

## Will the Arab states follow Turkey in the fight against Isis?

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After refusing to do so for more than a year, Turkey has finally taken the bit between its teeth and plunged into the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. This U-turn has been spurred by a series of provocations by Isis as well as international pressure and a growing domestic political crisis as the Turkish Islamist government has been seen as doing nothing against Isis while Turks are slaughtered.

The question now is whether such a dramatic move can be followed by Gulf Arab states, who still believe that there are more important things to do than to counter the jihadis. These include the competition and differences with Iran, denying the success of the nuclear deal between the US and Tehran, trying to conquer Yemen but plunging it into a humanitarian hell and refusing to carry out reforms to end the paralysing Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict.

Isis now represents “a national security threat to Turkey”, a senior official in Ankara told the New York Times recently. Yet the official did not say [why it had taken Turkey so long to act](#), why Isis did not represent such a threat just the week before or why Turkey had allowed so many foreign recruits to join Isis using Turkish border crossings into Syria.

Isis has been much clearer about its intentions and provocations. It has always wanted to drag Turkey into the conflict so the country’s Islamist government could be exposed as pro-western. The jihadis have wanted to undermine Turkish power in the region and attack the seat of the last caliphate – the Ottomans – who ruled Turkey for half a millennium, so they can install their own caliph.

Then, on July 20, Isis carried out a series of suicide attacks inside Turkey, capped with the vicious [bombing on the border town of Suruc](#) that killed 32 and wounded dozens.

Finally, [Ankara last week declared itself an ally](#) in the war against Isis and allowed US and Nato planes to take off from its Incirlik air base in southern Turkey to bomb Isis targets in Syria – hugely shortening the flying time for US bombers. Turkish bombs also fell on Isis targets in Syria. Suddenly, Turkey’s passivity towards the jihadis was replaced by a hard anger and a desire to strike back.

Turkey’s Kurds have had to pay a heavy price for the move, however. In Iraq and Syria local Kurds have been a mainstay in the fight against Isis but Ankara has now got US support to retaliate against terror attacks by the Kurdistan Workers party, or PKK, and the 2013 ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK is at an end. In the past few days, Turkish bombing runs against the Kurds have outnumbered those against Isis, bringing into question the country’s commitment to fight the jihadis.

Can the Arab states now be persuaded that the war against Isis must take a decisive turn if it is to be successful? Can Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have also been on the receiving end of Isis terror, stop fighting their absurd war of conquest in Yemen, cease their obsessive criticism of the US nuclear deal with Iran and build a tolerance towards Shia and non-Muslim minorities in the face of the larger threat of Isis?

There is some hope on that front from another heavyweight state. Iran hates Isis and is helping the Iraqi and Syrian government fight the menace, which is not appreciated by Gulf Arab states which would like to see an end to any Iranian influence in the Middle East. However, Iran is persisting in trying to woo the Arabs – after signing the nuclear declaration the country’s foreign minister Javad Zarif visited the Arab Gulf states appealing to them to form a joint front against Isis.

[Mr Zarif promised the Gulf states](#) that his country would join in the fight on extremism and militancy in the Middle East. “Any threat to one country is a threat to all... No country can solve regional problems without the help of others,” he said in a press conference in Kuwait.

However, in return Iran would have to tone down its support for the Shia militias such as Hizbollah that are shoring up President Bashar al-Assad’s forces in Syria. The Arabs want Mr Assad gone while the Iranians want him to stay. There could be wriggle room here for a diplomatic effort and a solution.

The involvement of Turkey – with its half a million armed forces, Nato level firepower and alliance with the west – could tilt the battlefield against Isis, and certainly help to contain the foreign recruits trying to join it.

Turkey’s close ties with Iran could help mend Arab-Iran relationships and persuade Iran to stop arming groups such as Hizbollah, which have become the mercenaries of the Middle East. Only by working together can Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar and the Kurdish authorities stem the sectarian bloodbath that has become the defining mark of the Middle East.

But the hope for such changes is dependent on a greater US commitment to a diplomatic strategy. The war against Isis will certainly be stepped up, but only the US and Europe – and ideally Russia too – can launch a diplomatic blitz to persuade the major Arab countries to take responsibility for the mess in Iraq and Syria, take the lead in the 60 nation anti-Isis coalition and put Arab armies on the ground.

The US and its allies need to pull all this together through relentless diplomatic efforts across the Middle East. The major Arab states have to come up with a road map that the US can sell to the region and beyond. The Arabs must demonstrate that – like Turkey – they, too, can reverse direction – whether on working with Iran, stopping the war in Yemen or mounting a campaign against sectarianism. Turkey’s U-turn may well have given the world a way forward, but this moment must not be wasted on just building new military alliances; it must be seized on to forge a diplomatic strategy that unites a disparate and divided Middle East end.