

TURKEY'S PROSPECTS IN FACE OF IS' ADVANCE ON KOBANI

Day after day, the situation is becoming increasingly tense in eastern and south-eastern Turkey, in response to the events in Syria, as tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees fled the advance of the “Islamic State” (IS) terrorist group against the border city of Kobani.

On October 10, the Interior Minister Efkân Âlâ stated that at least 31 people were killed and 360 others injured since the outbreak of the protest denouncing the alleged inaction of the Turkish army earlier this week. According to official and media reports, it should also be noted that several hundreds of business premises and public facilities were damaged following acts of vandalism, including schools, party offices, power stations, bank branches, and street furniture. Demonstrators also set ablaze hundreds of private and public vehicles. As of today, over 1,000 people are already detained for their involvement in these protests, including 58 people who have formally been placed under arrest.

This outburst of anger amongst the Kurdish population in Turkey has already affected 35 cities with important Kurdish communities, which are mainly located in the eastern provinces of Batman, Bingöl, Diyarbakir, Hakkari, Yalova, Mardin, Mus, Siirt and Van. However, incidents have also spread to Istanbul and Ankara, where the security forces fired teargas to disperse opponents to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Syrian policy.

Moreover, Efkân Âlâ indicated that 2 police officers were shot dead on Thursday evening by unidentified “terrorists” while inspecting a demonstration scene in the city of Bingöl. According to his report, 5 suspects were later killed by the security forces, who received orders to take every necessary provisions to “stop the violence spiral”, as authorities fear the ethnic and religious aspects of the movement. Indeed, several incidents opposed militiamen from the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) “Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement” (YDG-H), and militants from the radical Islamist organization “Kurdish Hezbollah” (KH), which support IS.

Realizing the scale and the potential implications of the phenomenon, the Turkish President stressed out that the street protests had “nothing to do” with the siege in Kobani.

In a written statement released via the daily newspaper Hurriyet, he argued that they were “designed to sabotage the ongoing Kurdish resolution process”. He added that the state would “fight against those who commit violence and vandalism without any tolerance, especially at a time when the country is passing through a sensitive process.” It is indeed worth mentioning that the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, publicly threatened to put an end to the peace process with Ankara if Kobani falls to jihadist fighters.

Such a negative chain of events is significant of the Turkish position’s inherent contradiction with regard to the Syrian crisis. While Recep Tayyip Erdogan pledged on September 23 to “give the necessary support to the operation” carried out by the US-led anti-IS coalition, his first strategic goal remains the ousting of President Bashar Assad. For 3 years, Turkey has hosted several hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime, and has granted support to several elements of the rebellion.

Although the Turkish Parliament authorized a potential military action in Syria and Iraq, Ankara made clear that it would not intervene directly on Syrian soil, unless the United States and its allies set out a comprehensive strategy in order to restore stability across the region, and to safeguard its own internal security. Similarly, Ankara formally requested the creation of a “buffer zone” to offer a safe haven to civilian refugees, as well as a rear base for moderate anti-Assad rebels.

As revealed by the outbreak of violence in the eastern provinces, another main source of concern for Turkey is the consequences of the Syrian crisis on the Kurdish issue. So far, the Turkish army has banned PKK fighters from crossing the border to join the Kurdish resistance in Kobani. Indeed, the military command fears that the PKK could eventually take advantage of the situation to reinforce itself within the framework of a new autonomous Kurdish entity on its border. In that respect, it is surprising that the resolution approved by the Turkish Parliament on October 2 considers that the “terrorist elements of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party” represent a potential threat against the country while at the same time there is no explicit reference to the “Islamic State” terrorist group.

One can assume that the situation on the ground will not evolve as long as Ankara will continue to regard the Kurdish force as an equal or superior threat compared to the one posed by the jihadists. As Recep Tayyip Erdogan admitted that all options should be considered, including ground operations, the Turkish authorities could however be forced to act decisively in order to prevent further instability, especially in the case of intensified clashes between Kurdish and Islamist fighters.

Given the magnitude of the protest, the situation could easily degenerate if Ankara does not adopt a strong stand against IS, before the terrorist organization takes full control over Kobani, and acquires a continuous strip of territory stretching along the Turkish border.

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