

Spreading the Conflict: Turkey and Australia Join In “Attacking ISIS”

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[Oceania](#)

Two very different allies of Washington have decided to spread their wings more aggressively in the ever expanding conflict against the Islamic State. Turkey has decided to get the boots of its soldiers dirty via parliamentary vote (298 to 98), while Australia has done its obsequious best by deploying its small forces by executive fiat.

Several crude and separate realities are masked by these decisions. For one thing, it doesn't get away from the fact that Ankara's view on the Islamic State is somewhat alien to that of Washington's. Foreign policy analysts use the irritating term “disconnect” in describing the relationship between the government of President Recept Tayyip Erdoğan and that of US President Barack Obama on the subject.[1]

Any Turkish deployment to assist the Coalition forces has been marred by its Syrian calculations, ones which were based on a labyrinthine series of considerations of which group to back in their conflict against the Assad regime. The logical conclusion of that rather skittish policy was one of backing almost all groups, from those of moderate hue (can revolution ever be in moderation?) to more conventional, hard hitting fundamentalists. Turning a blind eye to atrocity and mayhem, even among Syria's own diffuse and murderous opposition, was always going to be on the cards.

Such laxness was bound to revisit Turkey at some point, and the fear now is that the Islamic State has become something of an internalised bacillus, keeping a close eye on Ankara's movements even as it supposedly involves itself with the somewhat hobbled coalition of the righteous. As Sinan Ülgen surmises, “The fear now is that this benign neglect has allowed the Islamic State to embed itself in Turkey and build the capacity to conduct terrorist activities on Turkish soil - and thus to retaliate for Turkish participation in the US-led coalition.”[2]

The statements from Turkish officials seem to centre on such flashpoints as Kobane (Ayn Arab), which is witnessing an incessant assault from Islamic State forces. It has become a point of attraction for Kurdish fighters whom the Turkish forces are wary of given their links to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and the issue of how far the Turkish troops will go to actually prevent it from falling. The Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has stated that, “We wouldn't want Kobane to fall. We'll do whatever we can to prevent this from happening.”[3]

Yet even as Kobane is being pummelled, the guns of Turkish tanks are trained away from the city. This seemingly describes a long tendency in Ankara's foreign policy. An authorisation for the use of military force need not be a clarion call for aggressive engagement - after all the fuss, the Turkish parliament has given three in a row.[4] The balance may well change if the tomb of Suleyman Shah - a Turkish enclave in northern Syria

- is threatened.

The Australian deployment to the Middle East was never in dispute, lacking the range of nuanced problems facing Ankara. Unlike the Turkish example, Cabinet, not Parliament, made the decision to engage in some long distance killing against an enemy it can barely describe. (Abbott has resorted to the Darth Vader-like appellation of an “apocalyptic death cult”.)

With the outflanked Greens essentially the only party crying foul at the pompously unilateral move, it was left to the near invisible foreign minister, Julie Bishop, to affirm “the usual convention of past governments and that is that the government of the day has the ultimate responsibility for making decisions involving our military.” On that score, dastardly convention is on Bishop’s side, with Australia’s Cabinet resolutely anti-parliamentarian in deploying troops since federation in 1901. Indifference and spinelessness are sound properties of the Australian political system.

While the Abbott government stirs populist flames on home soil dangling burqa bans for visitors to Parliament (Abbott subsequently quashed the inane moves), Canberra’s foreign deployments operate according to laws of futility. An almost enviable, clear headed stupidity seems to dictate the Prime Minister’s decision. “ISIL,” Abbott explained on October 3, “has effectively declared war on the world. The world is responding.”

In typically bamboozling fashion, Abbott, having suggested that the Islamic State has declared a global war, suggests that Australians are not involved in such a business, engaging in a repelling, humanitarian “mission”. Having taken a rather novel reading of the laws of war, Abbott noted the authorisation of “Australian air strikes in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government and in support of the Iraqi government.”[5]

The Middle East has always provided the richest of grounds for abhorrent vacuums of power. These have all too often been filled by something worse. There are no exotic proclamations of pivoting away and finding refuge in some other strategic theatre. The Coalition’s language of liquidation and degradation towards the Islamic State will simply displace one problem with another. Ankara may have stumbled, but it has done so in part with good reason. Australia’s involvement, however, is pure indulgence, an act of historical vanity and political immaturity.

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Notes

[1] <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2014/10/02/turkey-s-isis-crisis/hqxm>

[2] <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2014/10/02/turkey-s-isis-crisis/hqxm>

[3] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-will-try-to-stop-isis-taking-kurdish-border--town-pm-davutoglu.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72487&NewsCatID=338>

[4] <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56835>

[5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-03/war-not-a-mission-abbott-incorrect-on-iraq--action-fact-check/5772316>

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