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**Turkey Joins the Anti-ISIS Coalition:  
Safe-Zone Plan Revisited**

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## Executive Summary

- ✓ Although they have agreed to work together, Ankara and Washington continue to have different political-military stances regarding the PYD, other rebel organizations and the Assad regime, and on the necessity of establishing safe-zones in Syria. These differences may hamper the effectiveness of the coalition effort against ISIS.
- ✓ ISIS is unlikely to retreat without a fight as the area has significant geostrategic value for the organization with regards to line of communications and critical resources. Even if it is forced to retreat, ISIS may leave the area practically uninhabitable or may seek to retaliate and humiliate the coalition at a later time.
- ✓ This necessitates the coalition airstrikes to be paired with effective ground operations. As the sides are unwilling to conduct ground incursion on their own, they will need to find reliable partners on the ground to do the job. As Ankara and Washington have different priorities, it is hard for the sides to find and agree upon partners that would be willing to operate in conjuncture their mutual objectives. Even if such groups are found or established, it remains to be seen how they will interact with other rebel groups fighting in the area of operations and area of interest, and how effective they will be in their fight against ISIS.
- ✓ By announcing their operations in advance, the US and Turkey have abandoned the element of surprise and have given ISIS time to prepare for the coalition operation.
- ✓ Ankara's goal of creating safe zones and hosting Syrian refugees there may be considerably challenging. Potential problems include but are not limited to; ensuring the safety of the zones and defending them against potential attacks by the regime, ISIS and other armed groups in the battleground, administering the zones, reconstruction efforts, convincing the refugees to move into these zones instead of crossing the Turkish border, much less the ones that are already residing in Turkey.
- ✓ Both the Assad regime and ISIS may try to capitalize on the political differences of Ankara and Washington to test their solidarity and disrupt the effectiveness of

coalition operations. These may act as quicksand and compel the allies to engage further in the Syrian civil war.

- ✓ The operations may be further complicated by domestic political developments on both sides, including uncertainties regarding the next Turkish government and the nearing elections in the United States.
- ✓ Due to the complexities of the Syrian civil war, Ankara and Washington's involvement may have unforeseen consequences which could act contrary to their interests or significantly increase the costs of achieving them.
- ✓ Maintaining an "ISIS-free zone" in a civil war-torn country through an air campaign is not an easy task. It would depend on a set of complex variables with many potential unforeseen parameters. A key military requirement would be maintaining air superiority over the area of operations, and even over area of interests as a second ring surrounding an "ISIS-free zone". Such a task would be tantamount to implementing a partial no-fly zone (despite many refrains from voicing the very need), no-drive zone, and no-kill zones in the critical border areas between Turkey and Syria.
- ✓ It is seen that the Turkish rules of engagement towards Syria was set to determinedly counter any Syrian Arab Air Force's elements violating or threatening to violate the Turkish airspace, but do not cover Syrian Air Defense Force's violations and provocations as strictly as it has been against fixed and rotary wing threats. This gap could be a problematic issue if Turkey opts for operating over Syrian hostile airspace.
- ✓ Using airpower as a distinct maneuver element against adversary is a complex task. Moreover as air operations rely on technology-driven platforms and munitions, they are extremely costly in long periods of time.
- ✓ Against fluid, highly mobile targets like ISIS, there will always be a huge gap between sorties and strikes.

- ✓ Recent Turkish air-ground intervention proved a promisingly high initial operational tempo. Yet, it would not be about if Turkey could reach such an operational peak-level tempo, but whether Ankara could sustain it or not due to operational costs and IPB hardships.
  
- ✓ Turkey and a possible coalition for maintaining an ISIS-free zone would have some key advantages as well. The first and foremost advantage is the proximity of Turkish airbases, which are now opened to the use of U.S. airpower, to the possible zone of operations. Forward (or close) basing would enable shorter range tactical aviation, namely aircrafts with lower combat radius (in the Turkish case, F-16 variants and F4 2020s), to operate with higher sortie rates without air-refueling that would foster their destructiveness, and keep higher loitering and on-station times that would be especially effective against mobile and fluid targets like ISIS.
  
- ✓ Apart from the challenge of engaging the Syrian air defenses, the regime's barrel bomb delivery missions via helicopters even over adjacent areas, which have been a serious threat to the local population, would be another tactical concern that could cause problems for a possible Turkish air campaign.

## Introduction

Following the deadly terror attack in Suruç, Turkey on June 20th which claimed the lives of 31 people, Ankara stepped up its internal and external anti-terror operations. While the brunt of Ankara's operations so far have focused on the PKK and radical left-wing terror organizations, it was the first time that Turkey used airstrikes against ISIS positions near the Turkey-Syria border. Ankara's policing operations against ISIS had already been underway, but the Suruç attack, allegedly conducted by ISIS, has also caused Ankara to step up its domestic policing operations against ISIS recruitment networks and militants.

These events also ushered Turkey's deepened participation in the anti-ISIS coalition led by the United States. Negotiations between Ankara and Washington over increased Turkish participation to the coalition had been underway for several months. Now, Ankara has agreed to allow the coalition aircraft to use the Incirlik airbase, which lies only 110 km from the Syrian border, and other airbases in the region depending on demand.

In return, it appears that Ankara has sought Washington's assistance for purging ISIS in areas near the Turkish border and asked for guarantees that these areas would not be occupied by the Syrian Kurdish PYD. Furthermore, the debates on establishing a safe-zone within Syrian territory have resurfaced, albeit with much dispute as to what the characteristics of such a zone would be. In light of previous EDAM discussion papers on the Syrian Civil War, this paper aims to discuss the political, technical, and military aspects of the establishment of a safe-zone near Turkish borders, in the 90 km. long and 30 km. deep strip of land stretching from Jarabulus in the East to Mare in the West.

## Understanding Ankara's Motives

Forming a safe zone near Turkish borders, as discussed in depth in the previous EDAM discussion paper<sup>1</sup>, may be beneficial for Ankara's interest in four main ways:

- Removing ISIS threat near Turkish borders: This would decrease the risk of ISIS attacks or ISIS related spillovers to Turkish soil. Furthermore if ISIS loses control of its last border area with Turkey, this would deal a logistical blow to the organization and hamper its use of the Turkish border as a crossroads for militants, materiel, and

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<sup>1</sup> Please see, Kasapoglu, C.; Ergun, D.; Ulgen, S. (2015, July 3) "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check" accessible on: <http://edam.org.tr/en/IcerikFiles?id=1037>

supplies – thus decreasing the amount of foreign fighters using Turkish soil to join ISIS.

- Preventing PYD statehood: Ankara does not want the PYD to bridge all three of its self-declared autonomous zones, which would strengthen its bid for statehood contrary to traditional Turkish security interests which are against the emergence of a Kurdish state as it is perceived that this would incite Turkey's domestic Kurdish nationalism issue. This traditional perception is exacerbated by PYD's ideological ties to PKK.
- Increasing Ankara's footprint in the area: Ankara may hope to establish the zone as a logistical base for moderate rebel organizations aiming to depose of the Assad regime as well as fight against ISIS. The area in question is proximate to Aleppo at which regime forces are contesting with the Syrian opposition for dominance, and such a logistical base may help the rebel forces tip the balance in their favor. Furthermore, the area can be used for the joint train and equip (T&E) program led along with the U.S., and help Ankara transfer arms and rebels into the Syrian battleground more effectively.
- Buffering spillovers: If secured, policymakers in Ankara argue that the region may help absorb influxes of Syrian refugees and rather than adding to the pressure that the country is facing by hosting close to 2 million refugees.

### **Allies at Odds: The Divergences between Ankara and Washington**

Ankara's plans for establishing a safe zone within Syrian territory are not new. The plan has been voiced numerous times by Turkish policymakers in the past, but Ankara has refrained from acting unilaterally<sup>2</sup> and was not able to convince Washington to assist in the imposition of such a zone. Although the U.S. has given more credence to Ankara's proposal in the latest deal between the two capitals regarding Turkey's deepened participation to the anti-ISIS coalition, it appears that the rift between the political stances of the two sides and their respective priorities has not been bridged.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis on the legality of the imposition of such a zone, please see Kasapoglu, C.; Ergun, D.; Ulgen, S. (2015, July 3) "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check" accessible on: <http://edam.org.tr/en/IcerikFiles?id=1037>

## Characteristics of the Zone in Question

Against initial declarations on the contrary, the U.S. and Turkey have had a different understanding of what could become of the “zone” in question. While the Turkish leadership is intent on convincing Washington to create a no-fly zone and a safe-zone in the area in question, it appears that Washington has not revised its policy of trying to keep a limited-profile in the Syrian civil war and refraining from targeting regime forces. Meanwhile, Ankara does not want to act unilaterally in either imposing a no-fly zone or involving the participation of its ground forces to the anti-ISIS operation at this point. Numerous titles for the proposed “zone” have been floated around in the Turkish and international media, including, buffer-zone, safe-zone, secure-zone, no-fly zone, and lastly, ISIS-free zone. Following contradictory statements by the sides<sup>3</sup>, Washington has rejected the claims that a no-fly zone will be imposed in parts of Syrian air space<sup>4</sup> but U.S. officials have been quoted in suggesting that the area would become a zone free of ISIS instead, and that safe zones may be formed as a byproduct of the operations<sup>5</sup>. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has argued that while Turkey has “always defended the establishment of safe zones and no-fly zones in Syria”<sup>6</sup>, with regards to the negotiated operations he claimed that “the safe zones will be formed naturally” “when areas in northern Syria are cleared of the (ISIS) threat”<sup>7</sup>.

According to Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, in addition to the allowing the use of Incirlik air base for coalition airstrikes, the current operations will utilize the fighters that underwent the T&E program and moderate rebel forces to take control of the areas currently under ISIS control by providing them air cover<sup>8</sup>. At this point, Turkey does not plan to deploy its ground forces in Syrian territory, but will assist the operations in Syria through its artillery and armored assets stationed within Turkish soil<sup>9</sup>.

Still, whether the sides decide to create an “ISIS free-zone” and/or a *de-facto* “safe-zone” at this point in time or pursue a buffer-zone or safe-zone in the future, they will have to overcome major political differences and operational challenges.

<sup>3</sup> Rogin, J. (2015, July 28) “U.S. Shoots Down the Idea of Syria Safe Zone” Bloombergview

<sup>4</sup> Huffington Post (2015, July 27) “U.S., Turkey Plan ‘ISIS-Free Zone’ In Northern Syria”

<sup>5</sup> New York Times (2015, July 27) “Turkey and U.S. Plan to Create Syria ‘Safe Zone’ Free of ISIS”

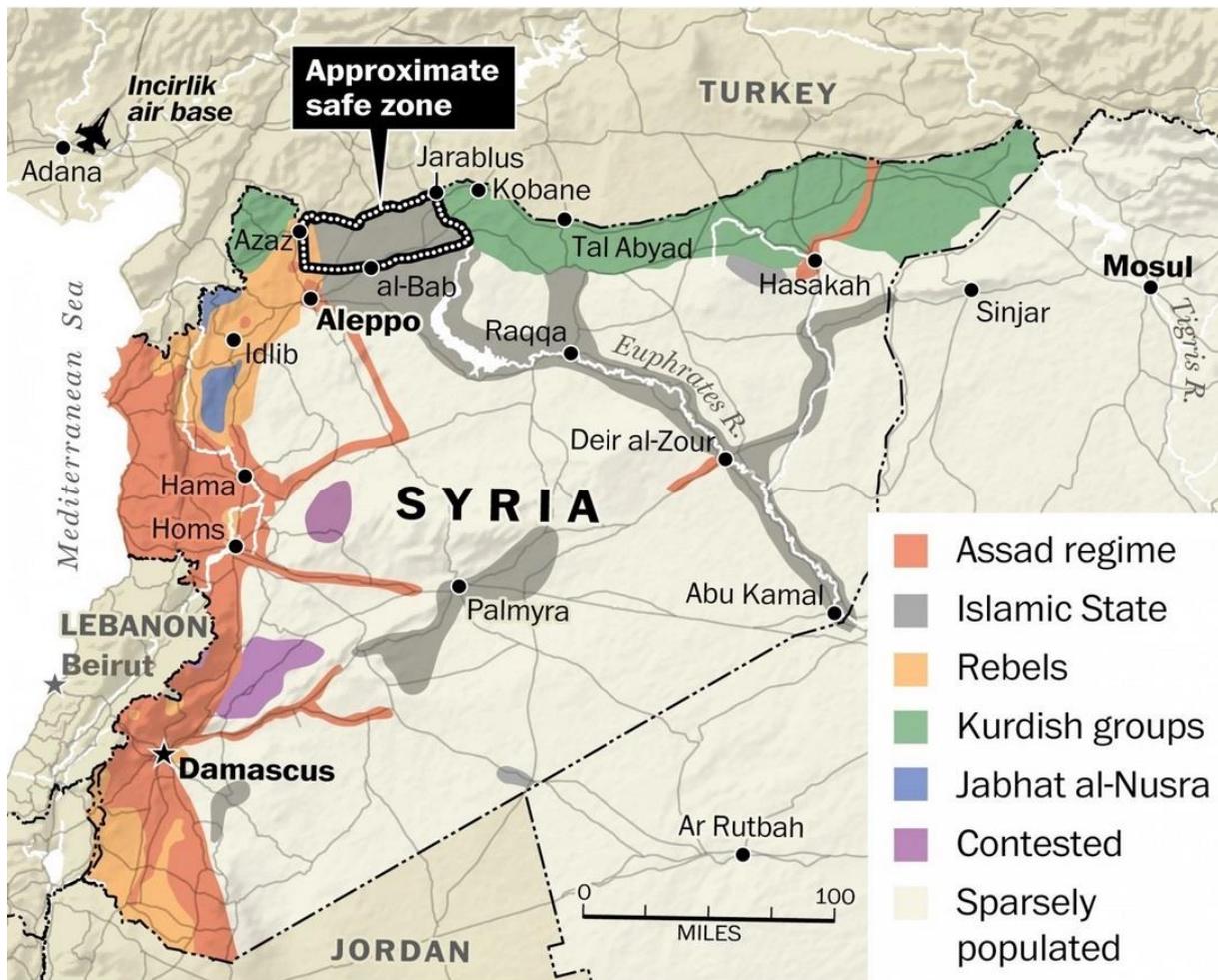
<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera (2015, July 25) “Turkey says parts of Syria to become ‘safe zones’”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Basın İlan Kurumu (2015, July 28) “Herkes ayağını denk almalı” Accessed on 3 August 2015 at:

<http://basinilankurumu.gov.tr/-herkes-ayagini-denk-almali-haberi-93129/>

<sup>9</sup> Kohen, S. (2015, July 28) “İŞİD’e karşı savaşın sınırı” Milliyet



Source: The Washington Post

### The Assad Regime

For one, Washington does not see the continued presence of the Assad regime in the same light as Ankara. While the U.S. has time and again argued that President Bashar al-Assad must step down in order to resolve the ongoing calamity in Syria, for Washington, the top existential priority continues to be the presence of jihadist organizations, most notably that of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, for Ankara, the presence of such organizations in the Syrian battleground is a symptom of the Assad regime and his deposition must be the top priority. This has been the position of the Turkish government since it decided to take a strong anti-Assad stance in late-2011, and has grounds in wider political, economic and strategic interests of Ankara.

This divergence of opinion regarding the status of the Assad regime has manifested itself in more practical means, such as the T&E program led by the U.S. and Turkey. Ankara hoped to

ensure that the trained forces would also fight against the regime, against Washington's position that the forces would only be tasked with fighting against ISIS. In fact, it has been reported that Washington's insistence has limited the number of rebels willing to join the T&E program, as deposing of Bashar al-Assad remains a priority for the bulk of the Syrian opposition<sup>10</sup>. In fact, both due to the lack of opposition groups willing to join the T&E program, and due to stringent vetting procedures, the number of trained forces so far has been around 60<sup>11</sup>, much lower than the initial plans of training over 5000 rebels a year.

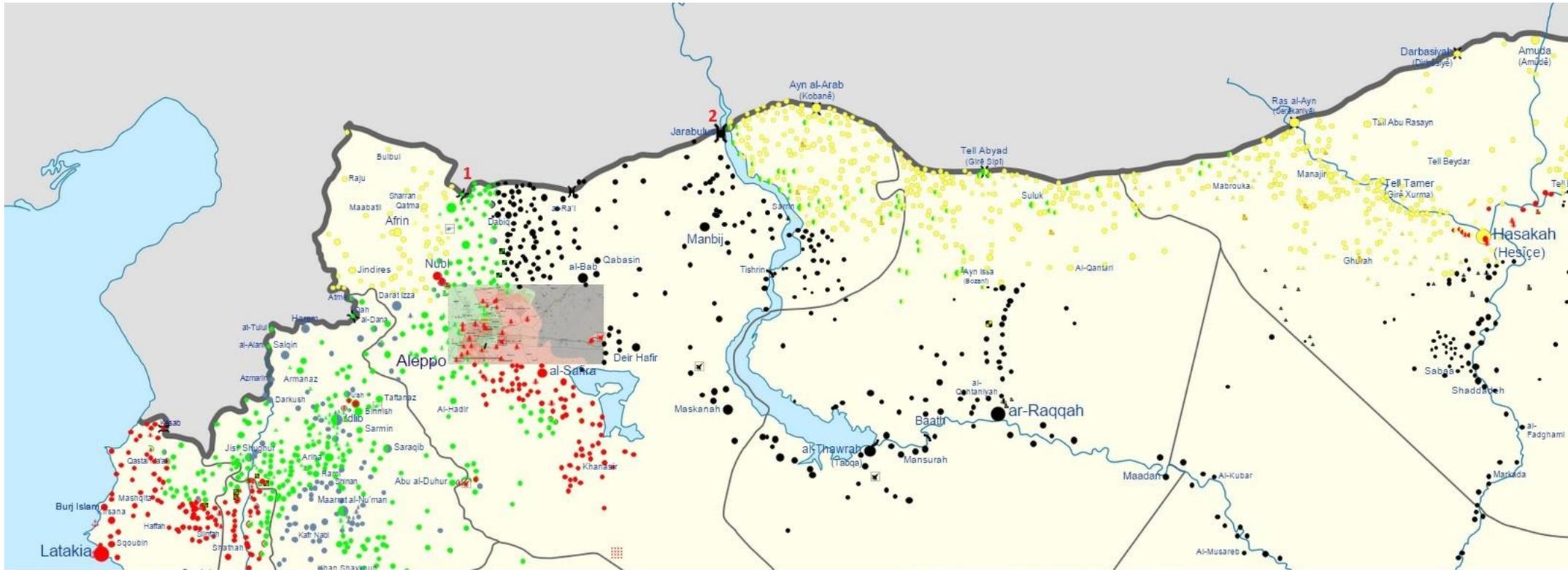
It appears that by increasing its cooperation with the anti-ISIS coalition, Ankara has moved combating ISIS higher on the ladder of its priorities. Still, this divergence in priorities are likely to arise if Ankara indeed establishes a safe-zone within Syrian territory and uses it as a logistical base for rebel forces to target regime positions in nearby areas, including Aleppo. Such a move may not complement Washington's goal of debilitating ISIS; on the contrary, it may limit the availability of rebel organizations willing to push further towards ISIS positions in Central and Eastern Syria by diverting them towards regime positions in the West and South instead.

In fact, the Assad regime may attempt to capitalize on this difference of stances between the two allies. The Obama administration has been keen on playing a limited profile and not involving ground components in its operations in Syria and Iraq. There are various hypothetical scenarios in which the regime may test the U.S.' reluctance to intervene and Turkey's desire to do so, such as potential confrontations between the Syrian and Turkish air forces in Syrian skies, the engagement of Syrian air defenses against Turkish air assets, or even the unlikely scenario in which regime forces may fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of ISIS forces due to coalition operations within the proposed safe zone and its close proximity.

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<sup>10</sup> International Business Times (2015, May 13) "Syrian Rebels Say US Train and Equip Program Delayed, At Risk of Failing"

<sup>11</sup> Al Jazeera (2015, July 8) "US admits it has only trained 60 Syrians to fight ISIL"



● Government ; ● Rebels ; ● Kurds ; ● Al-Nusra (JaN) ; ● Islamic State (IS)  
 ● Contested ; ● Stable mixed control ; ● Truce (Government & Rebels)  
 ○ Inner controls, outer sieges (or strong enemy pressure) ; ↻ Enemy pressure from one side; Small icon within a larger icon: The situation in individual neighbourhood/district  
 ✈ Airport/Air base (plane) ; 🚁 Helipoint/Helicopter base ; 🏰 Military base ; ⚡ Strategic hill ; 🏭 Industrial complex ; 🚧 Border Post ; ⚓ Major port or naval base ; 🏰 Dam ; 🏘 Rural presence

1. Öncüpınar - Bab al-Salam border crossing
2. Karkamış - Jarabulus border crossing

Source: Screenshot from Wikipedia on 6 August 2015 at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Syrian\\_Civil\\_War\\_detailed\\_map](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Syrian_Civil_War_detailed_map)

## The Kurds

Traditionally the Turkish government has been wary of the formation of any sovereign Kurdish entity outside its borders due to its domestic Kurdish nationalism issue, as it was perceived that such an event would heighten the Kurdish separatist sentiments of the PKK and the Kurdish minority in general. Although Ankara was strictly against the formation of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq initially, it gradually revised its position due to economic and political interests. Though it was a hard pill to swallow initially, the KRG led by President Masaoud Barzani has been an ideological rival of the PKK and has become a political ally of the Turkish government. The Syrian case presents a more challenging conundrum for Ankara due to the PYD's strong ideological ties with the PKK. For example, at the outset of Washington's decision to cooperate with the PYD, Ankara strongly opposed direct arms transfers as it was perceived that these weapons would eventually be used against Turkish security forces by the PKK after the civil war ends. Although Prime Minister Davutoglu has noted that PYD may have a place in the post-Assad Syria unless it supports terrorism or works together with the Assad regime against Turkish interests<sup>12</sup>, he also argued that Turkey would not allow the PYD to move further towards the West of the Euphrates River<sup>13</sup>, beyond Kobane<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, citing several terror attacks linked to the PKK over the last weeks, Ankara has decided to conduct major military and police operations against members of the PKK, detaining hundreds for their alleged ties to the organization and conducting airstrikes against PKK camps in Northern Iraq. The PKK has retaliated by targeting Turkish security forces, and news of multiple casualties of Turkish security forces surface in the Turkish media every day since Turkey's initial operations<sup>15</sup>. The recent escalation paints a bleak picture with regards to the Kurdish peace process in Turkey, and has the risk of spiraling out of control.

On the other hand, the PYD has been the most reliable partner of the U.S. on the ground in its operations against ISIS. While Washington has expressed its support for Turkey's right to defend itself against the PKK<sup>16</sup>, it has also called for de-escalation and a return to the peace

<sup>12</sup> Yetkin, M. (2015, July 27) "Davutoglu: Gücümüzü gösterdik bölge denklemini değiştirdi" Radikal

<sup>13</sup> Hürriyet (2015, July 31) "Güvenli bölgeye geri dönüş planı"

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis of Turkey's stance regarding the PYD please see Kasapoglu, C.; Ergun, D.; Ulgen, S. (2015, July 3) "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check" accessible on: <http://edam.org.tr/en/IcerikFiles?id=1037>

<sup>15</sup> Zaman (2015, August 2) "PKK, 2 ton bomba ile karakola saldırdı: 2 şehit 31 yaralı"

<sup>16</sup> Reuters (2015, July 27) "Turkey, U.S. aim for a zone cleared of Islamic State in northern Syria"

process<sup>17</sup>. Washington's top priority remains the war against ISIS, and it may see that if Ankara and the PKK go back to full-fledged confrontation, it would be detrimental to both of their capabilities and willingness to fight against ISIS. Furthermore, the situation may quickly escalate to a very undesirable scenario for Washington, for example if the PKK uses PYD territory to launch operations against Turkey, and Turkey decides to take military action against PYD positions in Syria.

The divergence between the positions of Ankara and Washington on the issue was apparent in the discussions regarding the use of Turkish air bases in coalition efforts. On July 27<sup>th</sup>, U.S. State Department Spokesperson John Kirby announced that the Incirlik air base may be used by coalition airplanes to assist YPG – the military wing of PYD – which was later denied by his Turkish counterpart Tanju Bilgic, who argued that assistance to YPG was not a part of the agreement reached by with the U.S., which was in turn denied by Deputy Spokesperson Mark Toner who stated that the U.S. will support anti-ISIS forces, including the YPG<sup>18</sup>.

Turkey has made its opposition to PYD's potential further advances towards Afrin and linking all its three autonomous zones amply clear, apparently both through its discussions with Washington and its military mobilization earlier in July as discussed in EDAM's previous discussion paper on the issue<sup>19</sup>. Still, the realities of the Syrian battleground may present multiple challenges to Ankara's position. For one, it is unclear whether Ankara would engage YPG forces if the PYD decides to advance further towards West. Moreover, if Ankara is not able to find reliable and/or effective partners in the region to advance against ISIS positions on the ground or administer its proposed safe zone, it may quickly fall at odds with Washington over the PYD's role. It is also important to note that the PYD and elements of moderate Syrian rebels have cooperated in parts of Syria against ISIS, including the latest offensive in Tel Abyad, and there are no guarantees that they would not choose to do so once again in the region that Ankara is concerned about. Conversely, if the PYD and other elements of the Syrian opposition backed by the coalition fight among themselves, Washington and Ankara may once again find each other at odds on who to support.

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<sup>17</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary "Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz, 7/29/2015" Accessed on 3 August 2015 at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/29/press-briefing-principal-deputy-press-secretary-eric-schultz-7292015>

<sup>18</sup> Bugün (2015, August 1) "ABD, İncirlik üzerinden YPG'ye yardım yapılacağını açıkladı"

<sup>19</sup> Kasapoglu, C.; Ergun, D.; Ulgen, S. (2015, July 3) "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check" accessible on: <http://edam.org.tr/en/IcerikFiles?id=1037>

## Domestic Political Issues

With the U.S. presidential elections due next year and in the midst of political uncertainties in Turkey, it is unclear how the sides will share the burdens as well as potential fallouts of the operation. The mandate of the current caretaker government in Ankara to take external military actions in Syria and Iraq are due to end in October 4<sup>th</sup>. Whether the current political uncertainty results in the formation of a coalition government, an AKP minority government, or re-elections, the caretaker Turkish government may soon find itself in a situation where it has limited freedom of movement regarding its Syria policy. Furthermore, any Turkish military operation, whether limited to airstrikes and artillery or the engagement of ground forces, may result in civilian casualties, which would be hard to defend for a conservative government of a country that has traditionally eschewed from being branded as responsible for the death of Muslims.

In light of the debates last month regarding a potential unilateral Turkish military action in Syria, the Turkish media reported on the hesitance of the Turkish Armed Forces to conduct extended military operations in Syria. It was reported that the military was wary due to high risks, including the possibility of engaging with regime forces and escalation, the possibility of suffering high casualties as a result of engaging ISIS forces, other jihadist organizations such as JN, and a potential confrontation with the PYD and PKK<sup>20</sup>. It has further suggested that while the military would obey orders if ordered to conduct military operations in Syrian territory, it does not want to face the political fallout from the risks of such an operation and maintains that the decision, as well as its potential consequences, should be the responsibility of the civilian government<sup>21</sup>.

With the ongoing domestic political turbulence and the decision to engage two asymmetric forces, ISIS and PKK at the same time, Ankara's priorities and its willingness to share the burdens of the coalition effort may be subject to change in the near future. Furthermore, as the U.S. presidential elections near, Ankara may find its transatlantic partner less and less lenient to be adventurous in its military engagement in Syria.

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<sup>20</sup> Yetkin, M. (2015, June 27) "Hükümet Suriye'ye müdahale istiyor, asker çekiniyor" Radikal

<sup>21</sup> Hürriyet (2015, June 27) "'Hızır ol' emri"

## Operational Challenges

### Ground Forces

At this point in time, neither Washington nor Ankara is intent on conducting ground operations within Syrian territory for political, military, economic and legal reasons<sup>22</sup>. Yet the area in question has significant strategic value for ISIS, as it utilizes these territories to exploit smuggling routes and trade through Turkey, develop supply lines to support its campaigns in adjacent areas, and to funnel militants, arms and supplies through the Turkish border. Therefore it is highly unlikely for the coalition to purge ISIS out of these territories solely through the use of airstrikes. Therefore, the sides have stated that they would outsource the ground operations to moderate elements of the Syrian opposition.<sup>23</sup>

Yet there are several major obstacles towards achieving this aim. For one, it is unclear at this moment which groups are referred to as moderate elements of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian battleground hosts as much as 1000 armed opposition groups<sup>24</sup>, a considerable amount of which are religious groups or are in close cooperation with such groups. In Aleppo, it has been reported that moderate/secular groups are in cooperation with the al-Nusra Front (JN) and that the influence they have inside the coalitions formed with hard-liner extremist groups is waning<sup>25</sup>. In some instances, the JN has crushed its moderate rebel rivals – one example was Harakat Hazm, which was backed by the U.S., where the surviving members of the organization joined Jabhat Shamiyah, a coalition that hosts both moderate and extremist rebels<sup>26</sup>. With regards to their respective combat strength and effectiveness, it is argued that Islamist groups, and especially JN, Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, have the upper hand compared to moderate rebels in the area<sup>27</sup>.

As evidenced by the limited number of militants admitted to the T&E program, the sides will likely have a hard time finding (and agreeing upon) reliable moderate partners in the region. While sources have suggested the probable use of Turkmen forces<sup>28</sup> to act as partners in the

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis on the legality of a ground operation in Syria, please see Kasapoglu, C.; Ergun, D.; Ulgen, S. (2015, July 3) "A Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check" accessible on: <http://edam.org.tr/en/icerikFiles?id=1037>

<sup>23</sup> New York Times (2015, July 27) "Turkey and U.S. Plan to Create Syria 'Safe Zone' Free of ISIS"

<sup>24</sup> BBC (2013, December 13) "Guide to the Syrian rebels"

<sup>25</sup> Masi, A. (2015, March 9) "Aleppo Battle: Al Qaeda's Jabhat Al-Nusra Is Friend To Syrian Rebel Groups" International Business Times

<sup>26</sup> The Washington Post (2015, March 1) "Syrian rebel group that got U.S. aid dissolves"

<sup>27</sup> Email correspondence with IHS Analyst Ege Seçkin on 31 July 2015

<sup>28</sup> BBC Türkçe (2015, July 28) "10 soruda Suriye sınırında 'güvenli bölge'"

region in addition to members of the Free Syrian Army, the relative strength of these organizations and their willingness to take part in coalition efforts are disputed<sup>29</sup>.

Furthermore, there are no guarantees that such organizations will not shift their allegiances depending on the changing tides of the war and cooperate with extremist organizations within and proximate to the zone in question. The opposite scenario is also true. The international community, including Washington, was taken by surprise when JN captured two leaders and six fighters of the 54 graduates of the U.S.-led T&A program after they crossed into Syrian territory from Turkey<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, they assaulted to the remainder of the group a day later in an “all-out assault”, in which “five fighters were killed ... 18 were wounded, and 20 were captured by the Nusra Front”<sup>31</sup>. Although the fighters reportedly fought effectively and coalition air forces provided air support quickly, most of the other rebel groups in the area did not come to the aid of the group.

Therefore the sides must be well aware of the complexity of the Syrian battleground and assume that not all of the rebel groups will embrace the presence of rebel groups backed by the U.S. and Turkey, even if they are tasked solely with fighting against their mutual enemy, ISIS.

Even assuming that the sides find relatively reliable partners in the region, providing close air support against ISIS targets would be an indispensable necessity for their advance against the jihadist organization. While the aforementioned graduates of the T&E program were able to call in close air support due to their training and the stringent vetting procedures applied by the U.S. before their admittance to the program, it is unlikely for local moderate partners to have such privileges at the outset of the intervention. For this very reason, it is probable that the U.S. and/or Turkey may have to deploy military advisors, spotters, special forces or intelligence personnel in the proposed zone to coordinate the airstrikes and ground operations. If that is the case, Ankara may run at the risk of facing casualties and being drawn further into the Syrian conflict due to the complexities of the battleground. In any case, the coalition and

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<sup>29</sup> Some sources have suggested that the united Turkmen force may amount to 5000 fighters, yet there is very limited open source information to back this claim and hence, the information remains unverified. Haberler.com (2015, July 28) “5 Bin Kişilik Türkmen Ordusu Sahaya İniyor” Accessed on 5 August 2015 at: <http://www.haberler.com/5-bin-kisilik-turkmen-ordusu-mit-onculugunde-7547224-haberi/> Email correspondence with IHS Analyst Ege Seçkin on 31 July 2015

<sup>30</sup> New York Times (2015, July 31) “Rivals of ISIS Attack U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebel Group”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the ground forces they support will have to maintain a sensitive balance with other forces in the region and mitigate risks accordingly.

### **Regime Forces**

Another critical obstacle will be conducting operations without stepping on Bashar al-Assad's toes. Although the presence of regime forces in the area is limited as they are engaged in fighting with rebel forces in Aleppo, the proposed zone would bring coalition airstrikes closer to Syrian air defenses, as will be discussed further in the subsequent military analysis. Regime forces have continued with their barrel bombing campaign and aerial attacks in areas that could fall under the proposed safe-zone, including the town of Al-Bab as recent as July 16<sup>th</sup><sup>32</sup>. If such a scenario is replicated if and once ISIS presence in the area is replaced with that of the Syrian rebels, Ankara and Washington could face an undesirable dilemma. Put simply:

“If Assad attacks rebels or civilians who are nominally under US and Turkish protection, Obama will be stuck between two awful choices. If he lets the regime kill people in territory patrolled by American and allied planes, it would humiliate the US and expose the safe zone as a lie. But if he fights back, he'd risk drawing the US into a full-blown war against Assad and the Iranian forces propping him up.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore it is also possible for regime forces and coalition backed rebel forces to face each other in the Syrian battleground. While this might be a desirable scenario for Ankara under right conditions, it would run contrary to current political interests and policies of Washington. This possibility would become a probability if Turkey promotes the use of such zones as logistical bases and staging areas for the rebel forces to mount offensives against regime positions in Aleppo.

The U.S. has recently announced its willingness to provide “defensive fire support” to coalition backed rebels if they come under fire from JN and the Assad regime<sup>34</sup>. Washington has expressed that the intention here was not “inviting confrontation with Assad in any way” but rather “an admonition, one that we [Washington] directed to the Assad regime at the very beginning of this effort last fall, where U.S. officials made clear to the Assad regime that they

<sup>32</sup> Middle East Eye (2015, July 17) “Syria barrel bombs kill 68 civilians in al-Bab town in one week” Accessed on 4 August 2105 at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-barrel-bombs-kill-68-civilians-al-bab-town-one-week-1249916981>

<sup>33</sup> Vox (2015, July 29) “The US plan for an ISIS-free zone in Syria, explained” Accessed on 4 August 2015 at <http://www.vox.com/2015/7/29/9066645/isis-free-zone>

<sup>34</sup> Defense News (2015, August 3) “U.S. expands potential targets in Syria”

should not interfere with our ongoing counter-ISIS efforts inside of Syria... That same admonition, that the Assad regime should not interfere in our counter-ISIS activities, also applies to the opposition fighters that we have trained and equipped to fight ISIS”<sup>35</sup>. The Wall Street Journal has reported that these new rules of engagement will only apply to forces that undergo the T&E program of Pentagon, and will not apply to the U.S.-backed forces fighting in southern Syria<sup>36</sup>.

Still, it is not hard to imagine escalatory scenarios in which Assad can seek to undermine the coalition between the U.S. and Turkey. Since the beginning of the civil war, the regime has gradually escalated its use of violence both to test the waters and build up the tolerance threshold of the international community for its sustained campaign of violence – crossing many red lines in the process and getting away with it. The same scenario may be true with regards to how Assad responds to the coalition backed ground forces and coalition air operations by betting on the reluctance of the U.S. to get involved in the civil war and Turkey’s reluctance to undertake unilateral military action. Furthermore, if coalition forces advance towards regime positions in Aleppo and elsewhere as Ankara wishes, Assad may gain legitimate grounds for targeting the coalition effort. If coupled with the establishment of safe-zones, especially if they are done through the involvement of Turkish ground forces and the imposition of a no-fly zone, the legality of the coalition effort would further come into question and the coalition would face strong opposition from Assad’s allies in Moscow and Tehran. Additionally, any decision to strike regime forces may have detrimental effects on the implicit understanding that the PYD and Assad have reached in parts of Syria, where the sides have refrained from targeting each other for the most part. In sum, any potential engagement against regime forces may quickly pull both Ankara and Washington deeper into the Syrian quagmire.

### **The Safety of the “Safe Zone”**

Whether formed “naturally” as a result of coalition airstrikes or through direct military action to impose them, maintaining the safety of suggested areas will not solely be a military challenge. For one, it is highly unlikely that ISIS will go down without a fight. Even if ISIS is overcome militarily, there are no guarantees that the organization will not strike back the safe

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> The Wall Street Journal (2015, August 2) “U.S. to Defend New Syria Force From Assad Regime”

zones at a later time to enact revenge, inflict terror among the populace, disrupt reconstruction efforts, demoralize coalition fighters, humiliate Turkey and the U.S. for their inability to protect the safe zones, and attempt to retake areas back into their control. This was displayed recently in Kobane, as ISIS infiltrated the city months after being forced to abandon the city and massacred over 140 civilians<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, as ISIS was abandoning the city in January, it ensured that most of the city was practically uninhabitable; “the retreating militants laid mines and booby traps wherever they could – going as far as to stuff explosives inside dead bodies. Up to 70 percent of the city is now uninhabitable”<sup>38</sup>. In order to ensure that the areas are actually safe, coalition forces as well as specialist NGOs may have to participate in demining operations that may take months<sup>39</sup>. By striking these regions again and again, ISIS may easily delay demining and reconstruction efforts.

Furthermore, such zones may be subjected to power struggles between different rebel organizations and may be the target of the Assad regime. The coalition or the local rebel organizations that are backed by the coalition will have to invest significant amount of effort and capital to police the area and maintain its security from external and internal threats. It is also unclear who would administer these zones if they are established – if this role falls upon the shoulders of Turkey or the U.S., that would be tantamount to invading Syrian territory and may cause legal and political headaches for both capitals.

Moreover, by announcing their intentions to establish the said zone, Washington and Ankara have mutually abandoned the element of surprise. Without having visible meaningful alternatives for ground operations, the coalition has given ISIS time to reinforce its defenses and prepare for the fight against ground forces. For example, in the days following Turkish air strikes against ISIS positions, the Turkish media reported that ISIS had begun digging trenches in Jarabulus near the Turkish border<sup>40</sup>. The area may soon emerge as a zone at which ISIS tests the effectiveness of the coalition and the credibility of its security commitment to the ground forces that it backs.

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<sup>37</sup> Al Jazeera (2015, June 27) “ISIL on 24-hour 'killing rampage' in Syria's Kobane”

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Refugee Agency web site: Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal (2015, July 29) “Syrian Arab Republic: Four reasons Syrian 'safe zone' unlikely to work” Accessed on 4 August 2015 at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/rssreader.php?FeedId=3>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Vatan (2015, July 29) “İŞİD sınırda hendek kazıyor”

As a result, it is highly problematic for the zone in question to emerge as a safe zone that would host Syrian refugees contrary to Ankara's statements in this regard. Unless such safe zones, whether they emerge naturally or are carved out, are proven to be "safe" it is unlikely for Syrian refugees to prefer settling in these zones rather than attempting to cross into Turkish territory. If Turkey decides to shut down its borders for Syrian refugees and establish camps in Syrian territory instead, it would have to take upon the responsibility of both administering and securing these camps, which may emerge as attractive targets for ISIS. Unless the area is established as a credible safe zone, it would be challenging, to say the least, to convince nearly 2 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey to resettle in the safe zone. Most of the refugees in Turkey are living outside refugee camps and many are unregistered, meaning that Ankara may have limited information as to their whereabouts, which makes it harder for Ankara to send back Syrian refugees even if safe zones are established. Last but not least, one of Ankara's rationales for calling for the establishment of safe-zones, preventing massive refugee influxes into Turkish territory, may not be possible. The timeline for a potential massive refugee influx and establishment of tangible safe zones may not necessarily coincide, and it has been argued that coalition operations may in turn create, albeit smaller, waves of refugees to try to cross into Turkey, especially if ISIS decides to fight back rather than retreat.

### **Conceptualizing the Operational Characteristics**

Maintaining an "ISIS-free zone" in a civil war-torn country through an air campaign is not an easy task. It would depend on a set of complex variables with many potential unforeseen parameters which could be formulated as "friction factor" in military theory.

Without a doubt, the first problem would be eliminating the adversary's combat capabilities in the area of operations, as the political-military end-state is defined as maintaining an area that would be free of ISIS activity and presence. The second military requirement would be maintaining air superiority over the area of operations, and even over area of interests as a second ring surrounding an "ISIS-free zone". Such a task would be tantamount to implementing a partial no-fly zone (despite many refrains from voicing the very need), no-drive zone, and no-kill zones in the critical border areas between Turkey and Syria.

The concept of operations depicted above would need some friendly elements on the ground, most probably supported by joint terminal attack controllers (JTAC) to orchestrate close air-support (CAS) missions and Special Operations Forces (SOF). This would mean “limited number of elite boots on the ground” which could make the situation even more sensitive. Still, if Turkey and its allies keep committing no boots on the ground, then it would mean that airpower would be used as the principle maneuver asset against ISIS.

Using airpower as a distinct maneuver element against adversary is a complex task, and in doctrine, it refers to the *Battlefield Air Operations*. As observed in the Operation Desert Storm, Operation Allied Force, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, this operational concept is complex and systematically incorporates close air support (CAS), air interdiction (AI) and strategic attack (SA) functions<sup>41</sup>. This would demand an advanced understanding on intelligence, information superiority, geographical factors, and possible enemy courses of action. Put simply, in CAS and AI missions, friendly forces’ relative positions to enemy is of critical importance as CAS is designed to support the friendly elements within the fire-support coordination line (FSCL) when engaging the enemy, while AI is conducted beyond the FSCL to target the enemy units before engaging the friendly elements on the ground. On the other hand, SA refers to striking enemy leadership, critical capabilities, C2, and critical infrastructure<sup>42</sup>.

Because air operations rely on technology-driven platforms and munitions, they are extremely costly and hard to sustain over long periods of time. In this regard, the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Martin Dempsey informed the Congress that creating a 24-hour no-fly zone over Syria could cost some 500 million USD<sup>43</sup>. Although an ISIS-free zone would be much different than an overall no-fly zone, still the costs of combat air patrols over the area of operations, area of interest and possibly adjacent envelopes would demand high flight hours & operational costs.

Notably, the initial periods of no-fly zone operations are the most expensive parts (due to heavy SEAD burdens, expensive long range land-attack cruise missiles, a long-list of target set, etc.), so that sustaining the current tactical-level anti-ISIS air strikes in Iraq and Syria

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<sup>41</sup> David, A. Deptula and Sigfred J. Dahl., “Transforming Joint Air-Ground Operations for 21st Century Battlespace”, *Field Artillery*, July-August 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony, Cordesman., *The Air War against the Islamic State: The Need for ‘Adequacy of Resources’*, CSIS, 2014, p.50.

could be even more costly. In this respect, Rear Admiral John Kirby put the average cost of anti-ISIS campaign some 7.6 USD a day in October 2014, which could cost more than 2.7 billion USD over a year<sup>44</sup>.

Furthermore, it should be underlined that against fluid, highly mobile targets like ISIS, there will always be a huge gap between sorties and strikes. In this regard, in October 2014, General Dempsey voiced a rough estimate that only about 10% of the flown sorties ended with “*launched munitions, in part because of the difficulty of distinguishing Islamic State forces from civilians and friendly force, the fact that Islamic State forces have improved their dispersal use of human shield, and limits in targeting capability*”<sup>45</sup>.

The aforementioned reasons make the concept of *intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB)* even more important in case of a Turkish – and / or coalition – air campaign over the Syrian skies. Doctrinally, IPB should incorporate a joint effort on intelligence assessments, estimates, and other intelligence products to analyze the physical domains, the information environment, political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure systems; and all other relevant aspects of the operational environment. Especially, in terms of *target development*, intelligence would be a key point to initiate the air tasking<sup>46</sup>.

Furthermore, because of the complex strategic environment depicted hitherto, joint air planning necessitates an advanced assessment process. Thereby the subject matters loom large in a complex fashion that includes various facts ranging from logistics, C2, political-military affairs, religious-cultural affairs, cyberspace and space operations, weapon system capabilities, electronic warfare, administrative support, and force protection<sup>47</sup>. Besides, determining the adversary’s and –if exist– friendly forces’ center of gravities would be vital.

So far, at peak level, Turkey dispatched some 75 aircraft in total (*approximately 50 F-16s and 25 F-4 E 2020s*) against PKK and ISIS targets to deliver some 300 smart and unguided munitions in three waves<sup>48</sup>. From a comparative assessment, during 2011 *Operation Harmattan* over Libya, Paris primarily employed approximately 20 combat aircraft (*Rafale and Mirage fighters*) along with some 16 naval aviation fighter jets operated from the aircraft

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.p.6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.51.

<sup>46</sup> For detailed operational planning and execution patterns, see: *Joint Publication 3-30: Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*, 10 February 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.III-4.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/pkk-ya-ikinci-isis-e-ucuncu-dalga-gundem-2092745/>, Accessed on: August 5, 2015.

carrier *Charles de Gaulle* conducting only some 55 sorties per day that rose to 150-200 sorties subsequently<sup>49</sup>. Thus, it would be fair to say that the Turkish air-ground intervention proved a high initial operational tempo. Yet, it would not be about if Turkey could reach such an operational peak-level tempo, but whether Ankara could sustain it or not due to operational costs and IPB hardships. Clearly, as the operations unfold keeping a pre-planned target set would get much harder due to the characteristics of the adversary, which would force the Turkish Air Force and the Army's fire-support units to deal with pop-up, fluid targets.

Despite the hardships, Turkey and a possible coalition for maintaining an ISIS-free zone would have some key advantages as well. The first and foremost advantage is the proximity of Turkish airbases, which are now opened to the use of U.S. airpower, to the possible zone of operations. Forward (or close) basing would enable shorter range tactical aviation, namely aircrafts with lower combat radius (in the Turkish case, F-16 variants and F4 2020s), to operate with higher sortie rates without air-refueling that would foster their destructiveness, and keep higher on-station and loitering times that would be especially effective against mobile and fluid targets like ISIS. The higher sortie rates through closer basing would enable more munitions to be delivered to targets in shorter time periods, which would make any air-ground mission more decisive in a given time. Although close basing would be more prone to retaliation<sup>50</sup>, its offensive advantages could be more relevant for an ISIS-free zone assuming that the Baathist forces would not use their strategic weapon systems against a US – Turkey coalition close-basing order of battle. In this regard, authorization of the Turkish bases to the U.S. Air Force use would also serve a burden sharing measure that would ease the operational costs and increase effectiveness for Washington. By having the advantage of Turkish bases, the U.S. could shift some of its drone and tactical aviation to Incirlik and other bases if necessary without the need for expensive refueling sorties, while using the bases in the GCC are (i.e. al Udaid) mainly for bomber missions, and also lower the burden on already costly naval aviation sorties flown from the deployed carrier strike group in the Middle East.

Secondly, Turkey's 161<sup>st</sup> and 181<sup>st</sup> squadrons are equipped with *Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN)* systems that make them suitable for 24-hours fly over the target area. This capability is matched by stand-off and guided air-ground munitions,

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<sup>49</sup> Jeremiah, Gertler. *Operation Odyssey Dawn (Libya): Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 2011, pp.17-18.

<sup>50</sup> For alternative strike systems and options in general see: Forest, E, Morgan. *Crisis Stability and Long Range Strike: A Comparative Analysis of Fighters, Bombers, and Missiles*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2013.

such as AGM-65<sup>51</sup>, to hit targets with pinpoint accuracy without risking aircrafts and pilots in deep hostile territory.

Thirdly, Turkey would enjoy army fire-support units deployed along the border area that can augment the Air Force's operations and support any friendly elements on the ground. As noted in [previous EDAM reports](#), the Firtina artillery is an advanced weapon system with 40km range depending on the munitions of choice, 6-7 rounds/min rate of fire along with 3 rounds/15sec. max rate. Due to its 65km speed, the artillery can effectively accomplish fire-and-displace tactics. Thanks to the Aselsan produced inertial navigation system, the self-propelled artillery can determine the coordinates of targets with 17.5m deviation, and can open fire in 30 seconds<sup>52</sup>. Apart from the 155mm class fire-support assets, it is reported that Ankara also deployed multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) in the border areas<sup>53</sup>.



*155mm Firtina self-propelled artillery*

Last but not least, Turkey also enjoys robust attack helicopter squadrons that could operate in the possible zone of action. Yet, due to the complex and menacing MANPADS landscape at low altitudes in the region, it could be risky to fly rotary-wing assets over the area of operations and area of interest.

<sup>51</sup> IHS Jane's World Air Forces: Turkey – Air Force, April 2015.

<sup>52</sup> For detailed technical assessment see: EDAM, *Turkish Intervention in Syria: A Reality Check*, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sinira-roket-ve-fuze-sevkiyati/siyaset/detay/2083659/default.htm>, Accessed on: August 6, 2015.

## Rules of Engagement and the Challenge of Syrian Air Defenses & Interceptor Fighters

Without a doubt, the scope of Turkey's involvement in Syria would strongly depend on the rules of engagement. At this point, we can start to assess critical parameters by underlining important variables and asking some key questions:

- ✓ **First of all, it is understood that the Turkish rules of engagement towards Syria was set to determinedly counter any Syrian Arab Air Force's elements violating or threatening to violate the Turkish airspace, but do not cover Syrian Air Defense violations and provocations as strictly as it has been against fixed and rotary wing threats. This gap could be a problematic issue if Turkey opts for operating over Syrian hostile airspace.**
- ✓ Turkey has drastically shifted its rules of engagement to confront the threats emanating from Syria that culminated by the downing of a Turkish F-4 Phantom by the Syrian air defenses in 2012. Since then, the Turkish Air Force has been strictly applying the new rules of engagement against the Syrian Arab Air Force by downing a Mi-17 military transport helicopter-gunship (2013)<sup>54</sup>, a Mig-23 fighter aircraft (2014)<sup>55</sup>, and recently, an unmanned aerial vehicle (2015)<sup>56</sup>.
- ✓ On the other hand, it was not an air-to-air threat that downed the Turkish F-4 and claimed the lives of two pilots in 2012, but the Syrian Air Defense Force's assets (probably a Pantsir-S1). Unlike the Turkish doctrinal order of battle, Assad's air defense forces are organized as a separate branch of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. Yet, although the Turkish General Staff reported several incidents of Syrian air defenses harassed (radar-lock) Turkish fighter jets during combat air patrol missions over the Turkish airspace along border areas, Ankara did not respond by eliminating the reported surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. In this regard, press sources notably detailed the exact Syrian systems that put the Turkish F-16s under radar lock as SA-2, SA-5, SA-11, and SA-17 referring to the Turkish General Staff<sup>57</sup>.
- ✓ Of the aforementioned systems, SA-5 Gammon (Soviet designation S-200) is a very long range (about 250km max) yet static system that was deployed in Homs and south

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/24723939.asp>, Accessed on: August 5, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sinirda-savas-ucagi-dustu/gundem/detay/1855930/default.htm>, Accessed on: August 5, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/iste-turkiye-nin-dusurdugu-hava-gundem-2060446/>, Accessed on: August 5, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/26137550.asp>, Accessed on: August 5, 2015.

of Dumayr Airfield before the civil war with early warning, height finder, acquisition, and tracking & guidance radars, Vozdukh-1M and Vector System C2 centers, along with shorter range SAM assets and AAA (anti-aircraft artillery) to protect the sites from very low altitude penetrating targets<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, SA-11 and SA-17 belong to the BUK missile family, and both are highly mobile, short range systems<sup>59</sup> that could pose unexpected threats under constant relocation operation concepts similar to the challenges posed by the Serbian air defenses in Kosovo 1999 against the NATO air campaign<sup>60</sup>. Thus, the obsolete and towed SA-2 system could have been a suitable target upon the noted radar-lock harassment incident, had Ankara opted for strict rules of engagement against the Syrian air defenses. Being suitable for such a notional scenario, the Turkish Air Force's 151<sup>st</sup> Squadron in Merzifon conducts the *Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD)* role and equipped with AGM-88 high speed anti-radiation missiles<sup>61</sup>.

- ✓ **Above all, as shown in the hypothetical maps presented by this paper, if the Turkish Air Force is to operate some 30 km deep over the Syrian hostile territory while the Baathist forces still keep some key SAM locations around Aleppo and Latakia, then Turkish CAP missions would have to operate under renewed rules of engagement to address the air defense challenge.**
- ✓ **Such rules of engagement could vary from neglecting out of range AAA fire and SAM sites that remain passive but answering all radar-locks to executing preplanned and reactive SEAD missions in a limited area to preemptively minimize operational risks.**
- ✓ **In the absence of the aforementioned rules of engagement adjustment, there could be a high-risk of recalling the 2012 F-4 incident through new casualties.**

An overall assessment on Syrian air defense capabilities and doctrinal order of battle was presented by a previous [EDAM report](#)<sup>62</sup>. Briefly, the challenge that the Turkish Air Force could face with is the very product of the shift in the Syrian military doctrine in the 1980s. In this respect, upon the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and Damascus' defeat, the Syrians have

<sup>58</sup> Anthony, Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan., *Israeli – Syrian Air and SAM Strength Analysis*, CSIS, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment- Eastern Mediterranean: Syria Air Force*, 28 Jan 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, et al. *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge*, CSBA, Washington D.C. 2003, pp.21-25.

<sup>61</sup> IHS Jane's *World Air Forces: Turkey – Air Force*, April 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Can, Kasapoglu. *The Syrian Civil War: Assessing the No-Fly Zone Option*, EDAM, 2013.

replaced their “strategic parity” approach with “strategic deterrence” to discourage any further Israeli attack. A dense network of *Integrated Air Defenses* under a separate branch covers the nation’s airspace to deter any air incursions<sup>63</sup>. Most of the systems are Soviet legacy, obsolete with exceptions of relatively higher-end systems such as Pantsir-S1. As noted earlier, Assad’s forces’ mobile, shorter range systems could still pose pop-up challenges under constant relocation concepts. In this regard, control of the terrain comes into the picture as a key element of confronting short-range SAMs.

Mostly depending on pre – civil war data, Syria’s Air Defense Command is believed to operate 25 air defense brigades under the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 26<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Divisions, mostly equipped with towed SA-2 and SA-3 (hard to locate), static but very long range SA-5, and mobile SA-6 systems. Based on a Soviet-supplied C2 architecture, the Baathist forces coordinates missile batteries and the Syrian Arab Air Force’s fighter interceptors with three computerized air defense centers<sup>64</sup>. EDAM’s military assessment suggests that important regime-held bastions that are located close to the possible area of operations and remain suitable for air defense and interception activity, such as Aleppo International Airport and Kowaires air base, could pose significant threats to possible Turkish combat air patrol missions to maintain an “ISIS-free zone”.

Last but not least, the regime’s fighter interceptors could pose a risk too, albeit much lesser when compared to the aforementioned air defense assets. EDAM’s [previous military assessments](#) suggest that Assad’s Mig-29 squadrons and *Mig-25 Foxbats*, which are believed to be reactivated recently, may not match the Turkish Air Force’s F-16s, but still can cause some trouble. At this point, we should remind the very caution that, [as noted in our previous take on the prospects of intervention in the Syrian battleground](#), an ejected or downed pilot situation –*as seen with an F-15 in 2011 Libya and very tragically with the executed Jordanian pilot at the hands of ISIS*– would bring about a true political-military crisis if combat search & rescue teams cannot locate and find the pilot before the red forces in the zone of action.

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<sup>63</sup> Anthony, Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan., *Israeli – Syrian Air and SAM Strength Analysis*, CSIS, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> IHS Jane’s, *Jane’s World Air Forces: Syria – Air Force*, June 2015.



*SA-2 Guideline SAM*



*The Turkish F-16C that downed the Syrian Mi-17 Hip Helicopter with the “kill-mark”*

### **The Regime’s Barrel Bomb-Operations and Rotary-Wing Assets**

In case a possible Turkish, or allied, air campaign is to be left no chance but to confront the regime for implementing a limited no-fly zone over the discussed “ISIS-free zone” area, **then Assad’s rotary-wing forces could be much more problematic than the Syrian fighter interceptors.** Put simply, it would be very problematic for Turkey to let Assad’s forces conducting barrel bomb salvos over the possible area of operations.

From a military standpoint, helicopters do not need large bases, they are harder to locate on the ground and to detect when airborne compared to fixed-wing aircraft, especially flying

with “nap-of-the-earth” patterns to minimize radar visibility. Besides, helicopters could be harder to hit<sup>65</sup>.

As EDAM shed light on the issue by a [previous report](#), “(barrel bombs) serve as a key tactical asset in the regime’s brutal crackdown offensives. Second, the weapon itself has been under a gradual improvement by the regime in terms of military technical features, tactical approach, and widespread usage. And third, barrel bombs’ indiscriminant character, and some versions’ incendiary functions, could initiate a new round of legal troubles to Assad regime in their efforts due to possible war crime allegations”<sup>66</sup>.

As noted by the report:

EDAM’s military assessment of the Syrian civil war suggests that the Baathist regime mainly uses barrel bombs in certain patterns listed below<sup>67</sup>:

- ✓ *Anti-personnel missions against rebel forces’ concentrations in geostrategically important locations,*
- ✓ *Punishment operations against civilian population that are sympathetic or neutral to the opposition forces,*
- ✓ *As a part of depopulation and intentional displacement campaign of the Baathist regime,*
- ✓ *For tactical purposes such as destroying buildings in critical areas in order to open ground for incursions, and to deny urban-warfare advantages to the operating opposition groups,*
- ✓ *As a part of psychological operations for intimidating civilian population and opposition elements.*

Open-source military surveys show that –albeit on the paper with much lower actual combat readiness– the Syrian Arab Air Force operates in total 6 squadrons of *Mi-8 Hip* and *Mi-17 Hip* helicopters<sup>68</sup> that are suitable for barrel bomb operations. Furthermore, the regime also operates 3 squadrons of *Mi-25 Hind* attack helicopters<sup>69</sup> that could be used for delivering incendiary submunitions.

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<sup>65</sup> Jeremiah, Gertler. et.al., *No-Fly Zones: Strategic, Operational ad Legal Considerations for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 2013, p.9.

<sup>66</sup> Can, Kasapoglu. *Barrel Bombs in the Syrian Civil War: A Game Changer?*”, EDAM, 2014, p.1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> IISS, *Military Balance 2015*, Routledge, London, 2015, p.353.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

As a result, apart from the challenge of engaging the Syrian air defenses, the regime's barrel bomb delivery missions via helicopters, even over adjacent areas, would be another tactical concern that could cause problems for a possible Turkish air campaign.

## **Geopolitical Spectrum**

### **The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant**

Against all the potential risks of operating within Syrian territory, it is certain that Turkey should take action against ISIS. In fact, most of the domestic criticism for Turkey's recent anti-ISIS operations has not been against Turkey's decision to act against ISIS, but rather for doing "too little, too late". ISIS is an extremist organization that has conducted terror operations against Turkey, and has undertaken sizeable recruitment and fundraising activities, as well as potentially establishing militant cells as evidenced by the number of detained in Turkey's recent anti-ISIS policing operations. Furthermore ISIS presents additional soft-security challenges (refugees, smuggling, increased criminal activity and so on) through its presence near Turkish borders.

ISIS's potential permanence in Syria and Iraq would allow the organization to consolidate its radicalization process in the two countries and would limit the potential for reaching an "acceptable" solution (one that would not be detrimental to Turkey and U.S.' core security interests) to the Syrian civil war. Through its successes in Syria and Iraq, the organization has managed to establish itself as an alternative brand against al Qaeda, and its multinational jihadist ranks, and accumulated combat experience, funds and military materiel have allowed the organization to attract local jihadist organizations and to branch into new countries in MENA. So far, ISIS has gained numerous footholds with varying levels of tangibility in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Algeria with potential operational presence in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Tunisia and Chechnya<sup>70</sup>. By its nature, ISIS is an ambitious and expansionist force and is very unlikely to transform into a quasi or fully-legitimate political actor in the future.

Even if it is defeated in Syria and Iraq, ISIS' ideological challenge and terror threat will likely persist over the years similar to the al Qaeda case. Its continued presence and its success serve as major propaganda tools, which appeal to extremists and persons vulnerable to

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<sup>70</sup> Institute for the Study of War (2015, June 27) "ISIS-Linked Regional Activity: June 2015"

radicalization. Therefore ISIS acts as a multiplier to the already existing international radicalization trends. In other words, while ISIS' split from al Qaeda initially meant that the two sides split the pie among each other, their mutual presence, and especially that of ISIS, has also gradually increased the overall pool for recruitment and fundraising. These ideological challenges are especially acute for Turkey as a secular Muslim nation, which has had to deal with domestic religious extremist terror organizations in the past. In some ways, it may be argued that ISIS is an existential threat to the Turkish political order, making a confrontation between the sides inevitable.

### **Iran**

Tehran's military, economic and tactical support has been one of the main factors that have allowed the Assad regime to survive in the war of attrition that has been ongoing for the last four years. Added to that, Iran's presence in the Iraqi battleground is evidenced by the Iranian backed militias that are actively fighting against ISIS in Iraq – raising eyebrows throughout the region as well as in Washington. Critics of the recent nuclear deal with Iran have argued that the gradual lifting of sanctions and the eased Western pressure over the country could allow Tehran to exert more influence over Syria and Iraq. A potential confrontation between Turkey and the Assad regime may easily disrupt the uneasy balance that Washington is maintaining with Iran with regards to its activity against ISIS in Iraq, and further damage the relationship between Ankara and Tehran. This could be more likely if Assad is emboldened through additional support it may receive from Iran.

### **Gulf Countries**

Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia and Turkey reached an agreement to coalesce their efforts to back rebel forces fighting in the Syrian battleground. The victory of the rebel coalition in Idlib earlier in April has been attributed to the assistance that the sides have given to Jaish al-Fatah<sup>71</sup>, which consists of numerous Islamist factions. The relationship between the sides was cemented further over high-level talks in May.

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<sup>71</sup> Independent (2015, May 12) "Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria"

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, the Arab League condemned Turkey's operations in Iraq against the PKK over grounds that it violated Iraqi sovereignty. Qatar was the only country to break ranks in the League, and expressed its solidarity with Turkey<sup>72</sup>. The Arab League's criticism is not expected to have any operational effects of the cooperation between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – instead, it has displayed the increasingly close relations between Ankara and Doha. The cooperation between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar is part of a bigger picture of trying to contain and curb increasing Iranian influence in the region<sup>73</sup>.

## Conclusion

Though Ankara stepped up its internal and external anti-ISIS operations and reached a deal with Washington regarding Turkey's deepened participation in the anti-ISIS coalition, many issues remain unresolved. Political differences between the two capitals regarding the necessity of establishing safe-zones in Syria and their approaches towards the PYD, other rebel organizations operating in the Syrian battleground, and the Assad regime continue to persist.

Furthermore, the complexity of the Syrian battleground is likely to present the two allies with considerable challenges and dilemmas. If the sides are to establish safe-zones within Syrian territory or help them flourish through coordinated airstrikes, they need to find reliable partners in the region to act as the ground force. Still, the complexities of the battleground make it hard to find trustworthy partners that would be willing to operate in conjuncture with the coalition's objectives, especially when Ankara's and Washington's objectives are not necessarily overlapping. Even if such groups are found or established, it remains to be seen how they will interact with other rebel groups fighting in the area of concern, or how effective they will be in their fight against ISIS.

The issue may get complicated further by the potential responses of regime forces and ISIS. Both sides may see the value in capitalizing on the differences of opinion between Ankara and Washington, and use the opportunity to test the resolve and solidarity of the two partners or may provoke them into further engagement in the Syrian battleground. If the sides do establish safe-zones, they will have additional issues in ensuring the safety of the zones,

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<sup>72</sup> Radikal (2015, August 5) "Arap Birliği Türkiye'nin PKK operasyonlarını kınadı"

<sup>73</sup> Business Insider (2015, May 7) "Turkey and Saudi Arabia are officially collaborating to bring down Assad in Syria"

which can be easily undermined by both the regime and ISIS, and have to tackle practical issues such as rebuilding, administering the zones, establishing and securing refugee camps. In sum, although both Ankara and Washington may have solid rationales for increasing their engagement in Northern Syria against ISIS, their involvement may have unforeseen consequences which could act contrary to their interests or significantly increase the costs of achieving them.

From a military perspective, maintaining an ISIS-free zone under civil war conditions in a battlespace that many state actors and non-state armed groups operate is a fairly demanding task. Even if ISIS' military capabilities could be degraded to a considerable extent in a short period of time, the zone itself would need 24-hours combat air patrols. This would inevitably bring about the risk of engaging with the Syrian air defenses, and could necessitate imposing an "unnamed no-fly zone" and even a local SEAD effort.

As discussed earlier, Syrian air defenses would be much problematic than dealing with Assad's fighter interceptors. Furthermore, preventing Damascus' rotary-wing barrel bomb operations in the adjacent areas would be another concern. Besides, complex MANPADS landscape and hybrid warfare challenges in the region could make the battlespace highly risk for armored incursions, as well as multi-purpose and attack helicopters.

Turkey enjoys close basing advantages and its Air Force is well equipped for targeting ISIS elements close to the border areas. However, operational tempo and duration could extremely stress defense economics and intelligence needs for sustaining the target set. Nevertheless, Ankara's authorization for the use of Turkish bases by the U.S. Air Force would be a tactical game-changer for the course of coalition efforts against ISIS.