

Intelligence brief | 19 December 2012

The likely development of Turkish policy towards Syria

1. Turkey is *highly likely* to:

- continue participating in international efforts to restrict foreign-sourced aid and support for the Bashar al-Assad regime,
- continue to support the Syrian rebels and opposition groups, and
- seek a leading diplomatic role as the end of the Assad regime appears more likely.

2. Turkey is *likely* to:

- withdraw its demands for a negotiated conclusion to the conflict and a coalition government as pro-Assad forces lose ground and capability and, instead, bank on Assad's removal from power.

3. Turkey is *unlikely* to:

- shut its border with Syria, as this may lead to a humanitarian crisis in northern Syria. Such a crisis would necessitate a sizeable international intervention, for which there is currently little enthusiasm among Western powers.

4. Turkey is *highly unlikely* to:

- be involved in military action on Syrian territory, whether unilaterally or as part of an international operation. This includes the creation of a safe haven in Syria, on which there is currently little international consensus.

Context

Relations between Turkey and Syria have historically been strained. The primary roots of this friction are the ingrained Syrian resentment of Turkish imperial control during the Ottoman era; the Turkish control of Hatay, a territory long-claimed by Syria; and water disputes over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers – now heavily dammed by Turkey, which has greatly reduced their flow into Syria.

More recently, Turkey's westward-looking policies of seeking EU membership, participation in NATO and close relations with the United States have been seen as a form of betrayal Syria and other regimes in the Middle East, notably Iran.

Meanwhile, Syrian support of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), a long-term thorn in Turkey's side, and suspicions that Syria has provided training and logistical assistance to Kurdish militants have long riled the Turkish government.



open briefing
the civil society intelligence agency

Open Briefing
27 Old Gloucester Street
Bloomsbury
London WC1N 3AX

t 020 7193 9805
info@openbriefing.org
www.openbriefing.org

However, Turkey's current ruling party – the Justice and Development Party, elected in 2002 – started demonstrating more tolerance for Islamic tendencies within this overtly-secular constitution and voted against participating in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, leading to a considerable thaw in relations with its neighbours in the subsequent period. In 2008, Turkey was invited by both Syria and Israel to mediate in their dispute over the Golan Heights (although this eventually collapsed after Turkey criticised Israel for its conduct during Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008-09). Good relations were further cemented when Turkey and Syria agreed on mutual visits to security outposts along their shared border.

In short, up until the conflict broke out within Syria, recent relations between Ankara and Damascus could comfortably be described as cordial, despite the historic antagonism.

International factors

When Syria's internal conflict started in March 2011, it was initially viewed by Turkey as relatively benign, with negligible impact as far as they were concerned. However, a steady flow of refugees fleeing repressive crackdowns by Syrian state security forces has stretched Turkish tolerance of the Assad regime to breaking point. (There are now an estimated 178,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey.)

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly criticised the actions of the Syrian government, as well as joined international calls for political reforms – including opposition involvement in government – and participated in international sanctions. In the early months of the conflict, there were also repeated calls from Ankara for a strong military response and even the removal of Assad, amid assertions that any unilateral Turkish action would be a matter of self-defence – comments that garnered little support from Arab states.

Turkey's goal – through empire and republic – has always been to be one of, if not *the*, dominant force in the region. It is possible that Ankara's initial 'anti-Assad' policies were guided by this desire to be a regional leader and based upon assumptions that Assad would be swiftly toppled and that Turkey would then be allied with the new Syrian government. If this was indeed the plan, then it backfired when this swift transition did not occur, leaving Turkey somewhat isolated from both Middle Eastern states and Western allies alike.

Diplomatic efforts by Russia (historically pro-Assad) have ensured that any Turkish attempts to escalate the conflict will be viewed as obstructing international diplomacy and Western nations are now pushing Ankara for a more measured and proportionate response. Turkey has essentially been blocked from participating unilaterally in the conflict and, for the time being, is obliged to respect Syria's sovereignty.

Turkey does, however, provide support for the armed opposition groups by allowing the flow of weapons and funds from Gulf states – particularly Qatar – to cross its border into Syria. There are Free Syrian Army (FSA) training camps on Turkish soil and FSA meetings are known to have taken place in Istanbul and elsewhere.

Furthermore, Turkish aircraft and troops are patrolling the border, with orders to respond in kind to any fire coming from Syria, and all Syrian planes have been banned from Turkish airspace. Beyond this, though unlikely, a no-fly zone is actively sought by Ankara as a possible precursor to a 'buffer zone' or safe haven inside Syrian territory. In light of increasingly frequent reports of crimes against humanity in Syria, support for a no-fly zone is growing among the UN Security Council members (or more precisely, the 'NATO group' therein). However, Russia and China are unlikely to endorse any such proposal, fearing that it would lead to a repetition of the Libyan scenario, where offensive operations escalated far beyond simply enforcing a no-fly zone and NATO actively participated in regime change.

In June 2012, a Turkish fighter jet was shot down by Syrian government forces and there has been repeated small arms and mortar fire across the border into Turkey resulting in civilian casualties. In response, the Turkish government requested that NATO Patriot anti-missile batteries be deployed along its side of the border. This drew angry reactions from Tehran – a staunch Assad ally – and Moscow warned that such missile deployments (and the US, Dutch and German troops deployed to operate them) risk increasing regional instability. Despite this, there are also ongoing discussions within NATO about combat troops being stationed along the border to support the Turkish army.

Domestic factors

In addition to the geopolitics of the conflict, there are important domestic factors influencing Ankara's positioning, not least of all public opinion and ongoing ethnic tensions.

The majority of the Turkish population is Sunni and largely supportive of the Syrian rebel forces. However, there is a sizeable Alawite minority (the same Shia community as the Assads), who are vocal in their opposition to Ankara's support for the rebels.

Hatay Province, in particular, has a significant Alawite population, which now has to live alongside a large and predominately Sunni refugee population from Syria. The province has also been used as a safe haven by Sunni rebels. Inevitably there have been Alawite demonstrations in Hatay, some broken up by riot police using tear gas. Turkish authorities are trying to ease this volatile situation by urging refugees to move out of Hatay and into camps outside the province.

With the start of the Syrian conflict, Turkey's internal conflict with Kurdish separatists went briefly into respite as PKK militants focussed on fighting the Assad regime. However, following reports that Kurds had reached an informal agreement with the beleaguered Assad for increased autonomy and self-government in Syrian-Kurdish areas, Ankara is now concerned that militant forces will return their focus to Turkish-Kurdish matters.

The Kurdistan Regional Government's hosting and training of Syrian Kurds in northern Iraq may also be raising longer-term concerns in Ankara about the prospects of another Kurdish mini-state on its border, this time in Syria.

Possible scenarios

Within the context and constraints outlined above, there are several possible scenarios of varying probability for the direction of travel of Turkish policy towards Syria. These include:

- Creating a safe haven inside Syria.
- Unilateral military intervention.
- Involvement in a NATO intervention.
- Closing the border with Syria.
- Continued participation in sanctions against the Assad regime.

Creating a safe haven inside Syria. Turkey has repeatedly called for a safe haven to be created within Syria – citing the large and still growing number of refugees in Turkey – but this has yet to garner any real support within the UN Security Council. As seen in Operation Safe Haven in Kurdistan after the Gulf War, creating a buffer zone within Syria while the conflict is ongoing would require substantial military support from outside parties. This is hard to envisage in Syria without the peacekeepers becoming increasingly involved in the conflict itself and therefore remains unlikely in the absence of even greater humanitarian crimes by the Assad regime.

Unilateral military intervention. Unilateral military action by Turkey in Syria, whether offensive or defensive, has been blocked by the UN Security Council powers due to Russian concerns that this will escalate the conflict and risk regional instability. Instead, there is a desire to maintain this as an internal conflict unless serious war crimes or crimes against humanity are committed (for example, the United States has talked of 'consequences' should Syria use chemical weapons). Therefore, unilateral military intervention by Turkey is highly unlikely.

Involvement in a NATO intervention. Similarly, any NATO intervention is unlikely while the conflict remains conventional and no serious war crimes are committed by either party. NATO's room for manoeuvre is severely hampered by Arab suspicions over Western motives for intervention. However, the Alliance will undoubtedly keep this option on the table due to concerns that the Syrian conflict may increasingly affect neighbouring states, as already seen on the borders with Lebanon and Israel.

Closing the border with Syria. It is unlikely that Turkey will look to close its border with Syria and little has been said by Ankara about such a move. There has been at least one occasion when refugees were stopped from entering Turkey due to a lack of space in existing camps and border towns, but this was only temporary and the border was reopened within a week. If Turkey was to permanently close its border, this may result in a major humanitarian crisis on the Syrian side, which would require an international response. The international community would prefer to continue assisting Turkey in dealing with the refugees there than have to deal with a significant humanitarian intervention into Syria and the requisite military security/peacekeeping support (which might turn the operation into a de facto safe haven in the process).

Continued participation in sanctions against the Assad regime. Turkey will continue to participate in efforts to restrict funding and weaponry to the Syrian government. The October 2012 interception of a Syrian Air flight en route from Moscow to Damascus due to suspicions that it was carrying munitions for Assad regime forces demonstrates this ongoing commitment. Conversely, Ankara will continue to allow weapons and funding for the armed opposition groups to cross its border into Syria.

Conclusions

Turkey has been urged to restrain from unilateral defensive or offensive military action on Syrian territory. Turkey is *highly unlikely* to go against such counsel without major provocation from Syria, which in itself is *highly unlikely*. Limited cross-border military operations against any PKK bases in Kurdish areas of northern Syria are a possibility, though *unlikely* in the short term given the wider consequences.

It is also *unlikely* that there will be any Turkish intervention in the Syrian conflict as part of an international operation in the short term. The most likely scenario in this regard is if Turkey participates in an international response to an extreme humanitarian crisis within Syria.

Recent comments by Russia that the Assad regime is losing the war may encourage Turkey to again attempt to take the diplomatic lead in the region. However, there will be lessons learnt from the early statements that isolated Turkey and any fresh demands from Ankara would likely be more restrained. Turkey has begun making overtures to Iran in an effort to find a regional solution to the conflict involving negotiation between Assad and the opposition. Tehran has indicated that a change might be supported if it does not threaten to weaken the Islamic Republic and respects their security concerns – conditions, it has to be said, that are unlikely to be met.

The Syrian conflict is by no means won but it is shifting slowly towards the endgame. Assad is fast approaching the point where he will no longer be able negotiate a surrender and exile in exchange for an end to this highly destructive conflict. Russia or Iran may still be willing to offer him sanctuary if he avoids resorting to drastic measures (such as mass killings and the use of chemical weapons). Alternatively, Assad might withdraw with loyal forces to a rump Alawite state on the Mediterranean coast. Turkey is therefore *highly likely* to continue support for the rebels and the Syrian opposition but, as pro-Assad forces lose ground and capability, will *likely* withdraw its demands for a negotiated conclusion to the conflict and, instead, bank once more on Assad's removal from power.

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