

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey is in the international spotlight over the Syrian uprising. So far, it has focused largely on the humanitarian situation taking a moral high ground on the civilians trapped by the conflict. Either due to its own ambitious rhetoric or the preferences of other regional and international actors, Turkey is expected in some circles to lead international efforts to end the actions perpetrated by the Baath regime. If necessary, this includes the use of force. Following the failure of the Arab League's peace plan at the UN Security Council, Turkey has vowed to mobilize a coalition of like-minded states to address the unfolding humanitarian crisis. This effort epitomizes the limited but crucial role Turkey could play here: facilitating a coalition at the regional-global nexus, so that a coercive diplomatic solution short of military intervention is forged.

Turkey's Syria Policy: The Challenge of Coalition Building

by Şaban Kardaş

Turkey's Syria Policy at a Glance

Turkey is sometimes presented as being party to an unfolding civil war with heavy sectarian undertones. Turkey's vocal criticism of the Syrian army's military campaign, call for a regime change, and sheltering of Syrian refugees and opposition groups are taken as indicators of the partisan motivations driving its policy. Some see Turkey as war-mongering under a humanitarian pretext, while others criticize its reluctance to intervene. However, a brief chronological account demonstrates that it has not adopted the current coercive position overnight and had to make some politically costly decisions before its policy crystallized.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the normalization of its ties with Syria was a textbook case for Turkey's regional policies. The nascent partnership with Damascus was a laboratory in which to develop the instruments of Ankara's neighborhood policy: high-level strategic cooperation councils, free-trade zones, mediation services, visa free travels, etc. But Ankara did more than try to fix its bilateral problems with Damascus. At a time when the Baath regime was under international pressure, Turkey worked to prevent Syria's further isolation, even at the risk of

severing ties with its Western partners. In return, Turkey gained a chance to establish channels of communication with Syrian opposition groups. By engaging both the regime and opposition, Turkey hoped to help transform Syria into a democracy.

The Arab Spring demonstrated that the Turks might have reached those conclusions rather hastily, and that major limitations to the transformative power of their engagement policy remained. For a brief period, it appeared this was the time to realize Turkey's engagement policy by capitalizing on the ties with the regime and opposition. Turkey did exactly that. Early on, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Aleppo, Syria, where he advised Bashar al Assad to heed his people's calls and save his country from carnage. However, demonstrations soon spread throughout Syria, with the opposition calling for comprehensive political reforms.

Though expressing support for demonstrators, Turkey advocated for a controlled transition of power under Assad's watch, a leader whose reformist credentials Ankara had confidence in. Assad was told to introduce political reforms, legalize opposition parties, and prepare the country



for free elections. Erdoğan even sent his most trusted officials to assure Assad that this scenario was realistic. When Assad announced several reform packages, Turkey claimed credit for instigating those changes.

The limited reform promises, however, fell short of satisfying the opposition, which gradually gathered pace and started to organize abroad, including in Turkey. The opposition neither trusted Assad's sincerity, nor was ready to settle for a negotiated solution that would leave him in control. To the extent that Turkey maintained its hope in Assad's ability to steer a controlled transition, it came under criticism that its previous engagement policy had now turned into a burden, preventing it from unequivocally supporting the uprising.

Continuing civilian deaths made Turkey's position increasingly unsustainable. So by mid-2011, Turkey grew increasingly critical of Syria's response, and Erdoğan argued that Turkey would not allow another massacre like Hama, where as many as 40,000 civilians were killed in 1982, to take place. Turkey's break with Assad took longer. For some time, Turkey entertained the idea that it was not Assad but the Baath establishment that resisted reforms. But that thinking also faded away as the crackdown continued into the summer. In the meantime, Turkey allowed the Syrian opposition to organize on its territory, justifying its position with the argument that its solidarity was with the people, and the regime could earn Turkey's sympathy only if it respected popular will. However, by that time, the opposition had firmly embraced the Libya option, i.e., regime change through military means, and was unhappy about Turkey's ongoing optimism regarding Assad's reformist credentials. That position constrained Turkey's ability to deliver a negotiated settlement.

Turkey, nonetheless, undertook a last-ditch effort to facilitate an Assad-led transition in August. The failure of this marked a sea change. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu spent hours in Damascus trying to convince Assad to agree to a transition plan, which he reportedly did. However, the redeployment of military units, which had been withdrawn during the Turkish ambassador's monitoring visit, as per a deal Davutoğlu had brokered, had a psychological impact, comparable perhaps to the episode

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prior to Israel's war on Gaza.¹ Turkey became frustrated by several unfulfilled pledges of reform. Turkey progressively concluded that the regime had lost its legitimacy and that the opposition deserved to be supported as the rightful representative of the people.

Turkey began to openly advocate regime change as the way to end the Syrian quagmire in the fall of 2011, believing that diplomatic avenues were exhausted. Though refraining from backing military intervention, Turkey supported the Western-initiated unilateral sanctions, which were vetoed in October 2011 by Russia and China, despite the fact that this attitude contravened Turkey's policy of not acting outside the UN-endorsed legitimate platforms. Turkey also accelerated the dialogue with the opposition at the official level, as well as supporting the Arab League's diplomatic initiatives.

The situation has reached a new phase with the failure of the Arab League's monitoring mission and the rising intensity of the clashes. The indiscriminate and disproportional use of force by the regime highlighted the humanitarian tragedy, on which Turkey was largely focused. Turkey was prompted to take initiatives to try to immediately end the bloodshed and then prevent sectarian divisions from taking a deeper

¹ Israel's launching of the operation only days after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's meeting with Erdoğan in December 2008 triggered the series of crises in Turkish-Israeli relations.



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hold, believing that the entire region could be engulfed with those repercussions.

Turkey accelerated the diplomatic track. Davutoğlu approached Tehran, hoping to solicit Iran's cooperation in dampening sectarian tensions in the region, especially considering that Tehran remained steadfast in its support for the Baath regime. Complementing such regional initiatives, Turkey also kept a close eye on how the Syrian crisis played out at the global level. Davutoğlu's visit to Moscow ahead of the UN vote was one such effort, though it had no obvious success.

The Russian and Chinese vetoes against the draft Security Council resolution caused anger in Turkey, as demonstrated by this statement issued by Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

The stage that has been reached by the regime's suppressing the desire of the Syrian people ... has acquired a threatening nature in which the international peace and security is at risk.²

The conceptual framework that underpins this description is one that has been used in the past to justify humanitarian interventions. Given its treatment of the population, Turkey feels the Baath regime has lost its claim to legitimately hold power and that the situation justifies coercion by the international community. The Syrian is no longer a purely domestic issue.

Turkey also expressed disappointment with the “irresponsible” use of the UN veto prerogative by Russia and China. Turkey appears to be acting with a sense of moral duty toward the Syrian people. Drawing attention to the plight of the civilians trapped in besieged cities, Turkey called for urgent action to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance and a halt to the shelling of neighborhoods.

Given its proximity, military capability, and stated concern, some now expect Turkey to lead efforts to address the Syrian crisis, even through an international intervention if necessary. Such a development would also square with the new U.S. policy of leading from behind, which was implemented successfully in Libya, and also adds credibility to the “Turkey-leads” scenario, given the new mood of cooperation between the United States and Turkey.

² http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_38_4-february-2012_press-release-regarding-the-un-security-council-being-unable-to-reach-a-decision-on-syria.en.mfa

Coalition-Building: The Challenge for Turkey

The statements from Turkish statesmen and the country's aspiration for regional leadership, exemplified in the notion of an “order-instituting” country, have raised expectations that Turkey would — or should — rise to the challenge and deliver in Syria. Given the nature of the situation, the regional and global ramifications of the crisis, and its own limitations, however, Turkey will be unlikely to lead such a unilateral mission. The best Turkey could deliver would be to facilitate coalition-building on this issue at the regional-global nexus.

The Situation at Hand: Enforcement of Regime Change

At this stage, the purpose of outside involvement would hardly be only mediation between parties, but would encourage regime change as an end to the bloodshed. For its part, both morally and geopolitically, Turkey put all its chips on a “non-Assad scenario” after several failed diplomatic efforts. Perhaps none of the other actors has engaged with the matter as deeply as Turkey early on in the crisis. Turkey concluded that the diplomatic avenues for a negotiated settlement were exhausted, and a solution could only be based on the formation of a new political authority. Russia's face-saving effort following its UN veto scarcely impressed Turkey. The road map Damascus presented to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was all too familiar to Davutoğlu, who viewed it as recycled version of Assad's earlier promises. Turkey has reached such a dug-in principled position that there is little room for a face-saving option, unless there is a comprehensive national reconciliation in Syria, under which Assad will make peace with the people.

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This principled position, and the many signals it has already sent, led to expectations that Turkey will go for the military option. Indeed, Turkey has stated on many occasions that the Assad regime has to be warned that all options are on the table, and that the international community will do everything in its power to stop massacres. Nonetheless, Turkish leaders dispute that they have told their Western partners that they could deliver militarily. Turkey has done little to prepare for the military option and has stated unequivocally that it is against foreign military intervention. Ankara maintains the hope that with international isolation and other coercive means, regime change in Syria could be achieved.

Regional-Global Nexus

Any solution, be it in the diplomatic or the military realm, will have to come through the global-regional connection, and Turkey could make only a limited, but critical, contribution there, considering that the positions on Syria are already entrenched. After the failure of the UN Security Council initiative, Ankara indicated it will seek alternative platforms of legitimacy at the regional level, if necessary outside the UN. Turkey views regional legitimacy as a substitute for UN-led initiatives. However, there is little capacity in the Middle East for tackling the Syrian crisis beyond diplomatic avenues, let alone undertaking military intervention. Even forging regional legitimacy will be incomplete, since Iran needs to also be confronted on the diplomatic front. It will not work for Turkey to take the lead in an initiative that will single out Iran, as it will complicate the already delicate balance between Tehran and Ankara, a situation Turkey seeks to avoid. Progress in Syria without Iran's participation could be done only if the issue is regionally owned.

Efforts to address the Syrian crisis will have to be undertaken in concert with global actors and involve the UN, meaning the Russians will have to be convinced. After being sidelined in Libya, Russia needs to be reassured that its geopolitical interests in Syria and its international standing will be respected. If the UN will be bypassed again, as in Kosovo, it will have to be done through a strong regional mechanism and with the decisive involvement of the United States. In any case, Turkey hardly commands the resources and wherewithal to achieve such an outcome.

The best Turkey could do currently is to lead initiatives that would alleviate the human suffering and pave the way towards a process that would see regime change in the medium to long term. In the meantime, it could work to facilitate convergence of regional and global actors around a broad-based coalition that can oversee regime change, preferably short of use of force.

About the Author

Dr. Şaban Kardaş works as an assistant professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara.

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