of YPG (People's Protection Units) that sought to unite the three disparate cantons where the PKK-affiliated PYD (Democratic Union Party) held sway. In the wake of the attempted coup of 15 July which traumatized the masses and elites alike, a – perhaps exaggerated – sense of existential crisis has driven Turkish policy. This partially explains the inconsistencies in Ankara's positions that reflected a

fixation with Kurdish gains militarily and diplomatically in Syria and caused a succession of humiliations from Washington and Moscow.

As for the rest of the MENA region, not much has changed in Turkey's relations with the countries of North Africa. Of course, the kind of attention and resource allocation that immediately followed the Arab revolts subsided. In the most problematic case, in relations with Egypt, there was certainly less mutual recrimination, but the anticipated amelioration that would be symbolized by the exchange of ambassadors did not materialize.

Yet, at the beginning of 2017, after a four-year lapse, a business group from Turkey visited Egypt and participated in the Turkish-Egyptian Business Forum and was received by the Egyptian Minister for Trade and Industry. It is clear that a restoration of cordial diplomatic relations will take a while. In the meantime, the two countries find themselves at the opposing ends of issues such as support for Hamas in Palestine or the desired political future of Syria. Increasingly, Cairo is backing the Assad regime, and Turkey, despite the fact that it is a signatory to the Moscow declaration, which implicitly recognizes the legitimacy of the regime, still desires its ousting.

With the Moscow declaration, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to take on the role of guarantors to facilitate the process for a ceasefire and safeguard the territorial integrity of Syria. In doing so they also, at least implicitly, recognized the legitimacy of the Syrian regime that Turkey has been rejecting since Summer 2011.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> FILIPOV, D.; CUNNINGHAM, E. and FAHIM, K. "Russia and Turkey, joined by Iran, announce intention to halt war in Syria," *The Washington Post*, 20 December 2016. [www.washingtonpost.com/world/investigators-seek-answers-in-russian-ambassadors-assassination-in-turkey/2016/12/20/e63b5950-c63a-11e6-acda-59924caa2450\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/investigators-seek-answers-in-russian-ambassadors-assassination-in-turkey/2016/12/20/e63b5950-c63a-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html)

## Broken Dreams

Turkey fancied itself a regional power that had both the vision and the capacity to shape the fate of the region. This was particularly the case in the wake of the Arab revolts when Turkey was seen as a plausible model for the aspiring democratic movements of the region. This exaggerated self-confidence coupled with a stubborn resistance to assessing the dynamics on the ground in Syria resulted, by 2016, in Ankara finding itself in an unenviable position. From August 2011 till August 2016, Turkey's priorities in Syria were: bringing the end of the Assad regime; supporting the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to bring them to power and "preventing the formation of the PKK-affiliated (...) autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria."<sup>2</sup> As of the late summer of 2015, fighting ISIS was finally added to this list and became an earnest goal in 2016. These goals required Turkey to sustain and support the Sunni Arab forces, which included al-Nusra and its other incarnations, that fought the regime no matter how disdainful they may have been ideologically and in their brutality. After August 2016, despite the war against ISIS, the Kurdish forces were the main target of Turkey's military might, along with its priority to break the ties between the United States and the Kurds of Syria and possibly eradicate the political gains accumulated over the past six years.

By the beginning of the year, many of Turkey's claims as a regional powerhouse have fallen by the wayside and the "precious loneliness" Turkish authorities prided themselves with only a few years ago turned out to be mainly "loneliness" in strategic terms. Paradoxically, this conclusion can be reached despite the fact that the Turkish military undertook a major operation inside Syria and reached the town of al-Bab and currently controls a swath of territory in the north of that country.

During the first half of the past year the government's main concern was to break the isolation that Turkey's policies has brought upon it. One could cite two instances when a tangible change in Turkey's policy in Syria took place. The first came after the forced resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the architect of Turkey's foreign policy, as Prime Minister. Operating un-

der the motto of "reducing the number of our enemies and raising the number of our friends," the new PM Binali Yıldırım's foreign policy moved to make amends with Russia, took steps to normalize relations with Israel and laid down Turkey's ambitions.

This was also when the government finally recognized ISIS as the major security threat that it was, following the terror attacks instigated by the organization. ISIS was to a certain extent tolerated by Turkey, particularly while it fought the PYD. But then it began to attack targets within Turkey in the wake of Ankara's decision to finally open the Incirlik base to allied aircraft, which bombed ISIS targets.

The heinous acts that killed tourists at two of İstanbul's most prized tourist spots at the beginning of the year, continued with a spectacular attack in Atatürk airport, Turkey's main gateway to the world and a very important hub in its own right for international passengers. Finally, ISIS organized the New Year's eve massacre at Reina, a famous nightclub with a significant international reputation and clientele.

## Making Amends

Particularly in the wake of the attacks within Turkey and in view of no agreement with the United States on how to relate to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, Turkey could not afford to continue having tense relations with Russia. In fact, the rapprochement with Russia was seen as a way to draw the attention of a nonchalant Obama Administration, whose relations with Turkey during its last months in power proved to be very acrimonious. So, shortly before the coup attempt, Turkey bent over backwards and managed to start ameliorating its relations with Russia, which had been severely harmed in the wake of the downing of a Russian SU-24 by Turkish Air Force in November 2015.

As Bülent Aras put it, "... Russian and Iranian interventionism cut back Turkey's self-assigned leadership role in the Syrian transition. (...) the Obama Administration's wobbling stance against regional crises undermined an assumed Turkish-American

<sup>2</sup> ALARANTA, Toni. "Turkish troops in Syria. It is all about the Kurds from now on?," *FIIA Briefing Paper* 214, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), February 2017. [www.fiaa.fi/assets/publications/bp214\\_Turkish\\_troops\\_in\\_Syria.pdf](http://www.fiaa.fi/assets/publications/bp214_Turkish_troops_in_Syria.pdf)

cooperation to steer the region towards normalization. (...) the changing dynamics of Arab geopolitics put Turkey on a collision course with pro-Western Sunni powers (...) who were apprehensive about Turkish support for political Islam and Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, Turkey found itself embroiled in immediate multi-frontal confrontation against Kurdish, Russian, Iranian, Western and Arab interests.”<sup>3</sup> The year’s assessment reveals a number of contradictions. On the one hand, many developments on the ground exposed the vast gap between Turkey’s ambitions and its capacities. The course of events in Syria continued almost independently of Turkey, and the way back into the thick of diplomatic manoeuvres required Russia’s permission or patronage. In order to attain its goal of reaching the town of al-Bab, an ISIS stronghold, alongside its less than competent allies in the Free Syrian Army, Turkey had to abandon the militias that it supported in East Aleppo. The area was ultimately taken by regime forces, aided by Russia, after a brutal bombardment and incursion.

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The shadow cast by Iran over both Iraq and Syria, Turkey’s southern neighbours, also played a part in defining Turkey’s actions. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Ankara and Tehran had taken diametrically opposed positions. In Iraq, there was an understated competition between the two. This year, the competition was further accentuated when Turkey declared its presence as permanent in the town of Bashiq, where its troops are stationed in the contested zones near Mosul, but was kept out of the operation to free Mosul of ISIS. Iran, on the other hand was heavily involved, albeit through the Shi’a militia loyal to Tehran, and raised its stakes and influence in the Kurdistan Regional Government area. It also

made a move to be part of the deals involving the oil transported from the contested province of Kirkuk to Turkey.

Yet, paradoxically or perhaps as a result of the lack of a compass in Turkey’s strategic objectives, Ankara has signed an agreement in Moscow with Iran and Russia concerning the future of Syria. It co-hosted a peace conference in Astana, Kazakhstan and, later, in 2017, became the guarantor of the umpteenth cease-fire in Syria.

In fact, Turkey’s paradoxical position vis-à-vis Iran was one of the major dilemmas of its foreign policy. In the wake of Donald Trump’s election as President, Ankara gave signals to Riyadh, Tel Aviv and Washington that if the struggle against Iran intensified, Turkey would join it. President Erdoğan during his last visit to Saudi Arabia warned his interlocutors about rising Persian nationalism and called on them to form a unified front against this. Yet he also cautioned his audience against intensifying the sectarian divide and turning the struggle with Iran into a purely sectarian one. His words and warnings drew a rebuke from Iran which, in turn, was sharply answered by the Turkish foreign ministry.

Driven by the desire to break away from its increasingly unsettling loneliness in international and regional politics, Ankara finally concluded a deal with Israel as well. This was meant to bring to an end the crisis engendered by the Israeli raid against the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara, which resulted in the death of 10 Turkish citizens in May 2010. As a result, the process of normalizing relations with the Jewish State with the exchange of ambassadors also began.

Indeed, the nuclear agreement signed between Iran and the P5+1 clearly gave an inducement in that direction. Turkey was not and has never been viscerally against finding accommodation with the Islamic Republic in the way Saudi Arabia and Israel have been. In fact, along with Brazil, Turkey actively worked to broker a deal with Iran back in 2010. Ankara still felt uncomfortable with the new context in the wake of a nuclear deal that opened enough space for Tehran to pursue its hegemonic aspirations.

Yet as Galip Dalay argues, “Turkey was better equipped to deal with the Arab Spring phenomena when it was mostly about socio-political and socio-economic demands, but Iran was better prepared to deal with the morphing of these Arab uprisings into ethnic-sectarian/ideological wars,

given its decades-old investment into proxy identity groups and Shia militias.”<sup>4</sup>

This context explains why Turkey wanted to maintain a presence in the town of Bashiqa, despite objections from the Iraqi government, and wanted to be part of the Mosul operation, although failing to convince the parties involved. Turkey’s activism in the north of Iraq particularly in the Shingal Mountains was also partially to contain Iranian influence. But mainly, that engagement and the occasional aerial bombardments of the region were meant to deny the PKK another stronghold in Iraqi Kurdistan, in addition to its headquarters on the Qandil mountains. Ankara tried to prevent the PKK from consolidating its position in Shingal and being a security threat not just to Turkey, but also to the Kurdistan Regional Government.

### The Road to Incursion

The most dramatic development of the year was the launching of Operation “Euphrates Shield” by the Turkish military, which, until then, had been reluctant to engage directly within Syria. The bloody coup attempt of 15 July, arguably prompted or facilitated the launching of the operation whose ostensible goal was to clear Turkey’s borders of ISIS militants. The operation further complicated Turkey’s role in Syria and its relations with the influential powers in that country.

Most critics of the operation were concerned with the lack of a clear political-strategic objective and the absence of an exit strategy. Undoubtedly, the undeclared goal of the operation was to deny the advancing Kurdish YPG forces the ability to unify the two “cantons” to the east of the Euphrates River under their control with the westernmost enclave of Afrin near Turkey’s southeastern border.

This was why the Turkish government repeatedly asked the United States for guarantees that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces would not be allowed to stay on the western bank of the Euphrates river. The pressure exerted on the United States for the YPG to leave Manbij stemmed from that con-

cern. Euphrates Shield may have had a third goal as well. After the failures of its militia allies on the ground, particularly after East Aleppo was taken by regime forces, Ankara wanted to maintain a Turkey-dependent Sunni Arab force that it might use in future operations. The fighting capabilities of these forces, the Free Syrian Army, left a lot to be desired though, based on their near abysmal performance during Euphrates Shield.

The American effort to convince the Turkish government that it was possible to peel the PYD away from the PKK did not resonate with the Turkish authorities, and the fateful decision was taken to treat the two organizations as identical. This, in turn, virtually reduced Turkey’s entire Syria policy to denying the PYD an autonomous zone of its own there. It was as much in pursuit of this goal that Turkey undertook Operation Euphrates.

The operation lasted nearly seven months and Turkey took the city of al-Bab from the Islamic State by the end of February 2017 after three months of grueling fighting. Yet the Turkish urge to deny the PYD control over strategic spots like Manbij, the main supply hub for ISIS in its capital of Raqqa, failed as the US and Russia separately prevented Turkey from moving any further. The two powers that control the eastern and western banks of the Euphrates river respectively forced Turkey to limit its military presence to approximately 2,000 square kilometres in northern Syria.

### The Unequal Partner

Both the US and Russia protected the PYD. Russian soldiers went so far as carrying PYD/YPG insignia on their uniforms. It is the debacles this fixation with the PYD/YPG engendered that ultimately led Turkey to signing the Moscow agreement with Russia and Iran. Under this agreement (Moscow Declaration, 2016)<sup>5</sup> Ankara had to accept the legitimacy and durability of Bashar al-Assad, whose ousting was previously a non-negotiable item on its agenda. As

<sup>3</sup> BÜLENT, Aras, *Turkish Foreign Policy after July 15*, Istanbul Policy Center, February 2017, p. 8 available at [http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Turkish-Foreign-Policy-After-July-15\\_Bulent-Aras.pdf](http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Turkish-Foreign-Policy-After-July-15_Bulent-Aras.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> DALAY, Galip. “What is Driving Turkish Foreign Policy Today?,” *Report*, AlJazeera Centre for Studies, 27 February 2017, p. 6, available at: [http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2017/2/27/07844d10549849a4af305fbc575cdba8\\_100.pdf](http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2017/2/27/07844d10549849a4af305fbc575cdba8_100.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Maria TSVETKOVA and Peter HOBSON. *Russia, Iran, Turkey Say Ready to Broker Syria Deal*, 21 December 2016, <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-russia-iran-turkey-idINKBN1491ZQ>

such, it effectively abandoned the position it had held since August 2011 in the Syrian conflict.

The Moscow summit took place a day after the Russian Ambassador was murdered in Ankara by an off-duty police officer and a couple of days after Aleppo's resistance fighters gave up and fled the eastern part of the city. Their surrender was a result of the fact that Turkey, which had supplied them throughout their occupation of Aleppo's eastern neighbourhoods, cut off supplies. The fact that Turkey was then able to move towards the city of al-Bab, which it finally captured after heavy fighting and casualties at the end of February, without Russian objections was widely interpreted as the quid pro quo for its abandonment of the jihadis and other opposition groups in Aleppo, who fled to the town of Idlib.

Despite these deals and Ankara's acquiescence to accepting the continuation of the al-Assad regime, the tripartite arrangement looked awkward from a Turkish strategic perspective. The three signatories of the Moscow agreement later convened a conference in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, which was seen as an alternative to the Geneva process where the Americans had had the lead. The conference, attended by most opposition or rebel groups, pledged to strengthen a fragile ceasefire and established a "trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire."<sup>6</sup> ISIS and the al-Nusra front were to remain outside the frame of the ceasefire.

Such a grandiose development presented Turkey as the major power broker that it had always sought to become. Yet, the draft constitution that the Russians submitted to the conference included clauses for an autonomous Kurdish zone that is anathema to Ankara.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, although the PYD was not invited to the conference because of Turkish objections, the Russians briefed the Kurds' representatives on the deliberations of the conference a few days after it was over. The Russians, just like the Americans appeared not to take Turkey's grave concerns about the PYD-YPG very seriously. In fact, Ankara was unable to keep the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces from becoming the allies of both

the US and Russia. To be fair, the Americans, while wanting to continue their collaboration with the YPG to take Raqqa, also tried to maintain a careful balance in order not to fully alienate Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Bab was not Turkey's ultimate destination. The real prize from a military and strategic perspective was to seize the city of Manbij, which was taken from ISIS by the SDF/YPG after a prolonged and bloody fight. Turkish authorities' repeated declarations that they wanted to move on to Manbij next and then partner with the Americans to capture ISIS' "capital" of Raqqa came to nothing. As the Americans would make woefully clear just prior to President Erdoğan's visit to Washington, CENTCOM preferred to have the SDF/YPG as their fighting force in the assault on Raqqa. Cengiz Çandar argues that "Contrary to what the Turkish public has been told, Turkey's operation in Syria was a poor military performance."

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Turkey continues to be an important factor in the ongoing Syrian civil war, but is unable to make its own choices prevail over those of the other actors. Still, as the country that has the longest land border with Syria and as a member of NATO, with the important Incirlik base on its territory, it cannot be counted out. So long as its policy choices are fixated on the PYD/YPG, which is a result of Turkey's own unresolved Kurdish problem and its ongoing war with the PKK, its vulnerability will be exposed and a more consistent strategic outlook will prove difficult to formulate, let alone implement. For the coming year, this will be Turkey's main challenge and the issue that will determine the nature of its relations with its allies, foes and "frenemies" such as Russia.

<sup>6</sup> Zena TAHHAN and Dylan COLLINS. *Astana Summit: Opposition Sets Demands for New Talks*, 24 January 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-summit-opposition-sets-demands-talks-170124163538146.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-summit-opposition-sets-demands-talks-170124163538146.html)

<sup>7</sup> "Key points of the Russian proposal for Syria's new constitution", *Al Arabiya English*, 26 January 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/01/26/Key-points-of-the-Russian-proposal-for-Syria-s-new-constitution.html>

<sup>8</sup> BLINKEN, Antony J. "To Defeat ISIS, Arm the Syrian Kurds", *The New York Times*, 31 January 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/opinion/to-defeat-isis-arm-the-syrian-kurds.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/opinion/to-defeat-isis-arm-the-syrian-kurds.html?_r=0)