

How to Destroy a Neighbor: Turkey's Involvement in the Syrian Crisis

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Syria, once a stable Middle Eastern country ruled by the Baath regime and a troublesome neighbor-turned into a close friend of Turkey, has come to occupy a central place for Turkey mostly due to the Islamist AKP government's inconsistent policies. For over a decade, Turkey has pursued three successive policies vis-à-vis Syria each containing its own flaw. Initially, the AKP government's aim was to create a sphere of influence in the Middle East, using its soft power tools including diplomacy, growing trade and investment, popular Turkish TV series, and Syria has been the linchpin of this expansionist Neo-Ottomanist policy. Starting from the 2000s, Turkey developed strong ties with the Assad regime, visa requirements were abolished, and Turkish exports and investment grew enormously. However, after the outbreak of riots in March 2011, Turkey shifted its policy to ousting Assad in order to replace his regime with Syrian members of the Muslim Brotherhood to which the AKP is ideologically closer. In this second phase, the overambitious policy of overthrowing a regime in a neighboring country not only deteriorated the situation on the ground but also had far more devastating effects on the regional balance of power, on Turkey's position in the region, and the refugee flow to Turkey - to name just a few.

Turkey's role was critical in the crisis due to the 911 kilometer border it shares with this country, and with a blinded effort to oust Assad from power, Turkey, for first time in its history, not only openly supported the opposition groups which were represented by the Syrian National Council but also allowed radical Islamists/jihadist fighters to use its territory, provided shelter and training grounds making the country a "jihadist highway."

The AKP government's efforts, together with the US, to overthrow Assad at any cost, continued even after the US changed its policy of regime change in Syria. It became apparent with the recapture of Aleppo by the regime in 2016 from the Islamist groups that Turkey's policy of attempting regime change through proxy war failed in Syria with devastating consequences for itself.

The biggest problem was the flow of refugees into Turkey who numbered nearly four million. In terms of security, the ISIS attacks caused the highest death toll in Turkey's history. Moreover, there exists potential threats since the country has turned into a safe haven for the radical Islamist militants and ISIS sleeper cells. Nevertheless, despite its failure to topple the Assad regime and the bombings and attacks of ISIS, Turkey's support for the Free Syrian Army and other radical Islamist groups continued unabated.

Another adverse effect of Turkey's involvement has been the rise of the PYD, the PKK affiliated Kurdish group in Syria which Turkey designates a terrorist organization, in the northern strip of Syria. At the initial stages of the conflict, the AKP government negotiated with the then PYD leader Saleh Muslim with an aim to win the Kurds over for Turkey's efforts to overthrow Assad but the PYD refused to ally with Turkey in its regime change campaign. Realizing the ongoing bargaining process with Turkey, Assad, as a putative move, withdrew his forces from the northern part of the country, leaving the area to the PYD and, the ire of Turkey.

From that time on, failing to convince the PYD to cooperate with Turkey, the AKP government intensified its support to the Islamist groups in late 2014 to undermine the formation of a Kurdish autonomous area under the PYD rule and to topple the Assad regime. However, with a shrewd move the PYD never ceased its dialogue with Damascus, while at the same time was able to draw the support of both Russia and the US.

In particular, the Pentagon, with its weapons procurement, military facilities and training became the protector of the PYD controlled region. The emergence of a de facto autonomous region alongside its border was an unintended consequence of Turkey's miscalculated involvement in the Syrian crisis and it had a strong impact on the course of the Kurdish question. Fearing any degree of Kurdish autonomy under the PYD which is an off-shoot of the PKK, Turkey first terminated the peace process regarding the Kurdish question domestically, and reverted to a crackdown which led to the arrests of hundreds of Kurdish politicians, and key figures including the co-chairpersons of the pro-Kurdish HDP party. Secondly, failing to persuade the US to cease its support to the PYD, Turkey, with the consent of Russia, launched two successive military campaigns: the Mare Jarablus region in northern Syria in 2016, and Afrin in 2017 in order to de-link the PYD dominated areas, to oust the PYD from its bordering areas and to resettle some of the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.

Thus, the third phase of Turkey's Syria policy which is based on preventing the establishment of an autonomous region in northern Syria has begun. Now, forced to abandon its maximalist policy of inserting itself as a regional leader, Turkey has to contend with a minimalist objective of impeding the formation of a Kurdish dominated entity in Syria. However, this policy suffers from many obstacles and is doomed to failure as well. First, Turkey still has no diplomatic relationship with Damascus and without the cooperation of Assad it is obvious that Turkey cannot alone stop the realization of a Kurdish autonomy. Second, Turkey is at odds with both the US and Russia in its policy towards the PYD. In the constitution making process it seems likely that Turkey will push for a solution that omits any reference to autonomy whatsoever in Syria. But Turkey's Kurdish problem has been intermingled with the developments in Syria and its insistence on the prevention of Kurdish autonomy in Rojava/northern Syria has political repercussions in dealing with its own Kurds in Turkey.

Currently, Turkey is deeply involved in Syria politically, militarily and strategically. It maintains troops in the Afrin area, Mare-Jarablus strip, in Manbij, and in Idlib. This has left Turkey with no exit strategy and with failed objectives in Syria.

All of Turkey's strategic targets and demands -ousting of the Assad regime, preventing an autonomous region, declaration of a no-fly zone, creating a buffer zone along the eastern part of Euphrates river, protecting/demilitarizing the radical Islamist groups in Idlib - have failed or seems likely to fail in the future.