

Miguel Ángel Medina Abellán*

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST
KALEIDOSCOPE

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TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST KALEIDOSCOPE

Abstract:

Turkey's recent involvement in the international coalition fighting Daesh in Syria and Iraq brings out more doubts than certainties about the real motivation of this country for this military intervention in its vicinity. This piece of work aims to clarify why and how has Turkey apparently adopted a pro-active stance in the fight against jihadism over the last three months. Two main ideas link the article throughout: on one hand, arguably the change in Ankara's foreign policy responds to its national security strategy, addressed at stopping the crystallization of a strong Turkish Kurdistan or state dismemberment in the Middle East what so ever; on the other, the result of the elections in June and the second leg, scheduled for November, are two domestic factors decisively determining Turkey's outreach.

Keywords: Turkey, Daesh, Syria, Iraq, Erdogan, elections, PKK, borders.

Resumen:

La reciente intervención de Turquía en la coalición internacional que lucha contra el Estado Islámico en Siria e Iraq presenta más dudas que certezas sobre las motivaciones reales de este país para intervenir militarmente en su vecindad. Este artículo pretende esclarecer por qué y cómo Turquía parece haber adoptado un papel mucho más activo en la lucha contra el yihadismo en los últimos tres meses. Dos son las ideas principales que sirven de hilo conductor del articulado: por un lado, se puede interpretar que el cambio de política exterior de Ankara responde a su estrategia de seguridad nacional de no permitir bajo ningún concepto la cristalización de un Kurdistan turco fuerte ni la desmembración estatal en Oriente Medio; por el otro, el resultado de las elecciones de Junio y la siguiente vuelta de los comicios, prevista para noviembre, son dos factores domésticos con una determinante repercusión exterior para Turquía.

Palabras clave: *Turquía, Estado Islámico, Siria, Irak, Erdogan, elecciones, PKK, fronteras.*

***NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

INTRODUCTION

The advance of Daesh¹ in the past year across first Syria and then Iraq both has surprised and worried players in the region. Its incursions into northern and western Iraq led to the fall of Al Maliki as Iraqi Prime Minister and forced Kurdish involvement. Besides, Daesh attacked and occupied Kobane in early 2015, fighting with Kurdish fighters in that Syrian town bordering Turkey. Reportedly Daesh had seized one third of the town yet United States air strikes helped stall the Daesh advance and slowly pushed it back². The town's proximity to Turkey and the fact that Turkey was not considerably involved in the action against to protect the town begged a fundamental question; Why was Turkey not involved in fighting Daesh? Why has Turkey not considered fighting Daesh a top foreign policy priority? Why was the bloody battle for Kobane not particularly relevant to the Turkish government and was rather a fringe problem?³

Moreover, the recently held parliamentary elections in Turkey could be seen as a fire test for the future of that country. The objective of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) was to achieve a fourth consecutive election victory, something unprecedented in modern Turkey. The result however forced the AKP to seek a coalition government and, given this has not been possible, there is a second leg of the elections set for 1 November 2015. Yet, there is a question worth asking; is Turkish foreign policy likely to change in the foreseeable future? Will we witness a major transformation in Ankara's external relations?

The present piece of work focuses on the role of Turkey concerning its immediate neighbourhood and the current geopolitical scenario. Most particularly, the paper scrutinises what role Turkey plays on the international action against Daesh and on the Syrian – Iraqi conflict in this regard. This document, then, aims to game out the possible scenarios that might unfold in Turkey's surrounding region. It first presents the working parameters. Then the article examines the determining factors of Turkey's policy regarding the fight against Daesh, the Kurdish issue, Syria and Iraq. The third part takes a look at the relation between Ankara and its 'inner outsiders', that is Washington, Brussels and Teheran. Some concluding remarks close the present article.

1 The present piece of work prefers to use Daesh to refer to this jihadist terrorist group, instead of the widely accepted definition of Islamic State. Daesh might be a transliteration of the Arab acronym al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham. By contrast, Islamic State is a biased definition of the clear borders between Islam, Muslims and Islamists.

2 MAHMUD Zwan, 'IS, Turkey and Kobane: How Events are Begging the Kurdish Question', available at <http://beaveronline.co.uk/is-turkey-and-kobane-how-events-are-begging-the-kurdish-question/>, 13 October 2014

³ See the interview held on 9 October 2014, the BBC correspondent Mark Lowen interviewing Yasin Aktay, Vice chairman of the ruling party AKP, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-29561467>

STARTING POINT

Three geostrategic imperatives serve as the central question linking the paper. On the one side, we can ascertain that there is no long-term strategy of the international community against Daesh, and clearly it is of the outmost necessity to seal the border between Turkey and Syria for the success of any attempt at stopping or at least undermining Daesh. Syria is the main supplier of goods and materials to Daesh, or at least its most important main safe passage. If the international community is to find a long-lasting solution, it should seek an all-encompassing, comprehensive and holistic arrangement, integrating both sides into the international system, securing the territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq and fostering development, stability and democracy in the region. Precisely, Daesh has found its place in this international legal and political vacuum and for the time being no reasonable solution seems plausible. The longer the international community focuses its attention on merely bilateral and punctual actions to defeat extremism, the sooner episodes like Daesh will reappear in the future.

This somehow mistaken approach from the West brings forth a second element; Daesh and the conflicts in Syria and Iraq demonstrate the need of a new geopolitical alignment regionally, which may take over the geopolitical order that took shape after the decolonisation process in the wider Middle East area and that survived the Cold War. The system derived from Sykes-Picot, now a century ago, is obsolete and not valid anymore as the umbrella of the Middle East checks and balances. It is imperative to inquire whether the action and the reaction provided by the international community are appropriate, given the scale of the crisis and the new geopolitical parameters.

And, finally, we have Turkey in this triangle. Ankara has not adopted a proactive stance in the international attempts against Daesh until the end of July 2015 and, to a large extent, it was *forced* to join the international coalition after the terrorist attack killed 32 people in Suruç and the Daesh attack to Turkish soldiers near the Syrian border. From that day on Turkish forces began an airstrike campaign against one of the very groups that has been crucial to stopping the advance of Daesh in Syria, the PKK and the Kurdish militia YPG. Turkey promised to scale up its own attacks to the Daesh forces and allow heavy gunfire from its territory.

But, paradoxically, Kurdish forces and their allies in Syria, who have been closely working with American forces, are pushing jihadists out of areas they once controlled. From cloaked rooms in northern Syria, members of the YPG have relayed intelligence and coordinates for potential airstrike targets to an American operations centre hundreds of miles away. The resulting strikes have in turn helped the Kurds seize a broad stretch of territory along the

Turkish border from the Islamic State⁴. Thus, while the United States had long sought Turkey's help in fighting Daesh, the events since the agreement reveal the tangle of diverging interests in the region.

HYPOTHESES

There are two major hypotheses in the present document. First, Turkey bombed PKK in Turkey and Kurds fighters in Syria not because a new foreign policy strategy or a major shift in its foreign relations; on the contrary, this is a tactical move to face up to the threat that Kurds and a potential Kurdistan represent to Turkey. Thus, Kurds are the strategic cleavage that never changes⁵. It is arguable to a large extent that Turkey does not have a new role in the fight against Daesh, yet it has modulated it. Turkey's *presence* in its immediate neighbourhood came only to the eyes of international public opinion in July, after the first massacres and atrocities in 2014, and this trend has taken shape in particular over the last two months. Therefore, Turkey has embarked upon the anti-jihadist activities only when it realised Kurds could complete their control over the Syrian border and when it took the threat posed by the YPG rapid territorial gains within Syria seriously.

Second, and related to the above, Turkey's movements over the last two months can be interpreted as a clever movement by Erdogan to gain popularity and public support after the (disappointing) results of the June election. It is worth reminding that Kurds across the region have historically sought an independent state, possibility that the Turkish government strongly opposes to. Turkey deals with the tactical aspects of the anti-Kurdish campaign that would have the strongest reverberations on public opinion, and thus, on their perception of the President and whether or not citizens will vote to support his party in the upcoming new elections. One way or another the AKP loss of votes is by and large a consequence of the party's increasingly authoritarian governing style and its isolationist foreign policy⁶. And AKP cannot risk to lose the election again; if Erdogan wants to maximize his nationalist appeal in the country, and particularly with the horizon of the new elections in November, he must first finish what he started with the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, or otherwise risk being bogged down to the point of having to abandon the anti-Syrian operation entirely. But he is in the middle of a dilemma: the longer any punitive anti-Kurdish operations are undertaken, and particularly if they meet unexpectedly huge casualties, the more likely it is that support

⁴ ALMUKHTAR Sarah; WALLACE Tim, 'Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS?', The New York Times, available at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-isis.html?_r=0, 12 August 2015,

⁵ BASSETS Lluís, 'Gambito de sangre', El País, 30 July 2015

⁶ PAUL Amanda; MURAT Demir, 'Turkey votes - Part II - All shook up - A first assessment of Turkey's post-election political landscape', *The European Policy Centre*, available at http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=5682, 8 June 2015

for Erdogan and his war will falter, thus negating the nationalist benefit that he hoped to receive from the war and transfer into political capital⁷.

TURKEY AND THE CURRENT MIDDLE EAST KALEIDOSCOPE

With overlapping civil wars in Syria and Iraq, a new flare-up of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, and tense nuclear talks with Iran, Middle Eastern politics are more volatile than ever and long-time alliances are shifting⁸. Turkey stands in the epicentre of this hot spot of international politics and the summer events have boosted again the importance of that country, both for the EU and the US. Which are the drivers of Ankara's foreign policies towards the region? What lies behind Turkish actions in its immediate vicinity? We have to focus three points; the fight against Daesh, the Kurdish issue, and the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey and Daesh – old wine in new bottles?

Three features help us understand Turkey's involvement in the fight against Daesh. Firstly, evidence and strategy come to the forefront. It is noticeable that after the three air strikes of the initial days Turkey has carried out no more attacks against Daesh. However, and although the Turkish government does not release exact numbers or locations, some analysts estimate around 300 strikes in Iraq and far eastern Turkey, including a large number from storm howitzers based near the Turkey-Iraq border. Likewise, the number of fighters killed is almost uneven – just nine Daesh militants, compared with nearly 400 Kurdish fighters⁹. Needless to underline, the two conflict sites are hardly close.

Secondly, Turkey has not confronted decisively the traffic of combatants, guns and materials deployed through the Syrian border over the last four years. Ankara has adopted a policy of ambiguity towards Syria and towards Al Asad and has made the refrainment from sensitive decisions a virtue. Despite there is no conclusive evidence, Turkey has allowed to a certain extent the transfer of jihadists across its borders and has been permissive with oil smuggling that finances terrorism. Certainly, it is easy to extract oil from the refinery in Qayara, and get profit, as we are not talking about places such as the North Sea. There is no need of

⁷ KORYBKO Andrew, 'Strategic scenarios surrounding prolonged Kurdish insurgency in Turkey (I)', *The Oriental Review*, available at <http://orientalreview.org/2015/08/11/strategic-scenarios-surrounding-prolonged-kurdish-insurgency-in-turkey-ii/>, 10 August 2015

⁸ 'Middle East friendship chart', available at http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_world_/2014/07/17/the_middle_east_friendship_chart.html

⁹ For a complete record on casualties and strikes related to Turkey's actions, see DYKE Joe; BLASER Noah, 'Is Turkey using its war on the so-called Islamic State as an excuse to go after its long-time Kurdish foe?', in *Irin News, Fact check*, available at <http://newirin.irinnews.org/fact-check-turkey-isis-pkk/>, 11 August 2015

sophisticated technology in this, and Daesh has resources, experience and manpower to extract oil.

Turkey wrongly considered that the civil war in Syria would stop very quickly, and that the rebel and Islamist groups might abolish the regime of Al Asad. This would explain why Turkey has not been very hard pushing the radicals on its southern border, which has been the hallway of the jihadist groups to enter into Syria. And it goes without saying that whereas there is heavy attack from the international coalition to the Syrian regime, which could be considered as the nemesis of Daesh to a large extent in Syria, Turkey prefers not to disturb Al Asad.

The third vertex of the equation is the campaign against the Kurds. Turkey indiscriminately targets both the PKK fighters and Daesh, and this in principle is hard to accept for the allies, Kurdish fighters have proven for the time being to be the most effective line of defence against Daesh, and even with Western support and logistic assistance. And this is the case at least in Iraq. All this causes uneasiness in Turkish public opinion, something that off sides Erdogan. This efficient action by the Kurds unsettles Ankara, and there are indeed reasonable fears of a spread of the Kurdish nationalist or self-government demands across the region.

As a consequence, Turkey seeks to dismiss and discredit Kurdish nationalism to justify its intervention in the border zones of Syria and its strikes against the PKK fighters, while building the idea that the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) is the political arm of PKK, in view of the forthcoming election on 1 November 2015. Erdogan and the AKP have mildly played a double game to keep international support and strengthen their prospects for a potential snap election. They have an interest to play down the airstrikes on the PKK in the eyes of the international community, while highlighting them to Turkey's nationalist electorate at home. It is interesting the comparison of the drifting away of Turkey regarding smuggling coming from Iraq with the attention devoted to the bombing by PKK of the oil pipeline connecting the oil wells in Kirkuk, in Iraq, to the port of Ceyhan, near the Southeast coast in Turkey. The results of the June elections and the unexpected increasing of votes of the HDP can be interpreted as a punishment for Erdogan external policy, triggered Turkey to accept the old request from the US to attack Daesh in northern Syria and allow the use of the air base of Incirlik to attack the Caliphate. Moreover, this diversion might be as well the best masquerade to attack the PKK in Iraq.

The Kurdish issue – external ramifications

Turkey, in a very few months, broke the fragile 2013 ceasefire with the PKK and the Kurdish forces, which had stopped thirty years of armed conflict and more than 40,000 deaths. And

its unilateral foreign policy may jeopardise the international coalition actions against Daesh in Iraq, where the bulk of Kurdish militia are. Why?

In contrast to the newly-emergent Daesh, PKK is Turkey's long established foe. The recent revival in attacks recalls the bitter decades-long struggle. Since the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish demands for some autonomy and the recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the Kurds living in Turkey have remained unheeded. After decades of failed attempts at greater self-government, the official opening of EU accession negotiations represented a shift in perspective and with it the potential for greater recognition of Kurdish identity. If we take a look to Turkish domestic politics, it is plausible that the latest elections might possibly induce momentum towards a definite settlement as this involves the continued pursuit of peace talks with the outlawed PKK¹⁰.

Yet, if we pay our attention to foreign policy, obviously the crucial consideration for Turkey regarding the Kurdish question is; what happens after Daesh? What then for the Kurds in Iraq and particularly in Syria? The Kurds of Syria seek an autonomous region of their own, a prospect increasingly likely because of Assad's weakening hold on Syria. Meanwhile, the Kurds of Iraq no doubt want an independent state. Furthermore, there are at least ten different ethnic groups in the area and, crucially, they do not correspond to ten different political communities. The Kurdish issue reminds that Turkey has always adopted a hard position concerning the territorial integrity and the borders established in the Middle East, as the worst- case scenario for Ankara would be a new regional framework with the existing countries divided into pieces. This would immediately pose a fundamental question; where to stop? Where do the final borders of the Middle Eastern countries lay?

This compelling tenet opens up Pandora's Box for Turkey, for its foreign policy and for its role in the foreseeable situation in the region. The break-up of Syria and / or Iraq into three would afford the Kurds a good opportunity for independence; with a legitimate claim as the largest ethnic group in the world without a state, as the force that fought against Daesh when no one else could or would, and as the only democratic buffer in a region dominated by theocracy and dictatorship. Independence (for Iraqi Kurdistan at least) is not as improbable as it once seemed¹¹, and taking this into account is paramount to understand Turkey's foreign policy on Syria, on Iraq and against PKK and Daesh. This is a critical issue that Turkey, the United States and the international community need to be address.

¹⁰ GEOPOLITICA, 'The Future of Turkey after the last Elections: the Kurdish question and the economic Outlook', available at <http://www.geopolitica-rivista.org/29121/the-future-of-turkey-after-the-last-elections-the-kurdish-question-and-the-economic-outlook>, 8 August 2015

¹¹ DYKE; BLASER, 'op.cit.'

Syria and Iraq

Scrutinising Turkey's relations with Syria and Iraq under the present circumstances require digging into the past and bringing geography to the fore. Even though during the Cold War Turkey adopted a policy on non-direct involvement in conflict-management, it has taken a proactive stance in its immediate neighbourhood ever since. Under Ataturk's motto of 'Peace at Home, Peace Abroad', Turkey was an essential actor in different bilateral and multilateral initiatives in its wider neighbourhood, albeit narrowly focused on security issues¹². The toolbox used by Turkey on the Middle East space and on its foreign policy to Syria and Iraq in the nineties suggests it delivered as a 'hard power' and was mostly related to self-defence and proper security purposes, leaving aside economic, commercial or humanitarian considerations. Just as an example, in 1996 Turkey deployed around 30,000 soldiers on the Syrian border and threatened to invade Damascus if Syria would not expel Abdullah Ocalan.

By the turn of the century the situation apparently changed, as the coming into power of the AKP government led to a more consensual and less conflict-based mentality and the realist zero-sum game spiral was gradually transformed into more liberal approaches, more pragmatic and confident policies in the early 2000s. Despite its huge military capabilities, Turkey's approach to conflict-management opted for new choices and strategies, less securitised, and the synergy with the EU's external policies in this field slightly increased¹³. Indeed, the new millennium saw Turkey turning out to be a fundamental actor in the wider Middle East space¹⁴. Worth mentioning are initiatives such as its mediation in Israel - Syria relations, its policy of 'constructive engagement' in the Israel-Palestine peace process as an important provider of resources and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian Territories, the normalisation of the relations with Iraq and Syria or its standing as a model for secularist reform and Islamist movements in other countries, in particular in the Maghreb¹⁵. In addition, Ankara has proven to be more willing regarding the promotion of groundbreaking initiatives to create a complex of regional cooperation mechanisms in the East Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and the Middle East¹⁶.

¹² Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>, 13 June 2015

¹³ Besides, Brussels has often outlined that there is a clear compatibility of EU's and Turkey's foreign policies, although Turkey's alignment with the CFSP statements, usually reaching 90%, has declined over the last few years. For a complete record, see the different European Commission reports on the road of Turkey towards accession.

¹⁴ SOLER Eduard, 'Turkey's Potential (and Controversial) Contribution to the global 'Actorness' of the EU, in ATESOGLU Nursin (ed), *Contentious issues of security and the Future of Turkey*, Ashgate, London, 2007, p 39

¹⁵ See in this regard ALTUNISIK Meliha, 'La política exterior de Turquía en el siglo XXI', *Anuario Internacional CIDOB, Barcelona, 2011, pp 421 - 426*

¹⁶ Herein we can underline the Multinational Peace Force South-East Europe (MPFSEE), the South-Eastern Europe Defense Ministerial Process (SEDM) or the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR).

Nonetheless we cannot turn a blind eye on the episodes of threat discourse that are sometimes present in Turkish foreign policy¹⁷.

And this is precisely where current relations between Ankara, Damascus and Bagdad breeze in. Let's remind that Syria and Iraq presents a multifaceted threat to Turkey, not only because of politics, but because of geography: Syria shares a 900 km border with Turkey (twice the border between France and Spain), and the Turkish-Iraqi border is 400 km long. And, worrying to the last, neither border seems to stabilise.

As regards Syria and the Asad regime, after four years of conflict the political situation in Syria remains blocked, while the humanitarian situation is increasingly worrying: 300,000 people have lost their lives, more than six and a half million people are internally displaced and around three million have fled the country¹⁸. It is common knowledge that the Asad regime and Daesh do not attack each other, and some analysts suggest that there is even reciprocity or complicity between these two actors.

It is worth reminding that Turkey alone takes in six more times Syrian refugees than all the EU countries together¹⁹. Undeniably, Turkey is the most engaged actor in providing support to the victims of the Syrian conflict and that provides the most important support to cope with this dramatic humanitarian situation. The two million Syrian refugees in Turkey enjoy very good humanitarian and health conditions and are properly taken care of, and this shelter rises up to an estimated cost of five billion dollars.

The situation in Iraq does not shed any light of hopefulness. The Peshmerga are clearly playing a large role acting as proxy fighters for Western democracies whose populations are too reticent or governments too timid to commit ground troops themselves. Thus, as it happens in the Syrian case, Iraq boosts and immediate analogy for Turkey, as Ankara cannot commit properly and fully to all Kurds who fight against Daesh. Turkey has taken careful distance from the battles between the Peshmergas in Iraq and the Daesh militia. Turkey takes into consideration that the United States has supplied arms to the Peshmerga in Iraq but not to the Kurdish fighters in Syria, and the uncanny relation between Ankara and Washington is the key explaining factor in this regard.

Hence, history, politics and geography illustrate us that Turkey should in theory be the actor with the biggest interest to solve the conflict in Syria and Iraq and to fight against Daesh, most in particular on its bordering regions. But high politics is full of grey areas, of

¹⁷ NAS Cigdem, 'EU and Turkey: Challenges and opportunities in Enlargement and Foreign Policy', in *FORNET Plenary*, 21-22 April 2005, Session II, Group IV

¹⁸ Most Syrian refugees have found their way to neighbouring countries, with Lebanon hosting 1.2 million, Turkey almost 2 million, Jordan 620,000, Iraq 215,000 and Egypt 140,000.

¹⁹ Turkey and Lebanon hold ten more times Syrian refugees than all the EU-28; compare the 2 million refugees in Turkey or the 1.2 million in Lebanon to the 350,000 refugees living in the EU countries.

unintended consequences, of suspicious movements, and having long borders with these two countries does not determine what so ever Turkey's behaviour. This case illustrates a fundamental question for international politics, not only concerning the fight against Daesh but also considering current threats and challenges to the international community; where do you look borders from? What do they mean?

THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES – THE UNITED STATES, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND IRAN

On the United States - Turkey relation

Turkey has been historically a key ally of the United States since the foundation of the Republic, maintaining close economic, strategic, political and cultural links. Turkey's geopolitical position as NATO's southern flank strengthened this alliance and beefed up the military cooperation between Ankara and Washington. But after the end of the Cold war Turkey's geographical assets were becoming less important in Washington's and NATO's eyes, and the revival of the bilateral relations with the EU seemed to indicate a shift in the Ankara – Brussels – Washington triangle.

The position of the United States in this conflict is Machiavellian to the max. It supports the Turks as they battle the PKK, but Washington is also giving aid to the Syrian-based PYG Kurdish militia and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, knowing full well that the training and weapons it provides will likely be funneled to their affiliated PKK partners in fighting Turkey. Ankara considers all the Kurdish fighters and factions as terrorist groups, whereas Washington believes they are its best ally against terrorism and to keep the current borders secure and free. This circular logic is not incidental, as it is all part of a larger plan traced by the United States. One the one hand, it wants to see how far along Turkey can go in invading Syria, and when/if it hits a wall (be it with the Syrian Arab Army and/or the Kurds), it could then reverse its support for Ankara (ergo the semi-critical talk about a "proportionate response" in attacking the PKK). And, at the same time, to a certain extent it tries to turn all the Kurdish groups against it in order to begin the formal dismemberment of the Middle East and give birth to the 'geopolitical Israel' of Kurdistan²⁰. Nonetheless, the United States has sought Turkey's help in the fight against Daesh since last year and sought to change Turkey's initial reluctance to contribute to the international coalition and fight against Daesh seriously. Turkey is considered by US officials to be critical to weakening Daesh in Syria.

Finally, by the end of August Turkey agreed with the United States taking part in the coalition against Daesh. Trade-off? Ankara gave the green light on the condition of creating a Daesh-free and Kurdish-free zone in Syria on the Turkish border. In return, the United States

²⁰ KORYBKO, 'op.cit.'

would be allowed to launch military operations against the jihadists from the Incirlik Air Base and other bases in Turkey *within a certain framework*, according to Erdogan. Moreover, US officials have been careful not to offend Turkey and have publicly supported its campaign against the PKK. But the Ankara–Washington deal is far from being effective and it does not solve the Syrian problem: rather than attacking Daesh, Turkey is bombing the Kurds. And the deal might be an open door and the best excuse for Turkey to keep the Kurdish population and PKK under strict control.

In short, collaboration between Ankara and Washington has not been easy over the last decade, and under the present circumstances the pivotal issue, for the United States in particular, is whether or not they continue and expand their help to the Kurdish factions despite Turkey's possible future resistance.

Turkey and the European Union: grinding to a halt?

Geography, borders and location still matter in international politics, and they matter considerably. Turkey, as the country uniting Europe and Asia in the southeast, stands in a vital geopolitical enclave not for European security, but also for the world stability. Turkey is located in the intersection of three seas, it unites two continents, it occupies a very unique geopolitical space and it has a privileged geostrategic position. We could consider this is both a disadvantage and an asset for Turkey's external relations. And the European Union is fully aware of this.

Moreover, the EU accession process and its involvement in ESDP have left Turkey with the dilemma of how to reconcile its internal and external policy challenges²¹. In addition, how Turkey conducts and has conducted its regional raises several concerns about its readiness to join the Union, based, among others, on the principles of good neighbouring relations and peaceful settlement of disputes. Thus, relations between Ankara and Brussels walk through a different path: the accession process. And this brings to the table, immediately, the question of how Turkey adopts or at least modulates its foreign policy to align it along the lines of the European Union's foreign and security policy. In other words, are European and Turkish foreign policies compatible? Brussels has always acknowledged Turkey's valuable contribution to the European security and foreign policy caucus, but the key question in our field is how Brussels conceives Turkey's foreign policy in its neighbourhood.

Turkey's 'new European orientation' has apparently crystallised under the AKP Government since late 2002, whose paramount objective has been accession to the European Union. This determination has brought forth the worsening of the strategic alliance with the United States, and a new era in Washington – Ankara since 1 March 2003, when the Turkish Grand

²¹ AYBET Gülnuer, 'Turkey and the EU After the First year of Negotiations: Reconciling Internal and External Policy Challenges', in *Security Dialogue*, 2006, 37, p 529

National Assembly (TGNA) decided not to allow the stay, use of military bases and deployment of US troops on their way to the Iraq war²². This obliged the US to change its initial plans and led to the deterioration of the preferential Turkish-American partnership²³. Some scholars even assent that between November 2002 and March 2003 Turkey underwent an extraordinary reversal in its foreign relations and passed through the biggest shift in its foreign policy ever²⁴, as it re balanced its strategic relationships with the EU, with the US and, indirectly with NATO, given that it broke the traditional military alliance with the US, it allowed the use of NATO assets and capabilities by the EU to develop its incipient Security and Defence Policy, lifting its veto over the Berlin Plus arrangements and addressing the EU capitals the willingness and to take part in the whole ESDP concert (structures, decision-making, decision-shaping and missions on the ground).

It is too early to determine whether and under what conditions will Turkey *Europeanise* its foreign policy regarding Syria, Iraq and Daesh. And most particularly this holds true under the present circumstances and the second leg of the Presidential elections set for November 2015. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that the EU has made Turkey move towards a new role, based on a more proactive status concerning conflict-management, changing the 'threat discourse' about the external environment and forging the use of civilian and economic means in Turkey's foreign policy, apart from the military ones. Moreover, Arab states, especially those in the wider Mediterranean, have tremendously improved the image of Turkey. The traditional alliance with Israel and the US had historically provoked reticence and misunderstandings among the Arab nations, in particular Syria, Jordan, Iran and Iraq, but the rapprochement between Brussels and Ankara has changed this picture. This might be more a psychological effect, but foreign policy is based also on perceptions, and the Turkish image in the Arab world is nowadays significantly better due to the EU factor.

Iran

We should not underestimate Iran in this equation. This country can be expected to maintain positive relations with both Turkey and the Kurds, not wanting to incite either of them and advocating for a peaceful settlement (and perhaps even playing a mediation role) between the two²⁵. Despite years of tough sanctions and economic stagnation, Iran is a rising power in the Middle East. Its population is young, well-educated and large; second

²² On 1 March 2003 a resolution was brought to the Turkish Parliament by the ruling AKP government to allow the temporary deployment of 62,000 US troops on Turkish soil. The deployment and transit through Turkey would have allowed a second-front attack against Iraq. By a few votes, the motion failed to pass through parliament and the American troops were re-routed to Kuwait

²³ EMERSON Michael; TOCCI Nathalie, 'Turkey as a Bridgehead and Spearhead. Integrating EU and Turkey Foreign Policy', in *CEPS EU-Turkey Working Papers*, N° 1, August 2004, p 27

²⁴ ROBINS Philip, 'Confusion at home, confusion abroad: Turkey between Copenhagen and Iraq', in *International Affairs*, Volume 79, N° 3, 2002, p 565

²⁵ KORYBKO, 'op.cit.'

only to Egypt in the region. It has a strong sense of national identity and culture; huge hydrocarbon reserves, and a regional network of allies and militant groups, such as Hezbollah. Iran's influence in the region has only increased since the 2003 Iraq war; the nuclear deal will reinforce this trend²⁶.

A neglected but nonetheless important dimension of Turkish foreign policy is the cultural dimension. To a large extent over the last few years, and most particularly under the direction of Erdogan, Ankara seems to have re asserted the Islamic orientation or identity of Turkey's external relations, or at least strengthening the ties with the Islamic countries in Africa and the wider Middle East, stepping aside on some occasions from the country's traditional foreign policy. Some analysts even suggest that, while the goal is not the restoration of the Ottoman Empire, it is nonetheless the establishment of a new Turkish cultural and economic hegemony in the former territories of the caliphate. In so doing, Turkey would be willing to forego over eighty years of its modern history to rediscover its role as a Muslim power²⁷. This might be explained by the stagnation over the accession process and the possibly hidden Islamist agenda of the Justice and Development Party.

And this is precisely where the future ties with Iran could harden, as they many common interests culturally, ideologically, commercially and energy wise. Iran has become over the last years a top trading partner for Turkey, mostly as its main provider of gas. Turkey is losing momentum on its relations with some Arab states of the regions, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, and Turkey has realised the need or the convenience to balance this worsening off with stronger ties with Iran.

Worth mentioning is the recent nuclear deal with the Persian country, which Turkey widely acknowledged. A future pipeline connecting Iran's gas fields to Turkey's trans-Anatolian pipeline could not only help stabilise the region, but would also contribute to the EU's energy security. In the absence of blatant Iranian violations of the nuclear agreement, European governments might favour protecting their commercial and energy interests over a unified transatlantic response to any ambiguous violation of the deal. The West hopes that the nuclear deal will make Iran a constructive partner in the region. Iran could help fight Daesh in Iraq and get tough on its Syrian ally or withdraw support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen. And the European Union might benefit from the special relationship between Ankara and Teheran, absolutely keeping in mind that it is naïve to assume that Tehran will suddenly change its colours and stop pursuing its interests regionally²⁸.

²⁶ KORTEWEG Rem, 'Iran nuclear deal: After the nuclear deal, Iran is our "frenemy"', *The Centre for European Reform*, available at <http://www.cer.org.uk/in-the-press/iran-nuclear-deal-after-nuclear-deal-iran-our-frenemy>, 17 July 2015

²⁷ ALESSANDRI Emiliano, 'The New Turkish Foreign Policy and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, Documenti IAI 10 - 03, February 2010, p 3

²⁸ KORTEWEG, 'op.cit'.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Turkey feels strong in an extremely volatile, fragile and weak environment, and to a large extent has found its place yet in the current geopolitical scenario. Turkey's location places the country as a unique actor, since it combines three elements that make this country unique: its geographic situation, its politico-institutional links with the West and its character as one of the few Muslim democracies in the world. Moreover, the country is close to 21 of the 23 possible conflict areas and crisis regions identified by NATO. Thus, to a certain extent Turkey has a natural role in any foreign policy initiative concerning the wider Middle East enclave, and it would somehow provide regional leverage, geostrategic assets and credibility to the international community's actions. It will be interesting to continue scrutinising a fundamental tenet; what does this external reach of Turkey's location look like?

Common interests or problems do not by themselves lead to common solutions. Even if the EU, the US and broadly speaking the international community recognize the general need to articulate a more solid and coordinated policy on the fight against Daesh and regarding Syria and Iraq, this seems pretty difficult to achieve. We will hardly see Turkey acting in full consistency with the international allies, partly because its inclination for isolationist foreign policy, and partly because a single-side, Washington-driven or multilateral settlement for the current crisis is especially problematic in complex decision-making situations where multiple solutions are possible²⁹. Turkey has huge military capabilities and the support it sought from NATO and from the United States is primarily political and even symbolic, not military.

Hence, the interlinked episodes of Daesh, the Kurdish question, Syria and Iraq relate that the EU has not been able to change a traditional trend in Turkey's external relations, that of the preference of bilateral relations concerning high sensitive issues. And these four items are top-priority external issue for Ankara. Following on from the 2013 ceasefire, there was hope of a historic peace deal earlier this year, but such optimism evaporated recently as the PKK launched deadly attacks once again, bringing the swift and large-scale Turkish response. Many in Turkey, therefore, feel it is the PKK, rather than Daesh, that poses a more fundamental threat. The stronger support to this argument might be the number of attacks carried out since June inside Turkish territory. PKK has conducted dozens of operations across the south and most recently in the largest city, Istanbul. Daesh, in contrast, has carried out just three attacks. This is also an explaining variable of how Turkey conceives its involvement in the fight against Daesh.

It is time now to test the two initial hypotheses of the document. We can conclude that Turkey's recent intervention against Daesh started for purely national security reasons, as the battle in Syria and Iraq is not driven by strategic reasons. We should highlight two

²⁹ SMITH, Michael E., *Europe's Foreign and Security Policy. The Institutionalization of Cooperation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p 100

features herein. First, it seems that Turkey is more actively targeting Kurdish insurgents of the PKK in Syria than the fighters of Daesh. And the numbers speak out for themselves. Then, Ankara's strategy is politically motivated and its motivations are primarily inward oriented. In June, AKP and Erdogan party lost the parliamentary majority, partly because of the electoral success of a pro-Kurdish party. By bombing the PKK, Mr. Erdogan stands to win back votes of nationalists who oppose Kurdish autonomy, and Turkey does not want to see the Kurds being the most powerful or effective player against Daesh.

To wrap it up, the article concludes that there are many more unresolved questions than accurate explanations to the determining factors of Turkey's involvement in the fight against Daesh, its position on the Kurdish issue and its foreign policy to Iraq and Syria. While the international community has not been able to end the conflict, no actor has the recipe to build the prospects for the immediate future in Syria and in the region as a whole. We should not expect Turkey to have the final reply to the question of what further concrete solutions need to be implemented in the region. Equally, we have to think over what kind of support have the US, the EU and its members, and other international organisations provided to countries under extreme pressure over the last four years. Most certainly, there will be rivers of ink written about how the international community tackles the refugee crisis or the atrocities perpetrated by Daesh, but there will be very few literature on what kind of conflict-prevention initiatives have been developed over the last decade.

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*Miguel Ángel Medina Abellán**
Doctor en RRII-Universidad de Cambridge
Master Estudios Europeos-Colegio Europa Brujas
Político UAB

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