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Turkey, the Kurds and the US Debacle in North East Syria

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8/28/2016

US policy in north east Syria has hugely complicated and exacerbated the situation there, setting the Turks and the Kurds against each other, and provoking threats of US military action in support of a misconceived policy that has not been thought through.

I don't think this is really true. The main part of the war is a straight contest between the Syrian government and its Jihadi opponents who are trying to overthrow it. As our contributor Afra'a Dagher has written, these Jihadis often use different names; however in terms of who they are and what they represent who are their external sponsors, they are always the same.

The situation in north east Syria is however more complex than elsewhere in Syria, so I will try to explain it in more detail. Whilst it is highly dangerous, as I will show the danger here comes not from what Erdogan and Turkey are doing, but from the US, which has experienced in this area a major debacle.

Turkey and the Kurds

There is much confusion about the Turkish incursion which led to the capture of the previously ISIS controlled border town of Jarablus.

The key point to understand about this incursion is that its intended target is not the Syrian government but the Kurdish militia known as the YPG (the “People’s Protection Units”).

What has upset the situation in north eastern Syria, provoking fighting between the Syrian army and the YPG and the Turkish incursion that has led to the capture of Jarablus, is the dynamic expansion of the territory in north east Syria which is controlled by the YPG.

This map gives an idea of how the area under YPG control expanded in 2015

With US support the YPG – disguising themselves the “Syrian Democratic Forces” – have recently captured from ISIS the town of Manbij, which is located west of the Euphrates river.

This was the key event that provoked the Turkish incursion.

Most Kurds live in Turkey where they may account for anything between 10% to 20% of the population (opinions differ). Turkey has had a long running problem assimilating its Kurdish minority and there has been a long history of conflict, with some Kurds during some periods of recent Turkish history fighting insurgency wars against the Turkish government and seeking outright secession from Turkey and the formation of an independent Kurdish state.

In light of this Turkey considers the Kurdish problem an existential problem for Turkey, one that places in jeopardy the very existence of the Turkish state, at least in its present form.

During the recent period of rule in Turkey by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Erdogan relations between the Turkish authorities and the Kurds have known periods of improvement. However they have recently sharply deteriorated, and there is now an ongoing insurgency situation in eastern Turkey pitting the Turkish military and Kurdish insurgents led by the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party).

The Turkish government accuses the YPG of being in league with the PKK. It therefore vigorously opposes the establishment of any Kurdish YPG controlled zone within Syria along the border with Turkey.

The Turks have previously made clear that they consider the Euphrates a “red line” beyond which they will not tolerate expansion by the YPG. The YPG captures of Manbij meant that the YPG had crossed this “red line”.

Manbij lies immediately south of Jarablus. Had the Kurds advanced north from Manbij and captured Jarablus and its surrounding areas, they would have connected two Kurdish-held YPG controlled areas in northern Syria, creating precisely the sort of autonomous YPG controlled Kurdish zone along Turkey’s border with Syria that Turkey is determined at all costs to prevent.

The Turkish move towards Jarablus is intended to pre-empt the YPG's capture of the town and this from happening.

The YPG and the Syrian government

The YPG and the Syrian government have been uneasy allies in the Syrian war.

The ideology of the YPG is secular, Kurdish nationalist and leftist – the diametric opposite of the Wahhabi Jihadist ideology of the Syrian government's opponents. That by definition makes the Kurds and the Syria's government's Jihadi enemies, enemies of each other. On the principle that "my enemy's enemy is my friend" that has forced the YPG into an uneasy alliance with the Syrian government.

The YPG's focus is however not on the survival of the Syrian government but on securing its control of the Kurdish populated areas of northern Syria. Its alliance with the Syrian government is therefore purely a function of the fact that the two have the same Jihadi enemies in common.

In the longer run it is why relations between the Syrian government and the YPG might fall into conflict. Ultimately the YPG is pursuing a Kurdish nationalist agenda within Syria, which is very far from that of the Syrian government, which wants to re-establish the Syrian state's authority over the whole of Syria.

The fragility of the alliance between the Syrian government and the YPG was recently exposed when the YPG, emboldened by the capture of Manbij, acted to consolidate its control of north east Syria by seeking to oust the Syrian military and Syrian government from the town of Al-Hasakah at the eastern end of the belt of territory the YPG controls.

This led to armed clashes in Al-Hasakah between the YPG militia and the Syrian army, which spilled over into fighting in Aleppo between Syrian troops there and the YPG militia which is participating in the siege of eastern Aleppo. There were even reports that for a short period the YPG briefly shelled Syrian army positions on the Castello road.

These moves have been interpreted in both Damascus and Ankara as the YPG preparing to take full control of the Kurdish populated territories in north east Syria. Both Damascus and Ankara strongly oppose this, Damascus because it threatens the unity of Syria, Ankara because it considers the YPG to be an extension of the PKK, and does not want a YPG controlled independent Kurdish region on its border which could act as a safe haven for the PKK.

Turkey's Operation 'Euphrates Shield'

The Turkish incursion and the capture of Jarablus were intended to pre-empt the YPG's intended capture of Jarablus.

Erdogan and his government have made this quite clear. The name of the Turkish operation is “Euphrates Shield”, which clearly refers to Turkey’s “red line” against the Kurds along the Euphrates river. Moreover it seems the YPG did attempt to advance on Jarablus on Monday 22nd August 2016, and were shelled before they got there by the Turkish army.

The Kurds and the YPG for their part have made it quite clear that they understand that the Turkish incursion is ultimately targeted at them. Redur Xelil, a spokesperson for the YPG, has denounced Turkey’s incursion as an act of “blatant aggression.” Salih Muslim, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), has written on Twitter that Turkey is now in the “Syrian quagmire” and will be defeated like ISIS.

Turkey and the unity of Syria

What is perhaps most striking fact about this latest episode is that Erdogan has now come out publicly as the champion of Syria’s unity. He is reported to have said on Wednesday 24th August 2016 that

Turkey is determined for Syria to retain its territorial integrity and will take matters into its own hands if required to protect that territorial unity.

This is in fact completely logical. Given that Kurdish separatism is for Turkey an existential question, Turkey – whether led by Erdogan or his opponents – will always prefer to have north east Syria controlled by whatever regime is in power in Damascus – even if that regime is led by Bashar Al-Assad – than have it controlled by the YPG.

What that means is that for the first time since the start of the Syrian war there is a commonality of interest between the Turkish and Syrian governments. That does not mean that there is a rapprochement underway between them, or that the Turkish government has changed its policy of wanting the overthrow of the Syrian government. It does however mean that the Syrian government is not as hostile to the Turkish move towards Jarablus as it might otherwise have been, which explains its relatively mild reaction to the Turkish move.

I understand that there are some people who think Erdogan is lying about wanting to preserve the unity of Syria and that his ambitions extend far further and that what he is really aiming at is the conquest of large belts of northern Syria up to and including the city of Aleppo.

I have to say that I doubt this is true. Conquering these territories and assimilating them into Turkey looks frankly beyond Turkey’s power. It would antagonise the Arabs to the south and the Russians and Iranians to the north and east. It would not serve the interests of the US; and potentially, by adding large Arab and Kurdish populations to Turkey, it would only exacerbate Turkey’s already complex internal problems.

Of course Turkey could expel these people from their lands, but doing so would simply create another set of problems and would surely only worsen further the already difficult situation Turkey has with its own Kurds in Turkey itself.

Frankly this project looks like a recipe for endless war, which Turkey in its present state simply cannot afford.

Erdogan is many things but he is not stupid, and I am sure that he understands this. His objective in Syria is not the conquest of its northern regions by Turkey or Syria's partition. It is the conversion of Syria into a Turkish satellite state by the establishment of a government friendly to Turkey in Damascus.

The Turkish incursion and the Battle of Aleppo

Erdogan remains committed to President Assad's overthrow and publicly supports Jabhat Al-Nusra, the strongest Jihadi group fighting the Syrian government in the battle of Aleppo.

Nothing Erdogan has said or done since the failed coup attempt suggests that he has modified this strategy in any way. He continues to allow Jihadi fighters and supplies to cross the Turkish border into Idlib province en route to the fighting in Aleppo. All suggestions that Erdogan is preparing to ditch the rebels in Syria and to reconcile with President Assad is simply wishful thinking.

There are widespread fears that Erdogan's plan is to create some sort of rebel "safe area" in north east Syria that the rebels can use as a launch pad to support their ongoing offensive against Aleppo and that is what the advance on Jarablus is all about.

Again I have to say that I doubt this is true. North east Syria is a bitterly contested area in which the dominant force is not the rebels but the YPG. It does not look like a credible "safe zone" for the rebels or a credible launch area from which to launch attacks on Aleppo. On the contrary an attempt to create a rebel "safe zone" in this area would antagonise the YPG, and would restore the alliance between the Syrian government and the YPG to full working order, leading to constant fighting in the area of the so-called "safe zone" between the Syrian rebels and the YPG. That would surely defeat the whole purpose of the "safe zone", rendering it unsafe and effectively worthless as a "safe zone".

Of course the Turkish military could try to garrison the area to defend whatever "safe zone" it created inside it. That would however require an incursion into Syria that went far deeper than the one to Jarablus, and which would risk the Turkish army becoming bogged down in a lengthy guerrilla war on Syrian territory with the YPG. I doubt Erdogan, the Turkish military or the US would want that.

I should say the US warning that it will shoot down aircraft that threaten US troops in the area also does not look to me like support for the setting up by Erdogan of a rebel “safe zone” in this area.

Firstly the US warning is simply standard US practice where the US has troops on the ground, as it is known to have in this area.

Secondly the US troops in question were backing the YPG – the same group Operation ‘Euphrates Shield’ is targeted against – which as I have said would be bitterly opposed to the setting up of a rebel “safe zone” in this area.

A warning whose effect was to protect the YPG from air attack by the Syrian air force does not translate into a warning intended to back the setting up by the Turkish army of a rebel “safe zone” in an area against the strong opposition of the YPG.

Besides it is not obvious that the rebels actually need a “safe zone” in this area. They already have a corridor to send men and supplies to Aleppo through Idlib province, which they already control. Why add to the problems of setting up a “safe zone” much further away in north east Syria when the rebels already control territories so much closer to Aleppo?

Overall, seeing this Turkish incursion as somehow intended to influence the outcome of the battle of Aleppo looks misplaced. There are sufficient reasons for it based on concerns about the danger to Turkey – real or imagined – posed by the YPG. One should not look for more reasons for a move when the already apparent reasons are fully sufficient to explain it.

The US, Turkey and the Kurds

The US is the prime backer of the YPG. It was US bombing that made the YPG’s capture of Manbij possible. It was the US that probably encouraged the YPG to turn against the Syrian government in Al-Hasakah, and which may have encouraged the YPG to push on and try to create an autonomous role within Syria.

As I have said previously, this is very much in keeping with classic US “third force” strategies, used by the US in many wars of which this is just the latest example.

What is fascinating about this whole affair is how quickly the US has acted to dump the YPG.

Given the choice between Turkey and the YPG, the US has unhesitatingly supported Turkey. Not only are US aircraft providing support for the Turkish military in Operation “Euphrates Shield” but Vice-President Biden, on a fence-mending trip to Turkey, has publicly said that the YPG must withdraw to the eastern side of the Euphrates or risk losing US support. This was it was all explained by a US official speaking to the Wall Street Journal

We've put a lid on the Kurds moving north, or at least doing so if they want any support from us, which I think is a fairly significant piece of leverage. So for the moment I think we've put a lid on the biggest concern that the Turks have, which I think gives us some breathing space to make sure this operation in Jarabulus [sic] is done the right way and that we and the Turks do it together.

More remarkable still is that Biden is also reported to have backed Erdogan's call for the preservation of Syria's unity. RT reports him saying at joint press conference with Turkish Prime Minister Binaldi Yildirim

No (Kurdish) corridor. Period. No separate entity on the Turkish border. A united Syria.

This incidentally all but proves that despite tensions between Turkey and the US since the coup attempt, the two countries remain allies. As I have said previously (see here and here) expectations of Turkey switching alliances, quitting NATO and driving the US out of Incirlik are wrong.

Summary

This crisis in north eastern Syria is a case study in the violence and chaos that flows from the contradictions of US policy in Syria.

The US officially brands Jabhat Al-Nusra a terrorist organisation but denies that the YPG is one. Turkey – the US's primary ally in this region – denies Jabhat Al-Nusra is a terrorist organisation but insists the YPG is one.

The US is prepared to defend the YPG if it is attacked by the Syrian military. However it will not defend the YPG if it is attacked by the Turkish military. On the contrary it will act to facilitate the Turkish military's attack – as it is in fact doing.

The US backed the YPG when it attacked Manbij, which lies west of the Euphrates. However it now insists that the YPG must withdraw back to the eastern side of the Euphrates – which means it must evacuate Manbij – or forfeit US support.

The US appears to have incited the YPG to attack the Syrian military in Al-Hasakah so that it could consolidate its control of the territories in which it operates and form an independent zone there. Following protests from Turkey it now says the YPG cannot have an independent zone there under its control.

It is impossible to see any coherent strategy here. Rather it looks as if CIA and military officials on the ground in Syria have been going their own way, encouraging the YPG to expand as fast as it can, heedless of the larger consequences.

The political leadership in Washington, when it finally woke up to what was happening, then had to take disproportionate steps to bring the situation back under control.

In the process two US “allies” – the Turkish military and the YPG – have practically come to blows with each other, and Turkey has suddenly discovered a commonality of interest with the Assad government in Damascus to block the setting up of an autonomous YPG controlled Kurdish region in north east Syria, probably sending the deputy head of its military intelligence service to Damascus to coordinate policy there.

It is this very lack of coherence in US policy which however is what is so dangerous about this whole situation.

The US has pursued a policy in north eastern Syria that led it to give a warning of military action a few days ago. However it is now clear that this policy was never properly thought through.

To say that this is an irresponsible and reckless way of going about things in a conflict situation where the Russians are also involved is a gigantic understatement. Yet there is no public debate or discussion about it either in Washington or in Western capitals.

If US policy is being made on the hoof in Syria in such a careless and irresponsible way then the danger of something going catastrophically wrong is hugely magnified. Yet it is clear that that is precisely the situation we are looking at, and be it noted that this is before the hawkish Hillary Clinton has become US President. It is impossible to look at this situation without being seriously worried.