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**A Turkish Perspective on  
the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate**

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## **Introduction**

Much of the recent analysis focusing on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the so called Islamic Caliphate seeks to uncover the dynamics that have led to the surprising ascendance of this jihadist organisation. The role of external actors, including regional countries, is covered in detail in such journalistic and analytical reports. But most fail to underline the depth of the concern that the rise of Islamic extremism generates in neighbouring Turkey. The apparent reason for failing to capture this acute sense of alarm is the ambivalent public rhetoric of the Turkish authorities on ISIL.

It may be that Turkey turned a blind eye to ISIL linked militants in their effort to oust the Assad regime. It may also be true that Ankara has not discriminated enough among the different factions of the Syrian opposition in the past. But today the Turkish government's perspective on ISIL has changed radically. The attack on the Turkish consulate in Mosul three months ago that has led to the capture of 49 of Turkey's diplomatic staff by the ISIL militants was certainly a factor. But Ankara is equally concerned about the security and geopolitical implications of the potentially game changing nature of the Islamic Caliphate. The first section of this paper will provide the historical context of Turkey's approach to ISIL. The second section will analyse the challenges posed by ISIL to Turkey and Turkish interests. The final section elaborates on the possible policy responses to the ISIL threat.

## **A Hopeful Beginning**

After it failed to sway Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to cease violence against protesters and enact political reforms in 2011, Ankara became the staunchest supporter of the political and military opposition against Assad. Aside from humanitarian concerns, Ankara had political and economic stakes that compelled it to become invested so much on the Syrian civil war. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey' ruling party, saw the prospect of replacing the Assad regime with a democratically elected government, which could potentially share ideological links with the AKP due to the Sunni majority in Syria. By establishing a cordial relationship with rebel factions especially the Syrian National Council, Ankara wanted to have strong political influence over post-Assad Syria. Such a scenario would have also caused Tehran to lose its influence over Syria and its link to Lebanon, thus causing Turkey's historic rival to lose standing in the regional competition for power.

In order to hasten Assad's removal, Ankara severed economic ties with the Assad regime and lobbied its NATO allies and the international community to intervene militarily against Assad. Another important feature of Ankara's policy has been the decision to provide logistical support to the Syrian civilian armed opposition without discriminating among the various groups, in the belief that helping

these groups would accelerate the downfall of Assad. A number of radical Islamic groups linked to al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also stood to benefit from Ankara's largesse.

Logistical support was not the only aid that Ankara provided to the rebels. There is mounting evidence to suggest that Ankara at least acquiesced to weapons transfers through its territory. A U.N. Security Council Group of Experts report dated April 2013<sup>1</sup> notes that significant amount of Libyan fighters and military material reached Syria through Turkey and Lebanon. Additional news reports suggest that Turkey and Jordan provided land channels for military equipment funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar<sup>2</sup>. There were numerous reports in the Turkish media with numbers gathered from the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) trucks intercepted by the Turkish gendarmerie<sup>3</sup>, the Turkish Statistical Institute, and the United Nations that show evidence of Turkish arms and munitions exports to Syria<sup>4</sup>, all of which suggest that the Turkish government not only allowed its territory to be used for these transfers but also actively transferred small arms and munitions itself.

As a country that has suffered from domestic and international Islamist terrorism, Turkey did not directly support ISIL. It is more likely that in its quest to hasten Assad's fall from power, Ankara did not pay much attention to whom its aid flowed. In addition, Turkey turned a blind eye to border traffic and allowed all shades of militants to use Turkish territory as a logistical base. A recent *Washington Post* report quoted a senior commander of ISIL who argued that their fighters, some of which were leveling the upper ranks of the hierarchy, easily passed through Turkish borders and received treatment in Turkish hospitals. According to the same report most of the fighters, equipment, and supplies used in the beginning of the war came to ISIL via Turkey, with places like the southern<sup>5</sup> city of Gaziantep becoming a "shopping mall" for ISIL fighters.

### **A Rude Awakening ...**

Things have not turned out the way Ankara had expected. Turkey has had to bear the mounting spillovers from the Syrian Civil War. Furthermore, in March 2014, ISIL threatened to strike a Turkish

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council "Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya" S/2013/99

Accessible from: [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2013\\_99.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_99.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CBS/AP (2013, March 28) "AP: "Master plan" underway to help Syria rebels take Damascus with U.S.-approved airlifts of heavy weapons"

<sup>3</sup> Al-Jazeera Türk (2014, February 15) "MIT trucks were stopped like this" (Originally "MIT TIR'ları böyle durduruldu") Accessed on 13 August from: <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/mit-tirlari-boyle-durduruldu>

<sup>4</sup> Tanış, T. (2013, December 15) "The proof of weapons to Syria" (Originally: "Suriye'ye silahın belgesi") Accessed on 13 August 2014 from: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/25361801.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Washington Post (2014, August 12) "In Turkey, a late crackdown on Islamist fighters"

enclave near Aleppo, and later kidnapped over 90 Turkish citizens during its expansion towards Mosul. 49 of these hostages, including the Consul General, were diplomatic personnel working at the Turkish Consulate General in Mosul and have been held captive by ISIL since June 2014. ISIL's growing expansion has hurt Turkish economic interests by considerably hampering the country's land trade with Iraq. There is also clear concern about the risks posed by ISIL's expansion into Turkey. Over the past 3 years, having benefited from Turkey's lenience in dealing with the growing threat, ISIL militants have developed their own networks and cell structures within Turkey, preparing themselves to carry out terrorist activities on Turkish soil in the future. Moreover, as ISIL increased its profile and strength in Syria and Iraq, it drew significant numbers of Turkish nationals to its rank, whose number may range from hundreds<sup>6</sup> to thousands<sup>7</sup> according to some estimates. These Turkish jihadists may present serious security threats to Turkey upon their return home, or may reinvigorate currently dormant domestic Islamist terror organizations. ISIL sees Turkey as an apostate state and has threatened to strike Turkish targets<sup>8</sup>.

### **Leading to unwanted geo-political problems**

But beyond these dire security problems, the rise of ISIL also poses substantive geo-political challenges to Turkish policy makers. Of particular significance is the Kurdish issue. The role that the PKK – qualified as a terrorist organization both in Turkey but also in the EU and the US- in fighting ISIL and more recently preventing the massacre of the Yezidi community has transformed the public perception of the PKK. To the extent that the PKK is seen as a core organized military force in Iraq able to contain the ISIL advance, it stands to benefit from a more clement approach of the international community desperate to find ways to contain ISIL with a minimum degree of risk and exposure. It is thus not a surprise that there have already been calls for the US to delist the PKK from its list of terrorist organizations<sup>9</sup>. This would also enable the US but also a number of EU countries to start to provide weapons to the PKK. But the upgrading of PKK's image comes at an incongruous time for Turkey. The Turkish government is negotiating with the political leadership of the Kurdish BDP party but also with Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the PKK, an ambitious plan to finally settle Turkey's long standing problem with its Kurdish minority. The negotiations are a critical stage and their success is not at all pre-ordained. Under these conditions, the improvement in PKK's public

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<sup>6</sup> Zaman "The return of Salafists" (Originally: "Selefi Türklerin dönüşü!") (2014, July 10)

<sup>7</sup> Today's Zaman "Story of former militant reveals young Turks attracted by ISIL" (2014, July 6)

<sup>8</sup> Vice (2014, August) "The Islamic State: Part 2" Accessed on 13 August 2014 from:

<https://news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-part-2>

<sup>9</sup> See for instance a recent report by the Center for American Progress <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Kurds-report.pdf>

perception abroad, let alone its delisting as a terror organization, could lead it to be even more maximalist in terms of its demands from the Turkish government. Ankara also has to consider the scenario of a failure of the negotiations. It would then need to start a fight against a PKK that would have substantially more international backing. So ISIL's rise can be said to have weakened Ankara's position in the ongoing negotiations for the settlement of Turkey's Kurdish problem.

The second geo-political consequence of import for Ankara relates to the changing nature of Turkey's relationship with Iraqi Kurds. Perhaps the only unmitigated success of the more recent years of Turkish foreign policy has been the rapprochement with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Turkey overhauled its policy towards the Iraqi Kurds and instead of looking at the region from the prism of security risks, decided to engage the Kurdish leadership with a view to transform the region into Turkey's economic hinterland. This objective has been fulfilled. The signature last year of a set of ambitious energy deals between Ankara and the KRG was the crowning achievement of this opening. The geo-political ramifications of this rapprochement are substantial. Turkey today is perhaps the only regional player that would peacefully accept the prospect of a Kurdish independence, an outcome which seemed on the horizon until the emergence of ISIL. But the rise of ISIL has changed this regional calculus. Not only a Kurdish independence has become less feasible in the short term but the Kurdish leadership will need to devise a more long term security strategy to fend off what may become a permanent ISIL threat. So as the beneficiary of the KRG's economic stability and the future owner of significant energy resources in the Kurdish region, Turkey will inevitably be asked to contribute to KRG's ability to defend itself. This will require the security linkages between Turkey and the KRG to be made more public if deterrence is to be obtained. The question for the Turkish authorities will therefore be to fully delineate the conditions for Turkey's extended assurance to the KRG. A complicating factor is the inability to judge the effectiveness of any deterrence policy vis a vis ISIL. In other words, it is unclear whether ISIL can be deterred from attacking or from regularly seeking to attack the Kurdish region even with a more explicit security assurance by Turkey. A judgment on the rationality of the ISIL leadership would be needed for this purpose. But with the compatibility of jihadism and rationalism in serious doubt, Turkey's security commitment to the KRG may end up drawing Turkey into a regional quagmire.

Finally Turkey will need to decide the level of support it is willing to give to Washington in the struggle to contain ISIL. Turkey's public rhetoric is not a sound indication of Turkey's willingness to contribute to this objective. The statements coming out of Ankara are very much colored by the need

to safeguard the lives of the Turkish hostages held by ISIL. But Ankara's real position is certainly more hawkish than when former Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdogan states that Turkey is opposed to the US air strikes against ISIL. It can safely be speculated that Turkey hopes that the US becomes more involved in combating ISIL. Yet it is also the case that a more sustained air campaign against ISIL would risk endangering the lives of the Turkish hostages. Despite the media ban introduced to prevent the hostage situation from turning into a platform for government criticism, such a tragic outcome would have significant political costs for the AKP leadership. Turkey has therefore every incentive to seek a negotiated solution to its hostage crisis. It is unknown whether negotiations with ISIL are continuing for the release of the hostages but time is not on Ankara's side.

### **Turkey's Options**

Publicly, Turkish officials have tried to downplay the ISIL threat<sup>1011</sup>. Even though Turkey formally recognizes ISIL as a terrorist organization, Foreign Minister and the newly appointed Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, in his remarks at the beginning of August, refrained from naming ISIL as such, arguing that "ISIL may be seen as a radical, terrorized structure" and that it was founded as a reaction to the disenfranchisement of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria. Ankara's primary concern at this time appears to be the 49 hostages in the hands of ISIL. Yet as underlined in this analysis, the policy reaction to the ISIL threat has been much more substantial.

Turkey has begun to take measures against the movement of foreign fighters, weapons, and supplies through its borders into Syria and Iraq. In terms of the movement of suspected jihadists, Turkey has expanded the number of names on its no-entry list from around one thousand at the beginning of this year to 5300 by June. Halfway through 2014, Turkish authorities had also deported 824 people suspected of engaging in jihadist activities. In parallel, the Turkish Interior Ministry launched an initiative in April of this year aiming to strengthen border security. The new set of measures includes the establishment of risk analysis units at airport border gates, the increase of controls and patrols in border cities and surrounding areas, the deployment of qualified personnel and additional equipment in the area adjacent to the Syrian border, the intensification intelligence activities and coordination in targeting terrorist groups and smugglers in Syria, the elaboration of additional

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<sup>10</sup> Today's Zaman (2014, June 20) "ISIL not targeting Turkey, says Arınc"

<sup>11</sup> Taraf (2014, August 8) "Davutoglu: ISIL may seem like a terrorized structure but..." (Originally: "Davutoğlu: IŞİD terörize gibi görünebilir ama...")

measures for the deportation of foreign fighters, and the enhancement of the physical security of Turkey's borders.

In order to further improve its ability to control the flow of foreign fighters, Ankara can also increase the level of its intelligence cooperation with its NATO allies and foreign partners in mapping known jihadists and affiliates in order to ensure that they are not allowed transit into and through Turkish borders. Turkish authorities often refer to the more superficial assistance provided by the intelligence services of Turkey's partners. In particular, the following areas are outlined as critical measures to ensure an improved environment for stemming the flow of foreigners traveling to Syria in order to join radical terrorist groups:

- Prevention of the suspected persons from leaving their home countries,
- Timely sharing of the information of highly suspected persons so that they can be included in the no-entry list,
- The sharing names and other necessary information of the persons who have been known to travel to Syria,
- More timely response to Turkey's requests regarding the citizenship of persons who are being arrested while trying to pass the border without any identification documents,
- The sharing of intelligence obtained from persons who returned to their home countries.

Yet it is clear that the most effective panacea against ISIL's extremism would be a coordinated response from the state of Iraq. This requires a political process that would culminate in a new and more inclusive government in Baghdad that could then diffuse Sunni reactionism. Ankara has championed and supported the transition in Baghdad, pushing for the replacement of Maliki, who is seen to be the main culprit in the worsening sectarian divisions in Iraq. Now is the time for Ankara to play a constructive role by using its influence over parts of the Sunni establishment<sup>12</sup> in Iraq for them to join and to work with the new government.

Finally Turkey should adopt a zero tolerance policy towards ISIL and its ilk. Ankara should target the financing and recruitment operations that jihadists are conducting in Turkey. ISIL has allegedly been conducting fundraising activities in Turkey through religious centers, charitable organizations, and associations<sup>13</sup>. Some of these activities were even conducted in major centers in Istanbul in broad

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<sup>12</sup> It should be recalled that the Sunni leader Hashimi, sentenced to death by the Maliki regime, is being hosted in Turkey.

<sup>13</sup> Radikal (2014, June 17) "A charitable organization with the ISIL amblem in the middle of Istanbul" (Originally: "İstanbul'un ortasında 'İŞİD amblemli' yardım derneği")

daylight. It is also reported that the organization sells \$800 million worth of oil from wells in Syria and Iraq to Turkey<sup>14</sup>. Because ISIL relies on Turkey as a recruitment base and especially preys on conservative youth in Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities mostly in central and southeastern Turkey,<sup>1516</sup> Turkish National Police and security forces should be utilized to crack down on the fundraising and recruitment activities. Furthermore, government agencies like the Presidency of Religious Affairs should enact policies to raise awareness amongst conservative youth to prevent them from giving into jihadist ideologies and ensure that radical ideologies do not spread to other religious orders and sects in Turkey. The country's budding cyber security capabilities should also be employed in targeting online jihadist chatter and propaganda.

No other NATO country is exposed to the threat of ISIL jihadism as Turkey is. So while Ankara may choose to downplay the issue to avoid endangering the lives of Turkish hostages in ISIL' hands, Turkey's activism will remain an indispensable element in any future strategy to contain and eradicate the threat of the anachronism that insists on calling itself the Islamic Caliphate.

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<sup>14</sup> Bugün (2014, June 13) "ISIL is making millions in Turkey" (Originally: "İŞİD, Türkiye'den milyonlar kazanıyor")

<sup>15</sup> Mynet (2014, June 18) "ISIL is recruiting in Turkey with leaflets" (Originally: "İŞİD, broşürle Türkiye'den eleman topluyor")

<sup>16</sup> Feldman, E. (2014, August 11) "How the Islamic State Lures Child Recruits to Fight in Syria and Iraq" Mashable.com