

Turkey vs ISIS: Where's the new caliphate now?

Written by er

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Under intense pressure from the United States--not to mention Russia--Turkey has begun to reassess its support for anti-Assad groups. ISIS's third attack in six months in Turkey has pushed it where it did not want to go. The first two attacks were against Kurds (one killed 33 outside a Kurdish cultural center in the border town of Suruc in July, another killed more than 100 in Ankara in October).

The poor Kurds have no friends anywhere. The West betrayed them at Versailles in 1919. They are a Turkish thorn and ISIS's mortal enemy, so those attacks did not raise much protest either abroad or in Turkey. But the latest was in the heart of Istanbul against foreign tourists. ISIS broke its devil's pact with the Turkish government as a sort-of ally, undermining Erdogan's rationale to let them carry out attacks as long as they target Kurds. Pacts with the devil usually go wrong and this is one of those.

Erogan's wild scheme in Libya and Syria

The Turkish political scene has changed dramatically since the Arab Spring five years ago. At that time, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Erdogan was the golden boy, with his "zero problem" foreign policy with neighbours, and the ability to square the circle--to have good relations with Russia, Iran and NATO. Even the Kurds got an olive branch, with a peace process in 2013, after Ocalan, from his prison cell, called on his fighters to abandon their armed struggle in return for political reforms.

The first crack in the peace shield came with an abrupt switch on Libya following the Arab Spring. Turkey initially condemned the invasion of Libya by its NATO allies, warning that a drawn-out conflict risked turning the country into a "second Iraq" or "another Afghanistan" (he was right). Though it finally joined its NATO allies in their criminal undertaking, Turkey piously refused to conduct bombing missions.

Turkey only recognised the rebel National Transitional Council in July 2011, when Foreign

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Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Benghazi's "Tahrir Square", named in honour of Egypt's revolution. Davutoglu told the rebels Turkey and Libya have a "common history and a common future. Turkey's role will be to withdraw from Libya as soon as possible" and "restore the unity and integrity of the country based on the democratic demands of the people. This deployment should not be carried out for Libya's oil."

Fine words and seemingly a balanced position, given that the fall of Gaddafi was written on the wall by then. A more cynical reading of this is: join the winners and reap some of the gains.

Eerily, the same scenario unfolded in Syria at the same time: a stalled insurgency, with the al-Qaeda types flocking in and receiving support from the West, intent on toppling the dictator by hell or high water.

Erdogan had a much friendlier relationship with President Bashar Assad than he (or anyone) had with Gaddafi, even vacationing with Bashir and his family. Initially, despite the flood of refugees already pouring into southern Turkey from Syria in 2011, Turkey refused to back western sanctions, calling for a mediated settlement. Before setting out on a tour of Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia in July 2011, Davutoglu told reporters at the Southeastern European Cooperation Process summit, "Syria's future is common with that of Turkey's. The important thing is that the Syrian people and the government get ready for the future with a new vision and to implement a new reform process."

More fine words. But as Gaddafi was being hunted down and gruesomely murdered, Assad was being shafted by his fair-weather friend. Just why Erdogan turned so abruptly on his erstwhile friend a few months later can be explained only one way: the dictator would fall under the wave of the Arab Spring, so join the winning side and reap the benefits. Syria was until a century ago the heart of the Ottoman Caliphate, and Erdogan was determined to re-establish their "common history".

Erdogan was dreaming of a day "when people can pass from a free Palestine through Istanbul to London. Not building walls around Turkey, but opening up to share with our neighbours. In Cairo, we are the Middle East, in Europe we are Europeans. We must shape history with all the nations around us," he told the Leaders of Change summit in March 2011. Middle East developments held out the promise of showing the way towards a "global, political, economic and cultural new order".

Yet more fine words. But like the Libya plan, the uprising in Syria went disastrously wrong. For many reasons: hubris, Kurds, anti-imperialists, and, of course, the duplicity of Turkey's NATO allies.

Kurds, Kurds, Kurds

Rather than launch a serious campaign against the ISIS-type terrorist groups, as the West and Russia have called upon him to do, Erdogan remains focused on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which continued to protest Turkish oppression by striking a police station last week, killing six people. A drop in the terrorist bucket, but Erdogan called for a harsh response, as he

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is once again in electioneering mode. Targeting the PKK is good fodder ahead of a proposed referendum that will grant him greater powers.

Syria now has an autonomous Kurdish region led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), with ties to the PKK. The ability of Syrian Kurds to fight ISIS (the only faction of the insurgency doing so) is a feather in their cap, and deserves the respect of the Syrian government and the West in any future settlement.

It has also exposed the perfidity of Erdogan in trying to use the Turkmen against the Kurds, and has revitalized Kurdish nationalism in Turkey in the face of the ongoing military campaign against Kurdish towns and cities. Not a pretty picture for Turkey, but not the Kurds' fault.

Given the longstanding Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, the Kurds will now have a strong position to finally get the recognition they were denied at the Treaty of Versailles.

NATO--including Turkey--is being pushed into Kurdish arms by the ruthless logic of history.

NATO threats ... to Turkey

There is plenty the West, Russia--and, yes, Iran--can do. In the short-term, they must force a ceasefire and mediate a peace process with the Kurds in Turkey, such as the settlement put forward in 2013 but which quickly unravelled. Turkey must also be pushed to lift its embargo on Rojava, where Kurdish towns and cities require urgent humanitarian assistance. Lifting this embargo will alleviate the humanitarian crisis and, therefore, the refugee flow into Europe. If they don't, warns NATO analyst Ranj Alaadin, this "requires threatening Turkey with expulsion from NATO."

Alaadin lists lots of Erdogan's anti-NATO sins in his recent Independent broadside. Refusal to toe the NATO line on Afghanistan, Iraq, Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo, Iran, Israel ... But Erdogan makes constant about-faces, now supporting NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq, jumping on the Libyan and Syrian bandwagons, shooting down Russian planes, cooling relations with Iran. It's impossible to see a clear policy at work anymore. The Kurds may have no friends, but with his erratic flip-flops, neither does Erdogan.

There are glimmers of sanity showing through:

*Turkey wants a unified Iraq, so it is supporting the rickety coalition of Shia, Sunni and Kurds trying to hold Iraq together.

*Relations with Israel have improved, short of official recognition.

*No more Turkish bombers in Syria, keeping clear of the Russians, after a profuse apology.

But the travail of the Kurds continues, something which both NATO and Russia have no interest in promoting. The Kurds have proved to be the surprise winners in the debacle in Syria which NATO and Turkey instigated, and they deserve credit--from Erdogan too.

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