



Securing the Airport:

Challenges facing Turkey's attempts to penetrate Afghanistan

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Turkey sought to become an effective player in Afghanistan after the US withdrew its troops and the Taliban seized power in the country. In its quest, Turkey is facing no easy challenges, especially after the Taliban, on three occasions reiterated rejection of any Turkish military presence in Afghanistan. The stand eventually promoted Turkey to announce, on August 27 that it was evacuating all its troops from the war-torn country.

Turkey's Previous Roles

Turkey played several roles in Afghanistan over the past period. These can be outlined as follows:

1- Training Afghanistan's armed forces: Turkey maintains a relationship with Afghanistan under the umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, in which Turkey is a member. During NATO's military presence in Afghanistan, Turkey maintained a 500-strong non-combat force in Afghanistan, where its mission was mainly focused on training the Afghan Armed Forces.

2- Providing medical services: During its presence in Afghanistan, Ankara sought to bolster its soft power through medical services that it offered to the Afghans in areas under the control of the Taliban. The aim was to maintain good relations with the militant group and, by extension, with all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.

3- Securing Kabul Airport: To expand its role in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, Ankara offered to secure Kabul Airport by maintaining its troop presence at the airport. Securing the airport includes protection for western diplomatic missions that decide to leave Kabul, as well as for intelligence agents or US army officers visiting Kabul to hold meetings with Afghan officials to provide support for their war against the Taliban. Ankara wanted diplomatic and economic concessions from Washington in return for this role.

On June 14 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US President Joe Biden met on the sidelines of the NATO summit and agreed that Turkey would take a lead role in securing Kabul airport as the United States withdraws troops from Afghanistan. In return, the US and NATO would cover the economic cost of stationing the Turkish troops. In addition, Turkey would also receive diplomatic, logistic and

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صورة لقلب الدين حكمتيار، وهو جالس في المنتصف، في حين يجلس على يمينه الرئيس التركي رجب طيب أردوغان، وعلى يساره راشد الغنوشي، زعيم حزب النهضة

financial assistance from the United States. Talks were already underway on the deal, but the fast-paced developments and the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul on August 15 caused these plans to be aborted.

One day later, on August 16, Turkey announced that it will provide technical and security support to the Taliban to seize control of the Kabul airport. But on August 24 Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said, “We want good relations with Turkey, but we don’t want their soldiers in Afghanistan.”

The next day, on August 25, two Turkish officials said that the Taliban have asked Turkey for technical help to run Kabul airport after the departure of foreign forces but insist that Turkey’s military also withdraw fully by the end-August deadline. One of the Turkish officials said that ensuring the safety of workers without the Turkish Armed Forces is a risky job, especially because the suicide bombing that hit the airport has exposed weaknesses in Taliban’s security procedures. The official noted that talks with the Taliban on the issue were ongoing.

Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said in a televised interview that after their withdrawal, Turkey’s troops could continue this operational task

at the Kabul airport if it is agreed in the terms and an agreement is reached in this direction.

Turkey’s ambitions behind its presence in Afghanistan

Turkey seeks to maintain presence in Afghanistan to achieve the following goals that serve its interests:

1- Strengthening Influence in Central Asia: Turkey wants to present itself as an alternative to Russia as a traditional economic and political partner to regional states, given, in particular, their overlapping ethnicities and ties between Afghanistan and Central Asian nations inspired religiously, linguistically and historically by Turkey. Economically, the region sits on a huge wealth of oil, natural gas, minerals, coal and underground freshwater aquifers.

2- Improving relations with Washington: Ankara seeks to explore areas of cooperation with Washington to offset disagreement on other issues, which increased recently, as well as to extract concessions from Washington.

Major points of contention include Turkey’s acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system; Washington’s decision to remove Turkey from the F-35 joint strike fighter program; the United States’ support to Syrian Kurds; and the issue of Turkish scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen, who was accused by Turkey of masterminding the 2016 attempted military coup attempt against President Erdogan. Other issues include Turkey’s harassment of Greece and Cyprus over gas fields in Eastern Mediterranean.

Overall, the issues caused sanctions to be imposed on Ankara by the US and European countries.

3- Addressing the Refugee Crisis: Turkey is facing a new refugee crisis that was sparked weeks before Kabul fell in the hands of the Taliban. Reports indicate that the numbers of Afghan refugees entering Turkey on their way to Europe are estimated at between 500 and two thousand on a daily basis. Ankara seeks to address this threat by completing the construction of a wall which began in 2017 along its border with Iran. By the end of this year, it plans to add a 64-kilometers stretch, trenches and barbed wire lines. In addition, Turkey reiterates that staying in Afghanistan and



attempting to support a peaceful settlement will help in achieving stability and consequently curb the current refugee influx into its territory.

Turkey's tactics

Turkey has several cards and bargaining chips to bolster its mission in Afghanistan, such as the following:

1- Ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Uzbeks: Turkey maintains relations with some Afghan warlords, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-e-Islami, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Afghanistan, and ethnic Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, who returned from Turkey to Afghanistan on August 6. Turkey's goal is to diversify tools required for moving on the Afghan arena. The Uzbeks, a Turkic ethnic group, are battle-hardened warriors, bitter enemies of the Pashtuns, to whom the Taliban belong, long before the Afghan civil wars.

Hekmatyar maintains strong relations with Erdogan. The Turkish Daily Star newspaper ran a photo on July 10, 2003, that shows Erdogan sitting to the left of Hekmatyar with Rached Ghannouchi, head of the Tunisian Ennahda Movement sitting to his right. The photo, which dates back to the era of the mujahideen who seized control of Afghanistan, is proof of the strong ties between the three leaders.

Despite the strong personal relations between Erdogan and Hekmatyar, the Islamist leader is less popular than the Taliban. He has ties with the Pakistani intelligence who seems to have strong influence on him. This was evidenced in his August 22 statements in which he praised Pakistan and fiercely attacked India.

Dostum did not last long against the Taliban when his forces quickly collapsed when the Taliban swept into the city of Mazar-i-Sharif and he fled to neighboring Uzbekistan. Ankara's ability to use him then was reduced, especially because of the intense hostility between him and the Taliban.

2- US and Western Support: Ned Price, Spokesperson for the US Department of State, on August 27, said that running an airport is not an uncomplicated piece of business, while Secretary of State Antony Blinken, spoke about a temporary closure of the Kabul airport

as of September 1. Blinken affirmed that he held talks with officials from a number of states to keep the airport up and running, or reopen it if the Taliban fails to run it. Washington is working to convince the Taliban to accept a role by a foreign state, especially as keeping the facility open is in the interest of a group who does not want Afghanistan to be isolated from the world, and helps deliver international aid to the country.

Washington seems to be suggesting to the Taliban that either Turkey or Qatar play a role in guarding the airport given that they are Muslim countries close to the group. The Taliban, however, insisted that it would run the airport while Turkey takes care of the logistics. The Americans clearly threaten the Taliban saying that numerous airplanes will refuse to land at the airport if the group fails to guarantee the security of the airport and smooth operation of the infrastructure. The threats aim to place pressure on the Taliban to accept a Turkish role in running the airport.

Despite that, on August 27 Turkey evacuated all troops from Afghanistan aside from a small 'technical group' left behind. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, in statements made on August 28, talked about reports that Turkey will take over security at the airport after the US withdrawal. Zabihullah asserted that they do not confirm these reports and actually reject them, showing Taliban's denunciation of all US and western pressures.

The North Atlantic Alliance Organization, or NATO, has reservations about Pakistan's participation in the security of the airport because of its strong ties with the Taliban, suggesting that Turkey will be more resilient to exchanging intelligence on traffic at the airport, which raises the concerns of the Taliban and by extension Pakistan.

3- Support from Pakistan and Qatar: The Turkish President sought help from Pakistan to convince the Taliban to accept a Turkish role in guarding Kabul airport following the US withdrawal. In a visit to Pakistan on August 11, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar tried to convince Pakistani officials to place pressure on the Taliban, but then the group refused to give in.

Moreover, the Taliban maintains good relations with



Qatar which hosted talks between the Taliban and US government, and between the group and the government led by former president Ashraf Ghani, all held to reach a peaceful settlement to the Afghan crisis before the Kabul government collapsed on August 15. Doha may be working to convince the Taliban to accept a Turkish role at the airport.

4- Using “the infrastructure reconstruction” chip:

Turkey seeks to reconstruct infrastructure destroyed in the war, and may be seeking partnership in Chinese projects in Afghanistan that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Major Hurdles

Although Ankara possesses the above-mentioned tools to expand its influence in Afghanistan, it is facing several hurdles preventing it from achieving its goals:

1- Taliban’s disapproval: The Taliban made it clear that they reject any foreign troop presence in Afghanistan, including those of Turkey. The group explains that Turkish troops are part of the NATO presence and that staying in Afghanistan would be in violation of the agreement reached between the Afghan group and the US Administration. The group’s rejection means that Turkey should withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, which it eventually did.

2- Concerns of the involved parties: International and regional powers involved in the Afghan crisis, including China, Russia and Pakistan, reject any effective role in Afghanistan. China is extremely worried about Turkish ties to terror organizations. It should be noted that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan previously attacked China and declared support for China’s Uyghur minority because they are part of the Turkic peoples. In 2009, when he was

prime minister, Erdogan described China’s measures against the Uyghurs as genocide.

On its part, Russia too rejects any Turkish role in operating Kabul airport. The Russian foreign ministry, in July 2021, expressed surprise that despite spending twenty-years in Afghanistan, the NATO and U.S. military presence was not able to train 600 Afghans to run Kabul airport. “That is a big question”, the ministry said.

On the other side, while Turkey is a member of NATO, Pakistan supported the Taliban financially and militarily, and provided a safe haven for the group’s leaders and their families. That is why, Pakistan is not expected to make investments to serve other states for nothing.

3- Turkish opposition’s stance: The Turkish opposition, and especially the Republican People’s Party and the Peoples’ Democratic Party, totally reject any plans to send more Turkish troops to Afghanistan or to keep the current troops in Kabul to guard Kabul airport. They even demand Turkish soldiers return home basically because of fears that Turkish troops would be involved in military confrontations with terrorist organizations and factions, namely ISIS, in Afghanistan. It should be noted here that the Turkish public opinion and the opposition share the same views and call for the Turkish troops to return home.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that despite a number of opportunities empowering Turkey to bolster its influence in Afghanistan, there remain internal and external hurdles that limit its availability to maintain a strong presence there. Washington will however continue to rely on Turkey or Qatar for a role in operating Kabul airport after the US and NATO pull their troops.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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