

My enemy's enemy – Turkey's stance on Islamic State

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In the context of the civil war in Syria, Turkey has been accused of intense co-operation with Islamic State. The accusations have been coming for some time from the West, and also from the Turkish opposition and the Kurds. The Russian government has also joined in the accusations over the past few months. According to the Kremlin's narrative, Turkey allegedly not only supports this organisation but is also engaged in trading oil with it 'on an industrial scale'. Ankara, which has categorically denied these reports, has undoubtedly displayed great ambivalence in its attitude towards Islamic State. Accusations of systemic co-operation with radical militants in Syria and Iraq are difficult to confirm. The radicals themselves pose a serious threat to Turkey's security. The terrorist attacks in Turkey are suspected to have seriously affected its internal stability and international reputation of being a safe country (especially the Istanbul attack on 12 January 2016). The internal characteristics of the Syrian conflict and the engagement of external forces make it difficult to verify the reports on extensive and coordinated co-operation between Ankara and Islamic State. All parties to this conflict receive external support, and the situation in Syria itself is changing. However, this does not change the fact that Turkey has for a long time tactically benefited from the existence and operation of Islamic State, given that its priorities include ending Bashar al-Assad's regime and preventing a Kurdish autonomous region being established in Syria. Yet, its ambivalent stance on the 'enemy of its enemy' poses a serious risk to both Turkey's internal stability and its international reputation.

Accusations of co-operation with Islamic State

Turkey was accused of co-operation with Islamic State already before Russia became engaged in the conflict. Accusations of this kind have been heard from Syrian Kurds, Western commentators, the Turkish opposition, and – since the deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations – also from Russian and Iranian leaders.

Turkey has been blamed for arming radical Islamic militants¹ – convoys with arms, ammunition and supplies reportedly en route to militants

have been sent to Syria, and their delivery was reported to have been coordinated by Turkish intelligence. State officials and journalists who revealed that the convoys had been sent to radical fighters were arrested on charges of supporting the so-called 'parallel state', a movement accused of attempting to overthrow the government². The government has responded to

¹ Semih Idiz, Is Turkey arming radical groups in Syria?, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-syria-aiming-radical-groups-shipping-weapons.html>

² The term 'parallel state' (not to be confused with the 'deep state') is used in Turkey to refer to the movement led by supporters of Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim preacher and businessman, who once backed the government. The movement used to have strong influence inside the various state institutions (including the police, the gendarmerie and the judiciary). Since the corruption scandal in December 2013, the government has taken on this movement, and the media outlets controlled by it have been taken over by the state.

the accusations that the support was intended to be provided to Syrian Turkmen³.

Furthermore, it is claimed that Turkish border services turned a blind eye to jihadists crossing the Turkish-Syrian border. According to Kurdish sources, traffic on the border was moving both ways, and not only were the fighters not obstructed by Turkish border guards, they also received, for example, Turkish uniforms from them⁴. According to the Turkish press, Duzce and Adapazari in western Turkey, where supporters of Islamic State gather, have also become training centres supervised by units of Turkish Islamic radicals. In turn, Turkish state services were reportedly aware of their operation and disregarded this fact⁵.

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The list of accusations also includes tolerating the presence of jihadists in Turkey itself and their campaigning activity in many Turkish cities. Radical fighters also reportedly came from Syria to Turkey to receive medical aid at hospitals or to rest. Furthermore, members of the governing party, AKP, have been accused of expressing their approval in public for the operation of Islamic State, displaying solidarity with fighters of this para-state and even holding meetings with Islamic radicals in Germany and convincing them to join the ranks of IS⁶.

³ Semih Idiz, *Is Turkey...*, *op. cit.*

⁴ For the list of accusations addressed to the Turkish state in Western and Turkish media see: David L. Phillips, Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey List, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Even before the Russian Su-24 aircraft was shot down by Turkey on 24 November 2015, Vladimir Putin joined the accusations formulated in the West and Turkey. In mid-November, during the G20 summit in Antalya, Turkey, he suggested that Turkey was involved in the trade of oil with Islamic State. These accusations have gained strength since the incident and have been repeated on numerous occasions in the Western media.

At home in Turkey the strongest accusations of this co-operation have been heard from the head of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtas. He said after the Ankara bombing that this attack would not have been possible without approval from the Turkish state services⁷. These accusations have been proven right by leaks from the Presidential Palace revealed by the press, according to which Turkish intelligence infiltrates jihadists with the intention of using this organisation also for achieving short-term goals in domestic policy⁸. Since 2013, Turkey has branded Islamic State a terrorist organisation. Although Turkey is formally a member of the Western coalition combating jihadists in Syria, it only began to take part in more decisive moves in July 2015. At the same time, it became focused in combating Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq, and its attacks on jihadist targets turned out to be only symbolic⁹.

The aforementioned accusations are difficult to verify, and in many cases they are based solely

⁷ Turkish opposition blames govt. 'blind eye' for attack, <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/10/12/turkey-intv-amanpour-pleitgen-selahattin-demirtas.cnn>

⁸ Ne olur bu kez yanıl Fuat Avni..Katliam sonrası korkunç iddialar... 'Erdoğan', <http://www.taraf.com.tr/fuat-avniden-katliam-sonrasi-korkunc-iddialar-erdogan-ic-savas-cikaracak-rus-jeti-dusurecek-o-valiyi-alacak/>

⁹ An anonymous Islamic State militant in his correspondence with *Cumhuriyet* newspaper claimed that the Turkish air force dropped bombs on buildings that had been abandoned by jihadists. See IŞİD yöneticisi konuştu... "TSK'nın vurdukları eski karargâhlarımız", http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/331729/ISiD_yoneticisi_konustu..._TSK_nin_vurduklari_eski_kararg_hlarimiz_.html

on circumstantial evidence¹⁰. However, the number of examples alone illustrating Ankara's support for Islamic State is overwhelming.

Turkey views the political emancipation of Syrian Kurds, who in its opinion have links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, as the greatest threat to its internal security.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government has as yet been unable to develop an alternative narrative that would demonstrate both the complexity of the conflict and the involvement of the other players in it, who may support the grouping or derive political benefits from its operation to a similar extent. In this way the image of Turkey as an informal protector, and thus an unreliable partner for Western states engaged in the conflict, is being reinforced.

The Syrian 'cauldron'

The internal characteristics of the conflict in Syria make it very difficult to unanimously determine Turkey's real engagement and to interpret media reports on Ankara's support for Islamic State. The anti-government opposition in Syria is non-homogeneous, consisting of radical Islamic groupings and the Free Syrian Army. Fighters were often exchanged between these organisations at the time of military operations. The opposition forces also combat Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds. In turn, the latter fight jihadists and are neutral towards Assad's forces. Meanwhile, the political emancipation of the Syrian Kurds, who

in Turkey's opinion have links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is viewed by Turkey as the greatest threat to its internal security¹¹. It has made its policy towards Syria dependent on halting this process, along with removing Assad from power. These two goals are thus the reason for Turkey's ambivalent stance on Islamic State. However, Turkey actively supports the Syrian opposition.

Those receiving Ankara's 'official' support in the conflict are the fighters centred around the Free Syrian Army¹². The army includes, for example, brigades formed by the Turkish-speaking minority, known as Syrian Turkmens¹³. However, radical groupings, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda) and the Islamic Front centred on Ahrar ash-Sham, are also among the major forces engaged in the fight against Assad. These two forces are no less radical than Islamic State, but for political reasons they are sometimes classified as 'moderate jihadists'. Ankara views the rise of these forces as a consequence of Assad's policy, but is itself most likely to have made efforts to gain influence among them in order to safely channel their activity. Supporting radical groups forming the Syrian opposition since the very beginning has been risky and has posed the risk that Turkey could lose its international standing, since these groupings – even if they are hostile to Islamic State – propagate similar slogans and

¹⁰ The Turkish army in co-operation with US officers trained soldiers of the Free Syrian Army. It cannot be ruled out that part of their trainees changed sides during the fights to join IS, taking with themselves the weapons they had received. Szymon Ananicz, 'Helpless and lonely: Turkey's attitude towards the war in Syria', *OSW Commentary*, 12 May 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-05-12/helpless-and-lonely-turkeys-attitude-towards-war-syria>

¹¹ As regards the Kurdish autonomy in Syria, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has long threatened with an armed response to actions aimed at strengthening the PYD forces. See Bedeli ne olursa olsun, engel olacağız, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/bedeli-ne-olursa-olsun-engel-olacagiz-29394009>

¹² The Free Syrian Army is the armed wing of the Syrian National Council operating in Turkey. The Muslim Brotherhood, in which Turkey invested politically as the potential architect of a future post-war Syria, began to gain extensive influence in this organisation in the initial phase of the conflict. Jonathan Schanzer, Merve Tahiroglu, *Bordering on Terrorism: Turkey's Syria Policy and the Rise of the Islamic State*, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, November 2014, <http://www.defending-democracy.org/content/uploads/publications/bordering-on-terrorism.pdf>

¹³ Their participation in the war is constantly emphasised by the Turkish government.

employ similar methods of struggle, and have struck tactical deals with IS.

All participants of the war in Syria (except Islamic State) have received either unofficial or official support from external actors. The Free Syrian Army is backed by Turkey, the USA, by European and Arab countries, and Israel. The main protectors of Assad's regime are Russia and Iran. Furthermore, the regime's forces are supported by Hezbollah from Lebanon and by some Palestinian organisations. In turn, the radical Jabhat al-Nusra, a grouping which combats Iran's Lebanese clients, is supported, for example, by Israel¹⁴. Given this context, Turkey's engagement in Syria is not an exception.

The dynamics of the conflict are another factor which makes it difficult to evaluate Ankara's intentions. A specific black market has formed in the areas affected by the military operation and all participants of the war are involved in the functioning of this black market. The warring sides use middlemen to trade in ammunition and fuel¹⁵, and this strengthens the position of Islamic State, which is fought constantly only by Kurds. The Syrian conflict has also made the neighbouring countries engaged – nobody monitors the Syrian border: neither the regime and the forces operating in specific areas, nor its neighbours. This leads to an uncontrolled flow of people (militants and refugees), and also of ammunition, weapons, raw materials, etc. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether the Turkish engagement in Syria (including the alleged co-operation with Islamic State) is exceptional – systemic and coordinated – when compared to the participation of other external actors.

¹⁴ For example, by offering medical care to wounded fighters, giving them shelter, etc. See Joel Khoury, *Are Israel, Jabhat al-Nusra coordinating on attacks in Syria?*, <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/syria-opposition-daraa-israel-communication-nusra.html>

¹⁵ See Erika Solomon, *Ahmed Mhidi, The munitions trail*, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/baad34e4-973c-11e5-9228-87e603d47bdc.html#axzz3xgjuXxSC>

The ambiguity of Turkey's policy towards Islamic State

The fact that Turkey does not view combating Islamic State as a priority is linked to its general vision of its policy towards the region. Both the Arab Spring and the war in Syria which was a consequence of it have motivated Ankara to make an attempt to expand its influence.

Were a situation to arise wherein the war develops contrary to Turkey's desires, Islamic State would be treated as a real force affecting the way the conflict is developing.

However, this would be achieved by installing a Sunni government in Syria that would be favourably disposed towards Turkey. In the longer term, this would lead to the creation of a bloc of Sunni states for which the Turkish Muslim democracy would be an model to emulate¹⁶. Such a bloc would counterbalance the influence of Shia Iran in the region, which is, along with Russia, Assad's largest protector.

From Turkey's point of view, the situation in Syria is complicated due to the political emancipation of Syrian Kurds who are centred around the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which in 2014 proclaimed autonomy in the 'cantons' it controls: Jazira, Kobani and Afrin (Rojava)¹⁷. The PYD controls the areas adjacent to the Turkish border, has taken a neutral stance on the regime in Damascus and, being a force which successfully combats Islamic State, is backed by the United States. At the same time, it is viewed by

¹⁶ Even though the situation has developed disadvantageously for Ankara, this vision is still being pushed for by pro-government circles in Turkey. See Etyen Mahcupyan, *What is Turkey's role in the new Middle East game?*, <http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/etyen-mahcupyan/2015/12/15/what-is-turkeys-role-in-the-new-middle-east-game>

¹⁷ Evangelos Aretaios, *The Rojava Revolution*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution>

the Turkish government as a very serious threat to its internal security. Around 15 million Kurds live in Turkey. For this reason, the emergence of any Kurdish political organisation on its southern frontier is treated as a future threat to the country's territorial integrity¹⁸.

Were a situation to arise wherein the war develops contrary to Turkey's desires, Islamic State would be treated as a real force affecting the way the conflict is developing. Ankara's toleration of it is risky but it paves the way for the implementation of Turkey's vision of a Syria without Assad. Once he is overthrown, Islamic State would also be defeated, and then Ankara could continue reinforcing its influence among Sunni Arabs, who at present live under this organisation's rule¹⁹.

The passive stance taken by Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during the siege of the Kurdish city of Kobani in autumn 2014 may be used as an illustration of this policy. The city was besieged by jihadists, and the (Turkish) government would probably have been ready to accept its conquest, if only to put off the strengthening of the Kurdish autonomous region on the other side of Turkey's southern border²⁰. The main reason why Islamic State is politically useful for Turkey in this context is the hostile attitude which Turkey has to any Kurdish force which Ankara has no control over.

¹⁸ Martin van Bruinessen, a researcher dealing with the Kurdish issue, has stated that Rojava is a kind of 'laboratory' for PKK. See Martin van Bruinessen: Turkish state will eventually come to the table with PKK, <http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/13341/martin-van-bruinessen-turkish-state-will-eventually-come-to-table-with-pkk>

¹⁹ This has also been manifested by Turkey's recent moves in northern Iraq where, for example, troops of Sunni Arabs are being trained who are expected to win back Mosul, which is now under Islamic State's control. Krzysztof Strachota, 'Iraq – a new front for Turkey?', *OSW Analyses*, 9 December 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-12-09/iraq-a-new-front-turkey>

²⁰ Erdogan gave in only under pressure from the West and after protests from Turkish Kurds, allowing the Peshmerga troops from Iraqi Kurdistan to move through Turkish territory and for support to be offered in winning back the city. Soon thereafter, in January 2015, a camp for 35,000 refugees was opened in nearby Suruc on the Turkish side of the border. Jenna Krajeski, The consequences of the battle for Kobani, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-consequences-of-the-battle-for-kobani>

Another issue illustrating the Turkish government's ambivalent stance on Islamic State is its attitude to this organisation's business activity. Already before the Russian Su-24 aircraft was shot down by Turkey, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, suggested that Turkey and the jihadists were engaged in large-scale economic co-operation.

A specific black market has been formed in the areas affected by the military operation; and all participants of the war are involved in the functioning of this black market.

Islamic State, which controls oil fields and refineries in Iraq and Syria, has created a black market for fuel operating in war conditions. As with the trade in ammunition, all the participants of the Syrian war and neighbouring countries are involved in its mechanisms. A network of agents operates in Syria. They supply fuel and electricity produced by jihadists both to Assad's regime²¹ and the Free Syrian Army, as well as all other parties to the conflict²². Businessmen and engineers from Syria and Russia are engaged in the trade and production of fuel²³. Turkey takes part in this because the para-state has used and developed the smuggling 'infrastructure' that has been in place for many years and the activity of traders selling cheap fuel in Turkey²⁴ (fuel is delivered in a similar manner to other countries, including Jordan). Turkish border ser-

²¹ Erika Solomon, Ahmed Mhidi, Isis Inc: Syria's 'mafia-style' gas deals with jihadis, <https://next.ft.com/content/92f4e036-6b69-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673>

²² Erika Solomon, Guy Chazan, Sam Jones, Isis Inc: how oil fuels the jihadi terrorists, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a.html#axzz3uUfStiP>

²³ Ceren Kenar, Ragip Soylu, Why Are Russian Engineers Working at Islamic State-Controlled Gas Plant in Syria?, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/09/why-are-russian-engineers-working-at-an-islamic-state-controlled-gas-plant-in-syria/>

²⁴ David Butter, Does Turkey really get its oil from Islamic State?, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34973181>

vices have taken action to crack down on smuggling, for example, by liquidating the illegal fuel supply channels²⁵. It is difficult to estimate the scale of the smuggling, but its volume is significantly higher than that of previous illegal trade, and most likely it would not have been possible without Turkish state officials knowing²⁶.

For the first time in the country's contemporary history, the government will most likely have to seriously consider the fact that radical ideas are gaining public support.

It is also suspected that oil was bought from the radicals by the government of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and 'legalised' this way and then supplied to Turkey²⁷. The scale on which this has been done and the indecision in counteracting Islamic State's business activity are proof of Turkey's ambivalence towards this organisation. However, Turkey's participation is not the deciding factor in this case. This organisation has created an economic circulation which it controls, and this makes it financially self-sufficient.

The external and internal consequences

Turkey's highly ambiguous policy towards Islamic State has consequences for both Ankara's international position and the domestic situation. As regards the external dimension, the prestige of the Turkish state is gradually eroding. Turkey has unconvincingly refuted accusations of co-operation with jihadists, and the stance it presented at the time of the joint air force oper-

ations with the USA is a good illustration of this ambivalence (even though the US air force was given access to the Incirlik airbase, the Turkish air force attacked mainly Kurds).

For this reason the narrative created by Russia and Iran (Turkey's largest rivals in the region) and by the Kurds meets with understanding in the West. Especially since the Paris attacks in November 2015 the West has taken steps to co-operate more closely with Russia. At the same time, the USA has appealed to Turkey to strengthen its southern border and offers it assistance in this area. In effect, this leads to limiting Turkey's influence on the way the situation will develop in Syria.

Turkey is also making efforts to create its own political support base among the Sunni population of Iraq and Syria. These calculations are probably the reason behind its ambivalent attitude towards Islamic State so far – the territories it controls are inhabited by a Sunni population. For similar reasons Turkey is training Sunni Arabs, who are expected to win back Mosul – according to this tactic, radicals can only be defeated by forces representing local residents. Even though concrete actions have been taken, creating a political base like this is still a project for the distant future.

In the domestic context, the Turkish government's ambivalence towards Islamic State is causing destabilisation in the country. Intensive fights with PKK mean that the conflict between the Kurds and jihadists is being transferred to Turkish territory, proof of which include the attacks in Suruc and Ankara – both of these were aimed at supporters of the Kurdish movement. This growing threat may potentially lead to more attacks against other targets, such as the liberal secular opposition, religious minorities (mainly Alevis) or Western tourists (like the Istanbul attack).

The resulting growing social polarisation, which is already strong, is causing Islamic State to gain a wide scope of ideological expansion in Turkey.

²⁵ Erika Solomon, Robin Kwong, Steven Bernard, Inside Isis Inc: The journey of a barrel of oil, <http://ig.ft.com/sites/2015/isis-oil/>

²⁶ Who is buying ISIL's oil?, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2015/11/buying-isis-oil-151127173736852.html>

²⁷ Mehveş Evin, Boşuna tartışıyoruz, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/bosuna-tartisiyoruz/gundem/ydetay/2097292/default.htm>

For the first time in the country's contemporary history, the government will most likely have to seriously consider the fact that radical ideas are gaining public support. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the US Pew Research Center in November 2015, 8% of Turks have a 'favourable' attitude towards Islamic State, and 19% have not made up their minds about it²⁸. The information that even 6 to 7 million Turkish citizens could support jihadists caused dismay among a significant section of Turkish public opinion.

The Turkish state is also losing confidence among a great part of its own citizens who expect that it is rather the security apparatus which will be the force capable of counteracting the increasing threat from Islamic radicals.

Conclusion

Turkey's attitude to Islamic State over the past two and a half years has been determined by the changing situation in Syria and the strengthening position of Kurds there. Given the complexity and the dynamics of the conflict, it is difficult to conclude that Ankara's support for this

organisation is in the form of co-operation of a strategic and coordinated nature. Turkey does not control Islamic State's operation in its own territory. Support for jihadists is temporary and indirect – it comes down to intentional negligence, such as turning a blind eye to the radicals' presence in Turkish territory, the failure to monitor the borders, etc. This is expected to weaken Turkey's enemies who fight in Syria.

This kind of policy entails a very high risk. On the one hand, Islamic State is hostile towards Assad's regime; it also fights against the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, which is treated as a base for PKK's operation in Turkish territory. At the same time, it poses a serious threat to Turkey's internal security, which means not only transferring the conflict with the Kurds to Turkish territory but also involves attacks on Western tourists in Istanbul. This in turn adversely affects Turkey's image as a reliable partner for its Western allies, as a secure state and as the EU's key partner in resolving the migration crisis, and also as an efficiently operating Muslim democracy governed by the rule of law (this latter is an image the modern Turkish elite has been working on over the past few years).

²⁸ Pew araştırması: Türkiye'de her 100 kişiden sekizi IŞİD'e sempatiyle bakıyor, <http://www.diken.com.tr/pew-arastirmasi-turkiyede-isisde-sempatiyle-bakanlarin-orani-yuzde-sekiz/>

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