

# Turkish getup? – Ankara’s Syria policy dilemma

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*With a neighbourhood in flames, Turkey has been one of the countries most affected by the escalating conflict on its southern border. Since the conflict began four years ago Ankara has had to manage unprecedented refugee flows from Syria and constant risk of violence spilling over the 900 km long border. Under the leadership of Turkey’s strongman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AK-party, AKP)<sup>1</sup>, the Turkish government has turned staunchly against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. Yet despite strong and consistent demands for the ousting of Assad, Turkey has been surprisingly restrained in its direct involvement in the conflict. Turkey’s overarching guiding principle has been to contain the conflict and hinder the spread of violence into Turkey, rather than direct involvement. However, Turkey has not hesitated in resorting to indirect involvement and manipulation. While Turkey tries to be defensive and remain at least overtly uninvolved it has in fact become a party in the conflict. This Janus-faced posture limits Ankara’s ability to actively contribute to a solution of the Syria conundrum.*

For the past decade Turkish foreign policy has been associated with far-reaching ambitions and ideals. Ahmet Davutoğlu - the current Prime Minister – was the architect of both the doctrine of *strategic depth* and the policy of *zero-problems* with neighbours. These concepts have guided Turkey’s foreign policy since the AKP came into power a decade ago. Turkey’s often troubled relations with most of its neighbours, not least Syria, started improving as a result of the AKP’s diplomatic efforts aimed at building confidence, stability and mutual economic gain. It was, in many ways, a successful continuation of the Turkish economic and diplomatic opening towards the Middle East originally initiated in the early 1990’s by former President Turgut Özal.

These foreign policy concepts have been intertwined with a security and defence policy in which Turkey seeks self-sufficiency and increased freedom of action, particularly in the military realm. While being an important European and NATO ally, from Ankara’s perspective there is little



Turkish soldiers on a tank sit opposite the Syrian town of Kobane. Photo credit: TT/AFP/Aris Messinis

NATO as an organisation can and will do to help Turkey in relation to conflicts in the neighbourhood. Thus, Turkey finds it unavoidable and indeed favourable to assert its own regional role and retain its potential to react to the ongoing conflicts in accordance with its own national interests, rather than those of Europe’s, NATO’s, or those of any other coalition.

Yet the foreign policy goals pursued by the AKP coupled to its bid to turn Turkey’s Muslim democracy into a model system for the region seems to have failed. Turkey has problems with almost all of its neighbours and Turkey’s strategic depth has been lost as a result of wars in the neighbourhood. In many parts this failure is due to regional political and social dynamics beyond Ankara’s control. But Turkish foreign policy activism and the uncompromising idealism of the *zero-problems* doctrine has ironically resulted in Turkey’s isolation in relation to many countries of the Middle East.

<sup>1</sup> *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP).

Syria has become an especially acute problem. At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Turkey tried to remain true to its self-declared *zero-problems* foreign policy. Initially, Ankara argued that Bashar al-Assad could be persuaded to implement necessary social and political reforms. In light of its diplomatic influence Turkey thought it could sway the Syrian regime and help avert turmoil. However the increasing brutality against protesters and repeated false promises made by Assad soon pushed Turkey to break with the regime. By autumn of 2011 Turkey argued that Assad and his government should step down. The removal of the Assad regime has since been the guiding principle of Turkey's Syria policy.

Despite its revulsion against Assad's behaviour, Ankara has not actively propagated military intervention. Instead, Turkey's main objective still is to keep any turmoil and hostility from spreading to Turkish territory. At first Turkey's sensitive relationship to the region's Kurds was the reason for its containment strategy. The central government was afraid that a spread of violence from Syria might rekindle the long-standing conflict between the *PKK*, an armed Kurdish rebel group, and Turkey. As ethnic and sectarian tensions increased, Turkey's concerns widened beyond the Kurdish issue. The threat of terrorism and broader sectarian discord spreading to Turkey now became equally important drivers of Turkey's Syria policy. Any high-profile military involvement would mean an increased risk of conflict spill-over and, thus, larger unilateral military intervention has not been an option for Ankara so far.

Although no serious incidents of violence have yet occurred in Turkey, civil society has nonetheless been increasingly affected by the war. By early 2015 approximately 1.6 million refugees have crossed into Turkey, according to Ankara's estimates. The actual numbers are likely even higher. The strain on local communities and growing discontent among constituents mean that Turkey's Syria policy has become intertwined with domestic politics.

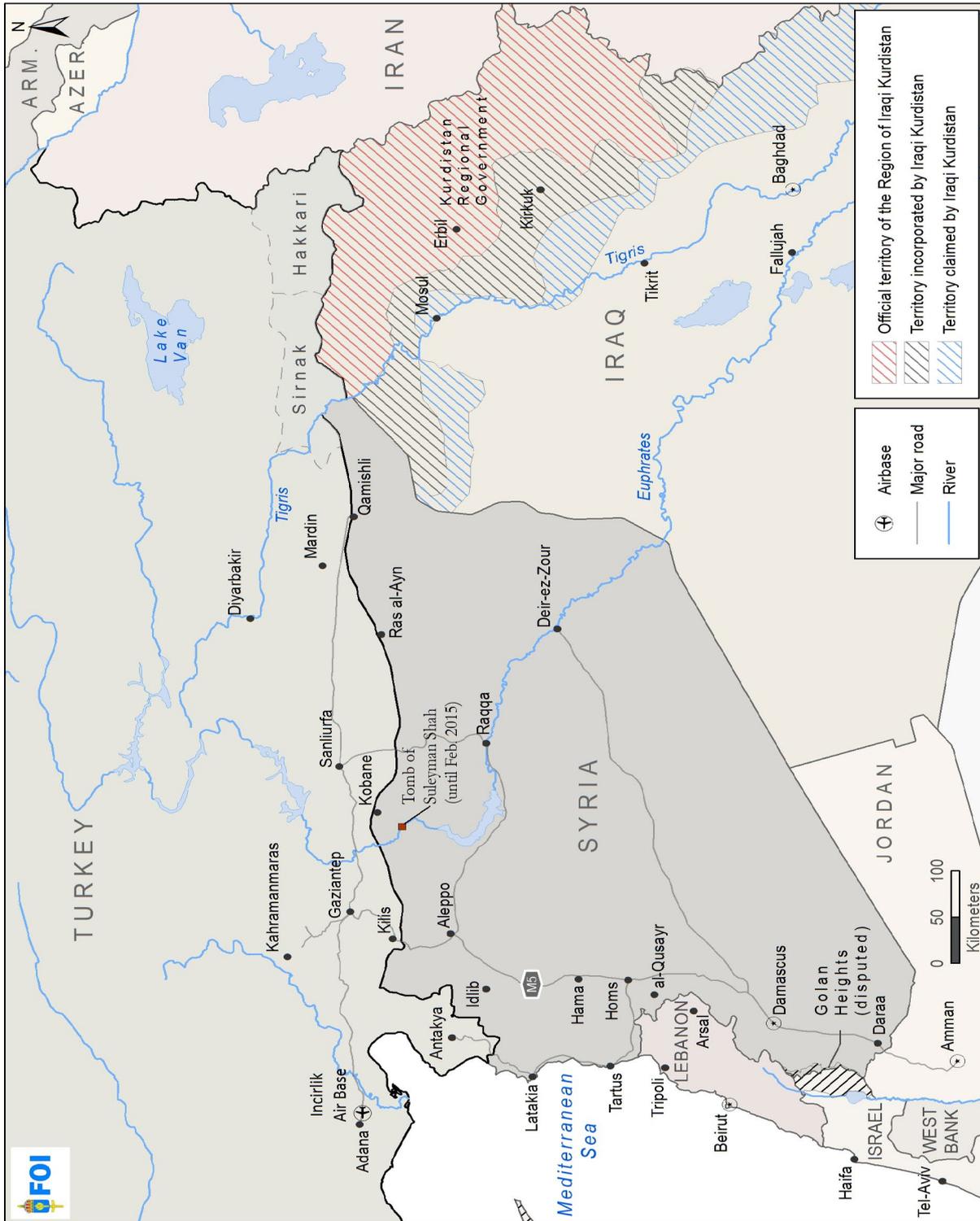
The effect is that Turkish policymakers are reluctant to publicly discuss the Syria policy beyond the doctrine of containment. For example, while public policy has been to not intervene militarily in Syria, a leak in the spring of 2014 revealed that government deliberations included military intervention scenarios. Discussing scenarios of military intervention into Syria was not the problem per se. Rather, it was the suggestions that Turkish public opinion would

have to be manipulated into accepting such operations that stirred criticism. According to the leak, one idea floated in the meeting was to justify intervention by staging an attack by Turkish forces and blame Syrian forces. The leaked discussion seemingly had to do with managing the Suleyman Shah tomb, a sovereign piece of Turkish territory inside Syria which until late February 2015 housed the remains of the grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire.

There have also been rumours and accusations of Turkish support to radical Islamist groups like ISIS, such as financial contributions. Any such support is difficult to prove. More likely, authorities have at times turned a blind eye to businesses, financial transactions and recruitment activities linked to ISIS and other militant groups on Turkish territory. The logic behind such tacit approval would be to minimize the risk of a sustained terrorist campaign that may have negative effects on for instance Turkey's economy, including tourism. Turkish officials have argued that Islamist groups such as the not so moderate *Ahrar al-Sham* and umbrella organizations like the *Islamic Front* should be included in international negotiations and taken off terrorist lists in the West. This is a position that suggests that supporting these groups does not necessarily contradict Turkish policy preferences.

Throughout the Syrian conflict Turkey has received limited political, military and humanitarian help from the international community, primarily because Turkish authorities have remained sceptical of foreign help and assistance. This scepticism may originate from a view that if things get even worse, no one will come to Turkey's help. Ankara considers the failure of the international community to intervene against Assad after the August 2013 chemical weapons attack a betrayal of promises made, and an example of exactly this logic. Growing Turkish scepticism post-2013 has at least partly resulted in a growing political rift between Ankara and its main allies in the West. This is best illustrated by their diverging positions regarding what the main threat in Syria is, and how to manage it. While ISIS dominates the agenda of Western powers and some of the other regional countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Turkey has a different perspective. Even in the face of the ISIS offensives in 2014 Turkey still viewed Assad and future Kurdish independence as the main areas of concern.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group (2014), *The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire*, Europe Report No. 230, 30 April.





Since the late fall of 2014 and as a result of domestic and international pressure, Ankara has taken steps to engage with Kurdish factions fighting in Syria. Turkey has allowed military and humanitarian aid to cross the border into Kurdish-controlled territories in Northern Syria. More significantly, the initial reluctance against dealing with ISIS has seen some change; Ankara has, as of early 2015, taken explicit steps to counter ISIS. For instance, by training moderate rebel groups fighting ISIS. The slowly shifting positions of Ankara with regards to the war highlight Turkish pragmatism, but also the difficulty in how to best position Turkey with respect to the evolving military-political dynamics on the ground.

Although Turkey takes a pragmatic approach, the main thrust of its Syria policy remains. Ankara continues to resist any direct military engagement against the radical Islamists even though it is part of the international coalition against ISIS. The Turkish air force has not joined the air campaign currently underway, and Ankara has refused its allies access to Turkish air force bases except for unarmed logistics and surveillance missions. Even the late February 2015 military expedition into Syria to relieve troops besieged at the Suleyman Shah tomb does not break with the principles of the Syria policy. In order to avoid the problem of Turkish territory being either attacked or conquered, the tomb was promptly moved to Turkey with the help of a massive military force. What seemed like a large military involvement inside Syria was in fact a very limited incursion to eliminate one issue that might have forced Ankara to take action in Syria at a time it cannot choose.

As the Syrian war continues, so does the threat of spill-over of hostility and terrorism into Turkey. The risks will likely increase if Ankara shifts to a more confrontational approach and policy vis-à-vis ISIS. Meanwhile, the Assad regime remains in place, the Kurds – viewed by Turkey with deep suspicion– continue to gain support for their cause, and the refugee flow continues unabated. Unilateral Turkish military action remains highly unlikely also in the future. Ankara is instead set to continue its policy of containing the war to Syria to the best of its abilities, while arguing that ousting the Assad regime, rather than combating ISIS, should be the focus of the international community. Simultaneously, the war generates growing social and

political tensions in Turkey. The mix of domestic, security policy and foreign policy factors that the government must balance in its Syria policies makes any Turkish contribution of the settlement of the Syrian conflict unlikely. Turkey's posture will therefore remain defensive and its ability to actively work towards a solution of the Syrian conundrum limited.