

Defending Kobani: Why Turkey hesitates joining the anti-ISIL campaign

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“We would like to appeal to the Turkish authorities in order to allow the flow of volunteers at least, and their equipment to be able to enter the city to contribute to a self-defence operation.”
—U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.¹

On Monday, October 6, 2014, Islamic State (IS, formerly called ISIS or ISIL) takfiris raised their ominous black flag on the eastern outskirts of the Syrian-Kurdish city of Kobani, located near the Turkish border.² Following a sweep capturing dozens of Kurdish villages in the region, ISIL militants were poised only five kilometers from the city center, preparing to launch a 3-pronged assault on the hapless Kurdish city.³ Yet Turkey hesitates to defend the Kurds of Kobani.

Indeed, the fall of Kobani would be a strategic victory for ISIL, giving it control over a continuous strip of land between the Turkish border and its self-declared capital in Raqqa, Syria, some 100 kilometers away.⁴ Some 200,000⁵ Syrian Kurds have already fled into Turkey since the ISIL siege began, making this exodus the fastest so far in three-year foreign-backed war in Syria.⁶ Turkish border guards had last week tried to stop the mass exodus of panicked locals from crossing the border by firing teargas into the crowds,⁷ actions that appears to contradict assurances by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu who insisted, “We will do everything possible to help the people of Kobani because they are our brothers and sisters.”⁸

Syrian Kurds desperately need Turkey to permit People’s Defense Forces (YPG) to cross over Turkish territory to join those fighting against the ISIL at Kobani, but due to a history of Turkish-Kurdish conflict, Ankara is reluctant over involvement in the anti-ISIL campaign.⁹ As a result, millions of outraged Kurdish citizens, who accuse the Turkish government of supporting the takfiri extremist organization, have poured into the streets to protest. Police using tear gas, water cannons and, in some cases, live ammunition¹⁰ for crowd control have killed at least 12 protestors and injured many others.¹¹

Clearly, Turkey is not anxious to support the Kurds due to animosity and suspicion as a result of a 30-year war staged by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) for an autonomous Kurdish region within Turkey.¹² From 1984 to 1999, the Turkish military was enmeshed in a campaign against the PKK, which killed over 30,000 people, displaced hundreds of thousands of it Kurdish citizens and cost Ankara over \$300 billion.¹³ During the conflict, the PKK had set up a system of village guards similar to the YPG, which itself is a wing of the PKK,¹⁴ so based on historical experience, Ankara understandably fears that weapons sent to the YPG may find their way into the hands of PKK separatists to be used in fighting for Kurdish autonomy within Turkey.¹⁵ The PKK remains on the terrorist lists of the U.S.,¹⁶ NATO¹⁷ and the European Union.¹⁸

Before agreeing to join the anti-ISIL coalition, Turkey is demanding safe havens and a no-fly zone in Syria, as well as increased efforts to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “Kobani is about to fall,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conceded, adding, “We asked for three things: One, for a no-fly zone to be created; Two, for a secure zone parallel to the region to be declared; and for the moderate opposition in Syria and Iraq to be trained and equipped.”¹⁹

While Ankara has agreed to allow foreign troops to be deployed on its territory, Washington appears to want more from its NATO ally, and to that end, U.S. President Barack Obama has dispatched his special representative for dealing with the ISIL threat, former General John Allen, and deputy undersecretary of State, Ambassador Brett McGurk, to pressure Turkish officials.²⁰ However, in what may be a diplomatic slight, Turkey's chief of General Staff Necdet Özel declined a direct invitation from U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey to attend the crucial counter-ISIL strategy conference.²¹

Despite possessing the strongest military force in the region with over 400,000 active personnel, more than 3,500 tanks and nearly 1,000 aircraft, Turkey claims that it fears a conflict spillover from Syria and therefore has sought assurances from NATO of protection against ISIL,²² which were forthcoming. "Turkey should know that NATO will be there if there is any spillover, any attacks on Turkey as a consequence of the violence we see in Syria," assured NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg in a recent press conference during which he pointed to the deployment of Patriot missile systems to strengthen Turkish defenses.²³ In NATO, the new secretary general insisted, its "All for one. And one for all,"²⁴ but Turkey does not consider ISIL a major enemy.²⁵

Certainly the U.S. is aware that Turkey, with the second largest army in NATO and fully-equipped, NATO standardized military bases such as Incirlik in Adana,²⁶ must be part of any anti-ISIL effort, for without Turkish military participation any such coalition would be stillborn. Hence, Ankara's claims of fear of ISIL blowback, while plausible, may be merely an expedient ruse for stalling to get a better deal from Washington over Syria after being snubbed by U.S. support for the military coup in Egypt and the ruling junta's witch hunt targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, with which Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has close ties.²⁷

Turkey's issues with joining a U.S.-led counter-ISIL coalition run deeper than fear of inadvertently arming PKK separatists or blowback from the Syrian conflict. Turkey has been one of the prime forces working to overthrow the Syrian government since Erdoğan publically called for al-Assad's ouster in September 2011. Since that time, Turkey has provided logistics support to the numerous groups of foreign fighters in Syria. Turkey's desire to overthrow the al-Assad government may stem from Syria's support for the PKK from 1984 to 1999. Turkey's early recognition of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in November 2011 most likely was due to AKP ties to the main SNC member, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which of course also had strong ties to Qatar.²⁸

Another issue is Turkey's fear of Kurdish control of Iraq's oil fields around Mosul and Kirkuk. Turkey did not go along with George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq out of fears that the action had the potential to create a Kurdish state, which effectively is what has happened given the existence of the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region. Facing a difficult choice between its own national interests and its commitments as a NATO member, Turkey chose to allow limited use of its airspace for Bush's invasion of Iraq.²⁹ With the current ISIL threat and U.S. push to form a coalition, Turkey is now facing a similar dilemma.

Nevertheless, the United States, too, is facing a dilemma. Up till now, Damascus has not voiced strong objections to the U.S.-led airstrikes inside Syria, but should Washington cave in to

Ankara's demands and attempt to establish a no-fly zone along the Syrian border, Russia may view this as an act of war against its ally, as likely would Iran,³⁰ judging by the statement made by Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham indicating Tehran's readiness to come to Syria's aid if requested.³¹ Obama is undoubtedly aware of the risk involved in taking such an action, so unless he can convince Erdoğan to back away from this demand for a no-fly zone, Turkish reluctance to jump into the ISIL-fray can be expected to continue, which is not good news for the embattled Kurdish fighters defending Kobani.

So the United States, after turning a blind eye to Turkey's support of takfiri militants in its quest to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, now wants Ankara abruptly to reverse course and join in its anti-ISIL escapade. In effect, Washington is asking Erdoğan and his AKP to cut ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahhabi-Salafi underworld, and sign on to the west's crusade. In any event, it looks like at the Kurds of Kobani are on their own.

Endnotes

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