

Turkey's Hard-Line Position on Syria

Written by Richard Rousseau, Contributor | 07 April 2012

The worsening situation in Syria has led Turkey to adjust its policy towards yet another ally. The Turkish government has imposed sanctions against the Syrian regime and suspended all economic trade, to which Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has responded by suspending agreements on free trade and levying new taxes on Turkish products, while declaring Russia to be Syria's "close adviser."

On December 19th, Syria agreed to allow Arab League monitors into its territory. The "Protocol" called for all violence to be halted, the withdrawal of troops from the streets of cities opposing the Syrian regime, and the release of detainees. However, before signing the document, the Syrian leadership proposed some amendments to the protocol, which were approved by the Arab League but not disclosed. At the same time Assad declared that he will not answer to anyone and signed a new law imposing the death penalty on anyone caught distributing weapons "with the aim of committing terrorist acts." Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem stressed that the protocol had been signed on Russia's advice, with no reference to Turkey, with whom Syrian leadership is explicitly no longer willing to cooperate. He also said that the "one-eyed views" of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have brought communication to an end between the two countries and damaged their peaceful economic relationship. "Over 10 years, we worked hard to establish the best of relations with Turkey, and they damaged them."

Since the beginning of the demonstrations against Assad the two countries have reached an impasse in their relations. After initially trying to reach a compromise with the Syrian government – advising it to stop violently repressing its people and to open itself up to democratic reforms as demanded by the people – to no avail, Turkey has turned its back on Syria, castigating Assad as a tinhorn dictator and openly disapproving of his conduct. Turkey's position is also very close to those of the European Union and the United States, who had hoped their ally in the Middle East and fellow NATO member would be successful in persuading Assad to stop the repression before they could be required to lead an international intervention into Syrian territory. The cold attitude of the Syrian president toward the Turkish concerns has pushed Ankara to distance itself from its former ally. Their relations now appear to be at a dead end.

The diplomatic break with Syria has left Turkey with another minus in its "zero problems with neighbor" policy, launched by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. The fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya forced Turkey to condemn and stand against leaders with whom it had collaborated just a few months before the wave of uprisings. This resulted in lost trade as well as problems on diplomatic fronts. Syria was one of Turkey's most important neighbors, but also Ankara's most difficult neighbor to maintain peace with.

During the Cold War, the building of Turkish-Syrian relations was not easy, as Turkey was firmly in the U.S. camp and Syria sided with the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the primary problems between the two countries were twofold: a dispute over the water sharing of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the terrorist activities of the PKK, which sought – and is still seeking – an independent Kurdish homeland. The PKK opposed the Turkish state but was supported by Syria.

It took ten years to negotiate and finally sign the Adana agreement, which was only reached after the Turkish army was deployed at the Syrian border, ready to attack. After, Syrian support for the PKK ceased and cooperation between Ankara and Damascus returned to normal. What followed was a period of ten years of relatively normal, even friendly, relations based on free trade, visa-free movement, and prospering economic cooperation. Syria became highly reliant on cross border trade with Turkey, which totaled \$2.5 billion in 2009 and was projected to reach \$5 billion by 2013 – before the recent events forced a total rethink.

Today, tensions between Syria and Turkey are as high as at any time in the past. Syria accuses the Turkish government of supporting the revolutionaries and has turned to Russia, which has for decades supported the Assad dynasty and refused to support the Turkish-inspired trade embargo. Turkey cannot accept being ignored by Syria, a neighbor it believed was one of its main partners in the region and a crucial stakeholder in building Turkey's role in the Middle East.

At the moment the border between the two countries is closed, the free trade agreement suspended, and economic transactions frozen. Turkey is coping with around 7,600 Syrian refugees (as of November 2011).

Turkey's main concern is the possible Syrian involvement with the PKK, which flared up in the last months of 2011. Although the Syrian government does not officially recognize the Kurdish political organization, Ankara suspects that Damascus has secret plans to support the Kurdish group.

Iran, whose influence in Syria has increased in the wake of the uprising, is also an important factor in Turkey-Syria relations. Iran plans to open an aeronautical and naval base in Latakia, the principal port city of Syria. Latakia is also Turkey's main supplier of natural gas and the primary transit route for Turkish exports to Central Asia. Iranian-Turkish relations have also been compromised by Turkey's decision to accept a NATO radar station on its territory.

Instability in Iraq also pose a threat to an eventual peaceful scenario between Syria and Turkey. The withdrawal of American troops from Iraqi territory has created a security vacuum, which is conducive to the further internal conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites. These clashes represent one of Turkey's greatest hazards, since inter-religious and inter-cultural conflicts – as demonstrated in Iraq and Syria – are considered to provide fertile ground for further Kurdish separatist activism. However, Turkey, in the worst case scenario of a real war, can rely on the support of the United States, as President Obama is happy to have a trustworthy ally in the Middle East ready to oppose the Syrian dictator.

Now that the Arab League monitors are on the ground, it is difficult to actually foresee how the precarious situation may develop in Syria. Al Assad's decision to accept the Arab League protocol seems to have opened some hope of resolving the clashes between the authorities and the rebels. However, Ankara has made clear that no option is excluded should efforts at negotiation fail. It is assessing the possibility of establishing a buffer zone along its border with Syria or even a military intervention.

The latest foreign policy signals of the Erdogan government indicate that Turkey is ready to protect and defend its interests on its southern flank at any cost. The most recent demonstration of this is Turkey's bold reaction in December to the adoption of laws by the French Parliament banning denial of the Armenian genocide. In reaction to the French Senate's approval of the bill, Prime Minister Erdogan immediately ceased diplomatic relations with France and recalled the Turkish

Ambassador from Paris, and the day after declared the suspension of all political, military, and economic meetings with France, making it clear that these special measures will not be lifted any time soon. The two countries had trade relations to the amount of 12 billion euros in 2010; France is the second largest foreign investor in Turkey, the country with the highest economic growth rates in the Middle East.

This dispute between France and Turkey is not of minor consequence in this pressing Syrian issue. Syria, like Lebanon, was for a long time a French protectorate, and both countries still have strong ties with Paris. Before the discussion on the genocide law in the French Parliament, France had suggested inviting Turkey to EU meetings discussing the Syrian crisis and endorsed Turkey's participation in the conflict resolution process. The freeze of diplomatic and political relations between the two countries will complicate NATO's position if it eventually must act in Syria.

What may disappoint Turkey most is the possibility of France failing to honor the bilateral French-Turkish anti-terror agreement, signed in October and to be ratified upon its approval by the parliaments of both countries. The agreement is meant to establish a cooperation network against terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration. The activities of the PKK have brought well-known ramifications in France, and the suspension of these cooperation plans might be detrimental to Turkey's security objectives.

The tense situation prevailing in Syria is destabilizing the already-fragile balance of power in the Middle East. At stake is not just the effective resolution of the conflict between Syrian civil movements, but the evolution of the political dynamics in surrounding countries. Predicting what will happen next is a difficult task, now that the Syrian government has allowed the Arab League monitors to observe its internal conflict. Will this be a step towards the halting of the violence and the beginning of movement along a democratic path, or is this a temporary measure designed to prevent any further international involvement?

Turkey has taken a uncompromising position on several issues and does not appear that it is willing to give up any more ground. After the May 2010 row with Israel over an Israeli commando raid on an aid flotilla heading to the Gaza Strip that left nine Turks dead, Turkey has decided to take a harder position against its most important neighbor, and such a stance not likely to be reversed anytime soon. Furthermore, the country is also going through a difficult period in its relations with France, which had first appeared to share the same position in how to deal with Assad. Syria has now turned to Russia for moral and military support, and blamed Turkey for breaking off relations between the two states.

Now Turkey can only hope for the peaceful resignation of Assad. If this happens, shaping the new Syria will become its main and most complex priority.

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