

Doug Bandow: Turks should lead ISIS fight

Doug Bandow | Sep 12, 2014

America apparently believes its allies to be wimps and weaklings. Why else would NATO officials promise to defend Turkey from the Islamic State? Surely this well-armed U.S. ally can hold off a few thousand Islamic irregulars, some of whom Ankara allowed to enter Syria, the country next door.

The rise of the Islamic State has led to much nonsense from Washington officials who speak as if the group was capable of conquering America. ISIS is made up of dangerous fanatics, but, in the form of the Islamic State, they are largely powerless to harm the U.S.

Their conventional capabilities are minimal compared with those of the U.S. Moreover, so long as the Islamists are attempting to conquer territory, they cannot afford to launch terrorist attacks on America, which would bring down the full wrath of the U.S. military.

Among the states threatened by ISIS is Turkey. This led NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to promise to defend Ankara: "If any of our allies, and in this case, of course, particularly Turkey, were to be threatened from any source of threat, we won't hesitate to take all steps necessary to ensure effective defense of Turkey or any other ally."

However, Ankara is partly to blame for ISIS' rise. The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan decided to support the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and allowed opposition fighters from all sides, including ISIS, easy access to the battlefield.

Reported the Washington Post: "Eager to aid any and all enemies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Turkey rolled out the red carpet." The government simply looked the other way as members of the Islamic State and other Islamist groups traveled to Syria.

Indeed, added the Post, Islamic State fighters treated the Turkish border town of Reyhanli "as their own personal shopping mall." Jihadis purchased supplies, and wounded fighters were treated in local hospitals. One Islamic State commander told the newspaper that "most of the fighters who joined us in the beginning of the war came via Turkey, and so did our equipment and supplies."

A politician from Reyhanli, Tamer Apis, complained that the government "welcomed anyone against Assad, and now they are killing, spreading their disease, and we are all paying the price." While there was a lot of blame to go around, "this is a mess of Turkey's making," he said.

The Erdogan government since has changed course, confronting insurgents it once welcomed. But passage for people and materiel through the 565-mile border with Syria still is available at a price.

Moreover, the worst damage has been done. Bloomberg reported that ISIS “has already established itself firmly in Turkish society.” An Islamic State military leader explained: “Now we are getting enough weapons from Iraq, and there is enough to buy even within Syria. There is no real need to get things from outside anymore.”

Turkey is paying the price of its own folly. There’s no reason to share the burden with 27 other NATO members. Especially since Ankara can easily defeat anything ISIS can muster.

The number of ISIS fighters has been estimated at around 10,000. Turkey has an armed forces of more than a half million. The Institute for Strategic Studies reported: “The army is becoming smaller but more capable. ... The air force is well-equipped and well-trained ... the military has ambitious procurement plans.”

Why would NATO have to protect Turkey?

Indeed, Ankara should be thinking offensively. If the Islamic State consolidates its position, Turkey is likely to be a site for the group’s expanded activities.

Last year, ISIS troops told a captured Turkish photojournalist that Erdogan and other top officials were “infidels” and claimed that “Turkey is next.” One brigade was made up mostly of Turks.

Ankara is part of NATO’s “core coalition” targeting ISIS. Why are U.S. planes and drones striking Islamic radicals operating next door to Turkey when its forces could take the lead?

ISIS is evil, but that does not make it a serious military threat against America. The Islamic State is a much more significant threat against Middle Eastern states, such as Turkey. These nations also hold the key to the group’s defeat. They have the interest and capability. As Islamic nations, they also have credibility.

All that’s lacking is necessity. If Washington or NATO rushes in to relieve them of responsibility, they likely won’t act. For once, these nations should be held responsible for their past policies.

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