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Issue Brief

TURKEY & THE INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

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At sunrise, on the 24th of August 2016, the Turkish forces opened fire on the ISIL border posts in Jarabulus, in an attempt to rid the town of their 2 year long hostile occupation. This Turkish offensive in Syria was well-rounded as the air strikes and ground troops supplemented each other. The Turkish ground forces were assisted by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian rebels while the US war planes overhead unleashed bombs over the Islamic State of Iraq & Levant (ISIL) forces. The ISIL weighed its options wisely and pulled its battered forces back to Al-Bab. Thus Jarabulus stands free. But is the battle ridden town truly free from the vicious cycle of political and strategic interests that is being run in Syria? It is not.



While Syria has become a land of unnerving humane disaster, it has also ushered in the most unlikely alliances among countries that have had deep historical rifts. After decades of enmity between Turkey and Russia, both countries have set out to fight a common enemy, ISIL, a global anathema that needs to be destroyed completely. However, the Turkish intentions stand to objectionable scrutiny. Global politics is abuzz with speculations that Turkey's objective behind the offensive was to keep away the Kurdish threat. The ulterior motive was conveniently wrapped up in attractive packaging of the 'noble'

cause of rooting out the 'evil' of ISIL. The situation becomes even more complicated with Turkey's involvement as the Kurdish forces in Syria, which it wants to destroy, are close allies to the US mission in Syria. In fact, according to different reports, the Kurds are the only real force in Syria to be reckoned with. Their manoeuvres are organized and systematic with a promising number of fighting men and women. Owing to the Turkish reservations regarding the Kurdish separatist campaigns, the Jarabulus military offensive has given rise to misgivings about their targets in northern Syria. Age old enmity combined with the thirst for regional domination has led Russia to voice its concerns regarding the extent of Turkish military involvement in Syria. Russian apprehensions have surfaced in the media recently, urging Ankara to observe sovereign boundaries. They have also reiterated that the attacks must be carefully targeted only at the ISIL hideouts. However, this Russian reaction to this entire intervention is dubiously lukewarm.

Turkey, however, is moving ahead with its forces, freeing towns and gaining more ground without paying heed to the admonitions of Iran and Russia. It may seem as an affront on the Russian mission in Syria, if the Turkish forces cross certain 'red lines'. However, is it really that simple? There may have been a prior understanding between the Russian and Turkish establishments on the issue of their interference in Jarabulus and beyond. The change in Turkish stance regarding President Bashar –al-Assad, is a clear indication of their cursory rapport in this regard. The words of the Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim reflect this point quite clearly, "Turkey may consider al-Assad as a future intermediary".¹ Thus, from their previous position which was condemning Assad's inhumane forays against his own people, Turkey has compromised its stance in exchange for a free reign in Syria. According to the Presidential spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, the next stop in the Turkish offensive is Al-Bab, a large town which has become the stronghold of ISIL.² As ISIL licks its wounds in Al-Bab, all opposing forces will require a joint stance to decimate this diabolical force that has been terrorising the world for quite some time. But fortunately for ISIL, and unfortunately for the world in general, the different forces in Syria represent self-interests instead of the collective global narrative on counterterrorism. For example, Turkey will attempt to use this opportunity to launch targeted attacks to weaken the Kurdish forces but this would divide the offensive against ISIL. As a result, the prospects of peace in Syria, in any manner, will reduce significantly. It will be a hard choice for Turkey to keep its attacks limited to ISIL and

¹ Anton Bayev, "Has Ankara struck a deal with Moscow on Turkish Involvement in Syria", *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 5, 2016. (https://rbth.com/international/2016/09/05/has-ankara-struck-a-deal-with-moscow-on-turkish-involvement-in-syria_627189)

² Ibid

to be not tempted by the battleground scenario and Kurds as the open target. Many a state have floundered in such situations and Turkey seems to be no exception. A strategically well-placed decision at this stage will decide the extent to which the Turkey's role as a regional player will be established.

From the Ottoman Empire to the 'Sick Man of Europe' and to the current Islamist power that it is in the Middle East, Turkey has come a long way in terms of democratic and diplomatic prowess. The recent failed attempt at a military coup reflects the political maturity that the Turkish society has achieved collectively. However, the identity crisis that divides the people on basis of both religious affinity and ethnic origin, also plagues the decision making process of the governmental institutes. Kurdish threat that looms overhead is also the result of the culture specific strategy that Ataturk initiated to overpower the religious narrative. Thus, cultural identities created certain clashes which resonated in the Turkish internal and external policies. This is exactly what will negatively impact the Turkish offensive in Syria as well. The separatist threat needs to be tackled in a manner more comprehensive than a military intervention across the border in the most volatile territories of the world. If Turkey manages to tackle this threat with strategic and political expertise by rising above its internal politics, only then will its role be established as a leading power in the region. Turkish dreams of resurgence of their former glory can only be materialised if they manage to bring peace to this region through mediation and diplomacy. The need of the hour is to extricate vested interests from policies for cultivating peace in Syria and pave the way for a harmonious regional environment.