

TURKEY'S FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM AND THE ROLE OF THE KURDS

Bilgay Duman

He was born in 1983 in Ankara. He has been carrying on his doctoral study at Abant İzzet Baysal University, Department of International Relations Ph.D Program since 2011. He wrote his postgraduate thesis on "The Turkmen and Kirkuk in post-Saddam Period". His articles and interviews have been published in various media agencies and organizations, on national and international press. He has attended to national and international conferences, panels, seminars and workshops as speaker. He has frequently carried out field studies in the Middle East. He took part in international observer teams and served as UN electoral observer during the elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. He continues to serve as a Middle East Specialist in ORSAM.

For decades, Turkey has been fighting directly with different terrorist groups internalising different dimensions of terror. Terrorist organisations with ethnic, religious, ideological and political motivations have been posing direct threats to the country. Turkey, along with its individual fight against terrorism, also actively supports international efforts to fight it. Especially the terrorist groups geographically using the Middle East pose a clear threat to Turkey. Territorial and administrative achievements of ISIS which occupy a major place in the international agenda and ethnically motivated PKK which is one of Turkey's fundamental security concerns made this threat even more serious for Turkey. Turkey both engaged in direct confrontation with these terrorist organizations and also revised its foreign policy due to the developments in Syria and Iraq. Within this context, developments related to the Kurds in the Middle East affected the role of the Kurds in Turkey's fight against terrorism both positively and negatively. In this analysis, their role within the context of Turkey's fight against terrorism from different aspects will be investigated.

Fight against terrorism is one of the Turkey's primary foreign policies. Turkey has been fighting against different forms of terrorism for years and threatened by terrorist groups such as ethnic separatist PKK, leftist extremist terrorist group DHKP-C, Al-Qaeda and the ISIS that operate under the guise of religion, and Armenian terrorist organizations like "Revolutionary Organization 17 November or 17N" and ASALA. At the hearth of Turkey's fight against terrorism are lies the principals of regional and international cooperation. In addition to Turkey's bilateral and multilateral relations developed in order to establish more active mechanisms in fight against terrorism, Turkey has taken a more active position on various international platforms. Turkey has actively supported UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which was adopted in 2006 and helped to define

a common strategy and an operational framework in fight against terrorism regardless of its aims. In this context, it can be said that Turkey has been actively participated in global counter-terrorism by being a part of all the UN counter-terrorism instruments.

Strategy for Fight Against ISIS and Turkey

With the emergence of ISIS, Turkey has been a main part of the fight against ISIS. Turkey has carried out its operations taking the national security, regional stability and the principals for global counter-terrorism into consideration and has been keeping on so. Turkey has possibly been the first country to realize the ISIS threat. Before ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front operating in Syria gained territories in Iraq and Syria, Turkey included ISIS in to the official list of terrorist organizations in 2013. Moreover,

ISIS gained control in some territories of Iraq and Syria together with its invasion of Mosul in June 2014. Initially, the territories held by ISIS in Syria, its attacks to opponents and massacres in Iraq were not discussed enough in the agenda of the USA and international society. On the other hand, the fact that ISIS has kept on its march in Iraq and massacres towards the ethnic and religious groups in the country has urged the USA government to take action for this situation. Iraq, which has already been on the edge of disintegration due to the policies of the former primary minister of Iraq Nuri El-Maliki, has gradually a more become decomposed, unstable and uncontrollable state with the enlargement of ISIS. In response, the USA stopped its reluctant support to Maliki to prevent disintegration of Iraq and supported the process to designate a new primary minister in order to get the support of

Sunni Arab and Kurdish groups. In this context, three months after the elections held on 30 April 2014, Fuad Masum was able to be elected as president and at the end of intense negotiations the new Iraqi government could eventually be formed five months after the elections in September. Furthermore, considering ISIS as an obvious threat, the USA firstly sent 300 military advisors to Iraq. Then, as of 8 August 2014, it started to launch air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq to stop the progress of ISIS and to support the anti-ISIS groups within the territories held by ISIS. These air strikes didn't involve comprehensive strategies but rather was a tactical move to support the Iraqi Kurdish and Shia militia groups against the ISIS. Despite this, ISIS enhanced its power in time and also American and Western European persons who joined the organization enabled the organization to

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extend its capacity of action outside Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the potential of ISIS to become a regional and even global threat urged the USA to take precautions against ISIS. The US president Barack Obama announced the counter-terrorism strategy against ISIS on 10 September 2014. Before announcing this strategy, Obama simultaneously supported the government formation process in Iraq, established the core coalition consisted of 10 NATO member states against ISIS in NATO Wales summit, and negotiated with its Arab allies in the Middle East to ask

them to join to the anti-ISIS coalition.

Obama announced the counter-terrorism strategy against ISIS at a televised speech on 10 September 2014 evening. In his speech, Obama announced that they aimed to “weaken and destroy” ISIS with a comprehensive and sustainable counter-terrorism strategy which would be composed of four pillars:

- a. to launch air strikes to the ISIS targets,
- b. to support the powers fighting against the ISIS on field,



- c. to use the counter-terrorism capacity to prevent the ISIS attacks,
- d. to maintain the humanitarian aids to the displaced people because of the ISIS attacks.

Obama stressed that in fight against ISIS, the American military forces wouldn't play a combatant role and they would not start a new ground war in Iraq. Moreover, he stated that they would supply the Iraqi military and Kurdish powers with training, intelligence services and equipment, and in order to keep these services organized several American advisors would be sent to Iraq. Obama announced that in fight against ISIS in Syria as well as that in Iraq they would supply Syrian opponents with military assistance instead of engaging with the Assad regime, and he called the Congress to give support to this decision. Considering

the third strategy Obama said they would cooperate with their allies to hinder the ISIS attacks and laid stress on such issues as disruption of financial sources of ISIS, strengthening the intelligence services and objection to the ideology of ISIS within the framework of counter-terrorism. He also mentioned about the foreign fighters among ISIS members and emphasized that the foreign fighters should be deterred from joining to ISIS and going off the region. As the forth step, Obama expressed that they would maintain their humanitarian aid to Sunni, Shia, Christian and other religious minorities displaced due to the ISIS attacks and he maintained that within the scope of these strategies the process of fight against ISIS defined as "cancer" was not a short-termed one but would take time.

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an abstaining approach towards the USA's strategies against ISIS and claimed that they were not adequately inclusive. Turkish authorities clearly stated that a strategy which was not supported with an inclusive political solution wouldn't be enough to achieve the targeted success in Syria and Iraq. In this context, there were disagreements between Turkey and the USA regarding the strategy of fight against ISIS and the developments in Syria and Iraq. Especially in Syria, the characteristic of the threats originating from the civil war has been changed over time. It was considered that the most

important part of this challenge was the regime at first but as the conflicts escalated different threats emerged. In addition to the Syrian regime, which was not a primary threat for the USA, Turkey, , forthrightly stated that it was necessary enlarging the scope of fight against terrorism and to take a position against PYD, which is an extension of the PKK in Syria, together with ISIS. As Turkey took the issue of border security as a prime concern, the USA adopted a different approach and under the guise of fight against ISIS it created space for the PKK/PYD that threatened Turkey's border security.

As Turkey made a proposal to create a “safe zone” in Syria, the USA persistently objected to this plan. While the most important expectation especially in terms of Turkey’s border security was to meet the refugee influxes beyond the borders of Turkey, it was another important action to hinder terrorist groups from overtaking control across Turkey’s borders. Since ISIS, PYD/PKK or the regime hold the control of many areas across the border, Turkey has become an open target for the terrorist attacks. In this context, Turkey took its actions according to its own priorities regarding fight against ISIS. Besides giving support to the international coalition established under the leadership of the USA, Turkey adopted a manner of action in accordance with its national security policies to overcome the deficiencies of the USA’s counter-ISIS strategy. For example, Turkey engaged in remarkable efforts

to sustain the stability of Iraqi government. Turkey clearly stated that the cooperation with Iraqi government was an essential part of Turkey’s fight against ISIS. However, before Obama announced the USA’s counter-ISIS strategy, the demand of Iraqi government for arms and ammunition aid from the USA and other Western countries within the framework of fight against ISIS was responded positively and the related aid was supplied. Furthermore, it was expressed that the USA would supply military aid to the counter-ISIS powers within the framework of the USA’s counter-ISIS strategy. Therefore, Turkey has some reasonable concerns with regards to that the instability in Syria and Iraq will escalate. Since the June operations of ISIS, process of re-militiazation has been observed in Iraq. Iraqi government has been supplying military aid to the counter-ISIS powers.

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This situation may turn to an aggravating factor for the instability in Iraq after the ISIS threat is weakened or destroyed.

Turkey and the Kurds in the Context of Fight Against ISIS

Turkey is against military aids to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as well as the central Government of Iraq. It is already known that there are such basic problems between Iraqi central government and KRG as the control of energy sources, sharing of oil revenues, Kirkuk and disputed territories, KRG

budget and status of the Peshmerga, which are still in need for solution. That the ISIS threat is on decline may lead these basic problems in Iraq to become apparent again. Since the military assistance of the USA and the other Western countries accelerate armament, it may increase the risk of conflict. It is known that the Iraqi central government and the KRG contradicted each other in military terms in 2011 and 2012. This will probably affect the political unity and the territorial integrity of Iraq, which Turkey actively make effort to sustain. It is possible to say that such an unfavorable case



in Iraq affects not only Iraq but also the circumstances in Syria. Moreover, it is highly possible that the arms aid to the KRG can be controlled by the terrorist organization PKK that takes shelter in the KRG territories. Turkey frankly expressed its deep hesitations regarding this issue to the KRG. However, the authorities from the KRG falsely interpreted Turkey's objections to the military assistance to the KRG, and Nechirvan Barzani, the Prime Minister of the KRG, declared in one of his statements that they couldn't get support from Turkey as much as they expected. This situation caused the KRG's public opinion to question whether there is a disruption in relations between Turkey and the KRG. Thus, the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani met separately with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in The World Economic Forum held in İstanbul on

28-29 September 2014. Although details of the meetings has not been public, it is possible to say that the KRG has made effort to "restore trust." However, there is not a dramatic change in Turkey's policies on Iraq and the KRG. As a result of the consensus between Turkey and the USA in 2015, "train and equip program" which aims to provide the counter-ISIS powers with training and logistical support was launched.

Within the framework of this program, Peshmerga as well as the Syrian opponents undertook military training in Turkey and were provided with logistical support. In addition to this, as a consequence of international coalition and the mutual understanding with Iraq, a training center was established in Bashiqa town in Mosul District of Iraq. While giving support to the KRG in fight against the ISIS, Turkey continues its relations

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with the Massoud Barzani administration in the post-ISIS political equation that will be set in the region.

Counter-terrorism in Syria and Iraq have a holistic meaning for Turkey. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the fight against the ISIS and PKK/PYD in Iraq in conjunction with that in Syria. In this respect, the statement of Massoud Barzani to announce that they came to a common point with Turkey over the counter-ISIS issue means that they support the Jarabulus operation. This recalls Mosul operation. Turkey's position and role in the Mosul operation will be very important in terms of the KRG and Massoud Barzani's activities in the region. Turkey, within the framework of the coalition for counter-ISIS, give support to the whole domestic forces fighting against ISIS. In the context of this support, the Peshmerga are provided training

in camps both in Turkey and Iraq. Furthermore, the existence of Turkish military forces in Bashiqa is a very important factor in terms of eliminating the ISIS existence as well as the training provided to the counter-ISIS powers. Until now the Turkish military forces in Bashiqa has eliminated approximately 470 ISIS members and the fiscal existence of the ISIS has been dramatically harmed. Thus, the Turkish existence in the region has been a facilitating and supportive factor for the counter-ISIS process.

In addition to the ISIS operation to be carried out in the city center of Mosul, Turkey considers it necessary to weaken the PYD/PKK existence in Sinjar and to cooperate to achieve the common goal considering the local power of the KRG and Massoud Barzani. To clean the region from other terrorist groups as well as the counter-ISIS operations

is an essential step to sustain the national security of Turkey and the regional security. In this context, it is already known that the terrorist organization PYD/PKK has been making efforts to create an integrated structure at first in Sinjar and then at the north of Syria and Iraq. This is a primary threat for the regional security after the ISIS. In addition to the attacks to Turkey from the north of Iraq, emergence of a structure that will destroy the security of Iraq's northern region will increase political instability in Iraq and in the KRG. Therefore, to fight not only against ISIS but also all terrorist organizations in the region with a common action will be important to sustain regional security.

Furthermore, to weaken the PYD/PKK is important for Massoud Barzani to preserve his power among the Kurds in the region and in the KRG. It may not be

wrong to say that there is a challenge between the PYD/PKK under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan and Massoud Barzani over the leadership of the Kurds in the Middle East. Therefore, it is possible to mention about a regional struggle between the PYD/PKK and Massoud Barzani. This struggle is not only observed within the Kurdishhood of the region but also in the political competition within the KRG. Especially the common action of the PUK and Goran sealed by an agreement against Massoud Barzani's KDP influence in the KRG leaves KDP in a politically difficult situation within the KRG. PUK and Goran use the PYD/PKK to carry out their pressure on KDP in general politics to the local politics and support them against the KDP. Because, although PUK and Goran are effective in the KRG politics, they can't take the control of Erbil and Dahuk in which KDP has more power and in

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the other regions like Sinjar, Zummar, Fishabur which are the regions close to the Syrian border of Iraq and remain in the KDP's sphere of influence. Therefore, they try to weaken the KDP using the power and effectiveness of the PYD/PKK in this region. It is also striking that at the time when Massoud Barzani made a visit to Turkey, a PUK delegation led by Mulla Bakhtiar visited Baghdad and held meetings on behalf of both PUK and the KRG.

However, it is also obvious that Massoud Barzani tries to keep the balance in the regional equation. It is another important detail that Hemin Hawrami, Head of the KDP's Foreign Relations Office, announced on the same day when Massoud Barzani visited Turkey that he would also visit Iran. This statement points that Massoud Barzani takes into consideration of Iran's role in the balances between the parties in the KRG. Thus, a new balance situation is

emerging in the Middle East. In this new balance, Turkey tries to determine its position through normalization in foreign policy, regional harmony and cooperation dynamics. Especially proactive, concrete and solution-oriented steps taken by Turkey within the framework of counter-terrorism process enhances Turkey's position. Massoud Barzani also tries to determine a position within this equation emerging in the Middle East and to preserve the advantage he gained after 2003. After all, it is possible to say that the possibility of multilateral cooperation dynamics both for Turkey and the KRG has increased for the period ahead.

In conclusion, there are two Kurdish actors come to the fore in Turkey's fight against terrorism. Turkey considers the KRG as a partner in fight against terrorism. However, Turkey's fight against terrorism process is directed towards

mainly PYD/PKK supported by the USA under the guise of eliminating the ISIS. Therefore, Turkey deals not only with ISIS but also with the PYD/PKK threat. In this context, Turkey takes its actions independently to maintain its border security and has troubles with its “strategic partner,” the USA. The “Operation Euphrates Shield” launched in August 2016 by the Turkish Armed Forces in the northern Syria against the PYD/PKK is

an important indication of this controversy. Within this framework, it is possible to say that the course of Turkish-American relations and reconciliatory attitude on regional politics, Turkey’s normalization process in foreign policy mainly with Russia and Iran, and relations with KRG considering the developments within the KRG will play a key role in Turkey’s fight against ISIS and PKK/PYD in the process ahead.

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Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr