

Question (R2 QL6): *What are near and long term Turkish interests and intentions in Syria and Iraq? What are Turkish interests and intentions with respect to al-Bab?*

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Executive Summary

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI

Despite policy shifts Turkey's key interests remain the same

The SME contributors to this SMA Reach-back write-up argue that the recent changes in Turkish security policy (e.g., pursuit of ISIL along with the PKK; relaxing of demands for Assad's removal; warming relations with Russia, etc.) do not necessarily indicate that Turkey's key interests and intentions have changed.¹ Rather, the shifts should be seen as changes in objectives or tactics that are still thoroughly consistent with Turkey's fundamental and enduring security interests: 1) containing and ultimately eliminating Kurdish or other threats to Turkey's internal stability; and, 2) foiling Kurdish (or others') ambitions that threaten the integrity of Turkey's borders. Former Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence David Gompert (USNA, Rand) explains that recognizing Turkey's dire concern with territorial integrity goes a long way in clarifying what may at first blush appear to be inconsistent policies regarding Assad, Syria, ISIL and even its "traditional enmity" toward Russia. Gompert expresses the message clearly: "...we can count on the Turks to do whatever it takes to prevent Kurdish states on their southern border."

Erdogan's political ambition: a third fundamental interest?

While most SMEs focused on Turkish threat perceptions and the Turkey—Kurd/PKK conflict as a key motivator of Turkey's actions in Syria and Iraq, Portland State University Turkey scholar Dr. Birol Yesilada argues that Turkey's security policy and actions cannot be fully understood without including President Erdogan's personal political ambitions and domestic political considerations as critical motivators of state behavior. According to Yesilada, President Erdogan is using operations in Iraq and Syria to demonstrate his government's strength and ability to provide security to Turks in order to advance his domestic political agenda. Erdogan's ultimate goal is to gain the backing to change Turkey's constitution to support establishment of his "Turkish-style Presidency" – a highly centralized, some say oligarchic or dictatorial, Islamist

¹ The SME's arguments mirror those from previous SMA Reach-back reports (e.g., see QL2, updated 10/26/2016). The V7 Reach-back report summary table of Turkey's key interests relative to the regional conflict is reprinted at the end of this section.

regime. (It is interesting to note that to date, Erdogan’s movements and plans for his “Turkish-style” leadership mirror those Vladimir Putin followed to centralize political power in Russia into his hands.)

Key objectives underlying Turkey’s actions

The SME contributors to this write-up provided a number of truly expert and comprehensive essays on Turkey’s short and longer-term objectives in northern Syria and Iraq. Although not always mentioned in this context, as shown in the summary graphic, each objective has a clear and direct link to the two fundamental security interests (i.e., internal stability and territorial integrity) and/or Erdogan’s domestic political interest.



1) *Defeating Terrorism.* Defeating terrorism against the Turkish state has generally meant the PKK in Turkey and Iraq and PYD/YPG² in Syria, although once ISIL fighters brought the fight into Turkey, Ankara has expanded the focus of its efforts to include the Islamic State. The question of the impact on Turkey’s security policy of Erdogan’s bid ultimately to change Turkey’s Constitution is a compelling and difficult to isolate. However, Professor Yesilada (Portland State) cites polls that show the political benefit Erdogan gains from these efforts: “91% of Turks support Erdogan’s anti-terror campaign inside the country and 78% support his military intervention in Syria and Iraq (esp. re Mosul) and 88% view his security policies favorably.”

2) *Impeding Kurdish political and territorial gain.* Containing Kurdish political and territorial gains and obstructing activities that might by design or inadvertently lead to an autonomous Kurdish entity on Turkey’s border, are critical Turkish objectives in northern Syria. Many experts see Turkey’s pursuit of Operation Euphrates Shield as motivated by the desire to carve out a buffer zone in northern Syria and drive a solid wedge between Kurdish-controlled territory to the east and west to thwart emergence of a contiguous Kurdish region in northern Syria, that from its perspective would threaten both Turkey’s internal stability and potentially control over its own territory.

² The People’s Protection Units (YPG) is the military arm of the Kurdish Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava). The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the largest group in the Federation and make up a good percentage of the YPG. To the US and Coalition the YPG have been some of the most effective fighters in northern Syria, have removed ISIL from major areas and are fighting in Raqqa as part of Euphrates Wrath. Turkey however sees the PYD as a terrorist organization given its alliance to the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK) in Turkey and Iraq.

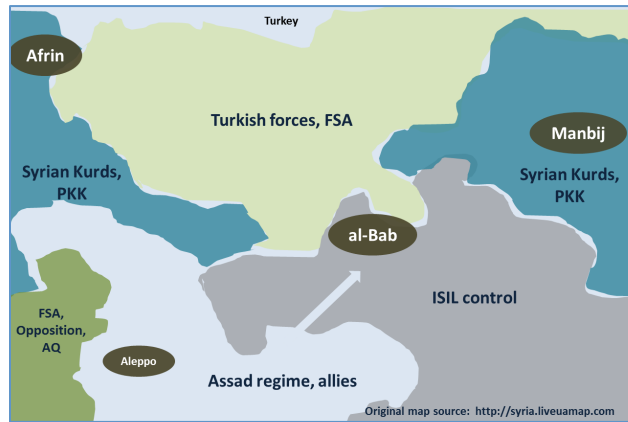
3) *Increasing Turkey's regional role and influence.* A number of experts noted Turkey's push to distance itself from EU and NATO. With respect to its recently thawed relations with Russia a number of the SMEs expect that Turkey will move cautiously in its relations with Russia as it seeks to as Gompert tags it, engage in "diversified outreach" to expand its list of international partners and carve out a more independent regional role for itself. They argue that Turkey has little to gain from upsetting the US to the degree that it loses US backing.

4) *Assuring domestic support.* Finally, as suggested by the opinion poll results cited above, at present President Erdogan enjoys extremely high public approval for his security policy – especially along Turkey's border. Continuing to demonstrate the government's ability to provide security for Turks will be a key facet of Erdogan's overall popularity and ability to push through his preferred changes to Turkey's democratic system.

Opening al-Bab: Turkey's Intentions

Operation Euphrates Shield began with the liberation of Jarabulus in August 2016. In November Turkish forces and allied rebel groups launched the assault to remove ISIL from al-Bab and have been bogged down there since.

Most contributors to this report see Turkey's mid-range intentions in al-Bab as two-fold: to defeat ISIL and push it away from the Turkish border, and to drive a pro-Turkey wedge between Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria containing the PKK and PYD and strengthening Turkey's buffer zone in north Syria. A number of the SMEs make the case that one of Turkey's mid-term objectives in conducting Euphrates Shield is to diminish the prestige the YPG has gained as the US/Coalition's "go-to" fighters in the area. Specifically, Turkey gains both domestically and internationally if its own Syrian rebel proxies can liberate al-Bab – the last ISIL stronghold in northern Syria -- and perhaps help in Raqqah rather than cede those opportunities to the YPG. Benedetta Berti (Institute for National Security Studies, Israel) suggests that Turkey's objective here is to guarantee itself influence regarding the details of any post-conflict resolution arrangements in particular what happens with regards to Syria's Kurdish population.



What next?

News reporters, commentators and the SMA SMEs continue to speculate on Turkey's next move after liberation of al-Bab. Some experts believe that once al-Bab is liberated Turkey-backed rebels will attempt to take the city of Manbij 50 km up the M4 from the YPG forces that helped liberate that city and establish a strong buffer from Jarabulus to al-Bab to Manbij. In fact, in a January 4, speech delivered two months into the battle for al-Bab President Erdogan assured Turks that al-Bab would be retaken from ISIL shortly and after that, that Turkey was "committed to clearing other areas where the terror organizations are nesting, especially Manbij."³

³ President Erdogan speech 4 January 2017; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN14O0ZT>

However, on 27 January Erdogan appeared to recant, stating that Turkey would "finish the job" in al-Bab, but not necessarily move beyond al-Bab to other areas of Syria.⁴ There is a domestic and a regional concern here: Turkey has taken most of its Euphrates Shield casualties in the fight for al-Bab. Erdogan pronouncement also comes at a time when Syrian government forces are moving toward al-Bab from Aleppo and the southwest. The softening of Erdogan's rhetoric likely reflects Russian influence as the forces of its two allies – themselves long-time adversaries, could come up against each other in al-Bab.⁵ One alternative is posed by Woodrow Wilson Center expert Amberin Zaman⁶ who is cited in news reports as doubtful that Turkish forces or Turkey-backed rebels would move on Manbij in part because of the Coalition Special Forces that he believes remain there following liberation of the city. Instead Zaman suggests that the next move in Turkey's battle against the YPG will be against Afrin which is also in Kurdish-controlled territory, but which is less populated than Manbij or al-Bab and so should prove less difficult to secure.

⁴ Ozerkan, Fulya. January 27, 2017, "Turkey's Syria offensive stalls at flashpoint town," Your Middle East. http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/news/turkeys-syria-offensive-stalls-at-flashpoint-town_45135

⁵ Some news analysts speculate that the Syrian Army push northeast from Aleppo toward al-Bab is not so much an offensive against ISIL forces in that city as it is the result of Syrian concern about Turkey's designs on al Bab as a key link in establishing its safe zone in northern Syria. See <http://aranews.net/2017/01/syrian-regime-allied-militias-join-battle-for-al-bab-to-impede-turkish-progress/>

⁶ <http://aranews.net/2016/09/turkeys-next-move-syria/>

Turkey's Strategic Interests Regarding Regional Conflict

Reprinted from SMA Reach-back Report V7⁷

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois and NSI Team

Turkey INTEREST	DESCRIPTION	INTEREST TYPE				
		National security/ population safety	Int'l/ intergroup prestige	Domestic politics/ regime security/ constituent support	Economic survival/ prosperity	Identity/ ideology
Maintain Erdogan, AKP control/ influence in government	<p><i>Political opposition to President Erdogan strengthened in light of several factors related to the war in Syria. However Erdogan's popularity has risen significantly since the summer 2016 coup attempt. Erdogan is closer to the numbers needed to win a referendum on his long-held ambition: replacing Turkey's parliamentary system with a presidential system that would as a consequence legally and substantially expand his powers.</i></p> <p><i>Changing demographics due to refugee influx into 5 provinces bordering Syria are shifting the balance of power between ethnic groups and increasing the potential for tension and conflict. It also has economic impact on use of services and dropping of wage rates as refugees who are willing to work at lower wages take especially unskilled labor from locals. In the past, voters have not supported the presidential system. Erdogan by changing that in part by linking the referendum to Turkish nationalism and threat perception. "Erdoğan has managed to introduce the idea that he is the only guy who can keep the country together, that Erdoğan's survival is essentially the survival of the state of Turkey."⁸ He also has made a number of sensational speeches since the coup appealing to nationalist, neo-Ottoman sentiment and reinforcing his tough stance against the PKK.</i></p>			X		
Stem Kurdish separatism; deny PKK safe havens	<p><i>Kurdish battlefield successes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq are viewed with trepidation by Turkey. In particular it remains concerned about arming of Kurdish forces in Iraq (Peshmerga) for fear that those weapons would fall into the hands of its arch enemy, the PKK – a designated terrorist organization -- which has also joined the fight against ISIL.</i></p> <p><i>Success by Iraqi Kurds, who have been able to significantly expand their territory (Bender, 2014), however is not necessarily viewed as a loss given Turkey's close economic ties with the Kurdish Regional Government of Northern Iraq.</i></p>	X				

⁷ The V& question was: What are the strategic objectives and motivations of indigenous state and non-state partners in the counter-ISIL fight? It can be downloaded in full from <http://nsiteam.com/sma-reachback-cell-v7-state-non-state-partners-countering-isil/>

⁸ Zia Weiss. "Erdoğan pursues his plan for even greater power," Politico, 28 October 2016. <http://unexploredworlds.com/cgiproxy/nph-proxy.pl/010110A/http/www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-pursues-his-plan-for-even-greater-power-turkish-president-akp/>

Since the 1990s, and particularly since 2003, Iraqi Kurds have been relentless in trying to convince the Turkish government that they have no real connection to the Turkish Kurds or the PKK. The KRG quite explicitly conveys that it is not and will not play the nationalist, ethnic card to rile up Turkey's Kurdish population. A 2014 deal between the Kurdistan Regional government and Turkish state energy companies over stakes in the region's oil and gas fields deepened the relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds (Dombey, 2013).

Limit Iran's regional influence

According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkish and Saudi foreign policy perspectives mutually support each other and create synergy" (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Both countries are concerned over Iran's increasing influence in the region and their alliance effectively forms a Sunni bloc. Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey competes with Iran for influence in Iraq and Syria, and like both KSA and Iran, attempts to use the region's ethnic and sectarian fissures to its advantage. Tensions have flared of late about the presence of Turkish troops in Iraq – which is seen as led by an Iran-leaning, Shi'a government that has lost governing legitimacy over years of excluding and targeting Sunni, and alienating the Kurds.⁹ Turkey does not want Iranian presence on its borders and from which it might direct proxy forces to attack. An analysis in *The National Interest*, argues that Turkey fears for the safety of the (Sunni) Turkoman population in northern Iraq at the hands of Iran and Shi'a militia operating in these areas.¹⁰

X X

Promote Turkey's position as regional leader; exemplar of moderate Islamist government

Turkey has a neo-Ottoman ambition to restore Turkish prestige and leadership in the region. However, its economy is dependent on foreign funds, particularly from the US, making it vulnerable to external shocks that reduce foreign investment. Moreover much of this dependence is in the guise of foreign loans/ short-term investment that could be swiftly pulled (Dombey 2014). Together these conditions generate a desire to be seen internationally as a "stable and democratic state, ruled by a moderate Islamist government that offers a model of a progressive political system for other Muslim countries" (Manfreda, 2014); Turkish government would like to be seen as the "big brother of the emerging Arab democracies" (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 16).

X X

Enhance Turkey's energy security and trade

Turkey has worked to position itself as energy hub between Europe and Central Asia/ME suppliers (Dombey 2014).

X X

Turkey's energy needs have risen along with its rapid economic growth. It is reliant on imported crude oil (Iran 26%, Iraq 27%, KSA 10%) and natural gas (Russia 57%, Iran 29%) from countries whose foreign policies are often at

⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad. "Are Turkey and Iraq Headed for War in Mosul?" *The National Interest*, 20 October 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/are-turkey-iraq-headed-war-mosul-18130>

¹⁰ Zalmay Khalilzad. "Are Turkey and Iraq Headed for War in Mosul?" *The National Interest*, 20 October 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/are-turkey-iraq-headed-war-mosul-18130>

odds with those of NATO and the EU. Its supply lines – particularly those running through Iraq have demonstrated vulnerabilities. Still, Turkey's involvement at the center of the region's energy trade – as a "strategic bridge" between the Caucasus and European markets -- is critical to the country's continued stellar growth.¹¹

Comments on Turkish interests and intentions in Syria and Iraq

(author name withheld by request)

It seems to me that the Turkish government is anticipating the withdrawal of Da'esh from most of Northern Syria, if not its defeat (i.e. total loss of territory) and is now positioning itself to make sure it has a seat at the table to discuss the post-D'aesh future in the region. I am having doubts that Turkey has a specific long-term plan in the area. Most of Ankara's actions strike me as being defensive and opportunistic: Ankara needs to take action to defend its perceived national interests in Syria and Iraq; and it may take advantage of the situation if it sees it can draw some symbolic gains from the situation.

For Turkey, the main concern in Syria at this point is the expansion of territory held by the PYD (with the YPG and SDF). While Turkey has found ways to work with the KRG in Iraq, the relationship with the PYD, given its ties to the PKK, is much more hostile. As Turkish forces are advancing from Jarabulus to al-Bab, the goal is as much to provide a presence on these territories to exclude the PYD, as it is about fighting Da'esh. Turkey is likely to continue putting pressure on Manbij to free the area from PYD. The avowed goal is to contain PYD east of the Euphrates River. I am wondering what that means for the area around Afrin, currently held by the YPG. Fighting ISIS remains a priority, but while continuing to entertain good relations with Sunni groups, including Islamist groups. As for Assad, it will be difficult for President Erdogan to change the rhetoric of demanding his stepping down, but this does not seem to be as pressing of an issue as before. Ankara is probably waiting to see what will happen in Aleppo, and the future of the Russia-US relation regarding Syria.

In Iraq, the KRG and Peshmergas are less a problem for Turkey. On the contrary, Turkey, prior to the Arab Spring, had developed good relationships and is looking forward to a future of good commercial and political relations with the KRG. Rather, Ankara is concerned with Shia militias (in particular Hashd al-Shaabi) and their taking over of territories freed from Da'esh. In particular, Ankara seems ready to step in (again) and play the role of protector of Turkmen territories (such as Tal Afar and Sincar).

¹¹ "Turkey's key strategic energy role in its region is expected to continue," Daily Sahah, 3 August 2016. <http://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2016/08/03/turkeys-key-strategic-energy-role-in-its-region-is-expected-to-continue>

“As Turkish forces are advancing from Jarabulus to al-Bab, the goal is as much to provide a presence on these territories to exclude the PYD, as it is about fighting Da’esh...”

At this point, I doubt that Turkey plans on a long-term occupation (or even annexation) of territories in Northern Syria and Iraq. However, recently President Erdogan has been making several references to the old concept of Misak-i Milli (National Pact), from the territorial negotiations at the end of World War I. This concept revives the old notion that Turkey, since its creation, was deprived of some of its rightful territories. According to Misak-i Milli, substantial territories in Northern Syria and Iraq should have been Turkish, and

these include Aleppo, Mosul, Kirkuk and Erbil. Accordingly, Ankara can make claims regarding intervention in these areas that will be seen as legitimate by the Turkish population. In any case, Ankara would want to have a say in the future of these territories.

Solving the Turkish Puzzle

David C. Gompert
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It is not easy for U.S. policy-makers and commanders to understand what drives Turkey. But it is essential, and it is possible. Confusing as it may be, Turkey’s strategy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as under his predecessors, can be understood largely in terms of Turkish perceptions of threats to the fundamental stability and territorial integrity of the nation. Circumstances change, but the principle does not. This fixed point of reference goes a long way in explaining Turkey’s seemingly complex, inconstant, and unpredictable behavior.

Turkish policy and posturing have become increasingly perplexing to American policy-makers grappling with Syria, ISIS, Iraq, Iran, Russia, and of course U.S.-Turkish relations. Toward ISIS, Ankara has vacillated between ambivalence and blunt force. In Syria, Turkey has attacked both ISIS and Kurds fighting ISIS. It favored the removal of the Assad regime until recently acknowledging that the regime must have a role in settling the civil war. Turkey’s traditional enmity toward Russia has been superseded by thawing if still wary relations, motivated in part by what is likely a temporary overlap of interests in Syria favoring Assad over his Arab and Kurdish opponents.

“Turkey’s nightmare is that military-political outcomes in both Syria and Iraq will yield semi-independent and possibly connected Kurdish states – Lego blocks of a future Kurdish state and supporters of violent separatism in Turkey.”

Through it all, Turkey wants the United States to remain its stalwart ally and ultimate protector, even as it accuses Washington of ignoring Turkish interests, especially regarding the Kurds, and of fomenting a coup d’état. NATO remains important for Turkey – as, arguably, Turkey is important for NATO – but the Turks are turning their back on European allies who have spurned them over EU membership. Relations with Israel took a turn for the better, then a turn for the worse, then recently another turn for the better. As for the Kurds, Turkey has reconciled itself to Kurdish autonomy in Iraq (KRG), yet regards those in Syria (YKP) as hostile and has ended its brief détente with those in Turkey itself (PKK).

Such complexity may obscure and yet is based on two pillars of Turkish strategy. One is *diversified outreach*: Turkey's strategy under Erdoğan has been characterized by wide-ranging international activism, in the form of efforts to develop beneficial economic and political relations with all (or most) of its neighbors and in all directions, thus enhancing both Turkish commerce and influence. Turkey's omnidirectional engagement is predicated on the political judgment that it has been wrong to put all its eggs in the West's basket, and goes hand-in-hand with opening up and securing energy for Turkey's economy. Turkey's recent shift toward joining multilateral peace efforts (such as they are) in Syria is consistent with the belief that it deserves and can play an important diplomatic role. Turkey's goals in Syria have not changed, but its principal tools have. In Syria and elsewhere, Turkish interests are served by being on reasonable terms with key actors, e.g., Russia, Iran, and Israel. While Washington sometimes finds Ankara's foreign policy problematic, this only underscores that Turkey's importance and freedom of action have grown since the Cold-War decades of insulation and dependence on the United States.

At the same time, Turkish extroversion, bridge-building, and political diversification tell at most half the strategic story. At its core, Turkey's strategy remains defined by its *perception of threats*.

“Kurdish success against ISIS in Iraq has created new political, military, economic, and geographic conditions that could increase KRG capabilities, leverage, and expectations. If so, and if Turkey regards such a development as potentially threatening ... the days of Turkey-KRG accommodation could come to an end.”

Outreach is anew chapter in the epoch of Turkey assuring internal stability, territorial integrity, and the state's monopoly of force. While Turkey faces a slew of threats, not all are of equal gravity. In particular, ISIS represents an immediate but, Turks believe, limited and manageable threat; though Sunni, the overwhelming majority of Turks, even the most devout, do not identify with Salafism or jihadism. Neither does anti-Shi'ism resonate in Turkey, as it does in other Sunni nations. Iran is not viewed as an unalterable enemy, as it is by the Saudis and others, but more as a difficult neighbor (one of several). Russia is menacing by virtue of its size, its proximity, and Putin's rowdiness, but it poses no current threat. Greco-Turkish disputes and tension are in the background for now. None of these dangers are existential.

Of all the actual, perceived, and potential threats facing Turkey, the one that could imperil its stability and territorial integrity is that presented by the Kurds. Kurdish separatism and desire for an independent and unified state are viewed uniquely as existentially threatening. More immediately, the existence of Kurdish entities on Turkey's borders can embolden and sustain an insurgency among Turkey's estimated 20-million Kurds.

Turkey's nightmare is that military-political outcomes in both Syria and Iraq will yield semi-independent and possibly connected Kurdish states – Lego blocks of a future Kurdish state and supporters of violent separatism in Turkey. While the United States has supported YKP in order to defeat ISIS in Northern Syria, Turkey is dead-set against a Kurdish entity occupying the border region taken back from ISIS. This is in part because the Turks see strong links between Kurds in Syria (YKP) and those in Turkey (PKK) – consistent with the proposition that Turkish policy can be traced to, and predicted by, whether its own stability and integrity is threatened.

Turkey has managed to have stable, even cooperative relations with the Iraq's Kurds (KRG), partly for access to hydrocarbons and partly because the KRG has not stoked PKK insurgency in Turkey. This could change if the KRG stakes out greater independence and more territory within a rump, post-Caliphate Iraqi state. It is unrealistic to expect the Kurds to cede to Baghdad territory that Peshmerga have liberated, especially if it contains Kurds. Kurdish success against ISIS in Iraq has created new political, military, economic, and geographic conditions that could increase KRG capabilities, leverage, and expectations. If so, and if Turkey regards such a development as potentially threatening to its own stability and territorial integrity, the days of Turkey-KRG accommodation could come to an end.

In sum, because Turkey's stability and territorial integrity are perceived to be at stake, we can count on the Turks to do whatever it takes to prevent Kurdish states on their southern border. Such is Turkey's fear of the creation of a unified Kurdistan and the likely civil war within Turkey that could ensue. Avoiding this is the compass for Turkish policy and behavior.

The ability of the United States to obtain Turkish cooperation vis-à-vis ISIS (or other Sunni extremism), Iranian destabilization in the region, and Russian skullduggery depends on showing consistent sensitivity to Turkey's opposition to Kurdish independence and any forms of Kurdish autonomy and collusion that point in that direction. This will not resolve all US problems with Turkey or prevent others from occurring. Inevitably, the United States and Turkey will be aligned on some matters and at loggerheads on others. Turkey is no longer a client, but an ambitious middle power. However, to the extent Turkey has confidence that the United States can and will act as necessary to prevent Kurdish independence and unification, Turkey is more likely to be in tune with US interests. In the long run, such a US policy can also work to the advantage of Turkish-Kurdish relations and of the well-being of Kurdish minorities where they exist, including in Turkey itself.

Specifically, the United States should, within its limited ability, oppose emergence of a Kurdish entity in Syria, as ISIS is displaced and as a new de facto political map emerges. It should also be alert to signs that the KRG in Iraq, flush from victory over ISIS there, will demand virtual independence, claim more territory, and start supporting the PKK. The United States has a special relationship with the Kurds, and it is therefore uncomfortable for it to frustrate Kurdish ambitions. But it also has a special relationship with Turkey, difficult and complicated as that may be. In the final analysis, US support for Turkey's strategic imperative of preventing the creation of Kurdistan is the surest way of gaining Turkish support for US interests.

Turkish Near and Long-term Intentions in Iraq and Syria

Dr. Benedetta Berti

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Turkey's policy preferences when it comes to Syria are fairly clear: the country wants a weak or better yet collapsed Syrian government (along with the eventual demise of Bashar al-Assad); a weakened ISIL that is unable to operate along the Turkish-Syrian border; along with weak Syrian-Kurdish politico-military forces. In terms of priorities, it certainly seems that preventing the rise

of a Kurdish continuous, self-governing entity in Syria takes precedence over all other objectives. To achieve this objective, Turkey has militarily positioned itself in the geographical center of this Kurdish enclave, de facto creating a buffer zone. It seems unlikely that Turkey will relinquish this military foothold in Syria for the time being.

In addition, Turkey has intervened militarily to demonstrate its military and political influence and to gain a seat at the table in the 'day after.' The country will presumably use this leverage to further contain Kurdish state-building aspirations. Albeit Turkey has not relinquished its negative assessment of the Assad regime, it does seem to be for the time being preoccupied with other, in its eyes, more urgent matters. What is more, the reality on the ground, shaped largely by Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime, may in the longer term lead to assuming a more compromising attitude with respect to Assad staying in power in so-called 'useful Syria.' That is unless the Gulf (and chiefly Saudi Arabia) don't dramatically increase their investment in the Syrian opposition so that the balance of power can start re-shifting against the regime.

Turkey's fight against ISIL is a direct response to the group's more aggressive posturing towards Turkey; as well as a way to further increase its footprint and leverage in Syria and to curb the role of Kurdish forces. Turkey's claims with respect to both al-Bab as well as Raqqah should be seen as concrete ways through which Turkey wants to exclude or weaken the role of Kurdish forces and increase its own.

Turkey's moves in Iraq are not radically different: there too Turkey has indicated a desire to take part in anti-ISIL operations; to train/support Turkmen local forces against ISIL and to reduce the need for Kurdish forces on the ground. At the same time, Turkey's political ties with the Iraqi Kurdistan government should be seen as driven by pragmatism, economy and by the possibility to leverage inter-Kurdish rivalry and tensions between Iraq and Syria to weaken the rise of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in Syria and to keep Kurdish forces divided in the region.

Comments on Turkish interests and intentions in Syria and Iraq

Dr. Birol Yesilada
Portland State University

Turkish interests in Syria and Iraq depend on Erdogan's personal ambitions. They can and they have changed during the last three years. Currently, he is using operations in Iraq and Syria to bolster his own position and image in Turkey and achieve the following:

1. To discredit the Kurdish parliamentarians by making them look as if they are supporters of the PKK and YPG. This will enable Erdogan to clear the Grand National Assembly of Kurdish Parliamentarians and call for special elections to fill those seats with his own supporters. He will then have the super majority needed to change the Constitution and establish his "Turkish style" Presidency – nothing short of absolute dictatorship. According to latest public opinion polls, 91% of Turks support Erdogan's anti-terror campaign inside the country and 78% support his military intervention in Syria and Iraq (esp. re Mosul) and 88% view his security policies favorably. His success in Syria and Iraq will determine how much he can achieve on the domestic and foreign policy fronts.

2. To establish himself as the leader of the Sunni Muslims. This has been Erdogan's ambition for quite some time as he built a coalition with Egypt's Mursi and Qatari Emir to provide support for Sunni Arabs fighting the Assad regime. It also paralleled his lashing out against Israel to gain support among the Palestinians. He is now without the support of Egypt but has significant financial backing of Saudi Arabia and to some extent of Qatar. Recent maps of Erdogan's advisors show northern Syria and Iraq (including Mosul) within Turkey's borders and with claims of ancestral lands stolen from the Turks. Such maps do not go well among Turkey's Arab allies but provide for strong nationalist fervor at home. There are sizeable ethnic Turkish/Turkmen pockets in these areas that look for Turkey's security umbrella against Arabs and Kurds.

3. To move Turkey away from the EU and NATO and join the Shanghai Five Alliance. This is part of a long-term goal of people like Erdogan who are pupils of the late Turkish Islamist politician and Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (see his book ADIL DUZEN). Erdogan will test the environment and move very carefully as he has done so many times before. He will try to avoid making Washington upset by direct intervention in al-Raqqa right now but will do everything possible to undermine the Kurdish offensive by providing support to anti Kurdish forces – that might even include providing support for other radical Sunni groups who are fighting the Kurdish alliance.

Northern Syria

In northern Syria, Ankara's primary goal is to shape the operation launched on November 6 east of the Euphrates. Erdogan's desire is to end YPG's control of the Kobani and Jazeera cantons. He has full support of the TGS and the Parliament (except Kurds) for this. If Ankara cannot impose a full military presence west of the Euphrates, it will definitely take control of al-Bab from ISIS and Manbij from the YPG and create a strong and manageable buffer zone that stretches from

“It is clear that there is a deal struck between Erdogan and Putin that is going to allow the Turks to hit Syrian Kurds using the Turkish air force in the future – probably in consultation with Moscow.”

Jarablus-Manbij-al-Bab and al-Rai. Some of the Turkish allies within the FSA would prefer marching on Aleppo which Erdogan and TGS oppose at this time. This would not be supported by Erdogan as he has come to the realization that regime change in Syria is not going to happen and he has to live with Assad and has cut a deal with Putin – Putin is likely let Erdogan keep the Jarablus pocket (buffer zone) and Erdogan will not support FSA's march on Aleppo. Putin has ulterior motives in maintaining cordial relations with Erdogan. His long-term goal is to move Turkey away from NATO and make it an ally of Russia through economic ties (gas exports,

construction, tourism) and membership (full or associate) in Shanghai Five. Erdogan has repeatedly asked for membership in this organization. In recent weeks, the Turkish armed forces have massed sizeable number of troops, tanks, artillery, and Special Forces along the Syrian border ready for a massive push into Syria when opportunity permits. These forces include two mechanized infantry brigades, an armored brigade and a commando brigade along the border. The Turks are relying on their 30-mile-range, 155-millimeter howitzers to interdict east of the Euphrates and hit YPG targets. Recently, following a meeting between Turkish intelligence and military chiefs and their Russian counterparts in Moscow, Turks launched air strikes that caused significant loss of life among Kurdish fighters. It is clear that there is a deal struck between

Erdogan and Putin that is going to allow the Turks to hit Syrian Kurds using the Turkish air force in the future – probably in consultation with Moscow.

With regard to operations beyond al-Bab, that will depend on how well Erdogan gets along with President-elect Trump's security team. In my opinion, the next logical target for Erdogan beyond al-Bab is the town of Manbij. It is important to note that Manbij is currently controlled by the YPG of SDF who has support of Washington. Note that al-Bab is strategically located between the two Kurdish controlled parts of Northern Syria (Tel Refat to the West and Manbij to the East). Can Erdogan persuade President-elect Trump to allow the FSA to take over? The short-term scenario is in favor of the Kurds. They will stay in control of Manbij. However, the Turks are also unlikely to pull back from their security zone. The future scenario is more Turkish troops entering this triangle. As soon as there is a shift in US support for the PYG, the Turks and their FSA allies are likely to advance on the PYG to push them east of the Euphrates River. This seems to be their ultimate goal.

Northern Iraq

Erdogan has additional interests in Northern Iraq which conflict with the interests of Turkey allies – particularly the US. He has increased the number of Turkish troops at the Bashiqa base (estimate is around 5,000 troops). He also warned the Iraqi Shiite forces about entering the city of Tal Afar (predominantly a Shiite Turkmen town). Turkish presidency spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said that the Iraqi Prime Minister and the US have pledged that al-Hashed al-Shaabi militia, who are Shiites, would not enter the Turkmen city of Tal Afar but that they seem to have done some nonetheless. Erdogan has massed significant military forces across the border as a show of force. His main ambition, and that of all Turkish political actors, is to crush the PKK once and for all. This is a daunting task and the Turks have not been able to eliminate the PKK for over three decades. PKK is in the process of moving its military HQ from Kandil Mountains in Northern Iraq to newly liberated Sinjar according to Turkish intelligence. If this is so, we can expect the Turks to expand their military operations against the PKK and PKK's allies in Sinjar. That would mean that the Yazidis and regional Kurdish government's Peshmerga forces would potentially end up clashing with the Turks. The Turks are also concerned that PKK's armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (HPG), has been fighting to open a corridor from the Sinjar Mountains to Northern Iraq with YPG doing the same from the Syrian side. These moves boosted the PKK's popularity among the Yazidis. What worries Ankara is that the PKK cannot give up Sinjar and it has always been part of the Yazidis. Wherever PKK goes, it manages to install an anti-Turkish culture among the people and that worries Ankara a great deal.

In addition to Sinjar and PKK, Ankara's interest in Tal Afar presents a serious problem for the US and its allies. Tal Afar has been a concern for Turkey which had said it feared Shia paramilitary forces engaged in combat could carry out any retaliatory measures against Sunni Turkmen residents of the town. On November 20, 2016, Kalin stated that Turkey will not remain silent if the Iraqi government does not honor its commitments to protect the Turkmen population or prevent Shiite militia from entering the town. Turkey's deployment of troops in Nineveh has also triggered a diplomatic war of words with Iraq. While Ankara maintains its presence is merely to train locals in combating ISIS, Baghdad says the deployment and Ankara's concerns over Tal Afar were a pretext for intervention into the country's affairs.

Another reason for Erdogan's posturing is that Turkey does not wish for Iran to have influence in Tal Afar. If Iran were to establish presence here through Iraqi Shiite militias, it would make it

easier for Iran to transfer arms through the land route it is seeking to establish from the east to the west of Iraq. This is also seen as one of the reasons behind the “behind the curtain” competition between Iran and Turkey over Tal Afar.

Will Ankara carry out its threat? Chances are small given the fact that the Erdogan government did nothing to prevent the ISIS takeover of Tal Afar or Mosul and, according to some reliable sources in Turkey, aided such radical Islamist groups. As a matter of fact, most Turkmen of the region are Shiites and Erdogan has never seen them as either true Muslims or Turks. His posturing at this time seems to be for domestic political scene in Turkey. He is more likely to strike against PKK than anyone else.

All of these moves by the Turks are within a very well calculated strategy of Erdogan and his closest advisors to maximize public support for him at home. Erdogan will be very cautious in challenging US interests while cleverly taking steps to distance the country first from the EU (and the Europeans have done much to assist him) and then from NATO (in the longer scenario) and finally joining the Russian-Chinese camp.

I should also mention that in successive purges, Erdogan has managed to eliminate military officers who were seen as pro-Kemalists, pro-NATO, and pro-Fethullah Gulen. In their place, he has been promoting officers who are followers of Menzil tariqat (Sunni congregation that is very conservative and Sunni) and Great Asia School of Dogu Perincek (close ally of the Chinese). These purges and appointments support my previous observation that Erdogan’s vision for Turkey is one that does not include the Western Alliance – in the distant future.

Biographies



Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia; development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas

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Dr. Benedetta Berti

Dr. Benedetta Berti is a fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), a Lecturer at Tel Aviv University, a TED Senior Fellow and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) and at the Modern War Institute, West Point. Her work focuses on human security and civil wars as well as on post-conflict stabilization and peace-building. Dr. Berti is the author of three books, including *Armed Political Organizations. From Conflict to Integration* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) and her work has been published, among others, in *Foreign Affairs*, *Democratization*, the *Middle East Journal* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.

The Honorable David C. Gompert

David C. Gompert is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Naval Academy, Senior Fellow of the RAND Corporation, and member of several boards of directors. Mr. Gompert was Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence from 2009 to 2010. During 2010, he served as Acting Director of National Intelligence, in which capacity he provided strategic oversight of the U.S. Intelligence Community and acted as the President's chief intelligence advisor.

Prior to service as Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, Mr. Gompert was a Senior Fellow at the RAND Corporation, from 2004 to 2009. Before that he was Distinguished Research Professor at the Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University. From 2003 to 2004, Mr. Gompert served as the Senior Advisor for National Security and Defense, Coalition Provisional Authority, Iraq. He has been on the faculty of the RAND Pardee Graduate School, the United States Naval Academy, the National Defense University, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mr. Gompert served as President of RAND Europe from 2000 to 2003, during which period he was on the RAND Europe Executive Board and Chairman of RAND Europe-UK. He was Vice President of RAND and Director of the National Defense Research Institute from 1993 to 2000. From 1990 to 1993, Mr. Gompert served as Special Assistant to President George H. W. Bush and Senior Director for Europe and Eurasia on the National Security Council staff. He has held a number of positions at the State Department, including Deputy to the Under Secretary for Political Affairs (1982-83), Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs (1981-82), Deputy

Director of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (1977-81), and Special Assistant to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1973-75).

Mr. Gompert worked in the private sector from 1983-1990. At Unisys (1989-90), he was President of the Systems Management Group and Vice President for Strategic Planning and Corporate Development. At AT&T (1983-89), he was Vice President, Civil Sales and Programs, and Director of International Market Planning. Mr. Gompert has published extensively on international affairs, national security, and information technology. His books (authored or co-authored) include *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*; *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*; *The Paradox of Power: Sino-American Strategic Restraint in an Age of Vulnerability*; *Underkill: Capabilities for Military Operations amid Populations*; *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*; *BattleWise: Achieving Time-Information Superiority in Networked Warfare*; *Nuclear Weapons and World Politics (ed.)*; *America and Europe: A Partnership for a new Era (ed.)*; *Right Makes Might: Freedom and Power in the Information Age*; *Mind the Gap: A Transatlantic Revolution in Military Affairs*.

Mr. Gompert is a member of the American Academy of Diplomacy and the Council on Foreign Relations, a trustee of Hopkins House Academy, chairman of the board of Global Integrated Security (USA), Inc., a director of Global National Defense and Security Systems, Inc., a director of Bristow Group, Inc., a member of the Advisory Board of the Naval Academy Center for Cyber Security Studies, and chairman of the Advisory Board of the Institute for the Study of Early Childhood Education. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering from the U. S. Naval Academy and a Master of Public Affairs degree from the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University. He and his wife, Cynthia, live in Virginia and Maine.



Dr. Birol A. Yeşilada

Birol A. Yeşilada is professor of Political Science and International Studies at Portland State University (PSU). He is also holder of the endowed chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies and Director of the Center for Turkish Studies in the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government. He came to PSU in September 1998 from the University of Missouri-Columbia where he was Chair of the Department of Political Science.

Dr. Yeşilada received his B.A. degree in 1977 in Neurobiology from the University of California at Berkeley, his M.A. in Political Science in 1979 from San Francisco State University and his Ph.D. in Political Science in 1984 from the University of Michigan. His current research interests include: Global power transition, World Values Survey (Cyprus), the European Union, political and economic development of Turkey, radical Islam and terrorism, the Cyprus negotiations and international conflict resolution, and politics of economic reform in the emerging markets.

His recent publications include several books, EU-Turkey Relations in the 21st Century, Islamization of Turkey Under the AKP, The Emerging European Union, Comparative Political Parties and Party Elites, The Socioeconomic and Political Transformation of Turkey, Agrarian Reform in Reverse: Food Crisis in the Third World, and over 30 articles and book chapters. His is

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Dr. Yeşilada has been an invited policy consultant at various Departments of the US government, the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the RAND Corporation, Booz Allen Hamilton, the Nathan Associates, Barclays Capital, the World Bank, and is an Academic Associate of the Atlantic Council. He was invited by the White House to take part in a panel study at the RAND Corporation on “Politics and Islam in the New Constitution of Afghanistan” as part of the commission that drafted the new Constitution of that country.

Dr. Yesilada received numerous awards and grants including the Fulbright fellowship and a grant from the Joint Committee on the Middle East of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. At the University of Missouri, he received a campus-wide William T. Kemper Fellowship in Teaching Excellence in 1996. He is the past-president of the Rotary Club of Tigard, Oregon and president of the Rotary Club of Tigard Foundation, past New Generations Committee Chair of Rotary District 5100, co-chair of District 5100 Peace Conference and is Peacebuilder Clubs Committee Chair for 2012-13.