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A Turkish Intervention in Syria:

A Reality Check

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Key Takeaways

- The rationale for Ankara's intervention may be: a) to repel ISIS and eliminate the threat near Turkish borders and quell the criticisms for its lack of involvement; b) to disallow Kurdish PYD (which many in Ankara see in line with the PKK threat) to capture Jarablus and strengthen its bid for autonomy; c) to create a buffer zone to host refugee waves; d) to use the territory a logistical base for Syrian rebels for them to launch offensives against Assad regime's remaining positions in Aleppo.
- A military operation at this stage, and especially a comprehensive one such as the discussed buffer zone option, would be very hard to justify on the grounds of international law on self-defense. Unless a major humanitarian crisis occurs in the future, Turkey could not easily justify a humanitarian intervention as well. Turkey could justifiably make the case that Damascus is not *de facto* in control of the territory that is the breeding ground for threats to Turkey, and is therefore "unwilling or unable" to suppress them. This could provide grounds for a Turkish intervention, but Ankara would have to highlight undisputable evidence towards a realistic or actual threat to Turkey that requires immediate military action with a defined scope for this to be perceived as a just intervention.
- Turkey cannot rely on NATO Article V under current conditions. If Turkey decided to create a buffer zone within Syrian territory, its deployed forces would also not be covered under Article V. If Ankara seeks NATO assistance, it will be through Article IV, with which Ankara would hope to get political and logistical support.
- Although the Turkish Armed Forces' artillery fire-support, close air-support, and air-ground operational capabilities are robust, they cannot be solely depended on for maintaining permanent control over a safe zone. Maintaining control over a 100km long, 30km deep hostile territory would inevitably demand boots on the ground.
- Turkey could probably use the 5th Armoured Brigade located in Gaziantep and the 20th Armoured Brigade located in Şanlıurfa as principal maneuver units in case of an incursion. Since the outset of the civil war, these brigades, along with other border units, were strongly reinforced. Thus, they are reliable units with high combat-readiness levels.
- The Turkish Armed Forces is one of the most experienced ones in low intensity conflicts and cross-border military operations in low intensity conflicts. Yet, the threat landscape in the Middle Eastern conflicts has changed drastically by the 2000s. In other words, the low intensity conflicts threats of the 1990s have given their place to hybrid threats with very different military and paramilitary characteristics. In this respect, advanced disruptive capabilities such as man portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided

missiles (ATGM) at the hands of non-state actors could significantly bleed conventionally superior armies.

- Although there are skeptical reports on the verification of the chemical deal, and assuming that the Baathist regime has kept its suspected biological weapons program active, we do not see a WMD retaliation risk likely. Yet, the regime could launch its ballistic missiles from deep territory. Still, a military analysis suggests that such a course of action would not significantly disrupt the Turkish operations. However, ballistic missiles are strategic weapon systems with psychological effects as terror weapons. Thus, Assad's missile forces' retaliation could drag Turkey into a dangerous escalation, and demoralize the Turkish public opinion as well as deployed troops.
- But given the complexities of such an operation, the associated risks and the almost formidable set of political, diplomatic, legal and military obstacles, Turkey's real aim in adopting a more interventionist tone is to refocus the attention of its partners in the West to the consequences of the Syria crisis for Turkey. With Obama's continuing disinclination to increase the US exposure in the Middle East and the political capital of Europe totally consumed with the Greek economic crisis, Turkey wants to remind its partners that the evolution of the Syrian crisis is reaching a turning point for Turkey's national interest. The territorial expansion of the Kurdish PYD, facilitated by the assistance provided by Turkey's Western partners combined with unending flows of refugees where Turkey is being asked to shoulder the short term humanitarian but also the longer term integration burden is compelling Turkish policy makers to raise the stakes. So the latest rhetoric may not necessarily be a prelude to an actual intervention but it is the strongest signal, as of yet, of the heightened unease created in Ankara by the dynamics of the Syrian crisis.
- Turkey's latest actions also aim to create negotiating space for the new government with a view to reach an agreement with its partners in the West that would entail stronger guarantees against the territorial expansion of the PYD in return for a stronger Turkish commitment to the anti-ISIS coalition.

Potential Turkish Involvement in Syria: Geopolitical Background, Political-Military Objectives, Legality, and Possible Courses of Action

Areas right beyond the Turkish border have seen heavy clashes between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Kurdish forces, predominantly the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing People's Protection Units (YPG) since last year. After its successful defense of Kobane, one of the three territories at which it declared autonomy at the beginning of 2014, the PYD has taken the offensive earlier this year with the assistance of the coalition airstrikes and moderate elements of the Syrian opposition. In July 2015, PYD managed to capture the strategically important town of Tal Abyad and effectively connected two of its self-declared autonomous regions in Kobane and Jazira. The Tal Abyad border crossing between Turkey and Syria lies 90 kilometers away from ISIS' self-declared capital in Raqqa, and the jihadist organization had been using the area and the border crossing to support trade lines, exploit smuggling routes and trade and smuggle militants, arms and supplies through the Turkish border. Although the area had strategic value for ISIS and its loss will harm the organization's logistical flow and lines of communication, the Kurds are not keen on furthering their expansion further down South onto Raqqa, and therefore the loss of Tal Abyad as an isolated incident will not have an existential effect on the grand scheme of ISIS operations in Syria and Iraq. Still, with Tal Abyad gone, Jarablus is the only major border connection that the ISIS currently holds with Turkey. Furthermore, Tal Abyad and the surrounding areas are all that's left in the way of PYD connecting Kobane and Jazira with its other territory, Afrin, in the West.

Ankara has been watching these developments anxiously. The potential for a Turkish intervention has been voiced by Turkish policymakers and the Turkish Armed Forces have mobilized around the border. Reportedly, the issue has also been discussed in detail at the recent National Security Council meeting. This paper will review the potential goals, legality, and military dimension of a Turkish intervention into Syria.

Turkish Military Action in Syria: Why Now?

By a military intervention into Jarablus, Turkey hopes to achieve the following four goals.

- **Disposing of the ISIS threat near Turkish borders**

ISIS' decision to pull forces from the northern front to support its campaigns in Palmyra and Ramadi has come at the expense of Tal Abyad. Although at this stage the loss of Tal Abyad is strategically less significant than the gains made through the capture of Palmyra and Ramadi, ISIS utilized the Turkish border and the surrounding areas within Syrian borders (Wilayat al-Raqqa and Wilayat Halab as ISIS names the provinces) to exploit smuggling routes and trade through Turkey, to develop supply lines in order to support its campaigns in nearby areas, and to transfer arms, militants and supplies through the Turkish border¹. With only Jarablus and the nearby border towns left at its hands, ISIS may choose to reinforce its presence in the area or, if it loses Jarablus, may attempt to retake the areas in the future. The more ISIS feels threatened in its capital in Raqqa and strategic junctures connecting the city to ISIS' other existing and prospective areas of operation, the more forces it will withdraw from eastern Syria and Iraq to assist its presence in the area. Therefore, if these areas become contested, ISIS activity in the area may rise, increasing the likelihood of military and civilian spillovers to Turkey. Ankara may hope to prevent this eventuality by carving a buffer zone in Jarablus and its surroundings or by assisting Syrian rebel forces to capture the area from ISIS.

- **Obstructing PYD Statehood:**

Ankara views the PYD in a very different lens compared to its Western partners. Although the threat that ISIS poses is clearly understood, Turkey views ISIS as a recent and potentially temporary threat. For many in Ankara, the PYD on the other hand, is seen as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terror organization that Turkey has had to deal with for over three decades. Turkey has traditionally been against the independence or autonomy of any Kurdish state beyond its borders, as it was feared that this could heighten its domestic Kurdish nationalism issue. For example, Ankara was adamantly against the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq for years before gradually abandoning its position in favor of economic and political cooperation beginning in 2009. In addition to the traditional anti-Kurdish independence reflex, Turkish statesmen point towards the fact that the PKK and PYD are ideological affiliates and it is feared that if PYD gains *de facto* or *de jure* autonomy, as well as direct arms supplies from the US-led coalition, this would benefit the PKK both politically and militarily. In an address on 27 June 2015 for example, President Erdogan stated "I am

¹ IHS (2015, June) "Syria and Iraq Insurgency: Conflict Monitor – An Assessment of the Islamic State"

calling out to the whole world: We will never allow the formation of a state in our southern frontier, in Northern Syria. We will continue our struggle against this, whatever the cost is.”²

From Ankara’s point of view, if YPG forces indeed manage to seize Jarablus and connect all of its three self-declared autonomous regions, it would strengthen the PYD’s bid for both *de facto* and *de jure* autonomy. Furthermore, Erdogan and the AKP leadership claims that it has intelligence reports suggesting that the PYD has been conducting ethnic cleansing operations against Turks and Arabs in the areas in question in order to establish a homogeneously Kurdish area to create grounds for future statehood. Reportedly, the “concerns over terror attacks targeting civilians and actions aimed towards changing the demographic structure of the region”³ have been voiced during the National Security Council meeting at the end of June 2015.

As discussed by the Turkish media throughout the week, Ankara may consider two alternatives to top PYD’s potential advance into Jarablus. Turkey may carve a buffer zone, referred to as a “safe zone” in the press, by itself, or it may aid the predominantly moderate Syrian rebel groups in the West to capture the area from ISIS instead of the PYD.

- **Increasing Turkey’s Footprint in the Area:**

Ankara has frequently been criticized, especially by its partners in the West, for not doing enough to stop the ISIS threat, and sometimes has even been blamed with supporting ISIS. By taking military action against the organization, Ankara may hope to quell the criticisms for its lack of involvement in the coalition effort against the jihadist organization. With Tel Abyad gone, the scope of a Turkish operation would be focusing on Jarablus, and hence the risks could be lower. Furthermore, Turkey has been keen in hastening the downfall of the Assad regime and may allow the use of the territory as a logistical base by rebel organizations to launch offensives on Assad’s remaining positions in Aleppo. The possibility of providing training to rebels in such a 'safe zone' as part of the train and equip program has also been mentioned in the Turkish media. Such a zone would provide Turkey with the ability to move arms and fighters back into the Syrian battleground more effectively and efficiently. The same would be true if the rebels seize the territory for themselves through Turkey's assistance.

- **Buffering Spillovers:**

By controlling a sizeable chunk of land across the border, Ankara may hope to limit the military and civilian spillovers to its territories near heavily contested zones. This is especially true for the refugee issue. Turkey is currently the country to host the largest number of refugees in the world, and has been

² Hurriyet (27 June 2015) “‘Bedeli ne olursa olsun engel olacağız’”

³ HaberTurk (29 June 2015) “MGK bildirisinde Suriye vurgusu”

floating around the idea of establishing a 'safe zone' across Syrian borders to host refugees instead of allowing more to cross into its territory for some time.

Another Alternative: Signaling and Posturing

It is also possible that though Ankara is making plans, it is not actually planning to take any military action at this time. Instead, Ankara may be hoping to signal both to the PYD and to the US-led coalition that it is strongly against Kurdish statehood in the area through official statements and voicing the idea of an intervention frequently in the media, and military mobilization.

Although the Turkish military most likely has finalized its contingency plans for such an eventuality, the Supreme Military Council (Yüksek Askeri Şura – YAŞ), which will likely result in the changing of top level military leadership, is due in August – so the timing would not be ideal. On September 2014, the Turkish Parliament (Grand National Assembly of Turkey – TBMM) passed a bill authorizing the sending of troops to Syria and Iraq until 4 October 2015. The bill grants the government to decide on the use and the essence of the use of force in order to *“take all necessary precautions within the framework of international law against any security risk or terror threat to Turkey’s national security, to dispose of any threats that terror organizations operating in Iraq and Syria may direct to Turkey, and to ensure security in other potential risks such as mass migration”*⁴.

According to the Turkish constitution, the TBMM enjoys the authority to send Turkish troops abroad, but if the TBMM is on recess or is suspended, the country has suffered an immediate armed attack, and the decision to respond militarily is unavoidable and shall be made immediately, the President can authorize the use of force. Turkey has yet to form a new government after its recent elections and the results require the formation of a coalition government, a minority government or if neither option is possible, the carrying out of early elections. Furthermore, political parties in the parliament are divided on whether the PYD is actually a threat to Turkish national interests or not. Even though the previous AKP majority government will be in charge until a new government is formed and has a mandate until October 2015, the legitimacy of a decision to conduct military operations at this time would be strongly challenged by the public and opposition parties.

The Legality of a Turkish Incursion into Syria:

There are few conditions under codified international law and customary international law where a state can legally engage in aggression with another state, or in another state’s territory.

⁴ T24 (2014, October 2) “İşte Irak ve Suriye tezkeresinin tam metni”

The first of these is the “inherent right of individual and collective self-defence” as codified in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. At times, states have offered different perspectives on the article. A narrow reading suggests that the clause is only applicable at times when the state claiming legitimate self-defense is attacked first. Since Turkey has not been attacked by Syrian forces or any organization operating in Syrian territory, this narrow reading would not be applicable. The Assad regime, still recognized as the legitimate sovereign of the Syrian Arab Republic, has the right to request the military assistance of any foreign nation, but Ankara has been one of the fiercest advocates of deposing Bashar al-Assad, so this scenario is also not possible.

Combined with customary international law, most notably the Caroline incident of 1837, some states have argued that preemptive uses of force may also qualify for just self-defence if they satisfy three criteria: imminence, necessity and proportionality. Imminence suggests that, once attacked, the defending country either has to respond within a reasonable time frame with the aim of dispelling any future threats, or, more controversially, may attack in order to stop an imminent or incipient attack on its territory or assets. The necessity aspect has to do with whether the use of military action is necessary in given circumstances or not. Although they provide the grounds for self-defense, the UN Charter and customary international both agree that military action should be the last resort after all other alternatives have been exhausted. The final principle, proportionality, states that the reaction (or preemptive military action) to a threat should be proportionate to the threat that the country faces. Reprisals or preventive strikes (striking before the perceived threatening party manages to achieve the capability to pose an actual threat), for example, are not seen as legal courses of action by the UN Charter.

Alternatively states may resort to military force if sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as stipulated by Article 53 of the UN Charter. The UNSC may issue resolutions that directly authorize a state or states to use military force, such as Resolution 1244 (1999) which authorized a NATO-led peacekeeping force to be established in Kosovo, instruct states to take a specific military actions, such as Resolution 1973 (2011) which imposed a no-fly zone in Libya and instructed states to take “all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas... while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory”⁵. The UNSC may also authorize the use of “all necessary means” or “all necessary measures”, which includes military action, to be undertaken by member states, such as Resolution 940 (1994) concerning Haiti.

None of the resolutions that the UNSC has issued regarding the Syrian Civil War and ISIS⁶ so far have provided this wording. Against ISIS, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, the United Nations has focused on

⁵ UNSC Res. 1973 (2011) Art.4

⁶ For a list of UN Resolutions on Syria since the beginning of the civil war, please see: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un->

issues such as the foreign fighters, arms transfers, oil trade and smuggling, sanctions, assets freezes, so on and so forth, without authorizing the use of military means. Furthermore, in its related resolutions, the UNSC makes sure to reaffirm “the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Republic of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic”⁷.

Turkey could justifiably make the case that Damascus is not *de facto* in control of the territory that is the breeding ground for threats to Turkey, and is therefore “unwilling or unable” to suppress the threats to Turkey. This would allow Turkey to take military action on Syrian soil. This would not be the first time that Turkey justified its extraterritorial military operations based on the unwillingness or the inability of the host state. For example, regarding Turkish military operations against the PKK in Iraqi soil, Turkey stated to the UNSC in 1996:

*“Iraq cannot exercise its authority either on the territory or the airspace of a part of its country. Turkey, therefore, can at present neither ask the Government of Iraq to fulfil its obligation nor find any legitimate authority in the north of Iraq to hold responsible under international law for terrorists acts committed or originated there... [U]ntil Iraq is in a position to resume its responsibilities and perform its consequent duties under international law, Turkey has to take necessary and appropriate measures to eliminate the existing terrorist threat from the area...”*⁸

Still, even if Turkey can legitimately argue that the Assad regime is not in control of the territories in question, the aforementioned criteria for self-defense would still apply for Turkish actions to be deemed legal. To-the-point military actions with specific limited aims, targets and duration, such as airstrikes or shelling against ISIS positions would be easier to defend and may be considered “illegal but legitimate”, whereas establishing buffer zones would be much harder to defend legally. Nevertheless, if Turkey chooses preemptive military action before suffering an attack first, it would have to present compelling intelligence to the UNSC that the threat to Turkish soil and assets is imminent and requires extensive military action to dispel. So far, Ankara has not officially taken the issue to the UNSC and even if it does so in the future, it would be challenging, to say the least, to convince the permanent five members on the necessity of a large scale Turkish operation. Even the U.S., Turkey’s NATO ally has brushed off the idea with John Kirby, spokesperson for the US State Department, stating “*The Defense Department has made it clear that they don’t believe there’s a need*

[documents/search.php?IncludeBlogs=10&limit=15&tag=%22Security%20Council%20Resolutions%22+AND+%22Syria%22&ctype=Syria&rtype=Security%20Council%20Resolutions&cbtype=syria](https://www.edam.org/documents/search.php?IncludeBlogs=10&limit=15&tag=%22Security%20Council%20Resolutions%22+AND+%22Syria%22&ctype=Syria&rtype=Security%20Council%20Resolutions&cbtype=syria)

⁷ UNSC Res. 2199 (2015)

⁸ Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Letter from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkey addressed to the Secretary-General and to the President of the Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/1996/479 (July 2, 1996) quoted in Deeks, A.S. (2012) “Unwilling or Unable”: Toward a Normative Framework for Extraterritorial Self-Defense” Virginia Journal of International Law, Vol. 52 No.3 p.526

for that [buffer zone] at this time and that the use of coalition military assets in trying to affect a zone like that would... entail an awful lot in terms of logistics, time, resources and effort.”⁹

This leaves Turkey with one other alternative justification and that is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The R2P principle has been put forth as a “duty to prevent and halt genocide and mass atrocities” and is “a role that cannot be blocked by the invocation of sovereignty”.¹⁰ As explained in the United Nations web page, R2P consists of three pillars:

1. “The State carries the primary responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and their incitement;
2. The international community has a responsibility to encourage and assist States in fulfilling this responsibility;
3. The international community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes. If a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.”¹¹

Although it has been a welcomed addition into international law in 2005 and there have been cases in which the UN has mandated the use of military force to prevent civilian casualties in cases such as Resolution 1973 (2011) in Libya, what constitutes the R2P has been a controversial issue. For example, Russia has argued that its intervention in Georgia in 2008 had been due to a responsibility to protect the local population in South Ossetia from “genocide”¹². In response to criticisms that it did not get UNSC approval prior to conducting an operation in Georgia based on R2P, Moscow points towards NATO’s intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 which also was framed under humanitarian concerns but had not gained prior Security Council authorization. Therefore against all good intentions in introducing the concept to international law, R2P and humanitarian interventions in general have been a source of controversy and have murky legal basis if conducted without the approval of the United Nations Security Council.

In the current scenario, if it decides to invoke the concept, Turkey would need to point towards a realistic threat to or the rapid degradation of humanitarian conditions in order to be able to legitimately use this as a justification and seek UNSC approval. Even if it decides to forego seeking UNSC authorization, it would still need to present solid intelligence pointing towards the ethnic cleansing claims that Ankara has voiced or any other atrocity that is likely to be committed by the warring

⁹ Hurriyet Daily News (2015, July 1) “US rules out northern Syria buffer zone”

¹⁰ United Nations Web Page “The Responsibility to Protect” Accessed on 2 July 2015 from: <http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/responsibility.shtml>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Evans, G. (2008, 31 August) Los Angeles Times. Accessed from the International Crisis Group web page on 2 June 2015 from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/commentary/evans-russia-and-the-responsibility-to-protect.aspx>

factions in the region. Furthermore, Ankara would have to show how its planned course of action would prevent or alleviate the humanitarian crisis that it grounds its potential intervention on. In any case, under current conditions, critics would simply ask the question why Ankara decided to intervene now, but not at any other instance since the beginning of the Syrian civil war during all the atrocities that ISIS and others have conducted.

In order to alleviate likely international criticism that would arise from a unilateral operation, Turkey may seek to take the issue to NATO and ask for the support of its Allies. Referring to the Article V, the main tenet of the North Atlantic Alliance, may be seen as the main way of doing this, but there are several reasons as to why the article would not apply in this case.

Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty states that:

“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, *such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force*, [emphasis added] to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the [United Nations] Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.”

With a Protocol to the Treaty introduced in 1951 after the inclusion of Turkey and Greece Alliance, the treaty was extended to cover Turkish soil. The second article of the protocol states that:

“For the purpose of Article 5, an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack:

on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, *on the territory of Turkey* [emphasis added] or on the islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer;

on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories [emphasis added] or any other area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.”

For one, in order for Article V to be applicable, the NATO member has to be acting out of self-defense in response to an attack. The only instance when the article was invoked was in response to 9/11 attacks and Turkey has hinted at the possibility of invoking the article during the course of the Syrian civil war, especially after its military jet was downed by Syrian air defenses in 2012. Still, as things

stand at the time of writing, Turkey has not been a victim of an attack that would warrant Article V invocation.

Secondly, if Turkey decided to create a buffer zone within Syrian territory, its deployed forces would not be covered under Article V due to territorial limitations emphasized above. Furthermore, if Turkey faces an attack within its territory as a result of its military engagement in Syria, it would be challenging, to say the least, to convince the Allies that Ankara is entitled to collective self-defense rights under Article V even though it was Turkey that initiated an aggression in the first place. Article V is grounded on Article 51 of the UN Charter, which, as discussed above, would not provide legal justification for claiming self-defense after initiating military aggression first.

Finally, even assuming that Turkey manages to convince its Allies that the conditions would fall under Article V, the article does not guarantee that the Allies would provide military assistance to Turkey. The response that the Allies would give is left to their individual decisions as emphasized above, and the Allies' approval may amount to no more than a simple green light to Turkey.

The other alternative that Turkey has regarding NATO is to invoke Article IV, which calls for a consultation among the Allies if "in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened". Ankara has invoked Article IV several times since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. By invoking the article, Turkey may hope to convince the Allies of the necessity of its course of action, get political and logistical support or convince the US to plan coalition airstrikes in concert with Turkish concerns and operations, yet for the myriad of reasons listed above, including John Kirby's statements, this would be an uphill battle. The US' close cooperation with the YPG, which time and again has put Ankara and Washington at odds, would not help its case if Ankara is indeed planning an operation with the aim of halting YPG's advance in Syria.

In sum, unless Ankara is able to build a strong case based on a realistic assessment of the threat environment in Syria and convince the international community, the United Nations Security Council, and its Allies in NATO that a Turkish military action is necessary and proportionate to stop an imminent threat to Turkish soil and assets, it would have a hard time legitimizing any potential military action. If the Turkish administration decides to conduct an operation with a limited scope, such as targeting ISIS positions with artillery and airstrikes, Ankara would not be able to dodge criticism but its actions may be perceived as "legally problematic but legitimate" by some. On the other hand, under current conditions, creating a "safe zone" as voiced by the Turkish media, would be very hard to justify legally and may tarnish Turkey's reputation in the eyes of the international community.

Military Assessment: Operational Risks and Feasibility of a Safe Zone

In the second part of this report, EDAM analysts describe how Turkey could conduct optimum force generation, use principle maneuver units, and maintain adequate fire-support (in term of artillery and close air-support) for the widely discussed safe zone issues.

Above all, we should stress that there is a problematic ambiguity with regard to use of military instrument due to several scenarios voiced by the Turkish press sources. Furthermore, it should be underlined that although 30km deep incursion into the civil war-torn Syria is well within the range of the Turkish Armed Forces combat capabilities; such a campaign would be very risky and could be fought in a highly uncertain environment. As this part explains in detail, the Syrian civil war is the very recent example of hybrid warfare in which non-state armed groups could pose tactical capabilities that can significantly harm a conventionally superior regular military. In fact, those hybrid capabilities could be even more worrisome than the prospects of retaliation by the Baathist dictatorship's missile and air forces.

Related to the aforementioned drawbacks and risks, it is reported that the Turkish Armed Forces' top echelons have embraced a cautious approach when compared to the more enthusiastic political administration¹³. Without a doubt, under the new parameters of Turkey's civil-military relations, the military's reservations could only be understood within a professional and legal framework, and thereby, if the Turkish administration still opts for launching the incursion despite the risks, the Armed Forces would follow the orders. However, in the absence of crystal clear political objectives, Turkey might overlook one of the very fundamental Clausewitzian principles of War Studies that "if war is a part of policy, policy will determine its character"¹⁴

Assessing a Possible Turkish Incursion: Force Generation Issue

Although the Turkish press is voicing puzzling and unsophisticated stories about the density of a possible Turkish deployment in northern Syria, force generation is a technical issue that necessitates professional military assessment.

From a doctrinal standpoint, the level of troops committed would depend on several factors as follows:

- Force-to-Space Ratio
- Force-to-Force Ratio
- Force-to-Population Ratio
- Operational Theme

¹³ <http://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/soli-ozel/1096232-karar-zamanina-dogru>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

¹⁴ Colin, S. Gray., *War, Peace and International Relations*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p.22.

- Intended Political Objectives
- Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace Assessment
- The Adversary's Combat-Readiness and Military Capabilities
- Available Force to be Employed
- Troop Rotation Planning
- Friction Factors

Finding the right troop density for operations has always been a debate among defense experts and war studies scholars. It has not been only a doctrinal or military theoretical matter, but a true policy issue that many times politicians and cautious military elite could face serious disagreement unless political elite and military leadership develop a crystal clear, mutual understanding on politico-military objectives and operational conduct of a campaign, force generation could fall short of intended objectives. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear political set of goals, tactical gains cannot be translated into strategic success, and the military can find itself in a struggle for open-ended objectives on the battleground.

How to Determine the Right Troop Number for a Possible Turkish Incursion

For one, the 'safe zone' plans that are being discussed in the Turkish press nowadays necessitate clearing and holding hostile territory, which is far different from conducting a surgical or punitive strike. This is the major parameter that EDAM's military assessment would consider to analyze the required force concentration. force generation depends on many variables apart from territory, such as population, adversaries' capabilities, policy objectives, and operational theme.

In military doctrine, although there are many schools of thought to calculate force concentration levels, the dominant troop density ratio approach is the one formulized by James Quinlivan, a mathematician and military analyst at the RAND Corporation. According to Quinlivan's works, the minimum required ratio for stability operations is 20 security personnel for one thousand inhabitants (20:1000 ratio)¹⁵. Indeed, military studies have proven low troop density levels in populated enemy territories could undermine the operational success to a considerable level, regardless of technological sophistication. In this respect, while past examples of stability operations with deployed troop/local inhabitant ratio over 20:1000 have shown meaningful success in the field (*Bosnia in 1996 with 22.6 ratio, Kosovo in 1999 with 23.7 ratio*), cases that fell short of the 20:1000 ratio have proved to be

¹⁵ For the detailed military model see: James, Quinlivan., Burden of Victory: The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations, Summer 2003, for RAND review: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/periodicals/rand-review/issues/summer2003/burden.html>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

problematic (*Somalia in 1993 with 4.3 ratio, Afghanistan in 2002 with 0.5 ratio, Iraq 2003-2007 with 6.1 ratio*)¹⁶.

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- Troop Rotation Planning
- Friction Factors

Finding the right troop density for operations has always been a debate among defense experts and war studies scholars. It has not been only a doctrinal or military theoretical matter, but a true policy issue that many times politicians and cautious military elite could face serious disagreement unless political elite and military leadership develop a crystal clear, mutual understanding on politico-military objectives and operational conduct of a campaign, force generation could fall short of intended objectives. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear political set of goals, tactical gains cannot be translated into strategic success, and the military can find itself in a struggle for open-ended objectives on the battleground.

The biggest problem about a possible Turkish incursion is the ambiguous characteristics of “local” population in the targeted area. Turkish press sources reported 2-4 brigades, about 10 – 18 thousand troops, to be deployed depending on several options that the on the table¹⁷. Simply, given swift fluctuation of the internally displaced population in Syria, population/depopulation strategies by nearly all state and non-state belligerents of the civil war, and troublesome border security, it would be extremely hard to obtain clear information about the human terrain. Thus, adjusting the right force generation ratio in a 110km wide, 30km deep safe zone might be problematic.

¹⁶ Avi, Kober., “Can the IDF Afford a Small Army”, BESA Perspectives Papers no: 209, July 18, 2013.

¹⁷ <http://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/abdulkadirselvi/suriye-ile-savasa-mi-giriyoruz-2014751>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

Secondly, if the Turkish political and military leadership's force generation calculus depends on quantitative military doctrinal approaches, the numbers could be deceptive. Clearly, from a military standpoint, EDAM's assessment strongly suggests that we should be more cautious when calculating required force generation levels for the proposed operation. First and foremost, population size-based ratios are often criticized as they tend to treat all populations as equal. Although this makes sense statistically, in the zone of action militaries must consider social, ethnic, cultural, and demographical challenges found in large populations. Therefore, along with quantitative variables, qualitative variables have to be taken into consideration¹⁸. Secondly, given the friction factor, it is unknown whether the operation could face unforeseen provocations that could force the deployed Turkish units to mount deeper incursions.

With regard to the current safe zone debates, it should be underlined that red-blue forces identification on the ground is highly complex that even the most precise intelligence estimate could fail to anticipate. Ankara has few friendly forces in the possible zone of action, and could face menacing state and non-state enemies.

What to Expect in a Worst Case Scenario: A New Threat Assessment Urgently Needed for Hybrid Warfare Threats

The Turkish Armed Forces is one of the most experienced ones in low intensity conflicts and cross-border military operations in low intensity conflicts. Most of the current military leadership played important roles at several ranks during Turkey's decades-long struggle against PKK, known as *İç Güvenlik Harekatı – Internal Security Operations* in the Turkish Armed Forces' terminology.

Yet, the threat landscape in the Middle Eastern conflicts has changed drastically by the 2000s. In other words, the low intensity conflict threats of the 1990s have been replaced by hybrid threats with very different military and paramilitary characteristics. Briefly, hybrid warfare can be defined as a set of multi-modal engagements that *"incorporates a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder"*¹⁹. In this respect, advanced disruptive capabilities such as man portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) at the hands of non-state actors could significantly bleed conventionally superior armies. The tangible and destructive outcomes of hybrid threats on the battlefield for unprepared militaries were quite observable during the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) 2006 campaign against Hezbollah. Put simply, 30 casualties out of the IDF total 114 were tank crewmen. Furthermore, out of 400 tanks that the Israelis

¹⁸ Not sf 20.

¹⁹ Frank, G. Hoffman., *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Virginia, 2007, p.8.

operated in southern Lebanon, 48 were hit, 40 were damaged, and 20 were penetrated, while 5 Merkavas were completely destroyed²⁰.

EDAM's military monitoring on Syrian and Iraqi conflicts suggests that there are alarming MANPADS and ATGM capabilities on the ground that could pose threat to the Turkish forces in case of a cross-border deployment. For example, during the Islamic State's campaign against the Iraqi Security Forces, it is assessed that between the January–May 2014 period, 28 advanced Abrams tanks operated by the Iraqi Forces were damaged, five of them suffering full armor penetration. During the same period, at least six helicopters were shot down²¹. Moreover, the leaked videos from the Syrian Civil War show that non-state groups enjoy advanced MANPADS arsenals²², and there are evidences of a menacing black and gray arms market flow that brought Chinese systems like the HJ-8 ATGM²³ and FN-6 MANPADS into Syria²⁴. Apart from the Islamic State, other non-state actors that Turkey might face, such as YPG and/or al-Nusra Front, also enjoy critical tactical equipment such as automatic grenade launchers, captured TOW 2A ATGMs, anti-material rifles, to name a few²⁵.

Keeping the Turkish Tanks Marching and Rotary-Wings Flying Safely

Open-source news sources show that Turkey could probably use the 5th Armoured Brigade located in Gaziantep and the 20th Armoured Brigade located in Şanlıurfa as principal maneuver units in case of an incursion. The 20th Armoured operated in the *Operation Sah-Firat* with some 50 M-60A3 main battle tanks, when Turkey relocated the monumental Tomb of Suleyman Shah in February 2015²⁶. In addition, the 5th Armoured, to which the 2nd Army Commander Gen. Adem Huduti paid a visit at the time of writing, has already started to deploy its forces along the border area to reinforce frontier battalions²⁷. In the Turkish Land Forces doctrinal order of battle, armored brigades appear as robust units with tank, mechanized infantry, and artillery battalions²⁸. Since the outset of the civil war, these brigades, along with other border units, were strongly reinforced. Thus, they are reliable units with high combat-readiness levels.

²⁰ Matt. M., Matthews., *We were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Israel – Hezbollah War*, U.S. Combined Arms Center, 2006, p.64

²¹ <http://www.janes.com/article/39550/iraqi-abrams-losses-revealed>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec7_Kd8hINM, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txy6xkJadaA>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1VVnDONVok>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²⁵ Armament Research Services, Syria, <http://www.armamentresearch.com/tag/syria/>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²⁶ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/28266610.asp>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²⁷ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/29441095.asp>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

²⁸ IHS Jane's, *World Armies – Turkey*, October 15, 2012, pp.9-10.



(Armored and mechanized deployments of the 5th Armored Brigade to frontier battalions)

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/29441095.asp>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015



M-60A3 main battle tank from the 20th Armored Brigade during the relocation of the Tomb

<http://fotogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/galeridetay/92322/2/5/suleyman-ah-turbesine-operasyon>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015

On the other hand, hybrid warfare characteristics of the Syrian battleground could pose some significant threats to the Turkish armor. Under counter-insurgency (COIN) conditions against adversaries with hybrid capabilities, while armored units (tanks and infantry fighting vehicles-IFV) are reliable and formidable assets with high survivability and fire-power, they would need significant modifications in terms of protective armor, equipment, and mounted weapons. In this regard, while the standard combat weight for a British Challenger-2 tank and a Warrior IFV are 62.5 tons 24.5 tons

respectively²⁹, during the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan their combat weight had risen up to 75 tons and 30 tons for extra protection against IEDs, RPGs, and ensuring efficiency in new COIN roles³⁰. Following the casualties in 2006, the Israelis also followed the same path in a more comprehensive modernization manner through investing in stronger armor kits for more advanced systems such as the Merkava IV tanks and Namer IFVs³¹.

Therefore, in the light of the trends given above, in case the Turkish tanks deployed along the border areas have not been modified for hybrid challenges, there could be higher risks for damage and penetration. Also, the aforementioned MANPADS capabilities of several non-state actors in Syria, which could retaliate a Turkish campaign for different reasons (*i.e. YPG, ISIS, al-Nusra Front*), can significantly harm the Turkish Armed Forces' rotary-wing assets. In the absence of a precise military intelligence, all the given disruptive tactical challenges might translate into strategic problems.

Standoff Strike Option: Assessing the Military Feasibility

Amidst the debates on a possible safe zone campaign, some sources claim that the Turkish leadership could also opt for conducting standoff strikes in support of friendly rebel groups' progress on the battlefield³². In this regard, Turkey could use its 155mm *Firtina* self-propelled artillery and fixed-wing tactical aviation force. Employing attack helicopters would be risky due to the MANPADS threat noted earlier.

Over recent decades, key developments in guided and unguided munitions enabled important upgrades for the artillery, especially the 155mm class³³. In this category, 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 tactics³⁴. 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 seconds³⁵. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Ankara has been intensively deploying

²⁹ For detailed information, see: British Army: Vehicles and Equipment, http://www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/285986_ARMY_VEHICLESEQUIPMENT_V12.PDF_web.pdf, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

³⁰ David, E. Johnson and John Gordon IV., *Observations on Recent Trends in Armored Forces*, RAND Corporation, 2010, p.3.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.5.

³² <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/29406624.asp>, Accessed on: 3 July, 2015.

³³ Carlo, Kopp. "Artillery for the Army: Precision Fire with Mobility", *Defence Today*, Vol:4 No:3, 2005.

³⁴ Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industries Corporation (MKEK) fact sheet, <http://www.mkek.gov.tr/Katalog/MKEKProductCatalog.pdf>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

³⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-hit-syria-with-s-korean-designed-howitzers.aspx?pageID=238&nID=31653&NewsCatID=338>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

Firtina batteries along the border areas³⁶. Therefore, there is a wide-spectrum of options available for the Turkish deployed artillery, ranging from target of opportunities in the zone of action to “on-call targets” depending on tactical military intelligence capabilities and fire support plan.

When it comes to the Turkish Air Force, Turkey enjoys a robust forward-basing in Diyarbakir 8th Main Jet Base Group Command that provides adequate number of sorties without air-refueling, boosts on-station times for effective combat air patrol (CAP) missions and against pop-up targets, and enables quick reaction times. The 8th Main Jet Base hosts the 181 and 182 squadrons with attack and multirole fighter roles respectively³⁷. The Turkish Air Force enjoys required munitions for the intended purpose such as AGM-65 air-to-ground tactical missile for targeting enemy vehicles (including armor) and facilities, advanced air-to-air missiles (*such as the AIM-120 variants and shorter-range AIM-9 Sidewinder*) in case of an engagement with the Syrian Arab Air Force, and anti-radiation missiles (AGM-88 HARM) in case of an engagement with the Syrian air defenses³⁸. At the time of writing, it is reported that Turkey reinforced its air-wing in Diyarbakir with 20 F-16s, and the Turkish jets are flying patrol missions with clear rules of engagement at high-alert³⁹.

Although the aforementioned artillery and air force capabilities are robust, they cannot be solely depended on for maintaining permanent control over a safe zone, as discussed by the Turkish press. Firstly, maintaining control over a 110km long, 30km deep area would inevitably demand boots on the ground. Secondly, close air-support and artillery fire-support would only be effective in support of a meaningful friendly progress on the ground. Thirdly and finally, although the Turkish standoff capabilities would be formidable in a punitive or surgical strike, sustaining a high operational tempo for a long time would bring about unbearable burdens.

The Risk of Syrian Retaliation

Technically, what the Turkish press is discussing is a military operation in hostile territory. Thus, the risk of a Syrian retaliation should always be taken seriously.

Syria’s military capabilities, albeit seriously degraded due to the prolonged civil war, is assessed in detail by several previous EDAM publications⁴⁰. Briefly, although there are skeptical reports on the verification of the chemical deal, and assuming that the Baathist regime has kept its suspected biological weapons program active, we do not see a WMD retaliation risk likely. Such a course of action would change the global calculus drastically against the Assad regime that has to play its cards

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auTchs6KBUo>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

³⁷ IHS Jane’s, World Air Forces-Turkey, 2012.

³⁸ IISS, *Military Balance 2014*, 2014, p.148.

³⁹ <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sinirda-alarm-tsk-teyakkuza-gecti-gundem-2082112/>, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

⁴⁰ For detailed information see: <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=1148>, <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=146>, <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=148>,

very carefully. Yet, the regime could launch its ballistic missiles (*Scud B, C, and D variants with about 300, 600, and 700 km ranges respectively*) from deep territory. Due to the accuracy problems of the Baathist Regime's longer range missiles, their limited payloads, and questionable efficiency of conventional warheads, such a course of action would not significantly disrupt the Turkish operations. However, ballistic missiles are strategic weapon systems with psychological effects as terror weapons, and Assad's missile forces' retaliation could drag Turkey into a dangerous escalation, and demoralize the Turkish public opinion as well as deployed troops.

Secondly, the Syrian Arab Air Force might be a problem. Although the regime's air force faces a high level of attrition, it still flies Mig-29 squadrons that cannot match the Turkish F-16s, but may still pose risks. Besides, some military sources report that Damascus has reactivated its retired Mig-25 *Foxbats*, which are very fast interceptors with high maneuver capabilities⁴¹.

Without a doubt, the Syrian Arab Air Force cannot match the Turkish Air Force's air-to-air combat capabilities. However, just one single ejected-captured pilot situation, which could happen even due to a technical failure, could cause Ankara to find itself in a very sensitive situation.

Conclusion

Recent events near Turkish borders have been followed by a mobilization along the Turkey border and increased discussions of a potential Turkish intervention into Syria. The Turkish press has provided various speculations on both the political objectives and military nature of such an operation. So far, it appears that Ankara feels that its national interests are threatened by both ISIS' remaining presence near Turkish borders and the PYD's potential for solidifying its bid for statehood. Furthermore, policymakers in Ankara may be seeing a necessity to create a buffer zone with the aim of absorbing prospective mass refugee influxes or providing logistical assistance to rebel organizations favored by Ankara in their struggle against the Assad regime.

From an international law standpoint, the current conditions would provide Ankara with little, if any, justification to take comprehensive military action such as establishing a buffer zone, or 'safe zone', in Syrian territory. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Turkey would get assistance from its Allies at NATO or the support of the coalition effort against ISIS.

The military nature of such an intervention would depend strongly on the political objectives of Ankara and necessitates the military to take into account both qualitative and quantitative variables when planning the operation. Although Turkey has significant experience and military assets that

⁴¹ http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=d77_1396784614, Accessed on: July 3, 2015.

would allow it to accomplish its objectives, it may also suffer significant costs from a prolonged presence in Syria due to the complex threat environment of the civil war.

But given the complexities of such an operation, the associated risks and the almost formidable set of political, diplomatic, legal and military obstacles, Turkey's real aim in adopting a more interventionist tone is to refocus the attention of its partners in the West to the consequences of the Syria crisis for Turkey. With Obama's continuing disinclination to increase the US exposure in the Middle East and the political capital of Europe totally consumed with the Greek economic crisis, Turkey wants to remind its partners that the evolution of the Syrian crisis is reaching a turning point for Turkey's national interests. The territorial expansion of the Kurdish PYD, facilitated by the assistance provided by Turkey's Western partners combined with unending flows of refugees where Turkey is being asked to shoulder the short term humanitarian but also the longer term integration burden is compelling Turkish policy makers to raise the stakes. So the latest rhetoric may not necessarily be a prelude to an actual intervention, but it is the strongest signal, as of yet, of the heightened unease created in Ankara by the dynamics of the Syrian crisis. Turkey's latest actions also aim to create negotiating space for the new government with a view to reach an agreement with its partners in the West that would entail stronger guarantees against the territorial expansion of the PYD in return for a stronger Turkish commitment to the anti-ISIS coalition.