

Turkey's ambivalence toward joining a US coalition against IS reflects the country's difficult strategic position

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The United States has been in the process of building a coalition of countries against IS militants in Iraq. Although Turkey has been involved in these discussions, it did not sign a joint statement which was backed by a number of other states in the region. [Ryan Kennedy](#) and [Halil Bilecen](#) write on Turkey's difficult strategic position, noting that the country is attempting to balance several competing interests. These include attempts to free 49 Turkish hostages currently held by IS, and Turkey's complex relationship with the Kurdish populations both within and beyond its borders.



The rise of the Islamic State (IS – formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) in northern Iraq and Syria has drawn an increasingly bold response from western states. The United States has commenced air strikes and humanitarian airdrops in Iraq. Meanwhile Germany, Australia and the US, among others have started sending arms to Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq and are exploring plans to expand these shipments in the near future.

All of this has left the Turkish government with something of a dilemma. On the one hand, the rise of IS directly affects the security of Turkey. The activities of IS has increased the violence in and refugee flows from Turkey's southern border. IS also claims parts of southern Turkey as part of the territory it aspires to control. In a video released by Vice News in August, for example, an IS activist threatened that the group would "liberate" Istanbul if the government did not reopen a dam on the Euphrates river.

On the other hand, Turkey has a long history of violent conflict with the Kurdish population in its south-eastern region and has, at times, been hostile towards the empowerment of the Kurdish populations in northern Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was viewed with hostility in Ankara, which refrained from extending legitimacy to the KRG for much of the post-Saddam era. Some in Ankara feared that KRG leaders would support the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in attempting to establish a Kurdish state that included parts of south-eastern Turkey.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and John Kerry at the recent NATO summit in Wales, Credit: U.S. Government Work

Yet, the response from the Turkish government about both the threat from IS and the arming of Kurdish fighters has been surprisingly muted. For a NATO member with direct strategic interests in the conflict, Ankara's relative silence on the subject seems unusual and has led to much speculation about what Turkey's policy will be with regard to the response to IS. This was apparent in Turkey's reluctance to sign a [joint-statement](#) against IS on 11 September, which was put together by the United States and several other Arab States including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan.

There are several reasons for the government's decision not to take a firm stance on the crisis. The first involves the domestic politics of Turkey. On 10 August, Turkey held its first [direct presidential elections](#). Former Prime Minister

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the election in the first round, with a slim majority of 52 per cent. Given the dramatic events on its southern border, it was notable that there was very little discussion of IS by Erdoğan or his party during the election campaign, likely due to the role that the government's policies played in the rise of IS.

In the early stages of Syria's breakdown, Turkey attempted to play the role of mediator. The country had decent relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime and thought it could bring the parties together to avoid a security and humanitarian crisis. This hope was abandoned in the summer of 2012 after Syria downed a Turkish military jet during training exercises. From that point on, Turkey maintained an open border policy with Syria that allowed anti-Assad fighters and their weapons to cross its borders easily. This policy played a key role in allowing foreign fighters to join IS and arm the group. With the rise of IS, Turkey has begun to regret its indiscriminate support for anti-Assad groups. It has tightened security along the border and increased screening of passengers on flights into Turkey. The government, however, has little incentive to place public emphasis on an issue that is likely to tarnish its foreign policy credentials both domestically and internationally.

A second reason for the lack of a strong stance from Turkey is that it has grown increasingly close with the KRG in recent years. Starting in 2009, the Turkish government recognised that military means alone would be ineffective at disarming PKK fighters in the north-eastern corner of Iraq's Kurdish controlled territory. This normalisation of ties with the KRG, sometimes labelled the "Kurdish opening," was partially inspired by domestic events, as the government attempted to address the country's internal Kurdish issues and solidify the ruling AK Party's support in Kurdish regions.

As a result of this policy, Turkey and the KRG have moved forward with an energy partnership that includes the construction of pipelines across the border for the export of oil from northern Iraq, a move that has been strongly opposed by the central Iraqi government. In June, Huseyin Celic, then spokesperson for the AK Party surprised many when he suggested that, if Iraq were to be partitioned, the government would support the right of the Kurdish regions to self-determination. He emphasised, however, that a divided Iraq was not Turkey's "number one choice." Thus, while Turkey is unlikely to directly support sending arms to the KRG, as some of those arms may end up in the hands of PKK militants, they also do not see the KRG itself as a direct threat.

Turkey also draws a distinction between the Kurds in northern Iraq and the Kurds in Syria. While there has certainly been some animosity between the Turkish government and the KRG, Ankara generally views the Kurdish population in Syria with greater suspicion. This is partially due to the role that Syria played in sheltering Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's primary leader, in the 1990s and the affiliation between the Kurdish militia that currently controls the region and the PKK. Thus, at the same time as Turkey has moved to normalise relations with the KRG, relations with Syria's Kurdish militias remain dissonant. This distinction is important to note, as Turkey's ambivalence to arming Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq is unlikely to extend to policies involving arming Kurds in Syria.

Finally, Turkey's policies must also take into account the hostages currently being held by IS. On 11 June, 49 people, including Turkish Consul General Ozturk Yilmaz and other diplomatic staff, members of the special forces and children, were taken hostage by IS. As recently as 1 September, the Turkish government confirmed that it believed the 49 hostages were still alive and that they were optimistic about their release. The hostage crisis has been a difficult issue for the government. Shortly after IS captured the hostages, a court imposed a ban on reporting on the crisis. The media ban was only recently lifted, although the government has still asked the media to be careful in the questions they ask. The crisis has limited Turkey's ability to act directly against IS, and is one of the reasons why Turkey has remained surprisingly silent on the crisis.

In sum, the Turkish government's lack of a clear response to the IS threat and to the actions of some of its NATO allies has roots in the difficult dilemma in which officials find themselves. While this is certainly a high priority issue for the government, their ability to take direct action is quite limited. Ankara is likely, at least in the near-term, to let its NATO allies take the driver's seat in dealing with IS and hope that the situation will develop in a way that provides strategic clarity.

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