

TURKEY'S ISIS CHALLENGE



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The use of Turkish territory as a transit for weapons and foreign fighters to enter Syria has led to accusations that Ankara has supported the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Others have argued that Turkey is partly to blame for failing to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into Syria. Ankara's decision to maintain an "open door" policy with Syria for humanitarian reasons and the porous 900-km Syrian-Turkish border make it difficult to prevent foreign fighters or weapons from entering Syria through Turkey. Strategically, it is against Ankara's interests to support ISIS, which has battled against the Western-recognized Syrian opposition, seized territory and helped bolster the Assad regime.

Turkey has a vested interest in ensuring that both Syria and Iraq maintain their territorial integrity and remain stable. The presence of terrorist groups pose a grave security threat to Turkey and Ankara has taken military actions against militants in Syria. The kidnapping of 49 Turkish consulate staff members in Mosul, including the consul-general, has forced Ankara to remain cautious and avoid any unilateral or multilateral military action. Nevertheless, Turkey announced that it would lend quiet support to the U.S.'s coalition against ISIS, noting that Western arms flowing to Baghdad should not exacerbate sectarian divisions. While it has been called a "reluctant" partner against ISIS, Turkey has advocated a strategy that addresses the underlying political causes of ISIS' rise.

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The Emergence of ISIS

In recent months, ISIS has seized vast stretches of territory in both Iraq and Syria. It has taken Raqqa, large parts of the Deir al-Zour province and Aleppo, Fallujah and several border crossings with Iraq in the last year. When the group seized Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) abandoned their posts rather than fight the militants, allowing ISIS to take control of heavy weapons and communication technology. The group then declared an Islamic Caliphate from Diyala to Aleppo, an area nearly the size of Jordan with 5 million inhabitants, and changed its name to the Islamic State to reflect its global ambitions.

ISIS emerged from the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq. Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS is the first terrorist organization to carry out a two-front land war, with between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria, according to the CIA. The seizure of parts of Iraq and Syria strengthened the organization as both nations provide access to oil, weapons, border crossings and financial networks, not to mention a strategic location to launch operations. When ISIS sacked the Iraqi Central Bank in Mosul, it increased the group's wealth from \$900 million to approximately \$2 billion, making it the wealthiest terrorist group in the world. The funds at their disposal allow ISIS to pay fighters, buy weapons and co-opt locals.

ISIS' strength in Syria and subsequent seizure of Iraqi territory undermines Turkey's interest in promoting a unified, Western-backed opposition. The group currently controls all Western Iraqi border crossings, which enables them to move fighters and arms across the border from Syria. The relative weakness of other opposition forces and intentional policies of the Assad regime have given ISIS the upper hand. According to rebels and activists, prior to the seizure of Mosul, the Assad regime never targeted ISIS militants. The regime has permitted the group to operate freely in order to justify its narrative of combatting terrorism and assist in its fight against the Western-backed opposition. The fact that ISIS has not been subject to the same attacks by the regime as other rebel groups is a key reason why it was able to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, the group's access to financing, weapons and skilled combatants, which far outweighs that of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), draws in recruits who do not necessarily subscribe to ISIS's ideology but give the group superiority on the ground. The presence of ISIS only strengthens Bashar al-Assad's hand by weakening the opposition.

ISIS poses a clear threat to Turkey and Turkish personnel in the region. When ISIS seized Mosul, it raided the Turkish Consulate and took 49 consulate staff and members and their families hostage. The group also kidnapped 32 Turkish truck drivers, who were later released. This was not the first time that ISIS threatened Turkish personnel. ISIS threatened to take over the Tomb of Suleiman Shah in Syria – technically a piece of Turkish territory inside Syria – and demanded the removal of Turkish troops from the tomb. Turkey has continuously stated that it would send additional troops to protect the tomb if necessary, as the government considers there to be “no difference” between the tomb and Ankara. ISIS also threatened to “liberate” Istanbul if Ankara did not reopen the Ataturk dam, after it accused Turkey of cutting off the flow of the Euphrates River. Moreover, ISIS militants have been active within Turkey; in July, members of the group attacked a Shiite mosque in Istanbul. Turkey has also repeatedly exchanged fire with ISIS in retaliation for cross-border fire and closed border gates after extremists gained control of the Syrian side. In a separate incident, two Turkish security officials were killed in a shootout with ISIS militants in the central Anatolian town of Niğde.

ISIS Threatens Turkey's Interests

Turkey has been one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian opposition, hosting the leadership of the Western-backed FSA and adopting an open-border policy with Syria. The open-border policy allowed unarmed rebels to organize, visit their families and stay in refugee camps, as well as receive medical assistance and purchase supplies in Turkey. Strategically, it is illogical for Turkey to support ISIS given that the group has been extremely detrimental to the Syrian opposition, seizing large swathes of opposition-controlled territory and

killing many FSA-affiliated fighters. During a particular fierce period of fighting in the Deir ez-Zor province, where ISIS took control of nearly the entire province during a six-week offensive in May-June, nearly 600 fighters were killed. In recent weeks, ISIS has taken a number of villages and towns in the Aleppo province and is currently advancing on Marea and Aazaz – key towns for the rebels' supply lines. If ISIS succeeds, the opposition will be further weakened.

Turkey has little interest in contributing to a proxy war in Syria. Following the chemical weapon attack in August 2013, Turkey was quick to support an international intervention for breaching President Obama's "red line." The chemical weapons deal was seen as inadequate in Ankara, as it did nothing to assist the opposition or protect civilians for conventional weapons and Assad's barrel bombs. Turkey has repeatedly urged the international community to intervene to put an end to the violence; assisting ISIS goes against this goal. The group's strength ensures that the conflict will continue, as the diminishing influence of the opposition damages any negotiating power that it has to reach a political settlement with the Assad regime. Turkey has long pushed for a negotiated end to the crisis, which has become a nearly impossible goal in light of the rise of ISIS. The rise of ISIS only divides the moderate opposition and delays the end of the Syrian civil war.

Furthermore, there is no strategic benefit for Turkey if ISIS makes gains against one of Ankara's closest allies, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Ankara has been clear that it supports Iraq's territorial integrity and the formation of a unity government in Baghdad. Turkey has a vested interest in a stable Iraq not only for the good of the region but also for economic concerns. The crisis has already had an economic impact on Turkey, as Iraq is the second-largest importer of Turkish goods. The instability in Iraq has hindered Turkish business – exports to Iraq dropped by 21 percent in June, 46 percent in July and 27 percent in August – as many roads are blocked or unsafe. Many consumer goods produced by Turkish companies are exported to the Gulf States via Iraq, utilizing routes that are no longer available. Moreover, Turkey has developed close economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan in the past years, particularly through gas and oil deals. Of the \$14 billion in annual exports to Iraq from Turkish companies, 75% are to the Kurdish region. Therefore, it is also against Turkey's economic interests to support a group that is actively aiming to destroy one of its closest trading partners.

A Porous Border

Many foreign fighters enter Syria through Turkey and Ankara has been accused of not doing enough to prevent foreign fighters from entering Syria. However, stopping the flow of weapons and militants is made difficult by Turkey's 900-km border with Syria, which remains extremely hard to patrol. Turkey's decision to adopt an "open door" policy to protect Syrians fleeing the violence was a humanitarian decision that inevitably complicated the difficult task of controlling its border with Syria. Nevertheless, Ankara has taken certain precautions to minimize the security hazards created by the border. Only three out of the 13 official border crossings between Turkey and Syria remain open, and foreigners are only permitted to utilize two of them. While Syrian opposition fighters are allowed to move in and out of the camps and border towns, the government closely monitors camp activity. Furthermore, fighters are not permitted to bring weapons across the border or recruit refugees from the camps.

Controlling the border has been a consistent problem for Turkey, especially given that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has used the territory relatively freely to fight the Turkish army for almost 30 years. Smuggling gangs have long been active between Turkey and Syria, controlling routes to carry weapons, equipment and manpower. Turkish troops have often had to use force or exchange fire with smugglers attempting to cross the Turkish border into Syria. Turkey has done its best to secure the border by increasing the number of patrols, troops and equipment along the border, constructing new fences, expanding intelligence activities and establishing highway checkpoints.

Controlling the border is made even more difficult by the flow of refugees and wounded soldiers.

Many Syrians cross in and out of Turkey without any paperwork, making it difficult to assess whether or not an individual is a foreign fighter entering Syria to join ISIS or a Syrian affiliated with the opposition. Until recently many European governments only provided limited information to Turkish intelligence authorities regarding jihadists, making it difficult for Ankara to determine who should be prevented from crossing the border. After the fall of Mosul, however, European governments and the U.S. have begun to share more intelligence, allowing Turkey to expand its “no-entry list” and increase the detention of suspected foreign fighters. Over 4,000 individuals have been prevented from entering Syria in 2014 alone.

The increased presence and power of extremist groups in Syria led Turkey to further crack down on illicit activities, arresting militants, banning certain foreign nationals from entering Turkey, freezing the bank accounts of individuals listed by the UN for links to al-Qaeda and ISIS, closing border crossings, and exchanging cross-border fire with groups. In January 2014, Turkish police forces detained 28 individuals for suspected links to al-Qaeda. In order to limit the amount of illegal crossings, Turkey is also building a portable wall made of concrete blocks in the southern Hatay province, which will be 1,200 meters long when finished. Similar initiatives, including ditch digging, have been implemented in other border areas. Nonetheless, retaining Turkey’s open door policy, while preventing the movement of foreign fighters and weapons, has become an increasingly difficult task for Ankara. Most recently, following the announcement of President Obama’s strategy against ISIS, Turkey has deployed 50,000 additional border police and is considering various options including the creation of a buffer zone along the border.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties involved in protecting the border and preventing the flow of foreign fighters, Turkey has pledged quiet support – intelligence sharing and humanitarian efforts – for President Obama’s strategy against ISIS. Turkey has a long-standing history of counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. Turkey’s participation in the coalition against ISIS will be limited in the short run not only because ISIS continues to hold 49 Turkish nationals, but also because Ankara considers the current strategy insufficient in addressing the political dimensions of the challenge at hand. Without a serious stance against the atrocities committed by the Assad regime and a common strategy to force it to negotiate with the opposition, a narrow counterterrorism strategy is unlikely to produce lasting results.

The possibility of an ISIS-controlled state along its border poses a grave threat to Turkey – both strategically and economically. It is illogical that Ankara would support ISIS. Turkey has a vested interest in a strong Syrian opposition, whose goals are being dramatically damaged by the growing strength of ISIS. Ankara also has a strategic interest in a strong and unified Iraq, particularly due to their economic ties. In order to combat the ISIS threat, the international community should avoid playing the blame-game and band together to minimize the group’s influence in both Iraq and Syria. The group’s financial resources and hold on U.S. weapons means that eradicating the group will take time and a common strategy among all neighboring nations and the international community. The civil war in Syria and the lack of political reconciliation between Baghdad and the Sunni community remain the underlying political challenges that any serious strategy will have to address.

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