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Turkey's Time in Syria: Future Scenarios

Dr. Joshua W. Walker

Despite the success of Turkish foreign policy over the last decade in opening new markets and expanding its reach into the Middle East through a policy of “zero problems with neighbors,” the Arab awakening, and particularly the crisis in Syria, has forced Ankara to confront the new realities of the region. Having initially inspired admiration in both the Arab world and the West for its early embrace of Tunisia and Egypt, Turkey misjudged the situation in Libya by initially rejecting sanctions and even opposing NATO’s involvement, before ultimately changing course. Ankara’s foreign policy toward Syria aims to learn from its previous missteps in Libya so as not to repeat its mistakes there.

This Brief considers current Turkish policy choices with respect to the Syrian uprising in light of the critical nature of Syria for Turkish policymakers. It then lays out two possible scenarios for Ankara as it faces the “Arab Spring’s” most significant crisis—taking place, as it happens, on its own border. While traditional Turkish foreign policy has been conservative and inward-focused, a “new” Turkey that boasts the fastest-growing and largest economy in the region has far more tools at its disposal to promote its agenda in its own neighborhood.

Since making the “wrong” decisions about Syria could have serious repercussions for Turkey, Ankara has been cautiously weighing its options as it decides how to deal with Assad and the ongoing humanitarian disaster unfolding in its own backyard. Because of Turkey’s own domestic evolution, and the resulting self-confidence vis-à-vis the world that it has developed over the last decade of reform, it is uniquely placed to play a decisive role in Syria. At the same time, the domestic and international dimensions for Turkey of the Syrian situation make the choice

between the status quo and either of the two scenarios presented below difficult to predict. A combination of status quo policies and one or more of the actions suggested in these scenarios is also conceivable as Ankara continues to struggle with balancing its strategic interests in Syria with its broader ambitions for the region.

Syria as the “Crown Jewel” in Turkey’s Foreign Policy

The roller coaster that has been Syrian-Turkish relations is tied to national ambitions, sectarian tensions, tribal affinities, and imperial legacy that stretches back from Ottoman times into modern history, as can be seen in the case of the disputed region of Hatay, in modern-day Turkey, which still remains unresolved.¹ Yet, Turkey remains the first among equals of Syria’s neighbors: In 2002, it invested more in Syria, both diplomatically and economically, than in any of its other neighbors, making Syria the “crown jewel” of its emerging regional policy. This transformed their relationship from one of military confrontation rooted in cold war geopolitics, and in Syria’s support for separatist Kurdish PKK terrorists in Turkey, to one of economic cooperation—as a result of which Ankara became Damascus’s lifeline both economically and geopolitically, even during Syria’s period of isolation following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and again after the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2009, Turkish President Abdullah Gul remarked during an official visit to Damascus and Aleppo that “Syria is Turkey’s door to the Middle East, and Turkey is a gateway to Europe for Syria.”² (Turkey’s ties to Syria also became a model of rapprochement for other problematic neighbors, such as Greece and Iraq.)

In many ways, Syria has benefited more from its partnership with Turkey, which has resulted in the establishment of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council and a free trade zone, visa-free travel between the two countries, and several mediation efforts over the last two years, than it has from its two-decade-long alliance with Iran. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Syria tripled between 2006 and 2010, trade volume leaping from \$796 million to \$2.29 billion over that period.³ In 2010, Turkey was Syria’s third largest trading partner, after Saudi Arabia and China;⁴ Turkish companies’ investments in Syria reached \$260 million, making Turkey the number one foreign direct investor in Syria. Treating Syria as a priority in Turkey’s new foreign policy toward its region, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the country more than he did any other neighbor up until the beginning of the protests in 2011.⁵

The popularity of Turkey in Syria and of Erdoğan personally—who was polled as the most popular leader in the Arab world in 2010 and again in 2011, with the highest percentage of approvals both years in Syria—allowed Ankara to reverse traditional Syrian perceptions of Turkey by drawing on its common heritage and history with Syria. A survey done by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in 2009 showed that 87 percent of Syrian respondents had a favorable opinion of Turkey, and that percentage reached 93 in 2010. By 2011, however, Syrians with a favorable view of Turkey had fallen sharply to 44 percent—and only 31 percent of respondents supported Turkey as a leader in the region.⁶

The turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations came in August 2011, when Prime Minister Erdoğan sent his Foreign Minister and top policy advisor, Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Damascus for a seven-hour consultation with President Assad, during which promises of a cessation of violence coupled with reform were made—promises that were subsequently broken. On November 22, Erdoğan for the first time publicly called for Assad’s removal.⁷ And on November 30, Davutoğlu announced a series of unilateral sanctions, ranging from freezing Syrian government assets and suspending

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loans to banning all military sales. Turkey was one of the last major NATO countries to impose sanctions on Syria, and Turkish officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, have repeatedly stressed that the sanctions were aimed at the Assad regime, not at ordinary Syrian citizens. Nevertheless, its sanctions were far harsher than anything imposed by previous Turkish governments against any neighbor, including those against Iraq in the 1990s.

Current Turkish Policy toward Syria

Given the implications of the conflict in Syria for Turkey's own security interests along their shared border and the fear of the civil war there spiraling into a broader regional conflict, Ankara has been cautiously monitoring the situation in Syria and has been active in the humanitarian relief efforts without committing itself to any future course of action—in effect “leading from behind.”⁸

On the one hand, Turkey has advanced beyond privately conveyed criticism by leading the push for international action as well as Arab League sanctions against Damascus, and it has reacted furiously to Russia's and China's vetoes in the Security Council. Furthermore, Ankara is publicly hosting Syrian opposition leaders, along with insurgents who have based themselves across the border, and it has reportedly been secretly arming the same forces.⁹ It has already imposed unilateral sanctions that go far beyond what any Western power has thus far attempted, and it was the force behind the recent “Friends of Syria” international conferences held in Tunisia and, most recently, in Turkey.¹⁰

On the other hand, the lack of coordination and training among the Syrian opposition has not engendered confidence in Ankara, which fears instability more than it does another neighboring dictator, or a brutal crackdown under the current one. Ankara's best hope is that Assad will be transitioned out by a minority Alewite regime that fears for its own future in a Sunni-majority country on the brink of disintegrating into sectarian chaos. Having offered to use its good offices to broker a compromise, along with eventual asylum for Assad, Ankara has tried desperately to use all of its accrued leverage with Damascus, but to no avail. Kurdish and sectarian divisions within Syria, which have been masterfully managed by the Assad regime, remain potent leverage against a stability-obsessed Turkish government.

Despite the precarious situation in Syria, Turkey has supported the nascent opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), which it hosted in Antalya. Other than offering humanitarian aid and providing shelter to refugees and dissidents who cross the border into Turkey, however, Ankara has been careful to not publicly disclose what type of support

it is providing to both the SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This strategic ambiguity has allowed Turkey to argue for more diplomacy while simultaneously calling for Assad to step aside and ratcheting up regional pressure. The issue for Ankara has become personal with Assad, whom they blame for making impossible a compromise that might have left Alewite rule in place only with more Sunni representation, even if at a token level, so as to diffuse the ongoing protests early on. In following the general Western and Arab League lead without getting too far ahead of the international consensus (for fears of a Syrian backlash, either in the form of an embittered Assad regime that survives, or from a new opposition council that judges its neighbors on the basis of their support in the struggle against Assad), Ankara seems to have made a strategic calculation that being in the forefront of international efforts would be far more dangerous than simply following them.

The disconnect between Ankara's calculations and its rhetoric was on full display during Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's February 2012 visit to Washington, which highlighted the caution and fear that prevails in Ankara with regard to Damascus. Rather than producing an international breakthrough, Davutoğlu's meetings with an array of important congressional leaders and Cabinet-level officials (including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council Director in one single day) reinforced the importance that Washington assigns to Ankara these days without seeing any movement on the administration's expressed desire to see Turkey take more of a lead with respect to Syria. Instead of specifics, Dr. Davutoğlu, a former academic, stressed the broader context of Ankara's caution dating from the September 11 attacks on America—which, he said, ultimately changed the logic of international security, and which had transformed Turkey's mindset such that it now assigned primary importance to finding a balance between security and freedom, a balance that it hoped to achieve by applying Davutoğlu's principles of “zero problems with neighbors.” According to Dr. Davutoğlu, what we are witnessing today in the Middle East is the overthrowing of the “abnormal and artificial structures” of Cold War divisions in the region. And, he observes, “[w]e wanted [Assad] to be the Gorbachev of Syria, but he chose to be Milosevic.”¹¹

Turkey's vision of a new set of values and principles in the international system of governance reflects the realities of the post-Cold War era as seen from Ankara. Davutoğlu explicitly cited the G-20, not the UN, as being Turkey's preferred mechanism for multilateral cooperation intended to reform the international financial and economic system on a more democratic and equitable basis. Turkey's growing frustration with the United Nations only strengthens its hopes for the G-20, particularly as it seeks to assume its presidency in 2015. Turkey's current approach to Syria is a showcase for this vision.

After Russia and China blocked the UNSC resolution calling for Assad's resignation, Turkey jointly announced with the United States the establishment of a "Friends of Syria" coalition that first met in Tunisia. "We see the Friends of Syria," observed Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, "as a platform which should function to exert collective diplomatic efforts for the protection of civilians in Syria."¹² This initiative, despite being symbolically important as an international forum to concentrate the minds of Turkish competitors such as France and Saudi Arabia (along with the rest of the Arab League and the West), has produced few tangible results. The decision by the Friends of Syria to officially recognize the SNC and offer humanitarian aid appears to offer little prospect of immediate new action against Assad's continuing crackdown.

Turkey, as the host (after Tunisia) of the second Friends of Syria meeting, continues to support the initiative. Turkey's position may change, however, depending on internal developments in Syria and Assad's behavior. Right before the second meeting of the Friends of Syria on April 1, 2012, the Syrian government announced that it had agreed to implement the six-point Annan Plan to end the violence in the country. Yet, Turkey, along with the international community, remains wary of any commitments or promises from Damascus that do not involve compromise or concessions made to the opposition. Prime Minister Erdoğan echoed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's skepticism at the opening session regarding the sincerity of the Syrian regime observing "President Gul, I, and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, we all had considerable personal connections with Assad, yet we couldn't get any results. I don't believe him, and I don't trust him."¹³

The breakdown in Syrian-Turkish relations is having a severely negative effect on Turkey's regional prestige. In particular, its ties with neighboring Iran, at once its chief rival and an important economic partner, have suffered. On the eve of the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul, Turkey announced that it would cut imports of oil from Iran by a tenth, giving in to U.S. pressure just a week after Washington warned Tehran's customers that they could incur U.S. sanctions unless they significantly reduced purchases.¹⁴

Maintaining the Status Quo: Rhetoric plus Non-interventionist Humanitarian Assistance

In the absence of the international consensus that Turkey deems necessary for any further action to be undertaken with regard to Syria, there have instead been increased calls for humanitarian support, echoed at the Friends of Syria conferences, as well as in support of Kofi Annan's six-

point plan for Syria.¹⁵ On April 11, 2012, a day after the UN Security Council unanimously demanded that Damascus immediately implement a peace plan formulated by the UN in conjunction with the Arab League special envoy, Turkey called for collective action but stopped short of taking any concrete unilateral steps as it waits to see how other key international actors, most importantly the United States, will respond.

Turkey's fears about Syria's territorial integrity and its implications for Ankara's own Kurdish population have further discouraged any bold moves. Turkey (along with Norway) finally closed its embassy in Syria last month and ordered all diplomatic staff withdrawn. On March 26, Turkish Airlines, which was the last remaining airline to operate in Syria, announced the cancellation of flights to Damascus and Aleppo beginning April 1, the day of the second meeting of the Friends of Syria group. Meanwhile, deteriorating relations on account of Syria between Ankara and Moscow, and Ankara and Tehran, have caused a general rethinking of the current Turkish government's international strategy of rebalancing its foreign policy in the direction of these Eastern neighbors and away from an exclusively Western orientation.

On the sidelines of the South Korea nuclear summit, President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan talked about Syria and observed that they planned to provide nonlethal aid, including communications equipment and medical supplies, to opposition groups inside Syria.¹⁶ On March 27, 2012, the same day the Syrian government accepted the Annan Plan, Prime Minister Erdoğan told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that "[t]o this date, ongoing efforts to convince the Assad regime [to stop his violent crackdown] have not delivered results. The Assad regime failed to take the necessary steps, despite promises to take democratic steps. The international community doesn't trust Assad anymore. We expect you to see this as well. You have to realize that Syria won't be convinced. Russia is a big country with a serious voice. Take a step forward for world peace."¹⁷ Notwithstanding, Russia announced that it wouldn't take part in the upcoming Friends of Syria meeting, criticizing it and Turkey for their efforts to "undermine" the Annan Plan.

There has been internal turmoil in Ankara about any scenario involving military action, stoked by deep suspicions on the part of the Turkish public that a "limited" military intervention might serve as a pretense for a full-scale operation that the international community does not have an appetite or the resources for—coupled with extreme reticence on the part of a demoralized Turkish armed forces to undertake anything larger than counterterrorist operations. A series of military intelligence briefings have highlighted the difficulties associated with military options,

thereby taking them off Ankara's public table. Given the geography of the Syrian uprisings and the difficulty of limiting military conflict to particular locales, options such as a buffer zone have been challenged as potentially requiring an even more robust military intervention or else an embarrassing retreat. Ankara is keen not to highlight a year of failed diplomacy, and so a status quo comprising continued rhetoric unaccompanied by any military action is likely.

The question remains: Where do we go from here? At the present time, two possible scenarios seem most likely.

Scenario One: Limited Intervention through a Buffer Zone plus Covert Assistance to the Free Syrian Army

Turkish officials have previously indicated that a surge of refugees from Syria might compel Turkey, preferably with international backing, to establish a buffer zone on Syrian soil to guarantee the security of its own southern border as well as the welfare of civilians fleeing violence.¹⁸ Assuming that the international will exists for a more robust response to Assad, Turkish leadership could perhaps generate the requisite domestic will and translate it into a mandate to establish a buffer zone for the Syrian opposition on the Syrian-Turkish border, similar to the no-fly zone in northern Iraq.

A buffer zone would involve working closely with the Syrian opposition and local coordinating committees to provide logistical, intelligence, weapons, training, and communications support, along with American air support, to help the FSA establish no-kill zones along Syria's northwest border.¹⁹ This approach would represent a significant departure from the status quo, noninterventionist policy that Turkey has upheld until now. Establishing a buffer zone on Turkish national security grounds would sidestep the international gridlock now immobilizing the UN Security Council, where Russia and China have repeatedly blocked action against the Assad regime. It would align the increasingly strident rhetoric coming from Ankara with the proactive actions that would be necessary to remove Assad from power.

Given Turkey's own interest in Syria and Turkish leadership's animosity toward Assad, a limited intervention to support the FSA, if requested by the Arab League and NATO, might eventually prove to be Ankara's best choice. This course of action would allow Ankara to tip the scales in favor of the FSA and potentially provide the conditions under which wavering Syrian army units could defect, thereby changing the calculus for the country's minorities and generating a stronger internal consensus against Assad's regime—results that do not seem achievable through simple humanitarian aid alone. Exploiting

its geography and resources (economic, intelligence, and military), Turkey could help the opposition cut Syrian lines of communication and deny government forces access to entire areas of the country through the coordinated use of early warning intelligence and anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.²⁰

A Turkish proposal for a buffer zone was advanced by Dr. Davutoğlu three months ago, in the aftermath of PKK attacks that Ankara suspected Damascus supported and when the Syrian death toll was roughly half of what it is now, but it did not receive any concrete international support. Should the flow of refugees increase and the buffer zone option become viable, however, Turkey, along with its partners, would need to be prepared to move to the next scenario, i.e. military intervention. Yet, Turkish leadership has been strangely quiet and reluctant to discuss the buffer zone idea again. Perhaps for many of the reasons that have yielded a status quo policy in Syria, Ankara remains rhetorically but not substantively engaged with the crisis.

Scenario Two: Internationally Sanctioned and Supported Military Intervention

Turkey's sending in ground troops to Syria may seem like a distant possibility when listening to the official denials being reiterated at all levels in Ankara, but given the frequency with which Turkish troops currently cross the border into Iraq, such a scenario is not beyond the realm of possibility. Additionally, Ankara already sees Syria through a zero-sum lens when it comes to Iran and is therefore squarely in the Western camp on the question of "how" and "when," not "if," to remove Assad. But to consider dispatching ground troops, Ankara would need an international mandate that at a minimum would include the support of the Arab League and NATO, similar to the first scenario; Turkey appears to be ready to move without the approval of the UN, so long as its bilateral ties with China and Russia can be maintained through face-saving measures. For example, the Turkish Prime Minister in his April 2012 visit to China, traveled to the Xinjiang province without raising the issue of Uighur claims to independence, an issue he had supported vocally in 2009. In turn, Turkey might expect a similar treatment from China in dealing with the Kurdish question. Russia's concerns could be similarly allayed by promises from the SNC and international actors that Moscow's interest in the port of Taurus would be taken into consideration in any future scenarios.

After the Arab Spring and the Eurozone Crisis, Turkey is clearly in the best position of any regional power to lead an international action in Syria. Given both its self-confident outlook with respect to itself and its irritation at Assad for publicly disrespecting Turkey, Ankara has many incentives for intervention intended to deal a decisive international blow to

Damascus rather than a tentative strike. But as with Turkish calculations in the lead-up to the two Iraqi interventions, how unified the transatlantic community is will, in the end, determine Ankara's position. In the first Gulf War, Turkey took decisive action by stationing hundreds of thousands of troops along Iraq's northern border, pinning Saddam Hussein's forces there while unilaterally cutting off oil as the UN-backed coalition marched to the outskirts of Baghdad. In contrast, during the second Gulf War, Turkey refused to allow any American forces to enter its territory without an international mandate, and Ankara sat on the sidelines, along with France and many other European powers.

Ankara refuses to discuss unilateral intervention on principle except when it comes to PKK attacks—but if Damascus was proven to be involved in any plotting against Turkey, this could change the political mood in the country very quickly. In this regard, Turkey's own internal power struggles within the ruling party as Erdoğan completes his final term as Prime Minister (with ongoing rumors of health concerns adding another wild card) might impel Ankara toward implementing this scenario. In addition, simmering issues involving Kurdish and minority rights and slowing economic growth, along with a troubling rift between Erdoğan and Turkey's most powerful Islamic fraternity, which is said to control the security forces, could all potentially point toward an intervention as an extension of domestic rivalries. Intervention is unlikely in the short term—but the consequences of daily media coverage of Assad's brutality, on the one hand, and Turkish leadership's bravado and rhetoric, on the other, are not negligible. If Assad continues down his current path, eventually Turkey's bluff on Syria will have to be called.

Conclusion

Turkey's emergence as an international leader suggests that it is becoming a more responsible stakeholder in terms of regional stability and its own long-term democratization. But it has also put Turkey on the international hot seat with respect to Syria, given the lack of leadership displayed thus far by any of the supporters of the Arab Awakening.

Ankara's choices regarding Damascus may have long-term consequences in terms of its regional alliances, and even its integration with the West. Turkish policies and Erdoğan's populism can complement Western concerns if framed within a broader and longer-term perspective of the transatlantic alliance that prioritizes common goals and values over short-term tactical differences.

Getting Syria right is critical for Turkey; yet it is almost entirely beyond its own control. As Ankara continues to cautiously weigh its options, Assad's ongoing onslaught on

his own people will force Turkey into implementing one of the scenarios outlined. Having already entered into private discussions with its allies about contingency planning and humanitarian relief, Turkey's leaders know that they cannot sit idly by as their neighbor disintegrates into civil war, nor can they afford to intervene unilaterally. Regardless of whether Ankara keeps its strategic options open by seeking to preserve the status quo, events on the ground in Syria could rapidly force Ankara into moving beyond rhetoric and intervening in either a limited humanitarian or full-scale manner. Having sought the role of regional leader over the last decade, Ankara's time has clearly come in Damascus.

Endnotes

- 1 The Hatay Republic held a referendum in 1939 and decided to become a part of the Turkish Republic. Syria never recognized the decision, however, and to this day considers Hatay province part of Syrian territory.
- 2 [Joshua W. Walker, *Milliyet*, May 15, 2009 \(in Turkish\).](#)*
- 3 [This data comes from the Turkish Statistical Institute \(Turkstat\) database Foreign Trade Statistics released March 2012.](#)*
- 4 [According to the Turkey CIA Factbook.](#)*
- 5 For more see [Nader Habibi and Joshua W. Walker, *What Is Driving Turkey's Reengagement with the Arab World?* Middle East Brief no. 49 \(Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, April 2011\).](#)*
- 6 See [Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011*, Tesev Report 2011.](#)*
- 7 [Sebnem Arsu, "Turkish Premier Urges Assad to Quit in Syria," *New York Times* \(November 22, 2011\).](#)*
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- 14 ["Update 2: Turkey to Cut Iran Oil Imports, Bows to US Pressure," *Reuters*, March 30, 2012.](#)*
- 15 ["Kofi Annan's Six-Point Plan for Syria," *Aljazeera*, March 27, 2012.](#)*
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- 19 See [Anne-Marie Slaughter "Turkey's Test" *Project Syndicate*, February 13, 2012.](#)*
- 20 Ibid.

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