

Turkey's Syrian Dilemma: Testing the 'Regional Solutions for Regional Problems' Proposition¹

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Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, Turkey has been cautiously weighing its options as it decides how to deal with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown and the ongoing humanitarian disaster unfolding in its own backyard. Having claimed regional leadership for itself and proclaiming a policy of 'zero problems with neighbours', Ankara's lofty rhetoric has put Turkey in the international spotlight over Syria. Due to Turkey's own domestic evolution, and the resulting self-confidence vis-à-vis the world that it has developed over the last decade of reform, it is uniquely placed to play a decisive role in Syria. At the same time, the domestic and international dimensions for Turkey of the Syrian situation make it one of the most difficult foreign policy challenges that Ankara has ever had to face. A combination of status-quo policies, international pressure and concrete actions against the Assad regime have all been attempted, but without strong political will or strategic conviction. Ankara continues to struggle to balance its strategic interests in Syria with its broader ambitions for the region.

Rollercoaster relations

The rollercoaster that is Syria-Turkey relations is tied to national ambitions, sectarian tensions, tribal affinities, and an imperial legacy that stretches from modern history back into Ottoman times. Yet Turkey remains the first among equals of Syria's neighbours. Since 2002, it has invested more in Syria – both diplomatically and economically – than in any of its other neighbours, making it the 'crown jewel' of Ankara's emerging foreign policy of focusing on its neighborhood first. This transformed their relationship from one of military confrontation rooted in cold war geopolitics and in Syria's support for separatist Kurdish PKK terrorists in Turkey to one of economic cooperation: as a result of which Ankara became Damascus's lifeline both economically and geopolitically, even during Syria's period of isolation following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and again after the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2009, Turkish President Abdullah Gül remarked during an official visit to Damascus and Aleppo that "Syria is Turkey's door to the Middle East, and Turkey is a gateway to Europe for Syria".²

The popularity of Turkey in Syria and of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan personally – who was polled as the most popular leader in the Arab world in 2010 and again in 2011, with the highest percentage of approvals both years in Syria – allowed Ankara to reverse traditional Syrian perceptions of Turkey by drawing on its common heritage and history with Syria. A 2009 survey showed that 87% of Syrian respondents had a favourable opinion of Turkey, and that percentage reached 93 in 2010. By 2011, however, Syrians with a favourable view of Turkey had fallen sharply to 44% – and only 31% of respondents supported Turkey as a leader in the region.³

The turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations came in August 2011, when Prime Minister Erdoğan sent his foreign minister and top policy advisor, Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Damascus for a seven-hour consultation with Bashar al-Assad, during which promises of a cessation of violence coupled with reform were made – promises that were subsequently broken. On 22 November 2011, Erdoğan for the first time publicly called for Assad's removal and on 30 November, Davutoğlu announced a series of unilateral sanctions, ranging from freezing Syrian government assets and suspending loans to banning all military sales.⁴ Turkey was one of the last major NATO countries to impose sanctions on Syria, but Ankara's sanctions were far harsher than anything imposed by previous Turkish governments against any neighbour, including those against Iraq in the 1990s.

¹ This piece is an adaptation of a longer Crown Center Brief published previously at: www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb63.html

² www.milliyet.com.tr/default.aspx?aType=SonDakika&ArticleID=1095187

³ See Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011* Tesev Report 2011 available at: www.tesev.org.tr/en/publication/the-perception-of-turkey-in-the-middle-east-2011

⁴ Sebnem Arsu, "Turkish Premier Urges Assad to Quit in Syria," *New York Times* (November 22, 2011), www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/world/middleeast/turkish-leader-says-syrian-president-should-quit.html

Current Turkish policy towards Syria

Given the implications of the conflict in Syria for Turkey's own security interests along their shared border and the fear of a sectarian civil war spiralling into a broader regional conflict, Ankara has been cautiously monitoring the 16-month old conflict in Syria.

Until the recent shooting down of a Turkish reconnaissance plane, Ankara had been active in its humanitarian relief efforts without committing itself to any future course of action – in effect “leading from behind”.⁵ Turkey has supported the nascent opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), which it hosted in Antalya. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said “Turkey will continue its inclusive activities to strengthen the opposition in Syria”.⁶ Other than offering humanitarian aid and providing shelter to refugees and dissidents who cross the border into Turkey, however, Ankara has been careful to not publicly disclose what type of support it is providing to both the SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This strategic ambiguity has allowed Turkey to argue for more diplomacy while simultaneously calling for Assad to step aside and ratcheting up regional pressure.

Internationally the staunch support of Beijing, Moscow and Tehran for Damascus has made Ankara less proactive than its rhetoric might suggest. Turkey insists that without a UN mandate for action its hands are tied. However, in light of continued massacres and killings in the face of UN monitors throughout Syria, some reports indicate that a call from the Arab League with concrete commitments from NATO might find a receptive audience in Ankara. Having helped broker the six-point Annan Plan before the second meeting of the Friends of Syria on 1 April 2012 in Istanbul and having given diplomacy more than a fair chance, Ankara remains frustrated with Damascus. Turkey continues its rhetoric. On 7 June 2012, Davutoğlu said “first, the international community should act unanimously to stop the oppression and atrocities”.⁷ Yet as Dr. Davutoğlu himself also points out, the Annan Plan needs a timetable.

On 22 June, Syria downed a Turkish RF-4E reconnaissance plane under a set of disputed circumstances. Ankara's rhetoric has been guarded as details continue to emerge about why the aircraft may have entered Syrian territory and whether Damascus knew that it was shooting down a Turkish plane without so much as a warning shot. Ankara chose to refer the incident to NATO's governing body. The consultations called under Article 4 of NATO bought Ankara time as it determines if and what course of concrete action to take. The last time Article 4 was invoked was nine years ago – also by Turkey – over escalating tensions with neighbouring Iraq. However, that case did not lead to the invocation of Article 5, which stipulates that an attack against any NATO country is as an attack against all. Given the lack of political will, there have been strong condemnations and rhetoric from NATO, the EU and now Ankara against Damascus, but a lack of concrete action all round.

The fact that Syria and Turkey have been in direct communication about the incident and the search for the two pilots' remains along with the wreckage in the Mediterranean indicates the lack of appetite for further action. The Syrian Foreign Ministry said “Syria remains committed to a neighbourly relationship with Turkey,” yet they also warned “if they [NATO] are hostile, they must know that Syrian land and waters are sacred”.⁸ Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – who is known for his nationalist outbursts and harsh rhetoric towards Assad – refrained from making a statement until after the NATO consultations, which indicated the pressure he is under to find the right mix of populist outrage and caution. Officials in Ankara, such as President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, have promised retaliatory action if evidence warrants it and have been quick to assert that, “no-one should dare to test Turkey's capabilities”. Yet Turkey is eager to avoid any further escalation and seems to be moving back to its position as a mediating power by reaching out to Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States in the immediate aftermath of the provocation.

Conclusion

The breakdown in Syria-Turkey relations is having a severely negative effect on Turkey's regional prestige and even domestic debates about the performance of the government. Having shifted the debate from massacres in Syria to abortions at home, the Turkish prime minister has confounded many with his lack of leadership on Damascus, especially given his harsh rhetoric against Assad, which he is yet to back up with actions.

⁵ *GMF Blog*: “Is Europe Leading from Behind on Syria,” blog entry by Judith Baroody and Joshua W. Walker, November 17, 2011, <http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/11/is-europe-leading-from-behind-on-syria/>

⁶ www.todayszaman.com/news-282852-turkey-us-condemn-assad-regimes-brutal-violence-in-syria.html

⁷ www.todayszaman.com/news-282852-turkey-us-condemn-assad-regimes-brutal-violence-in-syria.html

⁸ www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/25/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE85D0IS20120625

Ankara's choices regarding Damascus may have long-term consequences in terms of its regional alliances, and even its integration with the West. Turkish policies and Erdoğan's populism can complement Western concerns if framed within a broader and longer-term perspective of a transatlantic alliance that prioritizes common goals and values over short-term tactical differences. Turkey has repeatedly called for regional solutions to regional problems, therefore taking the lead with clear support and commitment from the Arab League, NATO and even the UN General Assembly is not beyond the realm of possibility.

Getting Syria right is critical for Turkey; yet it is almost entirely beyond its own control. As Ankara continues to cautiously weigh its options, Assad's ongoing onslaught on his own people will force Turkey into either explaining why it sat idly by as its neighbourhood burned or into leading a more robust international response. Having already entered into private discussions with its allies about contingency planning and humanitarian relief, Turkey's leaders know that they cannot stand by as their neighbour disintegrates into civil or sectarian war, nor can they afford to intervene unilaterally. Regardless of whether Ankara keeps its strategic options open by seeking to preserve the status quo, events on the ground in Syria could rapidly force Ankara into moving beyond rhetoric and intervening in either a limited humanitarian or full-scale manner. Having called for Assad's removal, the status quo is also untenable given the fact that the Pandora's Box unleashed by Damascus directly affects Turkey's interests and broader strategic vision as a regional leader. Having sought the role of regional leader over the last decade, Ankara's time has clearly come in Damascus.

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