

The Syrian Quagmire: What's Holding Turkey Back?

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ABSTRACT

The Assad regime has been playing all the diplomatic, political, and security cards it has accumulated over the past several decades. While keeping the violence under a certain threshold on a daily basis so as not to provoke immediate international action, the regime has benefited from the entangled and often conflicted international interests in Syria. The opposition has been unable to deal a serious blow to the regime and international pressure has so far yielded no major results. Though calls for international and regional action have recently intensified, there exists no clear international leadership or consensus on how to handle Syria. The Arab League and Turkey, along with other countries, have created the "Friends of Syria" group after the failure of the UN Security Council resolution on Syria, but Russian and Iranian backing for the Assad regime is seriously limiting options. Given its support for the people against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring and its anti-Assad stance, expectations for Turkey to "do something" are increasingly more pronounced. So, what's holding Turkey back?

As the Assad regime continues its brutal crackdown on the opposition, international efforts have been focused on finding a way to provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian people and on convincing Russia and Iran to drop their support for the regime. Little progress has been made on these fronts and it is not clear how the Arab League will be able to increase its pressure. Turkey, for its part, is trying to increase the international attention on Syria while supporting the Syrian opposition inside Turkey.

The international community is divided on Syria and no single country seems able or willing to lead a coalition to end the Assad regime. For its part, the Syrian opposition still lacks the capacity to seriously destabilize the regime. The undoing of the 40-year-old regime with its complex security apparatus and

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relatively broad base of support among Syrians adds to the conflicting interests of regional and global powers. As many analysts point out, there seem to be no good options on Syria.

Going forward, convincing Russia to reconsider its support for the regime will be crucial to any kind of international effort that would impact the dynamics in Syria in the opposition's favor. Some analysts have called on Turkey to act unilaterally and possibly take military action to help end the violence in Syria; however, such calls are premature to say the least. Barring an immediate security threat from Syria, Turkey will have to act as part of an international coalition.

Turkey's Syria Policy: The Pendulum Swings Back

In order to identify the possible actions Turkey may be willing to take in Syria, we need to analyze the course of these countries' bilateral relations, especially in the past decade. While Turkish policymakers were deeply distrustful and

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suspicious of Syria in the 1990s, over the past decade Turkey's Syria policy has dramatically changed. Today, in terms of government-to-government

relations, we are back to square one. However, there is a fundamental difference today: Turkey has a significant stake in what happens in Syria's internal political scene. This was not the case a decade ago.

Turkey's relations with Syria improved greatly during the tenure of the AK Party government, especially in the second half of the past decade. In the 1990s, Turkish policy toward Syria was defined by the security threat posed by Syrian support for the PKK, which even led Turkey to the brink of war with Syria in the late 1990s. PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's expulsion in 1998 from Damascus was a turning point in bilateral relations as Ankara's pressure on Damascus yielded concrete results in terms of security cooperation. As a result, over the past decade, Turkey has developed extensive relations with Syria within the framework of its self-declared "zero problems with neighbors" policy.

Good relations with Syria had represented the hallmark of Turkey's neighborhood policy toward the Middle East.

Turkey not only improved its political and economic relations with Syria but also worked toward ending Syria's isolation from the international arena through a peace deal with Israel. Positioning itself as an honest broker in the region,

Turkey sought to advance its regional interests through economic and political integration on the one hand, and security cooperation on the other. When the first

protests against the Assad regime started in Syria, Turkey responded quickly and tried to convince Assad to implement reforms that would create an inclusive and ultimately democratic governance structure. Clearly, the biggest disappointment for the Turkish government has been the Assad regime's refusal to set the country on a peaceful course and its brutal crackdown on non-violent demonstrators.

Once it was clear that the regime would not respond constructively to Turkish advice and instead insist on using force against its citizens, Turkey took a clear stance against Assad and started openly hosting the Syrian opposition in August 2011. Turkey's turn against Assad was considered both late and early depending on one's political position. Liberal activists have argued that Turkey was too late in adopting its anti-Assad stance, while pure "realists" have argued that Turkey should have left an open door to continue negotiations with the regime. In any case, Turkey's dealings with Assad since the early 2000s have provided Turkey with enough insight to determine that the Assad regime proved incapable of reform and of reaching a reasonably negotiated solution.

The Arab Spring's Challenge for Turkey

Syria has been the centerpiece in Turkey's successful redefinition of its neighborhood policy toward the Middle East.

Relying on its improved relations, Turkey was able to position itself on the "right side of history" when the Arab Spring

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came along. In fact, Turkey's scorecard in responding to the Arab Spring has been impressive and this is clearly reflected in various opinion polls out of Arab countries about Turkey and the perception of Turkish leadership. This reception is based on what the country represents in terms of the level of democratic maturity, economic success, and regional standing. Turkey's alignment with the people against authoritarian regimes has solidified this positive reception throughout the region. Turkey endorsed the Tunisian revolution and Prime Minister Erdogan was the first leader to call on Egyptian leader Mubarak to step down. At the same time, Turkey refused to adopt a cookie-cutter approach to the uprisings as it maintained communication channels with the authoritarian leaders. Turkey did not, however, endorse the authoritarian status quo; on the contrary, Turkey advocated for reform, change, and responsiveness to the "legitimate demands of the people." This is what has made Turkey "the biggest winner of the Arab Spring."¹

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in Syria now poses the most difficult challenge for Turkey. Turkey reacted very quickly to unrest in Syria by offering Assad help in making the necessary political reforms. Assad, in Turkey's estimation, had ample time to adopt a path of reform, hold elections, and possibly emerge as an elected leader setting the country on the path toward democracy. Turkey told Assad in the bluntest

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of terms that he would lead the country into chaos if he failed to implement meaningful changes; unfortunately, Assad passed on the opportunity to lead a peaceful transition. More tragically, the Syrian regime made the assessment that it should fight its way out of the current unrest. If it could crush the opposition ("terrorists" in the regime's vocabulary) early, the Assad regime could return to the status quo. Clearly, the regime chose a path where it could employ its domestic security machine and rely on international alliances in suppressing and delegitimizing the opposition.

The Syrian regime's unresponsiveness to Turkey's offer for help in avoiding the "bloody route" out of the Arab Spring has seriously threatened Turkey's interests in Syria. Turkey has a critical interest in a stable Syria to avoid the security risks that emanate from refugee influxes and possible PKK activism from within Syria. Much of Turkey's trade

with the Middle East had gone through Syria over the past decade but this came to a halt in the wake of the current uprising. Economic development on both sides of the border had been a celebrated fact of life over the past decade but this is no longer the case.

Turkey has promised to stand with the Syrian people against the regime to promote a stable, democratic and inclusive Syria. Above all, Turkey wants to avoid a sectarian civil war which could create a "black hole" in the Middle East and seriously threaten to destabilize the

region. Given the Assad regime's resistance to any proposals for ending the violence – let alone to negotiate with the opposition – and the international community's inability to agree on a framework for a peaceful transition, calls for arming the opposition and/or for outside military intervention are gaining traction. At the moment, Turkey is focused on getting humanitarian aid to civilians inside Syria while openly making references to "contingency" plans. As the refugee numbers are now above 14,000 with the most recent refugee influx, Turkey has begun to openly talk of establishing a buffer zone. Syria, the most successful example of Turkish soft power in the Middle East, may in fact force Turkey to exercise its hard power.

A Turkish Intervention?

Turkey wants to avoid any action that could jeopardize its perceived positive



Photo: REUTERS, Osman Orsal

A Syrian refugee boy gives a victory sign at Reyhanli refugee camp in Hatay.

role among the Arab people in the context of the Arab Spring. At the same time, it is also hard pressed to keep its promise to stand with the Syrian people. Since its call for Assad to step down, Turkey has been openly hosting the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) while calling for an end to regime violence; such support could already be considered intervention at some level. However, based on the lessons learned from Iraq, Turkey has remained a vocal critique of outside military intervention. Yet, Turkey has also said time and again that it will not remain silent in the face of regime violence. In mid-March, Prime Minister Erdogan announced that a “safe zone” and “buffer zone” were

among the options being “examined.” This may have been an attempt to warn the regime, which was undertaking a fresh assault on Idlib. On the eve of the April 2, 2012 meeting of the “Friends of Syria” group, it remains to be seen whether Turkey would table or endorse such a proposal, given its long-standing anti-interventionist position as well as the lack of domestic support for such an action.

There have been sparse reports that Turkey may be turning a blind eye to the flow of arms to the opposition. The veracity of these reports are hard to confirm but there is no serious black market for arms in Turkey and only the Turkish state could provide arms if Turkey

chose to do so. The Gulf countries, in particular, are more likely involved in

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providing some money and small arms to the opposition, especially through northern Lebanon. Militarization on the ground has clearly increased and calls for arming the opposition have recently strengthened. Still, Turkey has not endorsed this position.

Turkey's reluctance to endorse a further militarization of the situation derives from its fear of a prolonged sectarian civil war and Syria becoming a battleground for a regional proxy war. Many ideas for intervention have been suggested such as a "humanitarian corridor," "safe zone," "buffer zone," "no-fly zone," and even a "no-drive zone," but any of these would essentially amount to military intervention. While keeping these options open to threaten the Assad regime, Turkey has not yet endorsed any of them. During the Libyan conflict, Turkey adjusted its policy and eventually aligned itself with the NATO operation; however, Libya was a very different situation than Syria in terms of complexity, concrete steps that could be taken, and most importantly, the lack of international consensus.

Turkey will most likely try to exhaust all available tools – humanitarian assistance, international isolation of the

regime, empowering the opposition – before it endorses arming the opposition

or some sort of military intervention. And even then, Turkey would act in concert with the international community. The Syrian regime has been careful not to provoke Turkey through

a mass movement of refugees across the Turkish border or by using the "PKK card." As such, it would be extremely difficult and possibly counterproductive for Turkey to act unilaterally without a direct security threat posed by Syria.

Regional Agendas, Global Calculations

Turkey's ability to act on Syria is not independent of the regional balance of power and global calculations. At the regional level, Syria is being turned into a battleground for sectarian agendas. At the global level, major powers are concerned with the continuation of their vital interests. These dynamics do not necessarily converge with one another; as a result, Syria is being pulled in different directions. Turkey must measure its actions so as not to provoke backlash and accusations of pursuing a Sunni (regional) or an "imperialist" (global) agenda.

The Assad regime has painted Turkey as trying to "meddle" in Arab affairs with a Sunni "neo-Ottomanist" agenda. Such propaganda does have some appeal among the Arab governments who are invested in the survival

of their own regimes in the wake of the Arab Spring. The recent public shouting match between Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki – over the arrest order issued for Iraqi Vice President Hashemi – reveals that Turkey can be perceived as a Sunni power despite its non-sectarian and democratic credentials. While Turkey refuses to base its foreign policy on sectarian priorities, it does find it increasingly difficult to escape the “Sunni agenda” charge in an environment where sectarian tensions run high. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu warned Tehran against contributing to a “sectarian cold war” in the Middle East. While Iran and the Gulf countries see winning the fight in Syria as crucial to their own sectarian agendas throughout the region, Turkey perceives the Syrian situation as a conflict between a repressive minority regime and a repressed majority. Turkey’s interests lie with a democratic and non-sectarian Syria, whereas Saudi Arabia and Iran are invested in the future of a Syria that will ensure that their sectarian regional perspectives prevail.

When Turkey took its anti-Assad stance in August 2011, the Syrian regime started a campaign against Turkey arguing that it was pursuing a neo-Ottomanist agenda and was being manipulated by the West. This propaganda worked to some extent, but Turkey has prevented the regime from distracting the Arab countries with this portrayal

of the situation as “Turks versus Arabs.” Turkey has strategically aligned its Syria policy with that of the Arab League and has advocated a “region-

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al” solution. The drawback of this approach is that the Arab League is not necessarily committed to a democratic future for Syria but mainly to reducing Iran’s regional influence. The benefit in Turkey’s engagement, however, is that the Arab League has been much more active and has endorsed a transition to a post-Assad Syria. Turkey helped create the “Friends of Syria” group, an international association of countries trying to resolve the conflict in Syria, to keep up the pressure on the regime, and therefore Assad is finding it increasingly difficult to blame the Turks when Arab countries and others are also calling for an end to his rule. While endorsing the Arab League efforts, Turkey continues to push for internationally legitimate solutions through the “Friends of Syria” group and by lobbying Iran and Russia.

Under these circumstances, there continue to be diverging and conflicting regional interests regarding Syria. Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia wish to stop the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown, but not for the same reasons. Saudi Arabia is interested in making sure that the Sunnis win in Syria at the expense of the

Iranian-supported Assad regime. This is not the same thing as Turkey's endorsement of the legitimate demands of the Syrian people and its vision for a democratic Syria. Turkey's historical foreign policy reflexes are not sectarian but internationalist and democratic. Even if it wanted to, Turkey could not pursue a successful sectarian policy as it lacks both the historical experience and ideological links to various sectarian groups. In contrast, the Saudis fund and share an ideological bond with groups such as the Salafis. Iran, on the other hand, has heavily invested in Shi'ite groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Syria, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are ready to utilize these investments and make sure to limit the influence of one another.

Iran is working hard to make sure its connection with Hezbollah in Lebanon is not damaged – with or without Assad himself – and that its long-time ally in the “resistance front” against Israel can continue to pursue Iran-friendly regional policies. The Maliki government in Iraq

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feels the Iranian pressure and is reportedly preventing help from the Iraqi Sunnis to the Syrian opposition along its border. Lebanon and Jordan (to a lesser degree) are fearful of destabilization as a result of a possible spillover from Syria; northern Lebanon is already feeling the

heat as pressure to smuggle arms to the Syrian opposition increases while economic activity has already been severely reduced along the border.

Israel has officially endorsed the fall of the Assad regime but it is fearful of “yet another Islamist government” in a post-Assad Syria. A weakened but stable Assad regime as opposed to a regime under “Islamist rule” seems preferable for Israeli policymakers given the “uncertain” environment created by the Arab revolutions. Although Israel sees advantages in a reduced Iranian influence in Syria, it also sees a bleak future in a post-Assad Syria where Islamist groups might take the center stage. As a consequence, Israel's less-than-wholehearted endorsement of Assad's fall has helped to reduce the sense of urgency among American policymakers who have already been deterred by the costly experience of the Iraq war.

At the global level, Russia has been backing the Syrian regime against what it deems as another American-led Western campaign to encroach upon its regional interests. If Syria falls, Russia's access to the Mediterranean may be jeopardized. Russia also wants to stop what it perceives as the Western regime-change agenda from coming closer to its borders. Russia is standing by Assad not necessarily because it is committed to Assad himself, but because it wants to rebuff what it sees as Western plots to induce regime change in countries friendly to Russia.

Russia might, in fact, be amenable to a grand bargain with the US but the US does not see sufficiently vital interests in Syria to be protected or worth seriously bargaining for. The US does have an interest in a post-Assad democratic regime in Syria with reduced Iranian influence. However, the US is also extremely cautious in considering a military operation despite the recently increased calls to do just that after its experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, which it does not want to repeat. The US strategy is similar to Turkey's approach but the resolution of the Syrian crisis is a much more urgent matter for Turkey given that it shares its longest land border with Syria.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of conflicting regional and international interests, a prolonged sectarian war or the continuing crackdown by the Assad regime may be acceptable and desirable for other regional actors but not for Turkey. Turkey has neither the interest nor the experience in waging a proxy war in a neighboring country, in undertaking regime change or unilateral intervention (except in the Cyprus case). Instead, Turkish action to date has involved taking a clear stance against the Syrian regime, housing and supporting the opposition, welcoming refugees, helping to build an international coalition, and working to provide humanitarian assistance. Unless it is endorsed by a legiti-

mate international coalition, it would be unlikely that Turkey would act alone.

Admittedly, Turkey's efforts by themselves will likely be insufficient in tipping the balance against the regime. As the regime has managed to break the resistance first in Homs and now in Idlib, the picture looks increasingly bleak for the opposition as they run out of ammunition and the humanitarian situation worsens by the day. Nevertheless, despite all its current shortcomings, the relatively nascent Syrian political and armed opposition will have to be the ones to deal a serious blow to the regime and destabilize it. Only then can international efforts and outside pressure have a serious impact.

Its extensive engagement with and investment in Syria over the past decade has made Turkey one of the major stakeholders in the future of a stable Syria. Protecting its security interests, aligning itself with the people's revolution, avoiding unilateral military action as well as a sectarian civil war, and navigating the regional and global complexities in Syria constitute the biggest challenge for Turkey posed by the Arab Spring.

Endnote

1. University of Maryland's "2011 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey" concluded that Turkey is seen as playing the "most constructive" role in the Arab uprisings, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/1121_arab_public_opinion_telhami/1121_arab_public_opinion.pdf. Accessed March 14, 2012.

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