

Analysis

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Summary: In a recent press briefing, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu insisted Turkey had never advocated military intervention in Syria. But reading between the lines, what was clear from Davutoğlu's statements was that Ankara had shifted its policy on Syria to reflect Washington's. There is little support for Turkey's unabashed campaign to overthrow Assad even among Erdoğan's core base, and without U.S. intervention, the battle against Assad cannot be won anytime soon. Turkey's best option is for a deal to be reached in upcoming talks in Geneva.

Turkey's Syria Reset

by *Amberin Zaman*

Introduction

On May 25, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister and the self-proclaimed architect of Turkey's hawkish Syrian policy, held a backgrounder for some 20 members of the Turkish press.

Coming on the heels of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's May 16 meeting in Washington with U.S. President Barack Obama, those of us in attendance were eager to learn what had been discussed behind closed doors. Most of all, we wanted to hear what had been agreed on Syria.

What we got instead was the most spirited and emotional defense ever of Turkey's Syrian policy. First Davutoğlu turned on the charm, shaking reporters' hands and sharing jokes. Then for three hours straight, the former political science professor gave yet another of his academic renderings of how Turkey went from being Bashar al-Assad's best friend to his biggest enemy.

Much of what he said was not new. From the start of the uprising, Turkey had done everything conceivable to persuade Assad to refrain from violence. Davutoğlu had travelled to Damascus countless times, handing

the Syrian strongman a detailed blueprint on how to share power with the opposition in a transitional government that Assad himself would lead. In the worst case, use rubber bullets, Erdoğan told Assad during one telephone conversation. But Assad kept on butchering his own people as the world continued to stand by.

Davutoğlu the Dove

Turkey, insisted Davutoğlu, had never advocated military intervention in Syria. On the contrary, it had pursued a peaceful solution and therefore Ankara's support for proposed Russian and U.S. sponsored "Geneva II" talks between Assad and the opposition did not constitute a volte-face. What Turkey had failed to foresee, Davutoğlu conceded, was not how long Assad would cling to power but just how "barbarous" he could be. In a bizarre aside, Davutoğlu stated: "One of Assad's problems is that his mother is still alive." She constantly nags her son, he said, for not acting as forcefully as his late father, the former president Hafez Assad. These observations made the headlines in the Turkish media the following day. Yet, amid all the spin and psychoanalysis, the real news was the reset in Turkey's Syria policy.



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The shift was already apparent when Erdoğan, who had been lobbying for U.S. intervention in Syria on the grounds that Assad was using chemical weapons and that efforts to revive the Geneva process were futile, emerged from talks with Obama, saying his views had evolved. “The steps to be taken by the UN Security Council and the Geneva process are important,” he declared. So too was Russia and China’s participation. The realization that the U.S. president would not change his mind about keeping out of the Syrian conflict has finally sunk in. Making a virtue of necessity, Davutoğlu insists that Ankara and Washington’s Syria policies are now “perfectly synchronized.”

Maybe so. But it is Turkey that is doing most of the synchronizing. For one, it is distancing itself from the Jabath Al Nusra Front, the Salafist opposition militia that is listed as a “terrorist” group by the U.S. State Department and had been allegedly tolerated, if not mentored, by Turkey. Davutoğlu said, “We regard the Al Nusra Front in the same way that we regard Al Qaeda.” It was the first time a Turkish official aired such views in public. And it was no coincidence that this happened after Erdoğan’s meeting with Obama. On May 29, Turkish police detained seven people with alleged connections to Al Nusra and seized two kilograms of sarin gas during separate raids in the southern cities of Adana and Mersin. This was another first.

It is Turkey that is doing most of the synchronizing.

Reyhanli Attack a Game Changer

It isn’t just Washington that is driving the change. The May 11 dual car bomb explosions that ripped through the Turkish town of Reyhanli on the Syrian border, killing some 51 people, proved a turning point. Was the Syrian conflict moving to Turkey? Millions of panic-stricken Turks demanded to know. Reyhanli is mainly populated by ethnic Arab Sunnis, making it a secure haven for the tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who moved there. The town is also a strategic gathering point for Syrian rebels and their commanders. Turkey swiftly blamed Assad, saying Turks arrested in connection with the blasts had confessed to have taken their orders from Syria’s intelligence service.

It makes perfect sense, for what better target than Reyhanli? The attack was a chilling reminder to the rebels that even inside Turkey, they are not beyond the regime’s reach. It also drove a wedge between the townsfolk and the refugees. But that wasn’t all. I traveled to Reyhanli two days after the tragedy. Outraged locals heaped much of the blame on the government. “Erdoğan better not set foot here. He will be lynched,” yelled a teenager. Others turned on the Syrians who began fleeing Reyhanli in droves. The common refrain was that by allowing the rebels to use its territory as a rear base, the government had invited this disaster upon the country.

There is little support for Turkey’s unabashed campaign to overthrow Assad even among Erdoğan’s core base. With the rebels moving freely in and out of Turkey, Davutoğlu’s claim that Turkey continues to pursue a peaceful solution to the conflict rings hollow. In Reyhanli, I encountered a group of fighters from the Salafist Al Farouk and Liwa al Islam brigades. They told me that Turkey provided them with “light weapons” and “bullets.” I asked Davutoğlu whether this was true. He skirted the question. What of Turkey’s failed efforts to unite Syria’s fractious opposition? He ducked that one too.

Destination Geneva

Backed by Iran, Hezbollah is now openly fighting on the side of Assad. The conflict in Syria is degenerating into a full-blown proxy war pitting a so-called Shiite axis against Turkey and its fellow Sunni allies, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This in turn is straining relations between Turkey’s minority Alawites, who support Assad, and the Sunni Arabs populating the Syrian border regions.

Meanwhile, the burden of an estimated 400,000 Syrian refugees is growing heavier by the day. In Reyhanli, locals complained that Syrians who were willing to work for lower wages were stealing their jobs. Even before the bombing, resentment towards the refugees had been brewing. A Syrian was attacked by a mob after a false rumor was spread saying the Syrians had burned a Turkish flag.

Without U.S. intervention, the battle against Assad cannot be won anytime soon. And Turkey cannot go it alone, which is why it refrained from retaliating against the Reyhanli



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attack or last summer's downing of its air force jet. Assad keeps escalating and getting away with it. Simultaneously at odds with Israel, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Turkey's role as a stabilizing force in the Middle East seems to be fading. Some would even argue that Turkey is adding to instability. Its decision to build a pipeline to carry oil from the semi-independent Kurdish region in northern Iraq has infuriated Baghdad and prompted a flurry of warnings from Washington that Iraq's unity is under threat. Yet, Ankara is pressing ahead with plans to build a second pipeline.

For all of Davutoğlu's talk of perfect synchronization, it is easy to detect Turkey's frustration with President Obama. He reminded us, for instance, that the United States had demanded that Assad step down in August 2011, despite Turkey's entreaties to hold off for a couple of weeks in order to allow further time to persuade Assad to come round. Would it have made a difference? I asked. "No" he replied. But he went on to elaborate on the divide between the State Department and the CIA, which favored arming the rebels (until the Benghazi attack), and the White House, which never did. Much like the Europeans, the Americans were "zigzagging," he complained. Erdoğan struck a similar tone when, on his return from Washington, he told reporters that "When Mr Obama's position [on Syria] becomes clear, in that case, it can be assessed how close ours is [to his]."

All of this suggests that not only did Turkey misread Assad, it may well have misread Washington as well. The conundrum is that if it reins in the rebels, this will assure Assad's victory. Not only that, some of the more radical militant groups might then turn against Turkey. Yet, if Turkey continues to support them, without decisive Western intervention, the conflict will likely drag on and the spillover effect will grow. A deal in Geneva, however elusive, seems the least bad option for all concerned. Turkey's own security hinges on its success.

About the Author

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