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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the August 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Kyle Orton from the Henry Jackson Society discusses Turkey's role in Syria by highlighting possible challenges that Ankara may face in the near future. The second article by Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak analyzes Justice and Development Party's radical reforms in Education and its proposed marriage regulation.

Sarah Jacobs contributed to this month's issue as assistant editor.

Turkey's Role in Syria

Kyle Orton

The Turkish government has gotten more and more deeply involved in Syria since the uprising began in 2011. But Turkey now finds its original aim, namely the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime, unattainable, creating tensions with the Syrian armed opposition, its primary lever inside Syria, and there are considerable problems stabilizing the zone of Syria that came under Turkish occupation after Ankara's direct intervention in 2016. The defeat of Turkey's primary objective has been accompanied by the rise of further problems, notably the exacerbation of its longest-standing internal security threat, that posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – PKK), and the generation of new internal threats, from the Islamic State (IS) and potentially from al-Qaeda-linked groups. The options for solving these problems are constrained and unpalatable.

Background

Before the Syrian uprising began in 2011, Turkey had a posture of “zero problems with neighbors.” Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) built on the improved relations that Turkey had fostered with Syria since the 1998 Adana Agreement. That accord had formally ended Damascus' support for the PKK, which began a bloody insurgency against Turkey in 1984 after constructing an army in Syrian-held areas of Lebanon with the assistance of the Syrian state and the Soviet Union.¹ Erdoğan forged a close personal relationship with Syria's ruler, Bashar al-Assad,² despite the Syrian government's outlaw status due to its unrelenting support of international terrorism, saliently underwriting IS's predecessor in Iraq,³ and murdering Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.⁴

Turkey emerged on the pro-revolutionary side of the “Arab Spring,” supporting elements of the Islamist opposition in many of the affected states, and Erdoğan's regional tour in September 2011 saw him greeted warmly in the three states—Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—where despotic governments had then-recently fallen.⁵ The same month, Erdoğan decisively broke with Assad.⁶

Erdoğan had tried to have Assad desist from repression and to reach a compact with the demonstrators. Assad had assured Erdoğan's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, this was the course he would take, but then continued to massacre protesters. After Assad had lied to Davutoğlu's face, there was no way back.⁷ As Assad's crackdown widened, and Iran and its tributaries moved into Syria to aid in suppression,⁸ it forced an existential decision on the opposition, of militarization or defeat, and the Syrian population fought back—with Turkish assistance. When the Free Syrian Army (FSA) announced itself, it was from Turkish territory, and the FSA brand was later adopted by most of the mainstream rebel factions. Turkey took a lead in providing support as a full-scale insurrection shook the Assad regime in the summer of 2012.⁹ Turkey's

rhetorical posture was aggressively anti-Assad, including calling for the imposition of “safe zones,” with or without a no-fly zone, to protect civilians and allow the rebels to create an alternative government.¹⁰

Turkey quickly found, however, that its superpower ally did not share its aims in Syria. On June 22, 2012, a Turkish reconnaissance jet was shot down by Assad.¹¹ There was to be no collective NATO response. Moreover, though the declared U.S. policy was that Assad must “step aside,”¹² the CIA’s involvement in the program run by Turkey and the Gulf states, that was attempting to actualize this policy by supporting the armed opposition, was mostly to *prevent* certain weapons, namely anti-aircraft missiles, being supplied to the rebellion.¹³ A major reason for this was U.S. policy toward Iran. The U.S. had begun secret talks with Iran in July 2012, exploring the possibility of a deal over Tehran’s nuclear weapons program,¹⁴ and the Iranians had made clear they would not allow President Obama to have such a deal if he intervened against Assad. The U.S. acceded to Iranian demands, even after Assad brazenly crossed Obama’s “red line” with a massive attack using chemical weapons of mass destruction in August 2013.¹⁵

The Turkish government maintained an open-borders policy until mid-2014.¹⁶ This policy was designed to allow support to the FSA-branded rebels, as well as Turkey’s Islamist proxies and allies that were disliked by the West and the Saudi-led Gulf bloc alike, such as Ahrar al-Sham, and to allow the refugees to flee the Assad regime’s increasingly-indiscriminate attacks—it was in the summer of 2012 that the Assad regime began using airstrikes against cities.¹⁷ Turkey’s open-borders system served many humane ends, and it continued even when it began causing instability inside Turkey,¹⁸ but it was difficult to police and led to accusations that Turkey was turning a blind-eye to the foreign jihadi-salafists flowing into Syria.¹⁹ The notion was that Turkey was instrumentalizing the jihadists to fight Assad and contain the PKK*, which was handed large tracts of territory along Turkey’s border by Assad.²⁰

Turkey’s Deepening Involvement

The battle for Kobani in late 2014 inflamed relations between the Turkish government and its Kurdish population. Turkey was hesitant in offering support to the PKK, operating under the name of the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - YPG), which held the town and was facing a siege from IS. Turkey did relent and allow Iraqi Kurdish forces to transit its territory to bolster the city’s defences and ultimately it was the U.S.-led Coalition’s airstrikes that turned the tide. But the memory remained and IS worked at this fault line.²¹ As IS’s external apparatus matured into 2015, Turkey became a prime target.²² A series of terrorist attacks against Kurdish political gatherings and parties helped accentuate the narrative among Kurds that Ankara and IS were working together; in tandem with Erdoğan’s

* Editors’ note: Turkey treats the PYD as part of the PKK, while the U.S. and others treat them as separate entities (even while acknowledging there are strong links between the two organizations). The question of the PYD’s relationship to the PKK is a controversial issue that has created tension in the relationship between Turkey and the U.S.

increasing reliance on identity politics, and the PKK's own violent conduct,²³ the 2013 ceasefire was torn asunder and Turkey was left facing a renewal of the PKK's insurgency and a wave of attacks by IS.

By the late summer of 2015, it appeared Turkey was going to impose the earlier-proposed "safe zone" unilaterally in an area of northern Syria in order to mitigate the dual threat of IS and the PKK.²⁴ The Turks stood down in exchange for a guarantee, brokered by the Americans, that the PKK would remain east of the Euphrates River. Before the end of 2015, the YPG/PKK had crossed west of the Euphrates, with assistance from Russian airstrikes.²⁵ In February 2016, the Russians assisted as the YPG attacked U.S.-vetted rebel assets and seized Arab-majority areas from them.²⁶ Soon afterwards, the YPG helped the pro-Assad coalition lock in the siege of Aleppo.²⁷

Even so, the Turkish government acceded to an American plan for the expulsion of IS from Minbij, a city west of the Euphrates, by the YPG, because of guarantees that the YPG itself would withdraw afterwards and leave the area to be run by its local inhabitants.²⁸ Instead, the YPG immediately began imposing its authoritarian structures on the city,²⁹ and then began moving west toward al-Bab and north toward the border city of Jarabulus, triggering Turkey's intervention, Operation Euphrates Shield, in August 2016.³⁰ While blocking the PKK's maximalism was a central Turkish objective, so was degrading IS, which had conducted another atrocity inside Turkey just days before.³¹ IS was expelled from Jarabulus within ten hours and the border was sealed

Euphrates Shield, however, came in the wake of the Russian intervention, which had severely damaged the mainstream opposition and solidified the Assad regime. As part of a quid pro quo with Russia to protect the Euphrates Shield from the regime coalition and the YPG/PKK to destabilize the zone, Turkey withdrew support for the rebellion in Aleppo,³² a key dynamic that allowed the pro-Assad coalition's unmerciful conquest of the city in December 2016,³³ an enterprise in which the YPG, again, assisted.³⁴

In February 2017, the Turks and their rebel auxiliaries secured control of al-Bab, one of the most important IS strongholds, where the security apparatus had a significant concentration, both to receive foreign volunteers and orchestrate external terrorism.³⁵ But the hopes that this influence could be leveraged to convince the U.S. to go with the Turkish option for liberating Raqqa, rather than the YPG, were thwarted by, among other things, the regime coalition cutting off the pass south of al-Bab,³⁶ and the Americans and pro-Assad forces combining to prevent Turkey from forcing the PKK out of Minbij.³⁷ In Syria, therefore, Turkey finds itself boxed in.

Turkey's Priorities Going Forward

The most obvious priority for Turkey is to stabilize the Euphrates Shield area. Turkey appears to be committed for the long-term in order to safeguard the frontier and to allow the return of some of the three million Syrian refugees currently on Turkish territory. So far, about 70,000 Syrians have returned from Turkey to the Euphrates Shield zone,³⁸ which contains around a million people, a quarter of whom are displaced.³⁹ Although some Turkish officials insist the situation is “pretty much normalized,”⁴⁰ there are worrying indicators. The Euphrates Shield zone has to contend with jihadist infiltrators, but the majority of the violence in the major cities between the formal end of combat operations and June 2017 came from rival Turkish-backed rebel factions clashing with one-another.⁴¹ Beyond the political violence, the area is plagued by ordinary criminality and lawlessness, even in the cities.⁴² The attempt to convert rebel forces into the army that guards against external threats and to train a police force for internal security has been hindered by the rebels’ continued capacity to overwhelm the police, and the attempted political micromanaging by Ankara has prevented governing institutions taking hold that have broad popular buy-in, leaving the provision of security and services deeply uneven.⁴³

Turkey’s objective when first getting involved in Syria in 2011-12 was to obtain Bashar al-Assad’s downfall. The official position is still that Assad must go to enable a lasting settlement, but it is clear that Turkey has de-prioritized ousting Assad. Turkey’s focus instead is on a patchwork stabilization effort of the kind seen in Euphrates Shield and on the parallel “negotiation” track with Russia and Iran, which first met in Astana in January 2017.⁴⁴ The Astana process is ostensibly apolitical, but there has been an “Astana-ization” of the formal Geneva peace process.⁴⁵ Astana is dominated by the Russians, who have converted the military gains of the pro-Assad coalition into a recognized basis for Geneva, inverting the process from one that aims at Assad’s removal to one that sets the terms on which he stays. Turkey has effectively enabled this. It can be argued that Turkey is trapped by a sequence of decisions, many of them American, which bolstered Assad and his allies. But the fact of Turkey’s altered priorities remains, regardless of the reason.

By now, the mainstream opposition is existentially dependent on outsiders, co-opted as a border-defense force by Jordan and Turkey, and as a counter-terrorism force by both states and America. To the extent that the U.S. and Jordan are working with groups in the Tanf base that originate in Deir Ezzor—a zone controlled by IS—there is a convergence of interest.⁴⁶ Turkey is already considerably resented by some oppositionists for, in their perception, allowing the fall of Aleppo, and the divergence of interests between anti-Assad rebels and Turkey, which wishes rebels to protect the border and mobilize against IS and the PKK, is only increasing.⁴⁷

For Turkey, the priorities now are the PKK, IS, and—lower down the list, but making itself a more pressing issue—Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The PKK and IS both saw the advantage in being the other's foil. The PKK got to claim to be the frontline against barbarism, and the addition of social radicalism to their messaging themes gained the PKK considerable popularity in the West, perhaps enough to grant the PKK a new status as a legitimate actor in the region.⁴⁸ IS presented itself as the vanguard of traditionalism.⁴⁹ Turkey has moved against the symbiotic rise of these extremist groups, but finds itself in the worst position of all: accused of collaboration with one (IS) and of pursuing a racist vendetta by combatting the other (the PKK).⁵⁰

At present, the PKK regards the Syrian theatre as a springboard for its war against Turkey, meaning it invests minimally in durable governance, taking a securitized approach that accrues little legitimacy,⁵¹ and necessitates ongoing abuses of human rights to retain control.⁵² It is possible that a peace accord between the PKK and Turkey could see the PKK devolve control of the areas it holds in Syria to locally-focused cadres. This would remove the impetus for Turkey to undermine the Rojava institutions. For now, however, with Erdoğan playing increasingly on nationalism and the PKK having greater power, conditions militate against a settlement.⁵³ On the contrary, the trendline points toward a collision between the PKK and Turkey on Syrian territory. The presence of U.S. troops has helped mostly avert this so far, though Turkey has struck at the PKK in Syria and Iraq without notification to the Americans embedded with the PKK in Syria.⁵⁴

Turkey appears to be awaiting developments, likely until after Raqqa, when the PKK will be weakened and the American temptation will be to withdraw. At that moment, the U.S. will effectively be choosing between Turkey and the PKK, and pushing whichever it does not choose closer to Russia and other undesirable partners.

Seeing this coming, the PKK has begun hedging its bets to avoid being left bereft of allies in the face of hostile neighbors. The PKK's statelet in Syria has always been reliant on the pro-Assad coalition, and the fear of American withdrawal has increased the integration.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, the PKK understands that Damascus and Tehran's tolerance for its territorial holdings is reliant on the current weakness of the pro-Assad coalition, so the PKK has engaged in anti-Iran and pro-Saudi rhetoric to exploit the fissure that has opened because of Turkey's siding with Qatar in the Gulf crisis.⁵⁶

In the meantime, there is the question of Idlib. Turkey's favorite proxy, Ahrar al-Sham, was the "greatest enabler" of the formerly-official al-Qaeda branch, HTS,⁵⁷ granting HTS a portal into the mainstream rebellion that allowed HTS to co-opt large sections of the insurgency. When HTS has destroyed nationalist rebels, Ahrar either stood aside or assisted. Only too late did Ahrar realize that its turn would come, as it did late last month.⁵⁸ HTS's piecemeal conquest of Idlib is now complete.

Essentially there are three scenarios for Idlib. It might transpire that nobody has the will or capability to eliminate HTS. Even if Turkey does nothing, however, and hopes that the current tactical restraint of HTS with regard to external attacks it has previously "dedicate[ed] resources to planning"⁵⁹ continues to hold, the pro-Assad

coalition might move against the province. Such an operation will flood Turkey with refugees it cannot cope with, as well as allowing the expansion of PKK influence. Or, Turkey could extend a Euphrates Shield-style protectorate over Idlib, but uprooting HTS would be difficult and HTS could begin attacks inside Turkey. Either way, a decision to destroy HTS is likely to be a joint enterprise of Turkey and Russia,⁶⁰ aggravating the divergence between Turkey and its rebel allies as Ankara is drawn further into the regime coalition's vision for stabilizing Syria.

The wildcard—assuming Turkey views Minbij as off-limits while American and Russian troops are protecting it—is the PKK-held Efrin Province, which Erdoğan has several times threatened to invade. This has seemed like an empty threat so far. The very disadvantageousness of Turkey's predicament suggests that the possibility of some radical effort by Ankara to reshuffle the deck should not be ruled out.

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AKP's White Revolution

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) have entrenched their power over the Turkish state. In tandem with the April 2017 constitutional referendum's expansion of presidential powers, the entire state institution is undergoing comprehensive reform, with drastic changes to Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri – TSK), Police, and Judiciary. In this context, the recent alteration of the country's national education curriculum and the proposed amendment of marriage regulations both reveal prevailing fault lines between conservatives and secularists.

Last month, Turkish Minister of National Education İsmet Yılmaz made a dramatic announcement about the new national curriculum's main elements. Yılmaz stated that as an ideology, Atatürkism will be removed from the school textbooks. Correspondingly, Atatürk's biography will be significantly shortened.⁶¹ Although the AKP had already eliminated Atatürkism as the education system's official ideology on September 15, 2012, until this announcement, the ideology had not been expunged from the textbooks.⁶²

Yılmaz's announcement was followed by the noteworthy addition of a section on the July 15, 2016 coup attempt to the school textbooks. The section was said to emphasize the importance of democracy, elected governments, and Turkey's history of military coups. This post-2016 coup education policy constitutes the opposite of that implemented following Turkey's 1960 coup. The post-1960 coup textbooks (used from 1960-1980) glorified TSK's military intervention on May 27, 1960, crowning it the "White Revolution" (Ak Devrim).⁶³ The coup perpetrators of 1960 declared May 27 a holiday of Freedom and Constitution (27 Mayıs Hürriyet ve Anayasa Bayramı). This holiday was instituted in 1963 and remained in effect until the enactment of the 1982 constitution, which was the product of a coup in 1980.

Thus, the AKP's agenda to design its own imagined community by indoctrinating its own national day is not a new phenomenon for Turkey. However unlike the White Revolution of 1960, the AK* Party's 2016 White Revolution does not attempt to legitimize itself with Atatürk's legacy. Rather, as İsmet Yılmaz openly declares, the new school textbooks will teach the students that the citizens who resisted the July 15 coup were participating in Jihad. An AKP member of the Turkish parliament's national education commission, Ahmet Hamdi Çamlı, summarized his government's stance:

* Justice and Development Party; the AKP also uses "AK Party" (The White Party) as an acronym to dispatch a subliminal message to the Turkish public that the party is not corrupt.

*Jihad is the primary component of Islam. It even outranks prayer (Namaz – Salaat). As for the Ottoman sultans, in order to not abandon jihad, they chose to not go on Hajj. Our ministry made a very good decision. If prayers are religion's tent pole, then Jihad is the tent itself... It is useless to teach Mathematics to a child who has no idea of Jihad.*⁶⁴

The Republican People's Party's (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP) made a notable response to this addition to the curriculum. Metin Lütfi Baydar, a secular opposition member of the education commission, accused the government of raising a vindictive generation of future militia members.⁶⁵ Despite CHP's outcry, the value of Jihad had already appeared in the 2013 Islamic law (Fıkıh) textbook of the İmam Hatip Schools.⁶⁶ This indicates that İmam Hatip's curriculum is permeating the secular curriculum, as İmam Hatip's values are becoming those of the Turkish national education system.

Additionally, the education ministry made a significant change by replacing Darwin's theory of evolution with Creationism. In Turkey, this subject has evoked heated public debates since 1987,⁶⁷ when then Minister of National Education Vehbi Dinçerler, deeply influenced by an ideology called Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, attempted to remove Darwinism from the curriculum. Like 1987, this decision received furious public criticism, resulting in the current Minister of National Education's indication that universities can still teach the theory of evolution.⁶⁸ Despite this concession, in July, Istanbul's Marmara University refrained from publishing an academic article on the theory of evolution, stating that the publication would harm the institution.⁶⁹

Unsurprisingly, each of these developments has been protested by supporters of secular and opposition parties. However, the AKP's parliamentary majority and alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – MHP) - which has allowed for extension of the state of emergency, boosting of the president's powers, and imprisonment of Kurdish political leaders - have left CHP without the capacity to counteract changes in the national curriculum.

Meanwhile, the AKP's conservative policies are not limited to education. The proposal that Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı – Diyanet) affiliated muftis be allowed to perform civil marriages alongside officials of the Registrar General of Marriages has also sparked friction. Similar to curriculum reform, this proposal triggered secular protest. The Turkish Bar Association's (Türkiye Barolar Birliği – TBB) Chairman Metin Feyzioğlu highlighted the ways in which this proposal threatened secularism,⁷⁰ and the Istanbul Bar (İstanbul Barosu) warned against the creation of a dual judicial system.⁷¹ Despite criticism, the AKP and the MHP insist on the proposal's advantages, claiming that the new regulation would encourage the rural Turkish population to perform civil marriage alongside traditional Islamic marriage. The credibility of this argument is undermined by the Turkish Constitutional Court's 2015 decision to invalidate the Turkish Penal Code,

Article 203, Paragraphs 5 and 6, which punished religious officials and couples who performed religious marriage in the absence of civil marriage.

In 2015, women's rights organizations decried this ruling as eroding Turkish women's rights. Similarly, women's rights organizations severely criticize the government for proposing to turn the current functioning civil law into a hollow one. One of these organizations' key criticisms is that the Mufti Reform lays the groundwork for child marriage. From this perspective, a mufti performing a marriage would be willing to overlook a child bride's age. Moreover, if the proposed Mufti Reform is passed, it would allow for oral registration of children born outside of medical institutions, who would then lack written documents. According to women's rights organizations, this would facilitate rapists' capacity to remain unidentified by local authorities. On a related note, the AKP's plan for pardoning sexual criminals, including rapists, was withdrawn in November 2016 due to public outcry.⁷²

Despite substantial protest, reflecting the deep fragmentation of Turkish society, the AKP administration continues to carry out its twenty-first century White Revolution, attempting to mold its conception of the ideal citizen. Like the pioneers of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis in the 1980s, the AKP seeks to utilize Islam as the glue for its New Turkey. That being said, the AKP has already surpassed its predecessors, implementing concrete measures that touch the daily lives of Turkish citizens.

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