CRS Insights

Turkey-U.S. Cooperation Against the "Islamic State": A Unique Dynamic?
Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs (jzanotti@crs.loc.gov, 7-1441)
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U.S. strategic objectives regarding cooperation with Turkey, a NATO member and Sunni Muslim-majority country, in countering the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL) in Syria and Iraq appear to include

- Avoiding attacks on or the destabilization of Turkey;
- Minimizing the use of Turkish territory by extremists; and
- Using Turkish territory and airspace and/or partnering with Turkish forces for military purposes and to further strengthen and diversify Sunni support within the anti-IS coalition.

For background information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

Overview

Following the September 20, 2014, release by IS of 49 hostages associated with the Turkish consulate in Mosul, Iraq, Turkish leaders have indicated willingness to expand the nature of Turkey's participation in the anti-IS coalition beyond the measures it reportedly began taking while the hostages were still in IS hands. These measures include curbing fighters' access to Syria and aiding humanitarian and logistical efforts. Turkey's openness to expanding its role possibly stems at least in part from calculations about what its coalition partners may demand in order to actively include Turkey in shaping developments in an area it views as crucially important. International concerns surrounding the fate of the IS-besieged, Kurdish-populated town of Kobane, Syria (also known as Ayn al Arab), are highlighting broader questions about whether, how, and under what conditions Turkey might become more involved.

Turkey's parliament voted on October 2, 2014, to approve potential military operations in Syria and Iraq launched from Turkey by Turkish or foreign forces. On October 12, U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice stated that Turkey had agreed to allow the use of its territory by coalition forces to train "moderate Syrian opposition forces" and to "engage in activities inside of Iraq and Syria." In apparent response to media speculation regarding whether such activities might include coalition use of Turkey's Incirlik air base for airstrikes in Syria or Iraq, Turkish officials subsequently stated that the use of Incirlik has not been agreed upon and that negotiations on the matter were ongoing.

Sources: Various. See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

Situation and Policy Assessment

A complicated array of considerations—including parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2015—affects Turkish calculations. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and 2012, Turkey, which shares a long border with Syria (more than 500 miles), has sought to minimize its security threats while also influencing regional outcomes. Stalemate and protracted conflict in Syria have exposed Turkey to increasing risks related to the long-term status of the approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey as well as to criticisms that Turkey has allowed extremists, including foreign fighters, to transit or seek safe haven in Turkish territory or use it as a market for smuggled oil.

Other factors include

- **The Kurdish Issue and Sectarian Concerns.** Despite rhetoric promising to do "whatever we can" to prevent an IS takeover of Kobane and reportedly allowing around 200,000 (mostly Kurdish) people from the Kobane area to take refuge over the border, Turkish leaders have shown reluctance to allow fighters or weaponry to flow to Syrian Kurds (particularly the Democratic Union Party or PYD/YPG) without statements or actions signifying unambiguous PYD opposition to Asad. The Turkish government might fear potentially negative reactions by Sunni Turks, who might characterize efforts to counter Sunni influence (Islamic State) in Syria as benefitting the Alawite-dominated and Iran-allied Asad regime.

  Assisting the PYD would also have domestic sensitivity because of likely concerns about bolstering Turkey's longtime Kurdish adversary, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, of which the PYD is generally viewed as an affiliate or offshoot). Kurdish unrest intensified throughout Turkey in early October, suggesting that Turkish efforts to prevent military assistance to Kobane presents its own risks. After reported Kurdish militant attacks against Turkish military outposts, Turkey launched airstrikes against PKK positions on October 13, leading to concerns about the future of ongoing efforts by the Turkish government and the PKK to reach a long-term political accommodation.

  Turkish officials announced on October 20 that they would allow Kurdish fighters affiliated with Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to transit Turkish territory into Kobane to assist PYD forces against IS, though Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has voiced opposition to PYD control over Syrian territorial enclaves. It is unclear how the new fighters might work with the

PYD, as the KRG's priorities are generally distinct from the PKK and PYD, possibly underscoring broader KRG-PKK rivalry for leadership and influence among Kurds throughout the region. Earlier in October, possibly due to KRG urgings, the U.S. military had stepped up airstrikes on IS positions in and near Kobane. U.S. officials, after notifying Turkey on October 19, ordered the air drop of KRG-supplied weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies (without overflying Turkey) to Syrian Kurds defending Kobane—a measure described by Secretary of State John Kerry as "not a shift in policy" but "a crisis moment, an emergency." Though the United States (as well as the European Union) designates the PKK as a terrorist organization, the State Department says that "the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under United States law."

- **Self-Defense and NATO.** Although Turkey has amassed ground forces at the border, its leaders may be reluctant to make a unilateral military incursion into Syria against IS, even if they could claim self-defense. They probably are concerned about IS reprisals, including possible sleeper cells. Additionally, if Turkey can be portrayed as an aggressor party, other NATO member states might be less inclined to consider themselves obligated to respond to a Turkish invocation of the collective self-defense guarantee (under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) following attacks against Turkish territory.

- **U.S. Commitment—Possible "Safe Zones" and Anti-Asad Efforts.** Turkey—along with the United States and a number of other countries—has advocated Asad's ouster since late 2011. Turkey may be cautious about taking on the risks of military action without a larger sense of the nature and level of U.S. commitment to that goal and to other key Turkish concerns. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has insisted that greater Turkish participation in the anti-IS coalition can take place only if "safe zones" are established in northern Syria—preferably with the assistance of air power from the United States—and if train-and-equip efforts against Asad are intensified.

Though some U.S. officials appear to be open to considering the idea of safe zones, which may share historical parallels with the zone created in northern Iraq in 1991, as of early October the concept was reportedly not being actively considered by military planners. Questions exist regarding for what purposes such zones would be used; their possible territorial scope and political/legal mandate; and the extent to which U.S., Turkish, and/or other forces would have the capacity and will to establish and patrol them. Would such zones make eventual conflict with Asad and his supporters more or less likely, and what effects might such zones have on broader regional, ethnic, and sectarian dynamics?