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ANKARA BETWEEN NATO NORTHERN EXPANSION AND NORTHERN SYRIA

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Hardly anyone had expected NATO's northern expansion to be met with opposition from Ankara. Turkey justified its veto with the accusation that Sweden and Finland were supporting anti-Turkish terrorist organisations and financing terrorist infrastructure in Syria. This was contradicted in Western public opinion with the argument that Ankara, in contrast to the Kurds, had behaved ambivalently in the fight against ISIS and continued to tolerate radical Islamist groups in northern Syria.

Ankara and the Scandinavians

The Turkish government coupled NATO enlargement to its own political priorities, namely the fight against the PKK and the followers of Fethullah Gülen. Accordingly, Stockholm and Helsinki were sent lists of suspected terrorists' names, which included that of a Swedish parliamentarian of Kurdish origin. The governments concerned referred to existing formats and a lack of extradition requests on Ankara's part. Ankara, however, was less concerned with specific names than with intimidating communist, Kurdish and Gülenist activists in Europe and citing the PKK, YPG/PYD and FETÖ (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü) as terrorists in a NATO document.

That is exactly what happened in the Trilateral Memorandum of 28 June 2022 concluded between Sweden, Finland and Turkey under the auspices of the Secretary General of NATO. The parties agreed on a consultation and cooperation mechanism at security agency level and referred to the financing of the PKK and its offshoots as well as the extradition of terror suspects to Ankara. The last point has already

proven contentious, which does not, however, change the overall impression of the document, which Ankara justifiably calls a success. This is because Sweden and Finland committed themselves to supporting Turkey's participation in EU defence projects such as PESCO, and Sweden is also revising its restrictive export rules regarding the sale of arms to NATO partners.

The conclusion of the Trilateral Memorandum once again illustrated how much the Ukraine conflict has benefited Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Politically largely isolated at the end of 2021 and berated by parts of the Western public for the use of Turkish combat drones against the PKK leadership in northern Iraq and Syria, the same Bayraktar drones have become a symbol of Ukrainian independence. Since then, Turkey has

been one of few countries involved in consultations with both Ukraine and Russia and has been able to arbitrate, for example, the issue of grain deliveries. Turkey is equally self-confident in dealing with Western sanctions against Russia, which it interprets as it sees fit.

Teheran – Northern Iraq – Northern Syria

The new Turkish self-confidence became clear at the trilateral meeting between the presidents of Iran, Turkey, and Russia in Tehran on 19 July 2022. The harmonious images of the summit are, however, deceptive. The major differences of opinion regarding the policy on Syria and Iraq were by no means resolved.

Iran and Turkey pursue different interests in northern Iraq. Ankara fights the PKK in cooperation with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and maintains a number of military bases to this end. At the same time, the Tehran-backed Shiite Popular Mobilisation Units and the KDP-led Peshmerga forces compete for influence in northern Iraq. The conflicting interests come to a head over the question of control of the strategically important Sinjar Mountains, where the Peshmerga, Iraqi military, Popular Mobilisation Forces and the PKK, against which Ankara repeatedly has been flying air strikes, confront each other. So far, Ankara has not coordinated with either Tehran or Baghdad, so that for the time being there are no de-escalation mechanisms in place and Turkish military installations are repeatedly the target of attacks by individual Popular Mobilisation Units. A missile attack on 20 July, which claimed the lives of nine civilians and for which the Iraqis hold the Turkish military responsible, led to a bilateral crisis accompanied by fierce anti-Turkish protests by Iraqi Shiites.

More important, however, is Moscow's and Tehran's rejection of a Turkish military intervention in northern Syria. Such an operation would only exacerbate the situation, even though the fight against

terrorist organisations is met with approval. Moscow wants more Syrian government influence in the north of the country, while Tehran hopes to reduce the US presence. The final word on a possible operation in Syria will be spoken in Ankara, of course.

From Erdoğan's point of view, the advantages of an intervention are obvious: First, it would deal a heavy blow to PKK military structures in the region. Secondly, it would open up the opportunity to settle some of the refugees along the border on the Syrian side, thus establishing a Turkish-controlled buffer to Kurdish self-government. In view of the strong xenophobic surge against refugees in Turkey, which parts of the opposition want to take advantage of, it helps the Turkish president to act decisively. This may, thirdly, prove useful in the coming election campaign. In view of modest poll ratings and a catastrophic economic situation, Erdoğan must play the ultra-nationalist card.

Threats against Greece are just as much part of the nationalist polemic repertoire as the fight against terrorism, i.e. the PKK. The PKK takes Turkish threats of invasion seriously and has years of experience of how much drones have changed the Turkish counterinsurgency: only small PKK squads can now infiltrate from northern Iraq. The Turks have moreover recently succeeded in selectively killing PKK command personnel through drone strikes, for example on 22 July 2022 near Qamishli. The fact that the USA expressed its condolences to the relatives of the fallen SDF/YPJ fighters proves how convoluted the situation in northern Syria is for Ankara and the USA.

Rojava and the many elements of the PKK

The PKK has undergone an organisational transformation since the early 2000s. The name was changed from Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to Kurdistan Social Union (KCK), a new constitution was written

(KCK-Sözleşmesi), the military forces (HPG, YJA-Star, etc.) and the European organisation (KCD-E) were restructured, and Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian branches were set up. The result is a confusing multiplicity of organisations, militias, and councils, which are nevertheless part of the overall KCK federation and whose military branches are oriented towards the guerrilla leadership in Iraq's Kandil Mountains. The organisation's offshoots in Syria (PYD, YPG, YPJ...) became famous in 2014 when they defeated ISIS in the battle of Kobane and secured the mass exodus of Yezidis from the Sinjar Mountains. Since 2010, they have succeeded in establishing their own administration, called Rojava (for West Kurdistan), or internationally AANES (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria). AANES is run according to communist principles. There are economic shortages and the room for manoeuvre of other political parties is clearly limited, because PKK cadres control all the levers of power. However, the socio-political course set in the area of women's rights is impressive and goes far beyond the role of women's guerilla.

The organisation's military prowess attracted the attention of the USA in 2014, which at the time was frustrated by its allies' unwillingness to intervene on the ground. Thus, the US arranged with the forces on the ground, that is the YPG and YPJ guerillas and the political party PYD. Turkey's objection that all three are parts of the PKK (meaning the KCK) is deflected by the US, which lists the PKK as "narco-terrorists", and claims that any relations between the YPG and PKK are things of the past. Besides, military assistance and training do not go directly to the YPG, but to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF are an amalgam of various Arab tribal militias and Kurdish forces led by the YPG. The SDF proved its mettle in the liberation of Raqqa in 2017. Since then, they have borne the infantry brunt of the fight against ISIS and continue to make an essential contribution to the security, both of the region and Europe by guarding

and maintaining the Al-Hol refugee camp, which gained notoriety as the ISIS women's HQ.

Admittedly, there can be no doubt that YGP and YPJ would hardly have been able to defy ISIS without military support from the US. Cooperation with the US contradicts the PKK's anti-imperialist and anti-Western identity, which the guerrilla leadership follows and which was formulated by the organisation's chief ideologue and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who remains imprisoned on the Turkish prison island of İmralı. However, the increased importance of AANES and SDF has strengthened the Syrian branch within the overall federation and created tensions between the guerrilla leadership and the YPG/YPJ military leadership, which cooperates with the US. The younger generation, socialised by the SDF, is unencumbered by the PKK's years of collaboration with the Syrian regime. This explains the contradictory attitude towards Ankara: Kandil continues to play the military card and has decades-old communication channels with the Syrians, while Rojava is interested in thriving relations with Ankara, which Turkey has ignored so far.

Left-wing groups around the world celebrate Rojava as a revolutionary project. This is especially true of communist, mostly Maoist, underground organisations from Turkey, which have experienced a renaissance since the Gezi protests in 2013. These groups are also active in Western Europe and are largely tolerated despite occasional bans and court cases. Like the PKK, these groups usually have an illegal core around which legal associations or parties have been formed that carry out cultural work, political education and agitation. Regarding Rojava, they follow the PKK's wording. These groups have become an integral part of the radical left-wing scene in Europe and are able to send fighters to Syria and bring them home. Like the PKK, some of these groups have their own command and disciplinary system to monitor their own followers and

investigate opponents. In general, these groups maintain contacts with European politicians, the media and universities, where they impart their interpretation of events as the academic standard.

Outlook and derivations

A Turkish attack on northern Syria remains possible. However, unlike previous operations (e.g. Afrin 2018), this time the existence of Rojava is at stake. The public sphere in Western Europe will almost certainly become the scene of violent protests and clashes between supporters and opponents of the military operation. It can be assumed that the social situation in Europe, which has deteriorated significantly when compared with previous conflicts (e.g. Favoriten 2020), almost certainly will lead to an intensification and widening of the protests far beyond the original cause.

The Afrin crisis of 2018 showed how both sides influence “their” so-called “communities” (Turks, Kurds...) through their respective networks (mosques, cultural associations, etc.). Western European governments and authorities must therefore be able to shape and de-emotionalise the political narrative regarding events in Northern Syria. This highlights the importance of well-timed target audience communication.

Ankara will continue to expect concessions from the Europeans. These not only concern the demands made of Sweden and Finland aimed at the maximum integration of Turkey into the European defence system, but also the visa-free regime for Turkish citizens, the continuation of financial aid for Syrian refugees and the desire to exert more pressure on the PKK’s international organisation.

Northern Syria (AANES, Rojava) deserves more attention at national and European levels. For neither can the benefit of Rojava for European security be denied, nor the danger posed by the PKK (KCK) for Turkey. Nor can a constitutional state accept the organisation’s parallel power structures in Europe. The prerequisite of successful decision-making, however, is dispassionate discourse.

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