

A TURKISH MISADVENTURE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

While Turkey has been active in the eight-year-old civil war in Syria, its recent military incursion significantly ups the ante on the conflict. Its egregiously named 'Operation Peace Spring' aims to create a "safe zone" that is 480 km wide and up to 35 km deep inside Syria. Ankara says it intends to relocate some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey in this "safe zone".

The Istanbul-based Ottoman Khilafat ruled most of West Asia, including Syria, till the end of World War I. The Ottoman Empire and Khilafat were both abolished by the nationalist revolution spearheaded by Kemal Ataturk, and replaced with a unitarian, secular republic with a Turkish national identity. However, its legacy still reverberates, as seen in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's efforts to revive ties with the Muslim world and in his constant emphasis of Turkey's Islamic roots. About 20 million Kurds, a quarter of Turkey's population, live in the underdeveloped south-east. By subsuming Kurdish sub-national identity, Turkish nationalism resulted in politico-economic discontent among Kurds. It fuelled a Kurdish insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara calls a terrorist organisation. A smaller number of Kurds live in Iran, Iraq and Syria. Although most Kurds have conformed to their respective nationalities, aspiration for a unified homeland, Kurdistan, remains.

Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria have leveraged the political upheaval triggered by the Arab Spring. Iraqi Kurds have created the Kurdish Regional Government, a proto-state with tentative ties with Baghdad. Syrian Kurds have cobbled together a militia called People's Protection Units (YPG), trained and equipped by the U.S. and its allies. YPG has become the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which played a frontal role in decimating the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Turkey has been increasingly alarmed at the growing Kurdish power in Syria and Iraq and has been fretting about the impact of this on its own Kurdish insurgency. It perceives YPG as a terrorist outfit nominally allied to the PKK. Ankara has used its Syrian Islamist proxies to contain the YPG and also intervened militarily on its own.

Turkey draws a red line at Kurds being militarily active on both sides of the Syria-Turkey border. An unstated objective of the current operation is to thwart that possibility by carving out a border strip under Turkish military control. Ironically, this first-ever Turk-Kurd military confrontation may harden mutual antipathy and foster Kurdish unity. The other objective of settling the Syrian refugees in the "safe zone" also seems unrealistic. Syrian refugees largely mirror their homeland's ethnic diversity and many among them are economic migrants. Thus only a few would be willing to relocate to a largely arid, Kurdish-dominated "safe zone". Moreover, the current hostilities have begun creating more refugees, mostly Kurds, living in the war zone. Lastly, Turkish attack and U.S. betrayal have prompted the SDF to join hands with Assad. Thus the military action runs the risk of creating the very conditions it was intended to prevent.

Mr. Erdogan may have domestic reasons for muscle flexing. His party lost the June mayoral election in Istanbul. He has often alleged coup plots by the military and Islamists. His Islamism contradicts Kemalist secular traditions. He may hope that a successful military campaign could bolster his popularity among Turks who are increasingly wary of Syrian refugees.

Turkey has the second largest armed forces in NATO, and the SDF is unlikely to match them in a frontal confrontation. Flat and arid terrain also favours the Turkish military. However, the battle-hardened Kurdish militia may not be a walkover in a subsequent asymmetric warfare, turning the Turkish foray into a costly mistake. Further, the SDF holds thousands of IS prisoners

who may flee, taking advantage of the conflict, and unleash their abhorrent brand of terror.

The Turkish military intervention can have wide-ranging consequences beyond the war zone. It would complicate the endgame in Syria. In a rare sign of unity, the Arab League has already condemned it. It could spillover into Europe where a significant number of Kurds and Turks live. In the past century, the Kurdish quest for an elusive Kurdistan has led to their betrayal by a number of regional and foreign powers, of which the U.S. is only the latest. This sudden abandonment of the SDF by the U.S. would further diminish American credibility in this region. While diplomatic flux may intensify, most observers expect the hostilities to continue in the foreseeable future. Thus, the unfolding developments may, yet again, underline the Kurdish adage “Kurds have no friends except the mountains”.

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