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POINT OF VIEW

Turkey Today, Pakistan Yesterday: Dilemmas of a Frontline State

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Cataclysmic territorial encroachment by the IS/ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) towards Baghdad and in Iraq's Kurdish region beyond Mosul remains as ascendant as it is in northern Syria despite the aerial attacks and some external assistance to the recently installed Haider al-Abadi administration in Iraq. With the air campaign proving less effective, the United States and other Western allies have accentuated pressure on Turkey to commit its troops on the ground so as to blunt the IS forces. Interestingly, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, the main antagonist for the IS, Ankara and the NATO, may be receptive to the idea of Turkish troops fighting fellow Sunnis so as to provide him both a needed legitimacy and some respite since President Tayyip Erdogan remains a persistent foe for the Baathist regime in Damascus. Concurrently, the Kurds divided across several post-colonial states and often seeking sovereignty and unification, begrudge Turkey for not helping their co-ethnics in Syria and for keeping its involvement limited to strictly settling down displaced Arabs and Kurdish refugees. In the same vein, the Iranians are equally engrossed in this fratricide on the side of a beleaguered Assad and a vulnerable Baghdad regime while poised against the troubadours of a Sunni Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In fact, they are relishing a field day since their favourite Shia Houthis obtained an upper hand in a war torn Yemen. Another major Iranian ally, Hezbollah, is already well-ensconced in Lebanon besides fighting the Sunni opposition to Assad, whereas rest of the world seems to be largely focused on IS's assault on Ain-al Arab (Kobani), a strategic town straddling the Turkish-Syrian borders. If the IS was able to capture this town, it would have the entire

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swathe of territory from Kirkuk in Iraq to Aleppo and eastern Mediterranean in Syria under its control bestowing it some of the most fertile valleys along with facilitating the munificent export of gas.

Amidst this melee of blame and counter blame, suspicions, sectarian mayhem and a sustained international condemnation of the poster boys of radical fundamentalism, Turkey is pursuing a wait-and-watch policy while refusing to buckle under the domestic (Kurdish) and external (Western) pressure. Washington and London are using diverse strategies including insinuation of Ankara for allegedly being hands in glove with the IS, while concurrently offering Turkey some sweeteners to get involved. But a clear majority of the Turks are reluctant, and like the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Kemalist secularists and Islamists of the ruling AKP party and Gulen Movement only advise for caution despite their country being in the proverbial catch-22 situation. In a recent public opinion survey, 52% of Turkish citizens were adamantly against any military intervention, which is certainly not due to any inborn anti-Kurdish feelings but owes to a pragmatic realism that the U.S. and other NATO nations refuse to openly acknowledge in their own longest-ever warfare in two Muslim countries and which has caused more body bags and a plethora of schisms on all sides. In addition, following the Libyan debacle in the wake of external attacks, scepticism and even serious criticism of outside interventions has multiplied while exposing the naiveté of quick-fix solutions. Interaction with academics at places like Seljuk University during a recent visit and travels across Anatolia helped this author detect a greater element of melancholy mingled with precaution prevalent across Turkey—a microcosm of global Muslim agony over “what has gone wrong?” Despite erstwhile self-idealisation and even valorous presentation by Turkey as a role model for the Muslim world at large owing to its political stability, economic development and reassuring inter-gender relationship, now there is a greater sense of awe and trepidation all across this historic bridge land.

Turkey has its own significant interests in keeping this 786-kilometer long border region safe including the tomb of Suleiman Shah, who is considered to be the forefather of the Ottomans, and is buried eighteen miles south of Kobani on a peninsula in the River Euphrates. Thirty-five Turkish soldiers daily guard this celebrated piece of Turkish territory, which is otherwise well inside Syria. Any attack on the shrine or the guards would certainly provoke a severe retaliation. Some IS elements subscribing to extreme purist and anti-Sufi convictions could try to sabotage this tomb, or even pro-Damascus saboteurs might nudge for such an action, which is a constant worry on this side of the borders. Relations between the Erdogan government and IS feature icy suspicions since the later, after conquering Mosul in the summer of 2014, took away 49 employees of the Turkish consulate as hostages and they were released only on 20 September following intense negotiations. Since then, Ankara has received a barrage of criticism for allegedly being soft on the IS. To some analysts, Turkey wants prior assurances from its NATO allies that in case of any retaliatory attack by Damascus, supported by Moscow, it will receive fuller support under Article 5 of the alliance where all 28 nations will be bound for its protection. This article has been invoked only once since the formation of the alliance in 1949 and that was on the U.S. pleas soon after 9/11. Turkey has certainly been demanding imposition of no-fly zone over northern Syria since it views Assad to be the real root-cause of instability in the Levant. Other than its doubts about Syrian and the IS intentions, Ankara is suspicious of the PYD, the Kurdish nationalist group in Kobani and around, which is now fighting the IS. Traditionally, these Kurds have not posed any serious security threat for the Baathist regime in Damascus but maintain closer relations with their counterparts in Turkey—the PKK, led by Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK has traditionally struggled for a united and leftist republic of

Kurdistan by uniting all the disparate regions from across five neighbouring states but their main armed confrontation has been with Ankara and over the past three decades thousands of lives have been lost on both sides. Ocalan is in Turkish prison and earlier began negotiations with Erdogan aimed at some political resolution of this age-old ethno-regional conflict. Turkey's restraint has certainly angered Ocalan and the PYD, who, on the contrary, seek an avowed Turkish military involvement aimed at curbing the IS.

Unlike the early optimism of the Arab Spring and Erdogan's often applauded stand against Israeli invasions of Gaza, Turks might simply not want to become another Pakistan, reeling under refugees and confronted with a million mutinies from within. They are aware of the biting realities of Pakistan's geo-political predicament owing to its two volatile borders besides an internecine war of attrition being waged by its own militant groups which since 2004 has claimed more than 50,000 lives of its civilian and military personnel whereas the economic losses run into at least a hundred billion dollars. This Pakistan moment is quite crucial for Turks in deterring them from becoming a partisan of another international war, which has all the potentials of turning into a civil war of multiple trajectories.

Pakistan under an unpopular regime of General Ziaul Haq (1977-88), both by choice and by compulsion, had assumed the role of a frontline state against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and other than housing four million refugees became the recruiting and training ground for Mujahideen of all varieties and nationalities. Many of these holy warriors including Osama bin Laden had been flown in especially from elsewhere by Western intelligence agencies to operate in Southwest Asia. In the meantime, the KGB and its Afghan ally, the Khad, in their resolve to weaken Pakistan, unleashed several disruptive forces though the conflict in general did not radically affect the body politic of the country at large. However, militancy in the name of political Islam and its accompanying Kalashnikov culture soon became an order of the day with several sectarian and ethnic outfits enjoying the patronage of Tehran, Delhi and Riyadh. No wonder, Pakistan's major quest for seeking a tangible balancing point in its three proverbial Ks (Kashmir, Kabul and Karachi) has remained elusive since the 1980s. In this tripolar imbroglio, Delhi was the aggrieved party due to a mass-based defiance in Kashmir Valley often with the support from Islamabad which itself felt reinvigorated by a triumphalist role in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and Iran both proved the cheerleaders of a contested Muslim Near East already polarised between Islam's two enduring sects whose origins lay in political contentions over the prophetic succession in the seventh century Arabia. The financial and scholastic support for respective Sunni and Shia militant groups, other than puritanical outfits with their own anti-Western agendas, received major fillip from Sunni Taliban and Al-Qaeda since the former assumed power in 1994. Pakistanis, in their geo-political ambitions, saw in the Pashtun Taliban a long-sought ally on their western borders who, unlike the previous rulers of Kabul, would debar any Indian influence whereas the Iranians saw in them another flank of Sunni majoritarianism to their north.

9/11 put Pakistan in a nut cracker as the Bush Administration demanded a total compliance from Islamabad which it afforded right away since the country was being ruled by another pariah military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, who like Zia before him, saw in it an opportune move to acquire global gratitude and legitimacy for his rule. Following a midnight call from Secretary Colin Powell, Musharraf's decision to support Washington in its planned attack of Afghanistan and a serious reprimand of Al-Qaeda and the Taleban, appeared to be a pragmatic step yet lacked any serious deliberations over its long-term ramifications for this precariously located Muslim state. Amidst a heightened anti-Americanism across the world especially among Muslims due to a multi-national military

campaign, profiling and internment of the Muslims the world over within the context of a Neo-Con-led evangelical zeal, Muslim regimes began to be seen as mere surrogates for non-Muslim interests. Pakistani civilian and military authorities soon were confronted by a wrath from their own Islamist groups, who in 2007 congregated under an overarching panoply of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), led by tribal Pashtuns. Pursuing a Jihad against non-Muslim forces and their Muslim allies, the TTP used youthful suicide bombers, country's disgruntled military elements and foreign Islamist volunteers to wreak havoc in cities by targeting military and civil installations. Several unpopular steps by Musharraf and his successors along with a 24-hour use of drone aircraft over Pakistan's tribal regions by the CIA causing underreported civilian deaths provided TTP an undiminished supply of disaffected youths. India and many powerful Western opinion groups perceive and posit Pakistan as the epicentre of world terrorism; its own political institutions remain vulnerably poised; various military operations against the TTP in tribal and settled regions have failed to quell militancy while Karachi is still a long way off from peace. Despite hosting such a huge refugee population, the country remains unpopular with the Afghans in general, who otherwise shirk from critiquing the 30+ invading states but use Pakistan as a scapegoat. While Pakistan's Western allies have never been satisfied with its anti-militancy campaigns and costs and instead keep on insisting for more vanguard action, Iran and Central Asian states remain wary of their neighbour. Its own populace perceives escalations in Afghanistan as not "our war" and while confronted by militancy on its own soil, a grave sense of nihilism pervades the society. Pakistan's very survival, despite periodic forecasts to the contrary, owes to Indus Valley people who keep it together as its stakeholders otherwise state often seems to suffer from internal cracks and indolence.

Turkey, like Pakistan, has been a victim of ethnic and ideological violence besides being under periodic military regimes, which often used secularism doggedly to stay in power. With the second largest military presence in the NATO, Turkey's generals, like their Pakistani counterparts have enjoyed de facto control over foreign policies besides maintaining volatile relationship with the Kurdish regions where the PKK-led insurgency has cost lives and ill feelings on all sides. It is only in recent times that politicians like Tayyip Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoglu have been able to consolidate political institutions besides acquiring a kind of needed balance between Kemalist secularism and society's historic identification with Sunni Islam. President Erdogan and his Prime Minister, Davutoglu are Anatolians and other than engineering their country's economic progress have reestablished its historic links with the Muslim world including the erstwhile rival, Shia Iran. Despite their fracas with the rival Gulen movement or scorn from some of Istanbul-based Kemalists, peace and progress have been the buzz words in Turkey over recent years and promotion of education, construction of quality roads and housing facilities, creation of jobs and a strong element of peace and prosperity have ensured ruling AKP the longest tenure in republic's history. Erdogan did not shy away from seeking a modus operandi with PKK's Abdullah Ocalan which ensured this sustained peace, and the generals, despite some murmurs, have often tagged along with the political leadership, something that Pakistani politicians ideally cherish to acquire. Now, the PKK, a Marxist nationalist Kurdish party, wants Turkish troops to help its Syrian counterpart—YUP—in its fight against the IS but many Turks feel that it will only strengthen the PKK which might resume the politics of secession. The PKK wants to help predominantly Kurdish Syrian city of Kobani, besieged by the IS but Ankara is worried about replacing one security threat with another besides ending up helping Assad by

default. The PKK has been holding demonstrations across Turkey and Germany to pressure Ankara for undertaking military operations inside the Syrian territory and some of these rallies have turned nasty claiming several lives causing ill feelings between the Turkish nationalists and their Kurdish counterparts. It is certainly possible that the IS has its supporters between both these ethnic groups which further blurs ethnic and ideological boundaries liable to befuddle any consensual military strategy. Similarly, Pakistan's support for Pashtuns in Afghanistan is due to both ethnic and strategic reasons as it has the largest number of Pashtuns on this side of the Durand Line. The nationalist Pashtuns in Pakistan, despite closer relations with Afghani Pashtuns, are apprehensive of Taliban ascendance amongst the former and like the Pashtuns in Kabul regime, seek a wider alliance to avoid radicalism. On the contrary, Islamist Pashtuns in Pakistan support Afghani Taliban and might even share softness for the TTP, which again makes entire geo-politics quite complex.

Both Turkey and Pakistan have historic ties as the early rulers of Muslim India were often Turks and then during the early twentieth century Indian Muslims pursued a valorous campaign for the survival of the Ottoman Caliphate. During the stormy phase of the First World War, Indian Muslims viewed the Ottoman caliph as the last vestige of Islamic suzerainty in the world, then being threatened by the Balkan nationalists, victorious Allies and the rebel Arab elements. In fact, several Indian Muslims forsook British India to live in Afghanistan during the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 and some even moved on to Turkey to help it during its dire years. They would eventually support Mustafa Kemal (1881-1937)—the Atatürk— even though he had abolished the caliphate in 1924 yet had safeguarded the territorial integrity of this Muslim state at a time when the entire Muslim world was in the grip of European colonialism. Some Indian Muslim elite such as in the princely state of Hyderabad enjoyed matrimonial connections with their Ottoman counterparts, and the eminent poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938), even visited Turkey, and viewed the great Medieval Sufi poet Mevlana Rumi (1207-1273) as his spiritual mentor. Iqbal's closest friend and the first-ever Muslim woman student at Cambridge University, Attiya Fyzee (1877-1967), belonged to a mixed Turkish-Indian parentage and was in fact born in Istanbul and died in Karachi. Since 1947, Turkey and Pakistan have enjoyed closer military, political and economic ties and in recent times these cultural and historic mutualities seem to have been growing.

However, excepting a sizeable portion of Turkey's Kurds including the PKK supporters, most Turks do not desire to become the conduit for a so-called war on terror. In general, owing to Sufi traditions and secularist ethos they would not support violent extremism of the IS and Al-Qaeda variety but they also lack trust in Assad nor do they feel comfortable with Western interventions in Muslim regions such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Libya. Despite acute Sunni-Shia dissensions, Turkey has maintained amiable relations with Tehran, a balancing act of great acumen, though they feel that Shia ascendancy in Iraq and Lebanon and Assad's sheer unilateralism have led to this Sunni backlash in the first place where Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Arabs find themselves in a disadvantaged situation and instead have turned to gun. Turkey does not minimise the threat from radical elements to regional peace and internal stability but it apprehends that extensive military operations will only help IS obtain more recruits and sympathisers who, like in Pakistan, will begin targeting Turkey itself. Of course, Turkey is geopolitically poised like Pakistan and any kind of unilateral decision may have serious and multiple ramifications for its future political and economic stability. London, Washington and Brussels do not want their soldiers on the ground, but the Turkish

military involvement on the soil of a neighbouring country will engender a serious legal and political backlash, and like all other such precedents, it may become a long and taxing engagement to the extent of unleashing many wars within the country itself. Turkey and Pakistan both are "front line" states where tight rope walking appears to be the only option as interventionism or betting on a favourite horse could stipulate even more troubles from within. It is easy to blame Turkey like Pakistan since 9/11 but Sunni victimhood in Syria and Iraq is helping the IS by default and those issues have to be addressed at large, besides a major rethink in Damascus and Baghdad. It is a sad reality that at one level, among other factors, this Sunni-Shia schism in the Arab Middle East has become both a cause and a symptom of a wider malaise. Numerous Turkish critics accuse the West and the rest of hypocrisy and double standards as they criticise Western inaction over Israeli invasions of Gaza and unrestrained encroachments in Jerusalem and the West Bank. In addition, they incriminate Washington for having caused one million Muslim deaths since 9/11, and thus lack trust in its policies and intentions. Like other Muslims, they are also baffled by intra-Muslim schisms and many of them would rather stay aloof when it comes to taking sides. Given the speed and momentum of events, it is hard to predict future scenarios and Turkey, with or without its active participation, is confronted with significant security challenges. States, especially the post-colonial ones, have to speed up their recognition of pluralism and its civic safeguards, but suspicions and uneven economic and political development would take time to be redressed in such cases. Understandably, many Turks are concerned about a trans-regional Kurdish nationalism besides its support from the various external quarters. Still, Turkey may be persuaded to "open up" for its own reasons but its intervention on the one side or the other is largely seen "risky" and given the history of secessionist ethnicities, it is not a minor concern. Only sagacity, short and long term calculations and persuasion through tangible consensus and confidence building measures on all sides can help regain some inter-state and intra-Muslim consensus in the Middle East.

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