



Turkish-Syrian Relations: The Erdoğan Legacy

SAMI MOUBAYED*

The rise to power of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan marks a new era in positive Turkish-Syrian relations. The new Syrian attitude towards Turkey represents a break from past: Syria considers Turkey a reliable partner for brokering a peace deal between Syria and Israel, and Turkey offers opportunities for political and economic cooperation for improving the welfare and security of two countries. The Syrian administration considers Turkey's partnership to be a key factor in its attempts to achieve integration into the international community, a solution of the problems with Israel, and the securing of territorial unity in Iraq.

The Syrians are making a lot of investments in Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, viewing him as a man who can bring peace to the region and help Syria re-enter the international community. The Syrians are evidently willing to go to great lengths to please the Turkish leader, as they demonstrated by opening channels with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) despite public outcry from Europe and the Greek Cypriots. Syrian students are being encouraged to study at TRNC universities, and a ferryboat line between Famagusta and Lattakia is now operational, bringing life to the divided island, whose only lifeline had been – due to an international boycott – the Turkish Republic itself. Public opinion in Syria is now ripe for a Syrian-Turkish honeymoon, in political as well as economic domains: Syrian tourist companies are actively promoting Turkish destinations like Bodrum and Istanbul, and for the first time ever, powerful

* Sami Moubayed, PhD, is a Syrian historian, political analyst, and university professor based in Damascus. He is editor-in-chief of Syria's leading English monthly *FORWARD*, and author of *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000* (Cune Press, 2005), moubayed@gmail.com.

Damascene families are setting a trend of holding weddings in Turkey, at times hosting parties for nearly 1,000 people in the hotels and resorts of Istanbul. Turkey is also being promoted as a shopping venue for Syrians, a clear alternative to and replacement for Lebanon, and private Syrian universities are seeking exchange programs with Turkish institutes.

Turkish TV dramas, dubbed into Arabic, enjoyed a tremendous success in Syria in 2008, even rivaling the highly-publicized Syrian series famous throughout the Arab world. For the first time ever, posters of Turkish actors and actresses are

“Historians from both countries are even toying with the idea of re-visiting the Ottoman Era to shed light on the reforms and positive sides of Syrian-Turkish history”

being pinned on the bedroom walls of Syrian teenagers. Syrian censors are making it clear to artists, directors, and scriptwriters that any work promoting animosity towards the

Ottoman Empire (much welcomed in the 1990s) will not be shown on Syrian TV. Historians from both countries are even toying with the idea of re-visiting the Ottoman Era to shed light on the reforms and positive sides of Syrian-Turkish history. Previously, generations have been raised knowing very little about the relationship, apart from the years 1908-1918, which witnessed the famous executions of Arab nationalists in Damascus, carried out by Jamal Pasha, the military governor of Ottoman Syria, during World War I.

Historical Background

Relations between both countries were never warm after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. The early years of Arab nationalism fanned anti-Turkish sentiment throughout Syria at a time when the Syrian Republic was young and needed to break with its immediate, yet very long and dominant, Ottoman past. The loss of the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939 – a deal brokered by none other than the French government – only added insult to injury, making the relationship appear irreparable. Although the Syrians continued to live in Ottoman-built buildings, work with Ottoman laws, and enjoy Ottoman cuisine, culture, and language, they had become increasingly anti-Turkish by the mid-1950s. The rift solidified further when Syria sided with the Eastern bloc, while Turkey allied with the United States and became a member of NATO. Under the regimes of presidents Shukri al-Quwatli and Jalal Bayar, both countries worked vigorously against each other. Turkish troops even lined the border in 1957, threatening a military invasion to prevent Syria from becoming a Soviet satellite.

In 1984, as part of its cold war with Turkey, Syria extended support to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), heading a Kurdish rebellion in Turkey. Although Syrian-Turkish relations improved somewhat in July 1987, during a visit by Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal to Damascus, when a security protocol was



signed between both countries, Syria became greatly annoyed when the Turks began constructing a number of dams on the Tigris and Euphrates, controlling much of the water flow of the Euphrates to Syria. Matters escalated once again in 1998 when the Turkish army again mobilized on the Syrian-Turkish border, threatening to go to war against Damascus if Syria did not extradite Abdullah Ocalan, head of the PKK. Syria's late president Hafez Al-Assad complied and Ocalan fled Syria; he was captured in Kenya in November 1998 and deported to Turkey where he currently languishes in a Turkish jail.

In 2000, wanting a clear break with the past, and acknowledging that the source of immediate tension, i.e. the PKK, was no longer present, President Ahmed Necdet

Sezer took part in Hafez al-Assad's funeral. He then turned a new page in bilateral relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who visited Turkey in 2004, being the first Syrian president in-office to visit Turkey since the collapse of the Ottoman

“Erdoğan’s rise was warmly received by the Syrians because it coincided with a time when most of its regional allies were backing off, under US pressure, after the onset of war in Iraq and the assassination in Lebanon”

Empire in 1918. Five years later, shortly after the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Harriri, Sezer paid a highly publicized and controversial visit to Damascus. He wanted to further advance bilateral relations but also to voice his displeasure at Washington's policies towards the Middle East, especially Turkey, since 2003. Both Assad and Sezer were opposed to the Iraq War. Both were furious over US support for Kurdish autonomy and the support – or blind eye – the Americans were granting to the PKK's military activities in northern Iraq. When the Turkish Parliament refused to give the Americans access to Turkish territory for their war on Iraq in 2003, the Syrian press was given a wake-up call; the old and difficult neighbor was not as bad as they had thought. Strong editorials in support of Ankara were run in the state-run dailies, signaling that the bad blood between the two countries was slowly becoming history.

The Erdoğan Legacy

The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement was sealed when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in Turkey in 2003. The Syrians realized they had a new friend in Turkey when, in 2004, Erdoğan refused an invitation to visit Israel from then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Instead, Erdoğan received a delegation from Hamas, headed by Khaled Meshaal, shortly afterwards. He next turned down a meeting with then Labor and Trade Minister Ehud Olmert in July 2004. In December 2004, Erdoğan landed in Damascus. Six months later, he kept silent when the US started pressuring Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, in marked contrast to most US allies, after the passing of UNSCR 1559 and the assassination of Harriri. In the midst of



all the noise being made against Syria, a Turkish people's delegation visited Syria in March 2005, and gave a press conference at the gates of the Syrian parliament expressing solidarity with Damascus, much to the displeasure of Washington.

Erdoğan's rise was warmly received by the Syrians because it coincided with a time when most of its regional allies were backing off, under US pressure, after the onset of war in Iraq and the assassination in Lebanon. Turkey's overtures also improved Syria's balance of power with Iran. Contrary to what many believe, the Syrians never chose to be so close the Iranians; apart from being on the same side of the conflict with the Bush Administration, the two countries have very little in common. This was an alliance imposed on them by the US-led boycott of Damascus, just like their alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

“On almost every issue, Syria stands closer to Turkey than to Iran. Apart from seeking Erdoğan's support on a variety of regional issues, the Syrians wanted the world to see that Syria and Iran were not two sides to the same coin”

From day one, the Syrians have been searching for alternate alliances to Tehran, so as never to become completely or excessively dependent on Iran. They have disagreed with Iran on a variety of issues related to Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon (at

least since the summer war of 2006). The Syrians did not want religiously driven politicians running Baghdad. They were opposed to the de-Baathification laws, the Iraqi constitution, and all talk of giving the Shiites an autonomous district in southern Iraq. In contrast, the Iranians minded none of that, and in some cases encouraged it. Iran's proxies in Baghdad were working with the Kurds, promising to implement Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, vis-à-vis transferring oil-rich Kirkuk to Iraqi Kurdistan. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maleki, in need of Kurdish support to maintain his tottering cabinet coalition, saw to it that Arab families were uprooted from Kirkuk to increase the city's Kurdish population; al-Maleki claimed that they had been illegally brought there under Saddam Hussein, for the exact opposite purpose.

On almost every issue, Syria stands closer to Turkey than to Iran. Neither the Syrians nor the Turks would ever support annexing Kirkuk to Kurdistan. On the Palestinian front, the Syrians were not in favor of internal fighting between Fateh and Hamas, despite their friendship with Hamas and historical animosity towards Fateh. Iran, which has no history with the Palestinians, did not mind conflict so long as it served Iran's interests in the Middle East. Iran channeled funds and arms to Hamas, which were used in internal fighting and the siege of Gaza in 2007. Against the backdrop of these developments, Erdoğan came as a blessing for the Syrians, as his policies on a variety of issues mirrored those of Bashar al-Assad. Like Syria, Erdoğan opposed the Iranian agenda for Iraq, and Kurdish ambitions



in Kirkuk. He frowned at the fighting in Palestine and saw an immediate ally in Assad in his war against the PKK.

Apart from seeking Erdoğan's support on a variety of regional issues, the Syrians wanted the world to see that Syria and Iran were not two sides to the same coin. Samir al-Taki, a Syrian political analyst and head of the Orient Center for International Studies (a think-tank working under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), described the reality on the ground saying: "When the Syrians

think of threats, they look at Iran. When they think of opportunities, they look towards Turkey." And these opportunities are very real. The Turkish government has offered Syria \$6.3 million USD to support 42 projects

“Relations between Syria and Turkey received a further boost in April 2008, when indirect talks began between the Syrians and Israelis under Turkish mediation”

being carried out as part of the regional cooperation program between Turkey and Syria. The volume of trade between the two countries is expected to reach \$2.5 billion by the end of 2008. Last April, when Erdoğan came to Syria to attend the Syrian-Turkish Business Council with his Syrian counterpart Mohammad Naji Otari, he called on the Syrians to follow the Turkish reform model, reminding them how national income increased in Turkey from \$230 billion to \$659 billion since 2003. "Our exports," explained the Turkish leader, "were at \$36 billion USD and then reached \$114 billion USD, over a five year period." "This easily can be done in Syria," he added; "all you need is will power, and only then will you be able to extract milk even from the male goat! We are willing to put our hand in yours."

Peace Talks

Relations between Syria and Turkey received a further boost in April 2008, when indirect talks began between the Syrians and Israelis under Turkish mediation. The Syrians wanted these talks to succeed for a variety of reasons. Prime on the list was the restoration of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967. They were also interested in attracting foreign investment to Syria, which had slowed considerably as a result of animosity with Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Accountability Act. The Israelis were interested in the talks because no progress was being made on the Palestinian track, especially since the Annapolis Conference in November 2007. They realized that a peace deal with Syria would be more than just a real estate deal, i.e. land in exchange for a signed piece of paper by Damascus and Tel Aviv. Rather, it would change the balance of power in the entire Middle East, affecting Israel's conflict with Hamas, Hizbullah, and Iran. If the talks succeeded, Turkey would forever be remembered and hailed as the nation to bring peace to the Syrian-Israeli front, something that all US Administrations since Jimmy Carter have failed to achieve. Neither the Americans, however, nor the Iranians, were pleased by the talks in Turkey. The US Administration believed that the Syrians



were bluffing, that they were more interested in a peace process than a peace deal with Israel, and were setting their sights primarily on ending the US-led boycott of Syria in place since 2003.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert talked the Americans into not opposing the talks during his 2008 visit to the White House. The Israelis cited Annapolis, saying that the Syrians went to Maryland despite loud objections from both Iran and Hamas. Both the Israelis and the Turks argued with Washington that Syria was a

“Since April 2008, it has been on everybody’s agenda, Syria and Turkey included, to get the Americans to endorse the talks in Ankara”

reasonable country with whom they could do business. Syria had no history of anti-Americanism, unlike Iran, and could provide solutions to a variety of problems

related to Iraq, Iran, Palestine, and Lebanon. The Turks realized early on, however, as did both the Israelis and the Syrians, that Ankara alone cannot pull through with a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty. The Turks can lay the groundwork for negotiations, and even get both countries into direct talks, but it will take a committed White House to sign a peace deal. Only the Americans can provide the economic, security, and political guarantees for a peace acceptable to both Damascus and Tel Aviv.

There is a feeling that because of the genuine commitment to peace in both camps, a deal can be ready before the end of 2008. The Israelis have assured the Turks that this will stand even after Ehud Olmert leaves office. But if the Americans insist on bypassing the talks, the deal will have to wait until a new president occupies the White House after January 20, 2009. Moreover, whether it is Barack Obama or John McCain, any US president will need at least ten months to get America’s domestic house in order and fill all the executive posts in the administration that would be able to endorse and implement a Syrian-Israeli peace deal. That means another year-in-waiting for the Turks, the Syrians, and the Israelis. During this time, a disgruntled Iran could drown any prospects for Middle East peace, through proxies like Hamas or Hizbullah. This is what happened in the mid-1990s, when triple attacks in Hebron changed the mood in Israel and brought down the Syrian-Israeli peace talks. An attack inside Israel, carried out by Hamas, or skirmishes on the border with Lebanon, might bring all parties back to square one. Iran is not pleased that the Syrians are talking peace with Israel through Turkey. They were not pleased when the Syrians went to Annapolis, nor in 2007, when they received Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Damascus. Iran feels that a Syrian-Israeli peace would come at the expense of Iran.

Intensive diplomacy over the last six months has been aimed at getting the Americans to endorse the talks in Turkey. One method was to cuddle up to the Russians last August, at the height of the war in South Ossetia. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad went to Russia and made strong remarks in favor of the Russian



war with Georgia, and more recently, sent a senior military delegation to Moscow to discuss military cooperation with the Russian Army. The aim was to tell the Americans, “Syria still has all its options open. It is in both America and Israel’s interest to invest in Syria’s readiness for peace at this stage, otherwise, if the wrong buttons continue to be pushed, the Syrians always have the Russian option on the table.” That message was badly received in Washington; rather than scaring the Americans into becoming proactive, it gave ammunition to the Bush Administration to further distance itself from the talks, claiming that the Syrians were not ready for peace. Then came the Syrian effort at bringing the French to the negotiating table in Turkey. During his July 2008 visit to Paris, President Assad invited Nicolas Sarkozy to co-sponsor the talks with Israel. This September, Erdoğan met with Assad in Damascus, at a summit with Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani and President Sarkozy. The Syrians and Israelis were willing to enter into direct talks, under both American and French sponsorship of the talks, along with Turkey.

Policy Recommendations

1. The priorities of the Syrian government shifted after a terrorist bomb struck in the middle of Damascus on September 27, 2008, showing just how dangerous the situation is in neighboring north Lebanon and Iraq. All related parties should pay attention to the fact that the new priority on the Syrian agenda is internal security and combating trans-national terror networks operating in neighboring countries.
2. The Turkish government needs to invest in Syria’s desire for peace at this stage, which has arguably never been so strong since 2001, and which perhaps will not remain as strong now that Tzipi Livni has become Prime Minister. Turkey can test the waters within Israel, to ensure that the Syrians get a public message of Turkey’s commitment to the peace talks started by former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. They need that kind of public assurance to re-engage with a Livni Administration.
3. The Syrians are uninterested in a rapprochement with the Bush White House, despite the latest meeting between Foreign Minister Walid al-Mouallem and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. They also need a US Administration that publicly and actively supports the indirect talks currently underway in Turkey, hoping that they can become direct talks after progress is achieved. Turkey should play a role in getting the new US administration more actively involved in Syrian-Israeli peace.
4. Both countries have a strong mutual interest in preventing the annexation of Kirkuk to Iraqi Kurdistan, because this would enflame the ambitions of Kurds in both Syria and Turkey. Turkey, Syria and Iraq should be persistent enough to support a strong central government in Baghdad, making current Prime



Minister Nuri al-Maleki less reliant on his Kurdish allies in Parliament. The more he feels isolated within the Iraqi political system, the more he will lean on the Kurds and appease them through implementation of Article 140 of the Constitution, vis-à-vis the future of Kirkuk.

The Syrians believed Erdoğan, when he promised to work with them, “to extract milk, even from the male goat!” Sustainability of cooperation is what matters now in bilateral relations between Syria and Turkey. Investment in the Syrian market, along with continued support for Syria in the peace process, are what the Syrians are looking for to keep the honeymoon going between Damascus and Ankara.

