Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 29.07.2015 www.osw.waw.pl

Turkey strikes the Kurds (and Jihadists)

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Turkey launched a new anti-terrorist campaign on 24 July. This includes intensive air raids on Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions in northern Iraq and air raids of significantly lower intensity on Islamic State (IS) in northern Syria. Furthermore, around one thousand people have been arrested in Turkey on charges of having links with terrorist organisations. Most of them are suspected of being linked to the PKK; and the rest with IS and the leftist terrorist organisation DHKP-C. Ankara has also allowed the United States to use Incirlik military airport for the needs of combating IS (it has also been announced that Batman, Diyarbakır and Malatya airports will be made available in special situations). The launch of the campaign was preceded by terrorist attacks which, according to Ankara's suspicions, were planned by IS (on 20 July in Suruc 32 people were killed and around 100 injured), and an attack on a Turkish military patrol three days later saw one death and four injured) and the PKK (attacks on representatives of the Turkish army and police on 20 and 22 July, claiming at least three lives; in turn the PKK is accusing Turkey of supporting Jihadists in their struggle against the Kurds).

Turkey and the PKK have made mutual accusations of breaking off the peace process launched in 2013. The PKK responded to the government's actions by intensifying terrorist attacks, including on Turkish police, military and the gas pipeline running from Iran.

The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) sees the anti-terrorist campaign as a way to reverse the negative trends in the region and above all as an attempt to rebuild its weakened position on the domestic political scene. The Turkish government hopes that the anti-terrorist campaign directed at the PKK will help it marginalise the influence the Kurds have on domestic politics and will consolidate the Turkish public around the AKP again. The announcement of the launch of the struggle against IS is viewed mainly as a way of distracting attention away from the combating of the Kurdish underground. Even though some (as yet limited) measures have been taken against IS, Turkey will most likely shun direct confrontation with Jihadist fighters. Nevertheless, the likelihood of an escalation of conflict with IS is growing significantly. The recent turn in Ankara's policy has put Turkey at risk of serious internal destabilisation and an even stronger involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts.

The reasons for the shift in Turkey's policy

The launch of the bombardment in Syria and Iraq has opened up a new stage in Turkey's Middle Eastern policy. Ankara's top priorities until recently were aimed at bringing about the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, avoiding direct military engagement in Syria,

supporting the moderate anti-Assad opposition (including the Free Syrian Army) and playing the regional actors off each other to ensure that none of them gained a dominant role (e.g. the Kurds and IS). Furthermore, since the launch of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in early 2013, Ankara has not been engaged in any serious military activity against the PKK.

Ankara changed its policy because it realised that its previous assumptions concerning the Middle East have proven to be false. Contrary to its expectations, Jihadist fighters have not become an instrument for combating al-Assad's regime in Syria; nor have they been able to prevent the expansion of Kurds linked to the PKK (PYD) in northern Syria. Furthermore, both groups, have become a serious threat to Turkey, as illustrated by the series of the most violent attacks in more than 2 years launched by them against Turkish targets in July this year. Moreover Ankara fears the Kurds' position on the domestic political scene has become too strong following the electoral success of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the parliamentary election in June this year.

The previous policy has led to regional isolation for the country and a deterioration in its relations with the West; it was also unpopular at home. Ankara's ambivalent stance on Islamic State, which contributed to the expansion of Jihadist fighters across the region and even gave rise to suspicions that Turkey was tacitly backing them, was especially strongly criticised. For Jihadists, Turkey is the main transit corridor to Syria and an important support base; for example, they benefit from Turkish medical care and smuggle fuel to the Turkish market (a major source of income for IS). Thus the launch of the operation against Kurds and Islamic State is expected to help Turkey take the initiative in the Middle Eastern crises, with regard to which Ankara has been helpless, and which become increasingly dangerous. .

The targets of the offensive: Kurds first, and Islamic State later

A comparison of the measures taken so far against the PKK and IS proves that Ankara's main goal is to combat the PKK. A few air raids have been launched against IS (and their effects have been played down by the Jihadists themselves), while the first three days of bombardments of PKK positions in Iraq, undertaken with the use of about 75 combat aircraft, covered around 400 targets. Furthermore, those suspected of links with the PKK and not with IS are predominant amongst the almost one thousand suspects arrested on charges of terrorism. The Turkish government has compared the PKK's activity to IS's terrorism, and has appealed to the Kurdish party HDP to sever its links with the PKK. The public prosecution authorities launched an investigation on 28 July in order to verify whether the leading politicians from the HDP have used their speeches to incite the public to become engaged in anti-state, terrorist activity. The party or its leaders may even be banned as a consequence. Ankara has also made efforts to break the tactical alliance between Syrian Kurds (PYD) and the United States.

Direct actions taken by Turkey against IS have so far been rather limited, and it is difficult to fend off the impression that the declared fight against IS is intended above all as a distraction for its offensive against the PKK. In practice, Jihadists will benefit from the weakening of the PKK, because they are fighting Kurds in Iraq and Syria. Ankara's permission for US troops to use Incrilik air base is the most serious, albeit indirect, move which will adversely affect IS's regional position. This will significantly shorten the distance between the US air forces' base and their air raid targets, and as a consequence will improve

the success rate of the bombardment (the distance between Incirlik and Raqqa, the IS capital, is around 400 km, while the US air bases in the Persian Gulf are located around 1,500 km away from it). However, it remains an open question whether Ankara will decide to openly confront IS inside and outside Turkey. IS fighters can enter Turkey practically without any restrictions, which makes it vulnerable to possible retaliatory moves from them. This has so far discouraged Ankara from provoking IS. Ankara's further policy towards IS will most likely depend on whether the Jihadists wage an offensive on Turkey, for example, by staging more terrorist attacks in this country.

The deal with the United States makes it more likely that a security zone will be established in northern Syria, which Turkey has long been calling for. The compromise with the USA does not meet all of Ankara's expectations, and it is principally restricted to creating an area free of IS militants. According to Turkey's original plans, this was to be a bridgehead for Syrian moderate opposition forces for fighting al-Assad and at the same time a no-fly zone where the international coalition's air forces (mainly the US) would be the guarantor of security for the anti-Assad opposition. However, the agreed compromise version leaves Ankara the hope that a significant part of Syrian refugees (around two million of them are staying in Turkey) would be moved to the future security zone (it will probably be located between the Kurdish towns Kobane and Afrin), that the ousting of IS from this area will have a stabilising effect on the Turkish border and, above all, that it will be possible to avoid a unification of Kurdish territories in northern Syria, which are currently separated from each other.

The domestic background

The launch of the offensive on terrorism is also motivated to at least an equal extent by the AKP's desire to extend its control on the domestic political scene. The party has been unable to form a government since the parliamentary election (this is the first time it failed to win an absolute majority in parliament in thirteen years). The electoral setback of the AKP, which has governed the country since 2002, was mainly caused by the fact that part of its electorate shifted to the Kurdish party HDP and the nationalist party MHP. The AKP hopes that the government's firm response to the attacks plotted by IS and the PKK will consolidate the Turkish public around the government party as an effective defender from terrorism. The AKP has been making efforts to marginalise Kurds and regain its nationalist electorate. At the same time, by stoking fear of the PKK (through rhetoric but also by provoking the PKK to launch a counter-offensive), and thus making the public more distrustful of the HDP, it intends to deprive the Kurdish party of public support (due to the unusual solutions adopted in Turkish electoral law and the fact that the HDP managed to cross the 10 per cent threshold in the parliamentary election in June this year, the AKP automatically lost dozens of seats). The AKP is likely to hold a snap election soon in an attempt to take advantage of these moves.

Ankara's policy stimulates radical sentiments among the Turkish public (nationalist, pro-Kurdish and leftist), and this is provoking tension. More and more often these sentiments translate into street protests and acts of violence (riots and clashes between Kurdish of leftist groups and the police). This trend is likely to grow in intensity.

Consequences and possible developments

The decision to resume the struggle against the PKK and to launch an offensive against IS marks a new stage in Turkish politics. It will be characterised by greater unpredictability and the risk of uncontrolled escalation of conflicts and internal destabilisation. The main sources of threats are the discontinuation of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process and the strong likelihood that military struggle and Kurdish terrorism in Turkey will be resumed. In the short term, Ankara will make attempts to defeat the PKK by military means, isolate it in the international arena (breaking the tactical alliance with the USA) and to politically marginalise the Kurdish party HDP.

Action so far taken against IS has been rather limited. Ankara has been unwilling to become directly engaged in the conflicts in Syria on a military level. However, since the Turkish air base has been made available to US air forces, this may provoke Islamic State to take action against Turkey. This might lead to a serious escalation of conflict with Jihadists, including in Turkey, to which they have unrestricted access due the permeability of its borders and via a network of local members and supporters.

At home, the AKP will attempt to capitalise on the crisis to reinforce its power. In these calculations, the principle of effectiveness will trump democratic standards (for example, it cannot be ruled out that the Kurdish party HDP will be banned, that its leaders will be eliminated with the use of quasi-legal methods or that martial law will be introduced in selected areas of the country).

Turkey's formal rapprochement with the USA and NATO does not mean that Ankara and the West have come to view the Middle Eastern crisis in a similar way. While Washington sees defeating IS as top priority, Ankara has focused on neutralising the PKK and on measures aimed at toppling the al-Assad regime. This difference is likely to remain bone of contention between Ankara and the West.