

Turkey's Unholy Alliance in Syria

Written by Mustafa Demir

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MUSTAFA DEMIR, SEP 14 2017

Turkey's collapse into authoritarianism in recent years has inevitably had a direct bearing on its foreign policy. Whether it is Turkey's rapprochement with Russia to the extent of considering purchasing the S-400 defense system from Russia or confronting Germany and other European countries for its populist domestic policies, it is clear that Turkey's foreign policy priorities are by and large motivated by the same political agenda of building a new regime in the country. How far Turkey would push its foreign policy to its limits is anyone's guess. For example, Turkish media reported that Turkey is preparing to expand its operation into Syria with a new cross border operation, first in July 2017. Turkey's previous operation into Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, was launched in August 2016 behind the pretext of targeting ISIS. However, the operation was in fact a direct response to the prospect of the emergence of a strong Kurdish entity in the northern Syria and targeted the People's Protection Units (YPG) forces in the region. This operation ended in March, 2017.

A potential new operation was first reported by the Turkish media in June that Turkish special forces were increasing their appearance along the Syrian border and preparing for an operation into Syria against the YPG. The signal of the operation came on 5th of August when President Erdogan in an address to a rally in Malatya said that – “We are determined to push deeper the dagger we drove into the heart of the terrorist formation's project in Syria with new advances.” During the address Erdogan also stated that: “It is patently clear that the issue in Syria has long surpassed the limits of combating a terrorist organization.” For some observers (Idiz, 2017; Zeyrek, 2017; Cengiz, 2017; Zaman, 2017), Erdogan was referring to Russian and US plans in their draft constitution for the future of Syria that foresee autonomous regions for the Kurds.

A source close to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, who spoke to Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, said, “Turkey's moves in Syria will be based on its threat perceptions, not on what others say.” Recent reinforcement of Turkish forces along the Syrian border appears to confirm this as well.

Both Russia and the US support the existence of a Kurdish entity in the post-conflict Syria and they often emphasise the Kurds' important role in the fight against ISIS. Turkey, on the other hand, sees the YPG as an offshoot of the PKK in Syria and; therefore, it views the prospect of a Kurdish entity in the region as an existential threat, similar to how it views the PKK and call for a distinct Kurdish identity in Turkey. Both Moscow and Washington have refused to list the YPG as a terrorist organisation. On the contrary, they see it as an important ally on the ground in the fight against ISIS.

In April, the Turkish army mounted strikes, shelling YPG targets in the northern Syria. The US and Russia officially expressed their displeasure with Turkey's move. Similarly, Russia even rushed to Afrin to protect YPG earlier this year when Ankara signalled that it was preparing to move into the city. There was news recently that the Turkish army entered into Kobani and retreated shortly after (Sputnik, 30July 2017).

Turkey's new operation into Syria, which appears to aim to directly target the YPG without pretending to be for something else, surely will complicate the Syrian crisis even further. The question is, despite these challenges, why does Turkey seem so keen on this operation?

There are historically rooted as well as contingent reasons behind Turkey's displeasure with the support YPG has

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been given that could potentially trigger Turkey to directly confront YPG in Syria.

The Religiously-motivated Turkish nationalism has been an important factor behind Turkey's collapse into authoritarianism in the recent years and it constitutes the ideological foundation of the new regime. Turkish politics has always been informed by Turkish nationalism regardless of the political spectrum since the foundation of the Republic. However, what sets this new form of Turkish nationalism apart from its previous appearances in the Republic's history is that it incorporates Islamism into the traditional nationalist reflexes of the state and has a strong power base. It is therefore possible to expect an increasing manifestation of Turkey's historical position on the prospect of a formation of a distinct Kurdish entity in the region that views the emergence of a strong independent Kurdish entity in region as a potential threat to its own existence in the sense that such formation would potentially mobilise its own Kurdish population.

There is little if any reason to expect a diversion from this position anytime soon. Although, Turkey's relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq showed a degree of departure from this position, it has been mostly for economic reasons that has similar limitations given Turkey's opposition to the KRG's referendum plan for independence. More importantly, Turkey sees the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish front, as an offshoot of the PKK. From Turkey's perspective, a Kurdish polity founded or overseen by the YPG, therefore, could mean a safe haven for the PKK, which is an enough reason for Turkey to prepare itself for a direct confrontation with the YPG. Russia's and the US's current support for the YPG and their plans for the future of Syria that recognises Kurds a similar position to the KRG in Iraq, on the other hand, feeds into the Turkish nationalist narrative that there is a concentrated international effort by the Western powers to weaken and divide Turkey.

Therefore, the Kurdish question with its wider implications for the region alongside with the emergence of a religious nationalist discourse in the Turkish politics determines Turkey's position on Kurds in Syria.

There are, however, other reasons beyond Turkey's traditional yet intensified policy. Turkey has been going through a slow-motion regime change. The historic block formed by the victims of the Kemalist regime, namely liberals, leftists, minorities religious conservatives and the others, which brought Erdogan into power has been dismissed by Erdogan and a new 'unholy alliance' has been forged with ultranationalist Kemalists, called *Ulusalcilar*. This has been more discernable during the purges that started immediately after the coup attempt. With this unholy alliance, as Cagaptay (2017: 104) named, the 'pendulum-like identity' of the AKP government has been swinging towards Kemalist ultranationalism. Therefore, its foreign policy and security understanding would have been shaped through the lenses of ultranationalism. The level of nationalism, which has been growing dramatically in the recent years, appears to be in accord with this ultranationalist perspective towards Syrian conflict and the Syrian Kurdish progress. Now, rather than the existence of Isis or continuation of Assad's regime, the possibility of emergence of a Kurdish polity in the north of Syria would work better to justify any sort of cross border operation into Syria in the eyes of Turks.

In this sense, it is no coincidence that the first operation into Syria was launched after the large-scale purges in the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) after the coup-attempt. It has been widely reported that the TAF had long resisted any cross-border operations in Syria. However, after the purges within the army, the TAF has lost its capacity to resist the government's self-justified decisions. Despite the TAF's occasional operations against the PKK in Iraq and Syria, it has historically positioned itself in a defensive position and avoided from assertive military engagements with any neighbouring country, except operations against the Kurds.

Another important implication of Turkey's drift into authoritarianism and the AKP's pragmatic coalition with the *ulusalcilar* (ultranationalists) is Turkey's NATO membership. This also has direct bearings on the Turkey's planned operation against the YPG/Syrian Kurds. *Ulusalcilar's* foreign policy doctrine is dubbed as *Avrasyacilik* (Euroasianism) so that they are also called as *Avrasyacilar* (Euroasianists). Although Turkey has been a NATO member since 1952, the TAF has served as the south-eastern wing of NATO's defensive umbrella against The Soviet Union as NATO's second biggest army throughout the Cold War. With the exception of the Kurdish question, NATO has been the main determinant of TAF's regional strategies.

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This new doctrine, on the other hand, sees the future of the country in a coalition with the Eastern, Eurasianist Powers; namely Russia and China. Therefore, Turkey's NATO membership and its implications are no longer a top priority for this 'unholy alliance'. On the contrary, it becomes a liability and a hindrance for Turkey's Eastward shift of axis. They, *Avrasyacilar*, have been working closely with President Erdogan to facilitate this shift as it is reported by some pro-government names (Kenar, 2016). It is also reported that the purge within the army has systematically targeted pro-NATO officials without any evidence of their involvements in the coup attempt, making the *Avrasyacilar/Ulusalcilar* the dominant faction leading the army (Cafarella, Sercombe and Vallee, 2016; Jacinto, 2017).

The AKP has followed a steady process to shift the power balance in the country in its favour and destroyed democratic institutions along the way. Similarly, as Turkey continues its journey into a regime change, Turkey's cross-border operation against the YPG will likely to become the regime's first assertive military action in the region. It would not, however, become the last radical step that the AKP regime would undertake militarily to secure the regime and remove any prospect of accountability for the country, whether it's the NATO membership or candidacy to the European Union. One thing is clear that we have yet to see the complete picture of this unholy alliance.

Today what we have been observing as part of Turkey's Syria policy and the planned operation of 'Euphrates' Sword' appear to be the products of this unholy alliance between Erdogan and *Avrasyacilar*.

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About the author:

Mustafa Demir holds a PhD in the School of Politics and International Relations at Keele University. He is also directing a research institute called Turkey Institute.

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