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EAST MEETS WEST: TURKEY, ROJAVA AND NATO

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JCSP 44

Exercise Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

In April of this year, France, the UK and the United States (US) launched a punitive response to President Bashar Al Assad's regime's use of chemical weapons with a US-led cruise missile strike into Syria. Though combined allied messaging focused on the fight against chemical weapons, Turkey remained adrift and announced that the country would not stand with any other country, NATO ally or not, in the conflict in Syria.¹ Tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly the United States, are strained. In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* suggests that Turkey is no longer an ally ally to the USA and "proposed replacing the NATO air base at Incirlik with one in the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) [Iraq]."²

Turkey has been a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member since 1952 and its current NATO contribution is 1.56% of its GDP.³ Though not a European Union member, Turkey is in a uniquely advantageous position within NATO due to its critical geopolitical importance, democratic credentials and position thus far not to block, though it could, a NATO-EU security agreement.⁴ According to previous Turkish Defence Minister Ahmet Davotoglu, Turkey is in a unique position to be able to leverage their multi-dimensions in both the West and

¹ Alex Ward, "The past 3 days of Syria news, explained," *Vox*, 16 April, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/16/17242600/syria-news-bombing-trump-assad-russia-turkey>.

² Bill Park, "Turkey's isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?" *International Affairs* 91, no.3 (2015): 581, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1468-2346.12280>.

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010 to 2017e)* (Brussel: North Atlantic Trade Organization, 13 March 2017), Graph 3, 3, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf.

⁴ Editorial, "Turkey and NATO: An Unhappy Marriage," *The Economist*, 3 February 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2014393922/fulltextPDF/EDAEE591C4404496PQ/1?accountid=9867>

the East.⁵ Furthermore, “Under the AKP [Justice and Development Party – Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi]⁶, Turkey sees itself as developing a model for success combining political Islam with modern democracy.”⁷ At a time when regional stability in the Middle East is at the forefront of mainstream security concerns, why would the only Middle Eastern NATO partner closest to governance by Muslim democracy, distance itself from the alliance?

A crucial part of the answer lies with three cantons in the north of Syria called Rojava. The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), also known as Rojava, is a united region of three Kurdish-majority cantons in northern Syria: Afrin, Cizire and Kobani.⁸ Of particular significance is an autonomous region governed by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Rojava is home to approximately 2 million people with a significant Kurdish concentration. In Cizire and Kobani Kurds make up 50% of the population, while in Afrin they make up 100%.⁹ Kurds have no recognized state of their own and are dispersed between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria with a total population between 30 and 40 million. Half of the Kurdish population lives in Turkey where they make up 20% of Turkey’s population.¹⁰ It should be noted that Turkey did outlaw ethnic classification and thus, these figures should be considered

⁵ Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Yelda Demirag, “Turkish foreign policy after the ‘Arab Spring’: from agenda-setter state to agenda-entrepreneur state,” *Israel Affairs* 20, no.3 (2014): 332, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13537121.2014.922806?needAccess=true>.

⁶ The AKP is current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s party.

⁷ Thowhidul Islam, “Turkey’s AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring,” *International Journal on World Peace* 33, no. 3 (March 2016): 25, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1774895805/fulltextPDF/9CD42730221A4761PQ/1?accountid=9867>.

⁸ Si Sheppard, “What the Syrian Kurds have Wrought,” *The Atlantic*, 25 October 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/kurds-rojava-syria-isis-iraq-assad/505037/>.

⁹ Fabrice Balanche, “Rojava’s Sustainability and the PKK’s Regional Strategy,” *Policy Analysis*, 24 August 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy>.

¹⁰ Bill Park, “Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey’s multiple Kurdish dilemmas,” *International Journal* 7, no. 3 (2016): 451, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1819578453/fulltextPDF/4C7B07E8409946EAPQ/1?accountid=9867>.

estimates at this time.¹¹ Kurds also make up 20% of the population in Iraq, 10% in Syria and 10% in Iran.¹² Rojava is currently a de facto autonomous region, along with one other autonomous Kurdish region in the north of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Furthermore, Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims, but it is estimated that a quarter adhere to Alevism, which is associated with Shia Islam.¹³

Turkey is home to half of the Middle East's Kurds and shares borders with heavily Kurdish-populated areas in Syria, Iran and Iraq.¹⁴ A crucial stakeholder in any conversation about regional Kurdish autonomy or Kurdish independence, Turkey's reaction to Kurdish developments has significantly influenced the dynamics of regional foreign policy and the response from the NATO alliance. From Turkey's perspective, "Kurdish independence in Syria... could at a minimum escalate a three-decades-long conflict and at worst threaten Turkey's territorial integrity."¹⁵ Currently, Turkey maintains a policy that establishes a 19-mile safe-zone between the Kurdish enclave in Syria (Rojava) and itself, and it refuses to discontinue its attacks against the Kurds in the northern Syrian city of Afrin.¹⁶

Unfortunately for Turkey, the Kurdish people of Syria have an influential and powerful "big brother" in the US. Specifically, the People's Protection (Defence) Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – YPG), the primary component of the DFNS' Syrian Defence Forces, have been

¹¹ Michael J. Totten, "The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds," *World Affairs* 91, no. 3 (2015): 5, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=69d92674-4a10-4572-988c-66ad6ea3df0a%40sessionmgr4008>.

¹² Park, "Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas," ..., 451.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 452.

¹⁵ Totten, "The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds," ..., 5.

¹⁶ Ward, "The past 3 days of Syria news, explained," ..., 1.

hailed as the America's top ally against ISIS.¹⁷ Equipped, trained and publicly supported by the US, the YPG has unprecedented levels of support in their fight for independence.

As the fight against ISIS (also known as Daesh) comes to a close, Turkey's actions against Rojava and the Syrian Kurds run counter to America's support for its Kurdish ally. This puts Turkey, the USA and NATO at odds over the best way to approach the war against Assad in Syria. Post Arab Spring, there is a strong argument that the "differences over Syria lie at the heart of the current crisis of trust [between NATO and Turkey]."¹⁸

For the purpose of this paper the question of Kurdish autonomy will focus on regional autonomy and not the question of Kurdish independence, nor the unification of regionally autonomous Kurdish states into a greater Kurdistan.

This paper will be divided into three sections. First, there will be an analysis of the series of events from before the Arab Spring to the present day, with a focus on the conflict in Syria and the corresponding Turkish response. The second part will examine two cases - Kobani and Afrin – in order to illustrate the progression of aggression in the Turkish response to regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria, and the worsening relationship between Turkey and NATO. The final part will examine a counter-argument on the future of Turkey/ NATO relations. Turkey's response to the Kurdish regional autonomy in Syria weakens its relationship with NATO.

¹⁷ Amberin Zaman, "Jilted Kurds ignore Western hand-wringing over Syria gas attack," Al-Monitor, 12 April 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/pyd-ypg-quiet-on-trump-assad-threats-douma.html#ixzz5Csrewssx>.

¹⁸ Park, "Turkey's isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?"..., 584.

A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Ankara & Damascus: Before the Arab Spring

Turkey's engagement in the conflict in Syria began with an early warning to Assad for reform. As the conflict progressed, Turkey executed a political U-turn and became a lack luster ally, damaging its position in the NATO alliance. With the effects of the Arab Spring felt throughout the Middle East, Turkey was first amongst Syria's allies to urge the Assad government to reform. In fact, "Turkey's relationship with the Assad regime [prior to the Arab Spring], conducted in the face of Washington's displeasure had been the centerpiece of Ankara's new 'zero problems' approach to its neighborhood."¹⁹

This newfound friendship between Ankara and Damascus fit perfectly with the key tenets of Turkish foreign policy at the time: "strategic depth" and "zero problems" [in the neighborhood]. Strategic depth,

...proposes that as a secular and democratic nation-state with a Muslim majority, Turkey is capable of playing a crucial role in Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia by applying a versatile, multi-regional foreign policy that may eventually turn Turkey into a regional, if not global, power.²⁰

Zero problems in the neighborhood refers to "a peaceful relationship with its [Turkey's] neighborhood and maximize economic relations with Turkish periphery."²¹ During the early days

¹⁹Park, "Turkey's isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?" ..., 587.

²⁰ Islam, "Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring," ..., 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

of the Arab Spring in Syria, Turkey maintained its commitment to its foreign policy and urged Assad to pursue reform.

Frien-emies No Longer: Ankara vs Damascus

By the summer of 2011, with 1,000 civilian casualties and the beginning of armed resistance forming in Syria, Turkey anticipated that Damascus would fall. In a political U-turn, Ankara sponsored and initially hosted both the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the latter being trained and armed by Ankara.²² Calling out its NATO allies, “From the outset, Ankara expressed its disappointment at the comparable inactivity of its western allies, and most especially Washington.”²³ Turkey called for NATO to establish a “no-fly zone and humanitarian aid corridor in northern Syria.”²⁴ In early 2012, Turkey attempted to use its regional influence to get a no-fly zone, but it failed to gain agreement from key players.²⁵ Turkey abandoned its newfound friend and volte-faced from its foreign policy of zero-problems in the neighborhood.

In June 2012, a Turkish F-4 jet was shot down from within Syria.²⁶ Turkey’s concern was now for its own protection, and it looked to secure its borders. Turning to its NATO allies, Turkey called for an emergency NATO meeting, during which “Ankara intended to invoke Article IV of the alliance’s charter and see western backing for its response.”²⁷ In addition to the anti-aircraft guns and multiple rocket launchers deployed to the Syrian border, “In December

²² Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?” ..., 584.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Islam, “Turkey’s AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring,” ..., 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

2012 NATO acceded to a Turkish request to deploy Patriot anti-air missile systems close to the Syrian border.”²⁸ Though supported by the General Assembly, the decision specifically required support from Germany, the US and/or the Netherlands, the only states with Patriot or parallel systems.²⁹ Protecting itself from Syrian attack and leaning on its NATO alliance, Turkey armed itself for war with Syria.

Ankara and the Rojava: Enemies

The tide soon changed for the conflict in Syria, where Turkey was faced with a bigger threat than the Syrian regime: the Kurds in Rojava. By July 2012, the Kurds had liberated Kobani and pushed back the Syrian Army.³⁰ As the Kurds gained ground, Turkey was concerned now with a bigger threat that was both beyond its borders and within its state. For Ankara, “the Turkish establishment is triply alarmed because the Kurdish militias in Syria – the YPG or People’s Protection Units – are aligned with the PKK.”³¹ The Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistani – PKK) is a Marxist/Leninist group formed in the 1970s that fought for an independent Kurdish state within Turkey. The conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK has cost 40,000 lives and thousands of displaced Kurds, who have not been permitted to use their own language or education.³² Their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, runs the PKK from a

²⁸ Park, “Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey’s multiple Kurdish dilemmas,” ..., 454.

²⁹ Anne Gearan, “NATO to deploy missiles to Turkey-Syria border,” *The Washington Post*, 4 December 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-says-anti-missile-defense-for-turkey-does-not-open-door-to-syria-no-fly-zone/2012/12/04/6886dbd2-3e3b-11e2-8a5c-473797be602c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ed3683d83118

³⁰ Editorial, *Rudlaw*, 20 June 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120721142617/http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/4978.html>

³¹ Totten, “The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds,” ..., 7.

³² Editorial, “Who are Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) rebels,” *BBC News*, 4 November 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>.

Turkish prison cell where he has been since 1999.³³ In the eyes of Erdogan and the AKP, the PYD is “an off-shoot of the [PKK] and as in league with the Assad regime.”³⁴ Turkey, the EU and the US list the PKK as a terrorist group.³⁵

In November 2013, reaching for regional autonomy, an interim Kurdish government, the PYD, made up of three self-governing cantons shook Ankara.³⁶ To Turkey, an independent Kurdish state along its border is a threat to national security. In fact, criticisms of the Turkish response have identified that “(...) Erdogan’s anti-Assad policy has caused, however, the most significant impact is that it has breathed new life into the Turkish Kurds’ long struggle for independence.”³⁷ To Turkey, regional autonomy in the Rojava is a threat to its national security.

In the rally for ground in Syria, Turkey’s primary objective was no longer merely to overthrow the Assad government. In fact, critics would later argue that Turkey was never fully committed to overthrowing Assad because of the threat from the Kurds. In summary,

To Ankara, these developments [PYD supported with PKK arms and fighters] implied the establishment of PKK-controlled havens on its [Turkey’s] southern border, and could herald similar initiatives in Turkey’s southeast. The Syrian regime’s withdrawal from the Kurdish areas soon after the uprising began effectively handed Syria’s largely Kurdish-populated areas over to PYD

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?” ..., 585.

³⁵ Editorial, “Who are Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) rebels,” *BBC News*, 4 November 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>.

³⁶ Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?” ..., 585.

³⁷ Oray Elin, “The Game Changer: Syria, Iran, and Kurdish Independence,” *World Affairs* (May/June 2013): 66, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1778397865/fulltextPDF/5D4F3380CADB4A1BPQ/1?accountid=9867>.

control... The PYD position was that its struggle focused primarily on Kurdish self-determination, or ‘democratic autonomy.’³⁸

Though self-determination and democratic autonomy are reasonable notions for the stateless Kurds, Turkey sees no distinction between Kurdish regional autonomy in Syria and the threat posed within its own country by the terrorist PKK.

There were other factors that were also slowly pushing Turkey to response against Syria. Prior to the newfound friendship, Syria provided material support to the PKK while they were fighting Ankara.³⁹ Furthermore, in the beginning of the conflict in Syria Turkey suffered difficulty in ensuring back door entry of PKK membership who threatened to enter the state amongst the flood of refugees coming into Turkey from Syria.⁴⁰ Overall, the tension between Turkey and the PKK “has hurt both Turkey’s internal development and its relations with its Western allies, especially the United States.”⁴¹ Though the conflict started with Turkey warning Damascus, the ground gained by the Kurds and the history between Turkey and the PKK drove Ankara to a foreign policy change in Syria.

On Opposite Sides: Ankara versus Washington and Rojava

As a result of the threat posed by Kurdish regional autonomy in Syria, Turkey executed a foreign policy U-turn. In 2014, Ozpek and Demirag argued that Turkish foreign policy had

³⁸ Park, “Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey’s multiple Kurdish dilemmas,” ..., 455.

³⁹ Islam, “Turkey’s AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring,” ..., 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

⁴¹ F. Stephen Larabee and Gonul Tol, “Turkey’s Kurdish Challenge,” *Survival* 53, no.4 (2011): 143, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2011.603566?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

changed as Turkey transitioned from nationalist agenda setter state to nationalist entrepreneur state; whereby Turkey was shelving its commitment to other states, such as NATO allies, in favour of pursuing Turkish power interests in the region.⁴² However, since 2014, events in Syria and the threat of regional Kurdish autonomy have perhaps driven Ankara from a more aggressive role as power-seeker in the region to a defensive posture attempting to protect itself against multiple threats in a dynamic environment. Bülent Aras, senior scholar and Coordinator of the Conflict Resolution and Mediation Stream at Istanbul Policy Centre at Sabanci University, categorizes the new Turkish position as one of many “occasional volte-faces to adjust to the complexity and fluidity in the domestic and external environment.”⁴³ He further outlines that “...the Kurdish-ISIS clash and the ensuing international support for the PKK and its off-shoots in Syria proved a tipping point for the long-awaited recalibration of TFP [Turkish Foreign Policy].”⁴⁴ Turkey responded to the Kurdish threat of regional autonomy in Syria by changing its foreign policy to a defensive posture, but was prepared to act aggressively. In the subsequent case studies of Kobani and Afrin, this Turkish direction is clear.

It is this new Turkish position of defensive shelter with an ability to pursue aggressive methods that has distanced Turkey from its NATO allies. First, as the threat of regional Kurdish autonomy increased, Ankara took increasingly defensive postures and remained distant from its NATO allies in the conflict against Daesh. Ankara became a lack luster ally, choosing instead to back bench the fight against ISIS and focus on the bigger threat to Turkey, an independent Kurdish state along its border. From Turkey’s perspective, a greater threat existed from the

⁴² Özpek and Demirag, “Turkish foreign policy after the ‘Arab Spring’: from agenda-setter state to agenda-entrepreneur state,”..., 328.

⁴³Bulent, Aras, “Turkish Foreign Policy After July 15,” in *Post-Coup Opportunities on Conflict Resolution and Democracy Project*, Conflict Resolution and Mediation Stream of Istanbul Policy Centre (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Centre, February 2017), 4, http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Turkish-Foreign-Policy-After-July-15_Bulent-Aras.pdf.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

Rojava than that from ISIS. A new course was set by Ankara and “(...)Turkey was more concerned with preventing Syrian Kurds from forming an autonomous region along Turkey’s southern border than in taking on ISIS.”⁴⁵ Accordingly, “It was evident that Ankara did not attach the same priority to the defeat of IS as did the US and its NATO and regional allies.”⁴⁶ To Turkey, ISIS is “the lesser of two evils”⁴⁷ compared to Kurdish independence.

In September 2014, Ankara stayed aloof from joining the US-led coalition for the fight against IS in Iraq. Turkey’s concerns worsened as the US equipped and trained Syrian Kurds as allies in the fight against ISIS. Rather than supporting the US-led coalition, Turkey prioritized its own border security and the Kurdish insurrection as foremost amongst threats. Furthermore, Turkey initially “refused access to the Incirlik base for US bombing raids into Syria.”⁴⁸ Specifically, “...Ankara, which was widely suspected of at minimum, turning a blind eye to jihadist groups in their fight against regime forces and their assaults against the Kurdish enclaves.”⁴⁹ Turkey’s defensive posture and prioritization of threat created dissension between Ankara and its NATO allies.

To make matters worse, public support from the US resulted in Rojava gaining an international profile it had not otherwise enjoyed. Michael J. Totten, American journalist, author and contributing editor for *World Affairs*, comments, “The United States, though, is backing the Syrian Kurds. We have to. They’re the only ground force capable of fighting ISIS and

⁴⁵ Michael M. Gunter, “Trump, Turkey and The Kurds,” *Middle East Policy* 24, no.2 (Summer 2017): 80, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/mepo.12269>.

⁴⁶ Bill Park, “Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey’s multiple Kurdish dilemmas,” ..., 455-6.

⁴⁷ Michael J. Totten, “The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds,” ..., 9.

⁴⁸ Bill Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?” ..., 586.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 585.

winning.”⁵⁰ Syrian Kurds were gaining ground as the Syrian Army withdrew and were being trained and equipped by the USA; Turkey openly denounced support for the PYD and argued against Kurdish forces. In the summer of 2015, Turkey openly voiced their positions against the Kurds. For example,

Erdogan was enraged when Kurdish forces in Syria liberated the town of Tel Abyad from ISIS, and the Turkish military drew up a plan to invade Syria, not to fight ISIS but to set-up a 30-kilometre-deep buffer zone to prevent the Syrian Kurds from controlling their home country.⁵¹

Turkey and the US were now voicing opposite messages. In March 2017, the Trump administration beefed up its support for the Syrian Kurds to take Raqqa, despite protests from Turkey.⁵² Though the name of the forces was changed to try and appease Turkey, by May 2017, “U.S. officials said... Trump approved directly arming the Syrian Democratic Forces, about 50,000 fighters evenly divided between Arabs and Kurds.”⁵³ The results were felt within the NATO alliance. In fact, “...the international spotlight on Turkey in the fight against ISIS and Turkish reluctance to comply wholeheartedly impaired Turkish-Western ties.”⁵⁴ Turkey response to Kurdish regional autonomy in Syria weakened its relationships with its NATO allies.

In summary, though the pre-Arab Spring era saw a new found interim peace between Syria and Turkey, Ankara changed its foreign policy from “zero problems” in their neighborhood

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² Michael M. Gunter, “Trump, Turkey and The Kurds,” ...,81.

⁵³ John Bacon, “Erdogan rips U.S. plan to arm Kurds; Mattis downplays rifts,” *USA Today*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/05/10/turkey-miffed-us-decision-arm-kurds-mattis-downplays-rift/101503304/>.

⁵⁴ Bulent, Aras, “Turkish Foreign Policy After July 15,”..., 10.

to war with Damascus. However, when Turkey deemed Kurdish regional autonomy in Rojava a threat to its state security, Ankara re-prioritized its support for the fight against the Kurds over the fight against ISIS. As a result, Turkey became distant from its NATO allies, including the United States, who supported the Syrian Kurds as allies in the fight against ISIS. Turkey's response to the threat of regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria weakened its relationship with the NATO alliance.

TWO CASE STUDIES: KOBANI AND AFRIN

After reviewing the series of events and the relationship between Turkey, Rojava and NATO, this section will explore specifically the cases of Kobani (also spelled Kobane) and Afrin. Each case will re-affirm by way of example the position of this paper regarding the weakening of the relationship between Turkey and NATO as a direct result of Turkey's response to Rojava. Furthermore, the two cases are different in that in Kobani Ankara has adopted a passive approach of resistance, aligned with a shift to a more defensive strategy. In the case of Afrin, by contrast, Turkey exercises a more aggressive strategy. Not only are both cases proof of the thesis in this paper, but they also delineate the progression of aggression Ankara has demonstrated in addressing the issue of regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria. These effects are felt deep within the alliance between Ankara and NATO.

Incirlik and Divergent Agendas: The Case of Kobani

The Turkish response in the case of Kobani and the resultant impact on Ankara's relationship with the US is an example of how Turkey's actions in light of the threat of Syrian

Kurdish regional autonomy weakened its alliance with NATO. By 2014, Turkey had identified regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a threat more dangerous to its own national security than ISIS. This includes an assumption by Ankara that the fighters in northern Syria supported the PYD, affiliated with their own terrorist PKK cell.

In late September 2014, ISIS surrounded the town of Kobani in Syria despite Kurdish resistance and 300,000 refugees fled the small northern enclave to Turkey.⁵⁵ By the end of September, a US-led coalition, who had previously been campaigning in Iraq, launched its first attacks against ISIS in Kobani, supporting the Kurdish resistance.⁵⁶ This re-tasked US-led coalition was the same aforementioned coalition from which Turkey remained aloof, prioritizing the Kurdish threat in Syria over that of ISIS in Iraq, a divergence from its other NATO allies.

Turkey did not join the US-led coalition (members include Germany, Canada and France) against IS in Syria and originally refused access to the NATO airbase at Incirlik, to be used by US fighters in an air campaign.⁵⁷ It was the controversy in Turkish public opinion after a suicide bomb killed 28 people at a Pro-Kurdish group meeting in Suruc, a Turkish city right across the border from Kobani, which some claimed was a warning shot from ISIS directly to Ankara, that forced the government's hand.⁵⁸ Consequently, "A few days later, the Turkish government finally allowed the United States to use Incirlik Air Base, just 70 miles from the Syrian border, to launch airstrikes over the ISIS-held territory – but only if airpower was not used to support Kurdish militias."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Editorial, "Battle for Kobane, Key events," *BBC News*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Park, "Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas," ..., 456.

⁵⁸ Totten, "The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds," ..., 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In October 2014, the Kurds took a strategic hilltop, Mishtenur hill, but they were exhausted.⁶⁰ They needed supplies and reinforcements. To Ankara's displeasure, the US provided supplies to the Kurdish forces. When the US dropped supplies to the PYD in Kobani who were fighting IS, Turkey criticized the support because according to President Erodgan, ISIL (Daesh/ISIS) is equivalent to the PKK.⁶¹ Furthermore, "Turkey sought to prevent Kurds from crossing the border to join in the defence of Kobane [Kobani], although it did eventually agree to allow, under US pressure, a small Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga force to transit Turkish territory and help lift the IS siege."⁶²

In the media Ankara went on the offensive against their NATO ally. As a result, "In response to US cooperation with YPG [PYD military wing] in the struggle with ISIS (...) Ergodan told officials they would have to choose between Turkey and the PYD, asking, "is it me who is your partner, or the terrorists, in Kobani?"⁶³

The case of Kobani outlines the Turkish response to regional Syrian Kurdish autonomy and its resultant effect on Ankara's relationship with its NATO allies, in particular the US. Bernard-Henri Levy names this strategy from Turkey, a cynical double game.⁶⁴ In fact, "...Bernard-Henri Levy has argued that Turkey's future in NATO is in doubt as a consequence of its passivity both towards the plight of the Kurdish defenders of the Syrian town of

⁶⁰ Editorial, "Battle for Kobane, Key events," *BBC News*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>.

⁶¹ Park, "Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas," ..., 457.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Ozlem Kayhan Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 20, no.2 (Summer 2016): 25, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1835985635/fulltextPDF/EDFC4EE3EE624C94PQ/1?accountid=9867>.

⁶⁴ Bernard-Henri Levy, "Shame on Turkey for Choosing the Islamic State over The Kurds," *The New Republic*, 12 October 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119803/kobane-syria-will-fall-islamic-state-and-its-turkeys-fault>.

Kobane...”⁶⁵ In the case of Kobani, the Turkish lack luster response pushed the country further adrift from its NATO allies.

Open Attack: The Case of Afrin

In contrast to the passive aggressive approach Ankara demonstrated in the case of Kobani, the case of Afrin demonstrates the active aggression with which Ankara responded to Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy. In early 2018, Turkey, using the Free Syrian Army (FSA), surrounded the northwestern enclave of Afrin in Syria and overthrew the Kurdish forces there to disrupt the unification of the northern enclaves into Rojava, the autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. As a result, the relationships between Turkey and its NATO allies, in particular the US, further degenerated. According to *The Economist*, “The most recent source of tension [in NATO] is the simmering row between Turkey and America over Turkey’s incursion into Afrin, a Kurdish enclave in North-West Syria.”⁶⁶ In early January 2018, to Ankara’s ire “...the US has announced plans to create a 30,000-man Border Security Force of Kurds and Arabs to keep ISIS out of Syria.”⁶⁷ Despite promises to the contrary, the US continued to support the renamed YPG, now the SDF, with weapons. Ankara initiated a hostile response focused on the north of Syria. President Erdogan promised “”to strangle... before it is born” a [the] 30,000 strong American-backed “border security force,” composed largely of YPG Kurdish fighters whom Turkey regards as terrorists.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Park, “Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?”..., 583.

⁶⁶ Editorial, “Turkey and NATO: An Unhappy Marriage,”..., 29.

⁶⁷ Patrick J. Buchanan, “A U.S-Turkish Clash in Syria,” *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 37, no.2 (March/April 2018): 33, <https://search.proquest.com/saveasdownloadprogress/F0F315F241D64010PQ/false?accountid=9867>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

On 20 January 2018, Turkey began its assault on Afrin, named Operation Olive Branch, to rid the city of the YPG forces, using the Turkish-backed FSA. The FSA had been fighting against both the Kurdish-backed SDF and ISIS since the beginning of the conflict in Syria.⁶⁹ It should be noted that these are the same FSA who were hosted in Turkey when Ankara believe Assad would fall early in the Syrian conflict.

But the advance is not stopping at Afrin. In fact, “Turkey is moving armor and troops south to Syria’s border enclave in Afrin, occupied by Kurds, to drive them out, and then drive the Syrian Kurds out of Manbij further south as well.”⁷⁰ Turkey’s openly hostile response to regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria put them in opposition to the US, a key NATO ally. Resultantly, “Turkey’s stance toward Syrian Kurds, and its general approach to the Syrian crisis, led to a loss of trust with its Western allies, who became less inclined to follow Ankara’s lead and respect its sensitivities regarding Kurdish issues.”⁷¹ Turkey’s aggressive response to regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria by invading Afrin, places Ankara and Washington on opposite sides of the conflict. As a result, Turkey’s relationship with NATO has suffered.

In summary, both the case of Kobani and the case of Afrin are examples that re-affirm the effect of Turkey’s response to regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria on its relationship with NATO, in particular the US. While in each of the cases, the details of the argument are present, it is the progression of aggression between the two on the part of Turkey that indicate the situation is both deteriorating and that there is an urgent need for alliance rather than isolationism.

⁶⁹ Editorial, “Turkey targets Kurdish forces in Afrin: The Short, Medium and Long Story,” BBC News, 18 March 18, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42704542>.

⁷⁰ Buchanan, “A U.S.-Turkish Clash in Syria,”...,33.

⁷¹ Park, “Regional turmoil, the rise of the Islamic State, and Turkey’s multiple Kurdish dilemmas,”..., 455.

Does Turkey's Response to the Kurds Really Matter?

The counter-argument to the question of this paper would argue that despite the change in Turkish response towards Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy, there is no impact on Turkey's relationship with NATO. In short, commentary that though the relationship might currently be tumultuous, Turkey's relationship with NATO is not threatened and nor is there any question that Turkey's membership in NATO is on the line. Furthermore, if the focus is placed on the US, an influential NATO ally, one could argue that so long as the air base in Incirlik remains available, there is no critical issues at hand between Turkey and the US.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship is, in fact, deteriorating as a direct result of Turkish actions. First, other NATO allies have been re-buffed by Turkey and have turned away from Turkey's rigid position. In 2017, for example, after Turkey refused to let German MPS launched attack from Incirlik and Konya into Iraq, Germany moved their tornados from Incirlik to Muawffaq Salti, an airbase in Jordan after an intervention by NATO representation was required to get access to the Incirlik airbase.⁷²

Despite a possible disinclination amongst individual countries though there is currently no mechanism to kick Turkey out of NATO. Even if there was, there would be political blowback for NATO kicking out the only country supporting a Muslim democracy, though turning authoritarian, and that would be unfavourable for the alliance.

Furthermore, though a banishment mechanism does not exist, Turkey's behaviour and the resultant frosty relationship it has with NATO is not without consequences. NATO can restrict the amount of intelligence sharing Turkey is privy to within the alliance. For example,

⁷² Editorial, "Turkey and NATO: An Unhappy Marriage," ..., 29.

Counter-terrorism efforts have been further complicated by Ankara's increasingly strained relations with its NATO allies, which are hampering international intelligence-sharing... Turkish officials are hesitant to divulge intelligence to countries they believe are ordering terrorist attacks inside Turkey...⁷³

Though NATO cannot kick Turkey out, they can reduce the access Ankara enjoys within the intelligence realm in particular. Finally, despite being the poster child for a Muslim democracy, Turkey has also been on a noticeably progressive drift towards authoritarian governance. There are NATO concerns about Turkey's drift towards authoritarianism, in particular in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup.⁷⁴ Combined with the most recent military coup of 2016, Turkey's continued response towards the Syrian Kurds and weakening of its relationship with NATO is giving Ankara bad press in the international stage. This could obliterate any possibility Turkey had to become a member of the EU. In particular, "activities such as media crackdowns, judiciary manipulations and has treatment of demonstrators whereby there have been increasing calls for suspension of Turkey's EU accession process."⁷⁵ In fact, if Turkey would lay off the Kurds, Ankara could use its membership in NATO to re-ingratiate itself with its EU allies. However, this is not the case. If there is a frosty relationship between Turkey and NATO as a result of the Turkish response to Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy, then any possibility for EU ascension is at sub-zero temperatures.

⁷³ The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Social divisions and rising terrorist violence in Turkey," *Strategic Comments* 22, no. 10 (2016): viii-x, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13567888.2016.1282746?needAccess=true>.

⁷⁴ Editorial, "Turkey and NATO: An Unhappy Marriage,"..., 29.

⁷⁵ Park, "Turkey's isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?"..., 583.

In short, the question of impact on the relationship between Turkey and NATO presents challenges to the thesis of this paper. There is no mechanism to expel Turkey from NATO nor would the political blowback be worth it. However, there is a slow attrition of NATO allies who, given Turkey's rigidity, have backed away. Furthermore, NATO can restrict the amount of intelligence Ankara can access. Finally, with Turkey's perceived drift towards authoritarian rule, any chance for EU accession could be on the table as well. Despite details that present strong counters, it can be concluded that there is an impact to the Turkey/NATO relationship as a result of the Turkish response to Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's response to regional Kurdish autonomy in Syria weakens its relationship with NATO. This paper has explored the series of events following the Arab Spring whereby Turkey's position in the conflict in Syria suddenly U-turned when Ankara faced regionally autonomous Syrian Kurds in Rojava. The series of events also outlined the polarization of Turkey and the US as the issue of Kurdish regional autonomy in Syria developed during the conflict. Furthermore, an exploration of two cases, Kobani and Afrin, supported the consequences of the Turkish response to Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy on the relationship Ankara has with NATO. Finally, a counter argument was presented to expose the question the criticality of the Turkish response plays in the relationship between Ankara and NATO.

Future areas of research should look at the role of the Kurdish regional autonomy and the role it plays in both the future foreign policy for Turkey. One possible explanation for the Turkish volte-faces in Syria is that Turkey had already selected a candidate to replace Assad in Syria; the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In fact,

ideologically, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), which has been banned in Syria, is closer to the AKP than the secular Ba'ath party of Assad. Because of shared ideology and politics, Turkey desires to see the SMB come to power, or at least share power with the Assad regime.⁷⁶

Future research is recommended into how the religious perspective changes the analysis of Turkey's relationship with the Kurds but also with other agents in the region, such as the SMB. Finally, into years to come, will Turkey shift its attention to other non-NATO allies? For example, "... in February 2015, the Turkish Defence Minister asserted that Turkey's new missile defence system would not be integrated with NATO's, thereby hinting that Ankara would indeed opt for the Chinese system."⁷⁷ It is certain that as the fight with ISIS draws to a close, the outcome in Syria will certainly drive the question of Turkey and which relationships are still standing.

⁷⁶ Islam, "Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring," ..., 24.

⁷⁷ Park, "Turkey's isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?"..., 589.

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