



What is Next for Turkey after the Fall of Aleppo?

By Mustafa Gurbuz

December 14, 2016

After the fall of Aleppo, Turkey's capacity to maneuver in the region will suffer tremendously. Indeed, the fall of Aleppo has increased tensions among Syrian opposition actors. Disenchanted with Turkey's role, some high-ranking members in the Islamist coalition Ahrar al-Sham revolted against the groups' leadership on December 10. Ankara is accused of weakening the rebels in Aleppo, especially after Turkish military officials requested and channeled thousands of Syrian fighters toward Manbij, a city in the Aleppo governorate, to prevent Syrian Kurds from forming a contiguous zone. Some rebels believe that Erdogan agreed with Putin to give up Aleppo in exchange for greater mobility in the eastern countryside. Resentment toward Ankara is especially high among Ahrar al-Sham's previous leadership, which advocated for a merger with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda) but could not succeed because of Turkish rejection.

Aleppo's fall led to Turkey-backed rebels seeking advances toward Al-Bab, a strategic town located 40 kilometers northeast of Aleppo. Several factors, however, complicate Turkey's maneuvering capacity: the Kurdish role in the Raqqa offensive, the potential radicalization in Idlib, and increasing dependence on Russia to save the Turkish economy.

The Question of the Raqqa Offensive

Clashes between the two US allies—Turkey-backed rebels and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—continue to present the most difficult challenges that have stalled the offensive on Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Given the fact that President-elect Donald Trump has spoken positively about both Erdogan and the Syrian Kurds, the situation requires delicate diplomacy.

Rumors in Ankara's political circles reveal that Erdogan may seek to exert more influence in both the Manbij region as well as in Afrin (both in the Aleppo governorate), and thus to create a de facto "no fly zone" starting from Jarablus on the western Euphrates. Such a plan would get some Syrian rebels on board as they seek refuge from intense Russian bombardment. Yet, it may trigger a total war between Syrian Kurds and Turkey-backed forces because the northern Syrian Shahba region and Afrin have long been declared as autonomous cantons.

The only way out of this deadly scenario may be a new round of negotiations between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This seems unlikely in the short term,

however, due to Erdogan's alliance with Turkish nationalists, which allows him to gain additional parliamentary seats that would pave the way to constitutional change for his executive presidency. Domestic terror attacks such as the recent Istanbul bombings, on the other hand, harm the prospects for peace. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), an offshoot of the PKK, claimed responsibility, whereas the Turkish government accused the Kurdish YPG forces of being involved in the plot. The day following the bombings, the Turkish government arrested 290 officials of the HDP, the pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish parliament. Such escalation of conflict and indiscriminate attacks by both sides feed Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms alike and may have serious implications for Syria.

The Future of Idlib

Aleppo's fall has brought Idlib to the forefront as a potential springboard for Syrian rebels. Adjacent to the 50-mile-long Turkish border, Idlib has received strong support from Ankara and this has enabled rebel attacks in Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia. As the emboldened Assad regime vows to crush Idlib, Turkey's strategy now appears to be more critical for the revolutionaries. Ankara has two main concerns.

First, Turkey's incursion into Syria in August 2016 was negotiated not only by the United States but also by Russia, with the agreement that Turkey would target ISIS militants. Earlier, in November 2015, Turkey's bold act of shooting down a Russian jet led to disastrous outcomes that forced Erdogan to apologize. Thus, Ankara may have a hard time if Russia is determined to crush the opposition in Idlib's border settlements, including Jisr al-Shughur in the west and Al-Dana in the east. To be sure, Turkey would never risk direct military confrontation with Russia.

Second, a growing disillusionment with Turkey among the Syrian opposition will have real consequences in Idlib. Suspicious of the Erdogan-Putin rapprochement and feeling "betrayed" by the United States after the fall of Aleppo, more rebels may find strong jihadist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the re-branded Jabhat al-Nusra) as their home. Although the group is still regarded in the West as Al-Qaeda, it remains the most formidable enemy of the Assad regime in the Idlib region. Even if a potential Trump-Putin alliance against jihadists never materializes, the support of Turkey and the Gulf regimes to these rebels may suffer significantly due to a new wave of radicalization. President-elect Donald Trump's discourse on Syrian opposition and Muslim refugees is not helpful when dealing with such a trend of growing frustration.

The Erdogan-Putin Rapprochement

If Erdogan, Putin, and Assad can agree on one thing, it is the containment of Syrian Kurdish enclaves. The Syrian regime aims for “double containment” of both Turkish and Kurdish influence; such enmity benefits Assad, who recently stated that Kurdish cantons are temporary. The recent rapprochement between Erdogan and Putin, therefore, ensured Turkish presence in Syria as Syrian Kurds are strongly supported by the United States.

Moreover, the botched coup in Turkey in July 2016 has led to a significant restructuring in the Turkish military, not only in favor of Erdogan but also in favor of Putin. The anti-NATO elements—popularly known as *Avrasyacılar* (Eurasianists)—have gained a remarkable stronghold. Tensions among high ranking officers have deep historical roots, but it is unprecedented to see Erdogan’s alliance with secular-nationalist generals who have deep resentments for NATO.

Increasing securitization and the mass civic purge following the coup attempt, however, led to further deterioration of the long-fragile Turkish economy—which may not be perceived as a bad development from Moscow’s perspective. As the country’s economy contracted for the first time since 2009, Erdogan recently proposed to replace the US dollar with the Turkish lira and Russian ruble in bilateral trade. Moscow was swift in welcoming the proposal. In this regard, Erdogan’s bid for executive presidency is noteworthy. Economic stability will be Erdogan’s key to receiving public support; thus, relations with Russia and his alliance with Turkish nationalists will be important. In the current configuration of the Turkish parliament, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) needs the support of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in order to set up a public referendum for constitutional change, expected to be held in April 2017.

With critical challenges at home and abroad, Ankara faces a poor list of policy options in Syria after the fall of Aleppo.