Turkey's Reluctance to Help Against ISIS Should Be a Red Flag

By Ivan Eland
October 13, 2014

The questionable continuance of the NATO alliance after the Cold War ended is demonstrated by Turkey's reluctance to help against the rampaging group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The alliance was originally supposed to defend NATO members against a Soviet attack but, in the post-Cold War era, has expanded in territory and mission (power projection to other parts of the globe). In the current "crisis," ISIS has been attacking close to Turkey in Kurdish areas along the Turkish-Syrian border and in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. Although the NATO allies, ever led by the United States, have pledged to defend Turkey against ISIS, as NATO's governing treaty requires for a member state, Turkey has done nothing to help the desperate Kurds fighting the group to keep the town of Kobani on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border. As usual, the NATO alliance--which long ago became an end in itself to demonstrate U.S. power and prestige, rather than providing the United States any real security--seems rather one-sided. Of course, Turkey, with a huge and capable army deployed along its border with Syria, does not need much help in defending itself from the ragtag ISIS group with only 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria--and far fewer along Turkish borders. Finally, the United States had to coerce Turkey into at least letting allied aircraft use the large air base at Incirlik to bomb ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

One-sided and out-dated alliances aside, Turkey's seemingly strange reluctance to see the danger from ISIS should be a red flag to the United States. During the Cold War and after, the hyperactive U.S. superpower has constantly seen local threats as more severe than the countries in a particular region. Yet one would think that regional actors would have a better idea of threats to themselves than a distant colossus, which often behaves like a nervous Nellie. They often do, and thus the United States has leaped into what turned out to be the quagmires of Korea, Vietnam, Pakistan/Afghanistan, and Iraq--in which the threats to the United States turned out to be vastly exaggerated. Turkey's reluctance to dive into a seeming threat right on its border should be a wake up call to halt the U.S. slide into another bog in Iraq and Syria.

Turkey is not helping the desperate Kurds against ISIS across the border in Syria because it fears the Kurds more than it does ISIS. For decades, Turkey has been fighting a civil war with its own Kurdish population that has killed 30,000 people. The Kurds are a stateless people in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq, although they have an autonomous region in Iraq and want one in Syria--

both of which the Turks also fear could embolden their own Kurds to want the same, or even independence from Turkey. The bad news for Turkey and the United States is that the most effective fighting force against ISIS has been the Kurdish PKK fighters from Turkey and its YPG Syrian affiliate--not the Peshmerga militias from the Kurdish region of Iraq or the Iraqi Army, both of which had trouble against the group. However, the PKK has also fought the Turks for years, is Marxist, and is on the U.S. terrorism list.

And there's more bad news for the U.S. war effort. In Iraq, the best hope for the United States is to turn the Sunni tribes from supporting Sunni ISIS to fighting it--just as the those same tribes were turned from supporting Sunni al Qaeda in Iraq to supporting the United States during its occupation. The problem is that this trick will be difficult to achieve a second time because before, the United States promised that the U.S-backed, Shi'ite-dominated government in Iraq would allow the minority Sunnis back into the Iraqi military an government bureaucracy. Those promises were broken, and instead the Iraqi Sunni tribes received nothing but oppression from the Iraqi government. Thus, in general, the tribes fear and loathe that government more than they do ISIS. ISIS is so effective largely because of the support from Sunni tribes. Even the few tribes that have partnered with the Shi'ite government have done so very warily.

Finally, the Sunni groups battling the Alawite (a branch of Shi'ite Islam) government of Bashar al Assad in Syria hate and fight each other as much as they do that regime. The Free Syrian Army--which is the United States's only hope for a ground force it can use against ISIS in Syria-- is pathetically weak compared to the other groups, such as ISIS and the al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra.

If this all seems to be a complicated morass, it is! Since ISIS is only a threat to the region, not the United States, the United States should avoid taking ISIS's bait and limit its involvement in the conflict, thus denying the group a tool to recruit added fighters and garner greater monetary contributions. As for Turkey, if the United States does not want to abrogate the NATO alliance (which would be wise but unlikely), the U.S. military should help defend the country with airstrikes if ISIS attacks it but otherwise wish Turkey good luck in dealing with the threats to its region from the Kurds and ISIS.

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