

A New Challenge for Turkey: Civil War in Syria

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ABSTRACT *The Arab Spring gave rise to a variety of transitions in the Middle East. Although initial developments in Tunisia and Egypt created optimism, tragic events in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and elsewhere revived fears about a return to authoritarian governments, failed states and civil war. With no foreseeable change in the UN Security Council with regard to Syria, the country's neighbors, including Turkey, face the risk of instability. Although a recent agreement between the US and Russia marked a major step toward destroying the regime's chemical stockpile, it fails to address the conflict itself. As such, spillover effects continue to threaten Syria's neighbors. This paper highlights the critical nature of the situation and the international community's role in finding a solution.*

The Arab Spring and its Aftermath

Although it is a truism that the sudden outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 was unexpected, some IR scholars believe that the signs of an imminent bottom-up revolt had been present in the Middle East at the beginning of the new millennium.¹ The uprisings were rapid and intense, a near simultaneous explosion of popular unrest across an Arab world which was united and galvanized by a shared transnational media and bound by a common identity. The use of new information and communications technologies – including satellite television, the internet and cheap mobile phones – em-

powered and connected the people of the Middle East to such an extent that the Arab street, with the effect and spread of a third wave of democratization², has become a new strategic player in the politics of the region.

The Arab uprising erupted a mere two and a half years ago within the context of a decade-old 'cold war' that polarized the region into an 'axis of resistance' led by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and (until recently) Hamas, and a 'moderate axis' consisting of Arab states aligned with the US and Israel.³ This new 'cold war' weighed regional interactions in a classical bipolar fashion that ignored Arab public opinion and thus actually created

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 15 / No. 4 /
2013, pp. 51-59

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conditions for the Arab Street could express its rage against its autocratic leaders.

Over the last two and a half years, the reality of the Arab Spring uprisings has led to different outcomes across the entire Middle East, whereby varying typologies of transitions have developed. The hope and belief that the Arab revolts would usher in democracies now seems to have vanished among the international community.⁴ Although there was optimism when events unfolded in Tunisia that the Arab awakening would head in the 'right' direction, this year's tragic events in Egypt, Syria, and to a certain extent Tunisia and elsewhere, have proved that there is also a very real possibility of a return to entrenched dictatorships, rejuvenated monarchies or even the collapse of the state and resultant civil wars. The uncertainty in the region coupled with popular unrest and demands for better economic and political governance has accelerated the conditions required for an intensification of regional and global competition in which new alliances and rivalries may develop. The present situation of intense flux has undoubtedly changed the nature of power politics

amongst both Arab and non-Arab actors in the region, as well as further afield. The pace of adaptation to the new reality of the power of the Arab street has made the struggle for influence among regional and extra-regional actors more challenging than ever, to the degree that some regional heavyweights – such as Iran, Israel and Al-Qaeda – have for some time been left behind in the face of newly emerging influences in the region. Now that this struggle for influence has increased in complexity, the notion of two diametrically opposed axis pitted against one another in the Middle East seems increasingly redundant. The conditions of alignment in these previously defined axes are no longer determined by rigid ethnic or religious identities but by geopolitical concerns.

In the aftermath of NATO's intervention in Libya and consequent Russian concerns, different types of cooperation and conflict have emerged during the Syrian civil war and the Egyptian coup between two opposing axes: the Iranian-led axis that has received Russian political backing much of the time and the broad US-led coalition. The unpredictable conditions of the Middle East under the impact of the stalled Arab Spring have also generated opportunities for issue-based cooperation not only between rival external powers but also among competing regional powers.⁵

Today, it is counter-revolutionary movements that have benefitted from the power vacuum in certain Middle Eastern states as a result of the

stalled Arab Spring.⁶ In some places, these marginal, radical groups have stepped in and countered popular desire for good governance in favor of an extremist agenda.⁷ This is the current picture, for instance, in the northern part of Syria,⁸ as well as for other regions of the Middle East. Some regional states have also benefitted from the continuing struggle to fill the power vacuum and have thus extended regional rivalries with the help of proxies operating on the ground in those countries plagued by conflict. The ‘incompleteness’ of the revolution in Egypt and the resulting gap between popular desire for better living conditions and the reality (and apparent failure) of the Muslim Brotherhood’s governance led to a forceful military takeover.⁹

The emergence of non-traditional security concerns is re-configuring regional alliances and increasing the likelihood of issue-based cooperation. Since these new security threats have found legitimate ground in failing states like Syria, they have rapidly become a great concern for some of the members of opposing axes. In this regard, the portrayal of the recent use of chemical weapons in Syria as a major global security threat has made the idea of cooperation an unavoidable reality, even between members of rival axes. However, this recent cooperation has emerged merely to prevent the spread and use of chemical weapons, which is a side effect of the continuing civil war and its negative security repercussions. However, the international community, which is still divided along the lines of two

axes competing with each other in an attempt to impose a particular agenda on the Middle East, does not appear to have a cure for the suffering of people on the ground in the case of Syria. As the complex security dilemma conditions of the Middle East has led to more uncertainty, both regional states and external forces are finding it difficult to adapt to the rapidly changing and arguably ‘deteriorating’ environment, a fact that is valid for Turkey as well.

Turkey’s Decision to Back the Arab Street and Democratic Demands in Syria

During the last decade of volatile conditions in the Middle East, Turkey has been challenged to find its place in the region. Before the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Ankara has endeavored to operate along the lines of “cooperative security” in the Middle East via material and ideational capabilities developed over the last two decades. During this time, Turkey temporarily improved relations with its neighbors due to the creation of a zone of peace in the South and East and an emphasis on cooperation through the introduction of economic and cultural mechanisms based on a balance of power mindset.¹⁰ This development led to accusations that Turkey was departing from an 80-year old policy of Westernization in favor of cooperation with the “axis of resistance”. However, soon after the outbreak of the Arab revolts, Turkey, which has associated itself with certain initiatives to market itself as a



An opposition fighter prepares a home-made rocket before launching it towards government forces in Syria's northeastern city of Deir Ezzor.

AFP

successful democratic Muslim country, re-aligned itself with the Arab people's pleas for democracy and has since started to be seen as part of the newly constructed western coalition. Despite unfair accusations of operating with the "axis of resistance", Ankara was later recognized as an influential non-Arab actor capable of operating with greater independence but not beyond the general contours of the "moderate axis" that now includes various Arab partner states.

Until events unfolded in Libya and Syria, the situation appeared to be

within the limits of viability. In the case of Libya, Ankara, after some hesitation, gave the green light to NATO operations directed against the Qaddafi regime. In Syria, after failing to persuade the Al-Assad regime to introduce reforms in accordance with the Syrian people's demands and the regime's use of violence against its own people, Ankara decided to side with the opposition forces. Since then, Turkey has been exposed to both soft and hard security threats.¹¹ These include an inflow of refugees that now numbers 500,000, the downing of a Turkish

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jet, frequent instances of border violations and mortar shelling, and of course the terror attacks in Reyhanlı, all of which are a result of the Assad regime's actions. The threats that Turkey now faces are the result of spill-over effects from the on-going Syrian civil war. From the inception of the Syrian crisis, Ankara has maintained that the problem could only be solved with the removal of Assad from power¹² Turkey was not alone in this view, which is why Ankara allied itself with the extended US-led coalition that includes not only NATO countries but also members of the GCC and a number of Arab League countries. The Turkish government's threat perception regarding the Syrian regime in the aftermath of the downing of a Turkish jet is shared by Ankara's Western allies; hence, the situation confirmed the necessity of stationing NATO patriots in the southern part of the country as an important deterrent mechanism.¹³

All in all, we can say that the strategic visions of Ankara and its Western allies were very much identical at the

inception of the Syrian civil war. Most of the Euro-Atlantic capitals share the view that the Syrian crisis cannot be resolved without the removal of Assad. However, where Ankara and its allies differ is in how to realize this aim and which instruments and procedures should be utilized. Due to its 900 kilometer border with Syria, Turkey is vulnerable to all manner of threats from the current regime in Damascus. So far, Ankara has tried to explain its current and future concerns about the prolonged civil war in Syria. There are several worst case scenarios related to a post-conflict Syria, one of which is already emerging with historic conflicts associated with ethnic and religious divides continuing to destabilize the Middle East. Both the government and opposition in Turkey believe that if the conflict in Syria continues, the disintegration of the country is a real possibility. Such a scenario would be the most unwelcome and risk-laden outcome in terms of the Turkish security framework. According to actors in Turkey, the third undesirable option would be the failure of the international community to solve the crisis – in essence, failure to intervene and help create a transitional government – and to leave Syria to its own destiny. According to Ankara's calculations and predictions, the "Lebanonization" of a major conflict alongside Turkey's borders could well be the unavoidable outcome of such a scenario.¹⁴

Today, the AK Party government explains its current stand in the new Middle East and Syria in particular

as a new policy based on moral values rather than rational interests. The government states that it is a moral duty to side with the international community, which also has an ethical responsibility to help the Syrian people. The Ankara government justifies its acceptance of Syrian refugees on the basis of Turkey's traditional open door policy. Facing both hard and

Ankara is trying to draw the international community's attention to the suffering of the Syrian people while the US-Russia deal focuses on the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons

soft Syrian-based security threats, the current government emphasizes the urgent necessity of confronting and resolving the root cause of the crisis. During Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to the US to discuss relations between the two nations, US President Obama declared that Syria's future transitional government should be assembled without Assad. In the aftermath of Erdogan's visit to the US, the Turkish government had high expectations regarding future diplomatic negotiations to assist in the formation of a Syrian transformational government in line with the previous year's Geneva talks. However, in the subsequent US-Russian meeting, the question of whether a transitional government should include Assad or not led to

deadlock. Soon after the failure to convene the Geneva II talks and the August 21st UN report that made it clear chemical weapons had been used in Syria, diplomatic and US-led military pressure led the Assad regime to confess to possessing chemical weapons. Moreover, the Assad regime decided to comply with US calls for the dismantling of its chemical weapons and thus chose to join the OPCW by accepting the terms of a US-Russian deal. According to the terms of this deal, the Syrian regime is expected to dispose of its chemical weapons by mid-2014.

Before the use of chemical weapons in Syria, it was the expectation of the Turkish government that the international community would assist in the creation of a transitional government in Syria without Assad, who is believed to be responsible for the atrocities carried out in the country. The Turkish government also welcomed a UN Resolution on the Syrian chemical weapons issue. The resolution was almost unanimously acknowledged as a significant move, as it was not only evidence of a consensus among the Security Council but also the first compelling decision on Syria to emerge from the UNSC since the start of the conflict. However, Ankara found the resolution insufficient to stop the ongoing violence in Syria, as it neither limited the Syrian's regime use of conventional weapons nor posit the threat of military force against Damascus for failing to comply.¹⁵ Since the US-Russian deal on chemical weapons did not address the destruction of Syria's ballistic

missiles (the Scud B-C, the M-600 and the SS-21 missiles) and other delivery mechanisms, Ankara has taken the view that a possible target of this weaponry is Turkey itself. Ankara is compensating for its lack of defense against its neighbor's long and short-range missiles by stationing NATO Patriot defense systems along its eastern and southern borders for the first time. However, these systems shall be located in these areas for only a year, as a pre-emptive response to a possible Syrian assault. Moreover, the US-Russia deal has obliged the international community to recognize the Assad regime as a *de facto* legitimate partner in the disarmament process in Syria because it is there to oversee the dismantling of Syria's chemical stockpiles by mid-2014. This makes it difficult to force the Syrian regime to agree to the road map of the Geneva II conditions in line with the wishes of the West. Furthermore, due to the chemical weapons agreement, the Assad regime has gained a covert political blanket that grants immunity to the use of force against the rebels, allowing it to continue to employ conventional weapons, which has already resulted in 100,000 deaths. Although the success of the agreement would benefit Turkey in terms of disarmament and nonproliferation by nullifying Ankara as a possible target for an attack by the Assad regime or any terrorist organizations within Syria, it neither addresses nor counters the real instruments that enable the Syrian regime to continue the conflict, which has the capacity to extend into Turkey. Though it seems difficult to persuade the actors

in Syria to come to the negotiating table and settle the conflict, Turkey welcomed the US-Russian deal of June 2012 that includes a provision formally endorsing a plan for a political transition in Syria. While Ankara and Moscow differ on how the Syrian crisis should be solved, the Turkish government's stance is that the issue cannot be solved without the consent of the Russian Federation. Turkish officials have also stated that it is crucial that Iran be invited to partake in negotiations to solve the present deadlock in Syria, in light of the fact that Tehran is already involved in the conflict via its Republican guards and the presence of its proxy Hezbollah on the ground.

Conclusion

If the international community does not act in Syria beyond the US-Russian deal on chemical weapons or attain the conditions necessary for a ceasefire, which in turn would lead to the formation of a transformational government, there is a very high probability that Turkey will continue to be vulnerable to hard and soft security threats along its 900 kilometer Southern border. In terms of unexpected developments, the Assad regime may employ conventional military capabilities against Turkey, which would severely test the credibility of the US/NATO extended deterrence.

Certain preeminent figures with experience in international negotiations in important political conflicts, such as Swedish Foreign Minister

Carl Bildt, believe that Assad will eventually leave. For now, Ankara is trying to draw the international community's attention to both the imminent suffering of the Syrian people and how the US-Russia deal on the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons could provide a future safeguard against the atrocities currently being committed by the Assad regime. In this regard, Ankara continues to raise awareness about the issue so that the real cause of the protracted Syrian civil war can be addressed and resolved with genuine action by the international community. ■

Endnotes

1. March Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*; (New York: Public Affairs Books Group, 2012), pp.1-257.
2. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.101.
3. Katerina Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No.1, (Winter 2013), pp. 75-89. See: also; Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "The Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East", Keeneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, Akram Al-Turk, Pavel Khaikh Baev, Ibrahim Sharqieh, Ömer Taşpınar, Shibley Telhami, Sarah E. Yerkes, Michael S. Doran, Khaled Elgindy, Stephen R. Grand, Shadi Hamid, Bruce Jones, Suzanne Maloney, Jonathan D. Pollack, Bruce O. Riedel, Ruth Hanau Santini, Salman Shaikh (eds), *The Arab Awakening*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), pp.243-249.
4. About the optimistic and pessimistic views about the evolution of the Arab Spring. See: Sheri Berman, "The Promise of the Arab Spring: In Political Development, No Gain Without Pain", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.92, No.1, (January/February 2013), pp.64-74. Seth G. Jones, "The Mirage of the Arab Spring: Deal with the Region You Have, Not the Region You Want", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.92, No.1, (January/February 2013), pp.55-63.
5. For instance, although America and Iran are not engaged in direct contact on many issues, by being aware of Tehran's influence in topics such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and international terrorism, Washington can attempt to construct an issue-based relationship with Iran, as it is now attempting to do regarding Tehran's controversial nuclear programme. Today, this issue-based security cooperation among states on opposing alliances is more likely under the current uncertain and unstable conditions in the Middle East. For instance, on the issue of al-Qaeda related radical groups in Syria, the members of opposing alignments – like Iran and Israel together with Russian and the US – can find ways of developing a common understanding which could result in productive modes of cooperation. Hence, one can expect to see these kinds of cooperations in the volatile conditions of the Middle East despite the existence of acute disagreements between rival states in the region. See: Bill Keller, "The Missing Partner", *New York Times*, 17 September 2013, p.7. In this regard, the latest decision to dismantle Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons can be cited as another example of a (recent) issue-based cooperation to be realized among the external and rival states of the Middle East.
6. Over the last two and a half years, the Obama administration's response to the Syrian crisis has been a top-down approach that relies on the (eventual) removal of Assad from power via diplomatic means. In this way, the US stands by the view that the conditions necessary for peaceful transition to democracy can be achieved. However, due to persistent political divisions between the members of the P5, diplomatic mediation has failed to bring about the expected outcome. The civil war in Syria has resulted in the deaths of nearly 120,000 people. More ominously, US inaction has also led to an increased presence of extremists within Syria. Anxious that American weapons may find their way into the hands of extremists, the US has more or less inclined to ignore the pleas of the Syrian opposition. During a meeting with their US counterparts – US president Barack Obama and Secretary of Defense John Kerry – in May 2013, Turkish officials told the American delegation that this lack of American support for the opposition has fuelled extremism because front-line brigades believed that the West had abandoned them. See: "Turkey's Spymaster Plots His Own Course on Syria", *The Wall Street Journal*, October 11-13, 2013, pp.10-11. Andrew J. Tablet writes that the cost of US inaction in Syria was high enough to lead many armed groups to seek support elsewhere, including private Salafi and

jihadist funders in Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. See: Andrew J. Tabler, "Syria's Collapse: And How Washington Can Stop", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.92, No. 4, (July/August 2013), p.92.

7. Andrew J. Tabler, "Syria's Collapse..."; *ibid*.

8. Syria has now become a training ground for foreign fighters and a microcosm of sectarian conflict. In the last year, an increasing number of foreign fighters have travelled to Syria to join the insurgency and attempt to topple Assad and assume power for the insurgents and their supporters both within the region and beyond. These fighters are gaining valuable experience in combat, bomb-making, propaganda and counter-intelligence. Hence, Syria's current situation is contributing to a resurgence of extremism reminiscent of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In this context, the US and Europe are thus, according to Seth G. Jones, obliged to focus on overthrowing the Assad regime as quickly as possible. See: Seth G. Jones, "Syria's Growing Jihad", *Survival*, Vol.55, No.4, (August/September 2013), pp.53-71.

9. The military's attempt to oust the democratically elected Morsi government on 3 July 2013 bore numerous resemblances to other counter-revolutionary coups, such as post-Diaz Mexico, Haiti post-Jean-Claude Duvalier and the Philippines after the fall of Marcos. However, I fully concur with Jack A. Goldstone when he states that the Egyptian military's attempts to block the Islamist factions from participating in the new political life will, in time, only help strengthen the radical forces. Thus, the priority should be "inclusiveness", the aim being to prevent such possibilities from occurring once again. See: Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.90, No.3, (May/June 2011), pp.8-16. I believe, this condition of "inclusiveness" holds true for every segment of Egyptian society.

10. Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant", *Adelphi Paper 438*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, (May 2013), pp.105-148.

11. Irem Kaya, "Gul to Push for tougher Attitude against Syria at UN", *Sunday's Zaman*, 22 September, 2013, p.4.

12. According to Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey was the first country to employ peaceful methods in an attempt to resolve the Syrian crisis. In an interview with *Today's Zaman* newspaper, Davutoğlu stated that the Turkish mediating efforts that started 10 years ago – when Ankara actually attempted to convince the Syrian regime to allow the opposition a voice in the country's politics – did not yield substantial result, mainly due to the fact that the Assad regime has, since then, not aimed at creating conditions for peace but instead opted to silence and suppress the opposition via all available military means. Again, according to Davutoğlu, a regime such as Assad's today, which has already used bombs, missiles and chemical weapons against its own people, loses its potential and/or credibility as a reliable partner for mediation. See: "Davutoğlu: Syria will Bear Consequences if it Retaliates", *Today's Zaman*, 19 September 2013, pp.1-4.

13. "NATO Support to Turkey: Background and Timeline", *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_92555.htm?, last visited on 2 September 2013.

14. Ali Hussein Bakeer, "Suriye'de Kabusa Dogru? Suriye'nin İçinde Bulunduğu Kritik Durum ve Olası Senaryolar", *USAK Raporları*, No.13-01, (Şubat 2013), pp.1-47.

15. "Davutoğlu: UN Resolution on Syria important but Insufficient", *Today's Zaman*, 30 September 2013, pp1-4.

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