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Turkey's Syria policy changes: With or without Assad?

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8/16/2016

It seems that Turkey's slow turn away from its failed Syria policy has been completed with the bloody coup attempt of July 15, following deals to normalize relations with Israel and Russia in late June. It has taken almost a year since Ankara's Syria policy started to change, with Turkey first deciding to open its strategic Incirlik base for U.S.-led coalition flights against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) last July.

As soon as Turkey opened the Incirlik base for anti-ISIL operations, both ISIL and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) restarted their acts of terror, killing hundreds and wounding nearly one thousand in suicide attacks in Turkey's biggest cities. A few months after Incirlik was opened to U.S.-led flights, Russia deployed its air forces at the Khmeimim base near Latakia in Syria, in addition to the naval base in Tartus. Events escalated to reach the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey after crossing the border with Syria, leading to Ankara's diplomatic crisis with Moscow that only ended on June 27, a day after the deal with Israel was completed.

Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu knocked on the doors of Turkey's opposition parties yesterday to secure their support for the deal with Israel. There is article in the deal saying that the Turkish government will pay any compensation to Turkish citizens if they open court cases

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against Israeli soldiers who killed nine Turks on board the Mavi Marmara ship on its way to Gaza. This article will cause some pain in the neck for the government, but there is no turning back on the deal from this point on.

Circumstances are forcing Ankara to find a new policy in Syria. For example, it seems that it will be very difficult to stop a Kurdish-controlled region in Syria bordering the Kurdish-populated regions of Turkey and Iraq. It is also looking increasingly difficult to get rid of the Baathist regime led by Bashar al-Assad. The former is consistent with U.S. plans against ISIL, while al-Assad is still supported by Russia and Iran.

The Turkish government, meanwhile, has two important demands from its NATO ally the U.S. The first is the demand for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, the U.S.-resident Islamist preacher who is accused by Ankara of masterminding the failed July 15 coup attempt. The second demands the pulling back to the east of the Euphrates river of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) militia, which the Turks see as simply the Syria branch of the PKK, also considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. The PYD has been there since Manbij was taken back from ISIL by a military operation coordinated and commanded by the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

Both demands are difficult to achieve for Ankara. Washington says the legal necessities for extraditing Gülen for trial in Turkey are not yet complete, while the use of the PYD by the U.S. in Syria and Iraq seems to have not yet expired.

Perhaps that is the reason behind Ankara's opening of the door for a meeting on Syria with Russia and Iran.

Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's statements to daily Karar on Aug. 15 suggest that Ankara is in the process of adopting a new, three-point Syria policy. This new policy will prioritize the maintenance of Syria's territorial integrity, (meaning no separate Kurdish entity), the avoidance of ethnic or sectarian domination, (meaning an end to al-Assad's Alawite-based government), and the return of Syrians to their country once a solution in Syria is reached.

The current situation looks ominously like the beginning of the Syria talks in Vienna last year. But now Ankara seems to be ready to accept a reconstruction of the Syria government, a coalition perhaps led by the Baath party. The question waiting for an answer is whether al-Assad will lead that government.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygun said on June 15 that they were working on a plan to take off ISIL's pressure from Aleppo, together with the Americans. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said a few hours later that they had started to discuss with the Turks the issue of international control on the Syrian border.

It seems that any final decision will in the end have to be reached between the U.S. and Russia. But for that we'll have to wait until January 2017 at the earliest, as that is when the next U.S. president will take office.