

November 19 2014 | Last updated 34 minutes ago

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Turkey's leaders view Daesh as a tool to bring down the government of Bashar Al Assad

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian | Special to Gulf News
Published: 20:00 November 16, 2014

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While the emergence of terrorism in unprecedented forms has sent tremors of anxiety around the globe, Turkey unyieldingly swims against the tide. Despite its

Nato membership, it adamantly refuses to participate in multilateral actions with the United States and its allies, Arab countries, Iran, Russia and Syria. While these countries have not acted in unison, they are engaged in a massive endeavour aimed at bringing down Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and eliminating terrorist groups.

The question, then: “What motivates Turkey to act unilaterally despite further isolating itself from the global community?”

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s president, and Ahmet Davutoglu — Erodgan’s long-time adviser, foreign minister and chief architect of Turkey’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy —view Daesh as a tool to bring down the government of Bashar Al Assad. They hope to institute in Syria a Sunni, pro-Turkish government as the first step in building a platform to establish a new Ottoman Empire.

In July 2012, Erdogan, then prime minister, made remarks that explain his support for jihadists fighting against the Al Assad regime. “The Justice and Development Party,” he said, “is a party in which the spirit of the Seljuks and the Ottomans is deeply rooted.” Erdogan, shares the same religious and political principles and belief system with the Muslim Brotherhood. He was, and still is, a devout supporter of former Egyptian president, Mohammad Mursi, who led the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Another Turkish priority is to use Daesh as leverage against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been at war with Ankara for several years. PKK has close ties with, and influence over, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, whose armed wing, the YPG,

is engaged in a bloody fight against Daesh in Kobani. An independent Kurdish region in Syria, influenced and run by the PKK affiliate, is a threat to Ankara. That Kurdish entity could potentially be used as a springboard for the formation of an independent Kurdistan in Turkey.

The Alevis, mostly ethnic Turks estimated at 15 million to 20 million people, are one of the biggest minorities in Turkey. The Alawites, commonly mistaken with the Alevis, are of Arab ethnicity with familial ties with the Syrian Alawites. Their population is less than a million and is concentrated in the Hatay province south of Turkey bordering northern Syria. Both groups oppose the ruling AKP party and are supportive of Al Assad. As long as Al Assad is in power, sectarian war spilling over into Turkey is always a possibility. Such an event would engage the Alevis and Alawites in a revolt against Ankara. This provides another prominent reason for Turkish support of Daesh in their quest to topple Al Assad.

In addition, energy, a factor in many global conflicts, plays a role in the Syrian conflict. The European Union is in desperate need of diversifying its gas supplies, especially in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis. The EU is worried about its dependence on Russian gas and is looking for alternative sources of supply. As a result of Turkey's geographical position — located between large energy producers and the EU market — Turkey can play a substantial role in contributing to Europe's energy security. The overthrow of Al Assad would put an end to the proposed Iran-Iraq-Syria natural gas pipeline running from the Iranian-Qatari South Pars/North Dome field towards Europe via Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This would provide Turkey with a

unique position acting as a European energy hub.

A pro-Turkish, Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Damascus government could potentially have closer relations with Hamas and would thus expand the influence and role of Turkey in the so-called Middle East peace process. Meanwhile, a like-minded Muslim Brotherhood government in Damascus would, regarding regional politics, weaken the role of Iran and Russia's alliance on the one hand and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries' on the other.

Iran and Syria have been the main corridor for Turkey's export to the Arab-rich Middle Eastern countries. Given that Iran is viewed as a regional competitor by Turkey, disconnecting Syria from Iran and establishing a Muslim Brotherhood government in Syria would afford a secure trade passage for the export of Turkish goods to the Arabian Gulf and Middle Eastern countries as a whole.

After Mursi was ousted, Saudi Arabia and the UAE together provided Egypt with credit lines and aid of about \$12 billion (Dh44 billion).

Now, should the current coalition succeed in eliminating Daesh, extremist ideologies will weaken. At virtually no cost, Turkey would profit.

Water and territorial disputes have been a major source of conflict between Syria and Turkey. In the absence of Al Assad and the presence of a friendly Brotherhood government, opportunities to de-escalate these disputes will increase significantly.

Erdogan's economic successes distorted his and his party's perception of Turkish capabilities. Coupled with the religious and ultra-nationalist vision he subscribes

to, this overestimation encouraged adventurist policies. Such overreaches have been motivated by the desire to curb Iran's role and influence in the region and rebuild a new version of Ottoman Empire presumably linked to the ebb and flow of conflict between Ottoman Turks and the Safavid Persians in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a research scholar at Princeton University and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. His latest book, *Iran and the United States: An Insider's view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* was released in May 2014.