



THE BATTLE FOR KOBANI AND ERDOGAN'S KURDISH PROBLEM

Dr. Ely Karmon, Senior Fellow at ICT
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ABSTRACT

The Turkish President must choose between catering to his Kurdish voters and permitting a massacre in Kobani.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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Since September 16, 2014 the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) fighters launched an assault on the Kurdish city of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), attempting to take control of the strategic territory on the Syria-Turkey border.

200,000 Kurds fled their besieged city to find refuge in Turkey. Some Kurdish defense forces remain in the city, supported by Western aircraft and missiles, while ISIL continues to attack with tanks and artillery captured from the Iraqi army.

Turkey has so far taken a back-seat in the fight against ISIL as its primary condition for greater involvement in the fight is for the United States-led coalition to do more to oust the Assad regime in Damascus. Turkey has also demanded that a buffer zone be established in northern Syria.

One of the reasons for the Turkish caution in the fight against ISIS was the 46 diplomats and 50 citizens held hostages since June 10 by ISIL in Mosul. Their release and a decision by the Turkish Parliament to allow Turkish troops to intervene in Syria and Iraq has apparently raised the prospect of a more active role by Turkey.

However, not only is Turkey reluctant to intervene directly in Kobani but it wouldn't allow Turkish Kurdish fighters to cross its territory to join the fight along their besieged brethren.

This seems strange considering that one of President Erdogan's most important legacies is an ongoing peace process with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK). The Kurdish Opening of the AKP government has put a halt to a thirty year insurgency that has cost over 40,000 lives.

After years of clandestine negotiations with PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan by Turkey's intelligence chief Hakan Fidan, one month before the August 10, 2014 elections the Turkish Parliament approved legislation creating the legal framework for Turkish politicians to engage in the peace talks.

The peace process caused fierce opposition by Turkey's nationalist camp and toward the end of the presidential campaign Erdogan's ethnic and sectarian appeals to the Turkish nationalist camp helped him gain the Presidential race.

Thus, President Erdogan faces a choice between expanding his Kurdish Opening, "which will move Turkey closer to becoming a bi-national state [or] continuing to assuage right-wing Turkish nationalism." His AK Party will be hard put to manage rising expectations among Turkey's Kurds while retaining Turkish nationalist support for the 2015 elections.¹

It is clear now that Prime Minister Erdogan's liberal policy vis-à-vis the Kurds was meant mainly to bring him their votes in his campaign for the Presidency and stabilize the country in a period of regional turmoil.

"For us, the PKK is the same as ISIL. It is wrong to consider them as different from each other," declared Erdogan on October 4, as he criticized pro-Kurdish politicians in Turkey who attacked the government for not helping the Syrian Kurds defend Kobani. At the same time he warned against any attack on Turkish soldiers stationed at Süleyman Şah's tomb, a Turkish exclave in Syria reportedly surrounded by ISIL fighters.²

Consider now Erdogan's policy towards ISIL and other jihadist groups.

Murad Batal Al-Shishani, a London-based analyst, compared Turkey's blind eye policy toward jihadists' movement into Syria with Bashar al-Assad's policy during the American invasion of Iraq between 2003 and 2007. Then, the Syrian-Iraqi border was the main gateway for jihadists supported by local networks flowing into Iraq to fight

¹ Micha'el Tanchum, "Erdogan Wins Presidency with an Unsustainable Majority," *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 7, No. 14, 13 August 2014.

² *Today's Zaman*. Com with Reuters, October 4, 2014.

Americans. The same jihadists play a significant role in the current Syrian civil war. This could be repeated along the Turkish border with Syria, claimed Al-Shishani a year ago.³

According to a report of the *Foreign Policy Project Bipartisan Policy Center* there were increasing signals in early 2013 that Turkey was tolerating Jabhat al-Nusra's presence on its territory and refraining from obstructing the group's use of Turkish territory as a rear base for its operations in Syria. The Obama administration pressed Turkey to cease "all active or passive support" for al-Nusra. Following that meeting, Turkey apparently curtailed its ties with the group.⁴

However, Turkey decided only on June 3, 2014 to designate Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, a terrorist organization.

At the same time, Ankara sought to limit the impact that developments across the border in Syria's Kurdish regions might have on Turkish politics by a proxy campaign aimed at curtailing the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD)'s power and the developing local Kurdish autonomy.⁵

Turkey feared that the Assad regime forces' withdrawal from northeastern Syria was the result of an agreement whereby "Damascus obtained assurances of the PYD's neutrality in the Syrian civil war in return for granting it de facto autonomy." While Turkey renewed its peace talks with the PKK it appeared to urge Syrian rebel groups to target the PYD in northeastern Syria. Taken together, these measures "represent a Turkish strategy to mitigate, or at least defer, the pressures of the Kurdish issue on domestic Turkish politics, especially as Erdogan was preparing to run for the presidency."⁶

³ Murad Batal Al-Shishani, "Turkey and Syria's Jihadis: More than Free Passage?" *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 6, No. 10, 22 May 2013.

⁴ Eric S. Edelman, Svante E. Cornell, Aaron Lobel and Michael Makovsky, "The Roots of Turkish Conduct: Understanding the Evolution of Turkish Policy in the Middle East," *Report of the Foreign Policy Project Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC)*, December 2013.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

There are numerous reports, including by Human Rights Watch, that radical groups, including ISIL militants, have been freely operating in Turkish towns and refugee camps and organizing offensives in Syria and even “retreat [back to Turkey] for medical treatment.” Kurdish “peshmergas” fighting against ISIL forces in northern Syria witnessed Turkish ambulances picking up wounded militants and carrying them to north of the border. In at least one occasion, the Turkish gendarmerie discovered weapons and military equipment in a truck manned by members of Turkey’s intelligence service (MİT), only to release it to continue to Syria upon receiving instructions from their superiors. When ISIL claimed responsibility for a car-bomb attack in the border town of Reyhanlı, Prime Minister Erdogan preferred to blame it on the Alawite regime in Syria.⁷

The German ARD TV aired video footage on August 31, 2014, showing ISIL training camps in Gaziantep and claimed that ISIL has a liaison office in İstanbul's Fatih district and that many militants going to Syria are assisted in crossing the border to join the organization's militants in the region. Gaziantep Governor Erdal Ata has said that 19 ISIL militants have been arrested in this southeastern province in September while some others whose crime involvement was not verified were returned to their countries. Ata denied the claims that the ISIL uses Gaziantep province as a base for training militia. It seems this was the first arrest of ISIL terrorists in Turkey.⁸

Die Welt reported that Ankara has information that there are more than 1,000 Turkish citizens who have joined the ISIL, an estimated 10 percent of the total number of its militants.⁹

Halil Karaveli, a Senior Fellow at the Stockholm Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, evaluates that the appointment by President Erdogan of Ahmet Davutoglu as Prime Minister and head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) “represents a

⁷ Halil Gürhanlı, “You Reap What You Sow: The Rise of ISIS and the Sectarian Dimension of the AKP’s Foreign Policy,” *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 7, No. 12, 25 June 2014.

⁸ *TODAYSZAMAN.COM*, September 4, 2014.

⁹ *Die Welt's* Balkan correspondent in Budapest, Boris Kálnoky, reported that most of the non-Arabs in the ISIL are either Turkish citizens or citizens of European countries who are of Turkish origin. *Today's Zaman*, August 5, 2014.

doubling down on the party's Sunni Islamic ideology" and his record as foreign minister "has demonstrated that the ambitions to redesign the neighborhood translates into both indirect and direct support to Sunni radicals and jihadi groups".¹⁰

Erdogan's reluctance to fight the militants has exasperated many American officials, while Kobani faces a massacre if American airstrikes fail to stop the ISIL offensive. Secretary of State John Kerry has recently said the U.S. is "deeply concerned about the tragedy" in Kobani, but at the same time stated that the situation "does not define the strategy for the coalition with regard to the ISIL," thus accepting in practice Erdogan's policy.

PKK commanders in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq threatened to halt the peace process with the AKP government and resume their guerrilla war within Turkey if Turkey does not help the embattled Kurdish forces in Kobani. President Erdogan is now seeking to alter the Constitution to gain more executive powers, which means he will need the support of Kurdish parties.¹¹

It remains to be seen what Erdogan will prefer, to destroy the burgeoning Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria or to flirt again with his national Kurdish constituency. In the two cases it will be difficult to stop the process of emancipation of the Kurds in the Middle East.

¹⁰ Halil Karaveli, "Looking Strong but Fragile: A New AKP and a "New Turkey", 27 August 2014, <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/340-looking-strong-but-fragile-a-new-akp-and-a-“new-turkey”-html>. Karaveli is Editor of the *Turkey Analyst* and a Senior Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center in Stokhol, Sweden.

¹¹ Kirk Semple and Tim Arango, "Kurdish Rebels Assail Turkish Inaction on ISIS as Peril to Peace Talks," *New York Times*, October 12, 2014.