

Turkey prepares for bigger role in fight against Islamic State - It “could serve to curb growing Kurdish self-rule aspirations”

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Direct Turkish military engagement and the creation of a buffer zone could serve to curb growing Kurdish self-rule aspirations.

After months of hanging back amid angry accusations of collusion, Turkey is gearing up for a bigger role in the fight against Islamic State (Isis) that could include sending Turkish ground troops across the border into Syria and Iraq.

But counter-terrorism aside, Turkey’s leaders have another, less altruistic motive for getting involved: preventing independent-minded Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, who have links to Turkish Kurd separatists, from further strengthening and exploiting their position as key western allies.

Speaking after meetings with the Obama administration and others at the UN general assembly in New York, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish president, said: “The logic that assumes Turkey would not take a position militarily is wrong.” He said negotiations were under way about a potential ground operation in tandem with US-led air strikes.

“You can’t finish off such a terrorist organisation only with air strikes. Ground forces are complementary ... You have to look at it as a whole ... If there’s no ground force, it would not be [a] permanent [solution],” Erdoğan said.

This week Turkey’s parliament is expected to renew “hot pursuit” powers allowing Turkish armed forces to enter Syria and Iraq. Erdoğan and the prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, will meet military commanders to finalise a “road map” spelling out Turkey’s strategy [\[1\]](#), following the release this month of 46 Turkish hostages held by Isis.

“We had said we would have a different road map once we save our hostages. Now a different road map is being put in place, it will inshallah begin [to be implemented],” Erdoğan said.

Ankara wants to set up a buffer area inside Syria, protected by a no-fly zone, in part to halt the flow of refugees. An estimated 1.5 million Syrians are now in Turkey, including 160,000 Syrian Kurds who fled the recent fighting with Isis around Kobani. Ankara is also concerned that the international campaign against Isis may bolster the Alawite regime in Damascus of Bashar al-Assad, whose resignation it has demanded.

But under pressure from the US, Turkish attitudes are hardening. Turkey had an “obligation to fight”, Erdoğan said in Istanbul on Sunday. Recalling his UN talks last week, he went on: “All leaders, either in private talks or bilateral meetings, all said Turkey must be in.” In separate remarks, Davutoğlu echoed Barack Obama and David Cameron in terming Isis “barbaric” and un-Islamic.

Direct Turkish military engagement, and the creation of a Turkish-controlled buffer zone, could serve to curb growing Kurdish self-rule aspirations, which Ankara fears may inflame Turkey's large Kurdish minority and possibly wreck the current ceasefire with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK). Turkey has tried to prevent Turkish Kurds from crossing the border to help Syrian Kurds, prompting accusations of collusion with Isis.

Ömer Taspinar, a columnist for the Turkish daily Today's Zaman, wrote: "Ankara is concerned the American-led campaign against Isis will achieve two things. First, it will strengthen the Syrian Kurds, who maintain close ties with Kurdish separatists in Turkey. Second, it will strengthen the regime in Damascus ... Ankara will decide to play an active role in the coalition only if it gets serious commitments about reversing these dynamics."

Commentator Gökhan Bacık said the Kurds' fight against Isis was rapidly increasing their international legitimacy. "As a direct consequence, the Kurdish groups are becoming more organised, to the point that they are acting as a quasi-state."

Rather than take fright, Turkey's wisest course would be to forge a grand alliance with the Kurds, said analyst Şahin Alpay. "A sound policy requires that Ankara hastens the peace process with the PKK to meet the common democratic demands of the Kurds of Turkey in return for the PKK laying down arms against Turkey. It must also refrain from a policy of playing the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Syria against each other and instead strive for friendship and solidarity with all."

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P.S.

* "Turkey prepares for bigger role in fight against Islamic State". The Guardian, Monday 29 September 2014 12.54 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/turkey-role-fight-islamic-state-isis>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29368925>