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The Specter of Turkish-Syrian War

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Syria's errant shelling of Turkey has weakened the regime, and Ankara is paving the way for action against Assad one strike at a time.

On Wednesday Turkey shelled a military outpost across its border with Syria. The move was retaliation for Syrian mortar fire earlier that day that hit the Turkish border town of Akcakale, killing at least five civilians.

The shelling, which continued on Thursday, marks the first military action by a foreign state in Syria since the uprising against Bashar Assad began last spring. Assad's forces have hit several Turkish targets since the start of the Syrian conflict, in which Ankara has shown increasing support for the anti-regime rebels.

Unless Damascus reacts recklessly to this week's exchange, which doesn't appear likely, the two countries probably aren't headed for a full-scale war -- yet. Nevertheless, the escalation with Turkey only bodes ill for the Assad regime, which is as alienated abroad as it is weak at home.

The Turkish government is now pressing for firm commitments from its NATO allies against Syria. On Wednesday night, following an emergency meeting in Brussels, the 28 NATO members put out a statement condemning Assad's "flagrant breach of international law" and demanding "the immediate cessation of such aggressive acts against an Ally." More meetings and further Syrian aggression could lead them to invoke Article 5 of the NATO charter, which stipulates that if one member of the alliance comes under attack, the others must come to its defense.

Ankara seems to be betting that Assad will not risk any further strikes on Turkish assets if NATO makes clear that it will stand firmly with Turkey. The Turks also know that, to achieve such a commitment from NATO, they can play the dynamics of the U.S. election year. Should the White House balk at issuing strong declarations in Turkey's defense, President Obama would leave himself open to accusations of not standing with a valuable NATO ally in distress.

Americans are therefore likely to hear calls from across the political spectrum urging Mr. Obama to show unflinching support for Turkey. If NATO shies from Turkey now, Ankara would almost certainly end its own commitments to the alliance. And the last thing Washington needs is to lose its only Muslim ally that also has sway in the Mideast.

Despite its well-triangulated strategy to get U.S. and NATO backing, Turkey is leaving nothing to chance in its bid to protect itself from Assad. Yesterday the parliament in Ankara met to authorize more military operations to respond to "further threats against Turkey" as needed over the coming year. Local news reports say that Turkish troops are mobilizing along the Syrian border. The scene feels eerily similar to 1998, when a show of Turkish force at the border prompted Assad's father, Hafez Assad, to change his policy on harboring violent Kurdish radicals in Syria. What a difference the threat of invasion makes.

Given the strength of Turkey's position, Assad is unlikely to retaliate against this week's shelling. But Turkey's patience already seemed near its limit back in June, when Assad's forces shot down a Turkish warplane over the Mediterranean, killing its two pilots. With this week's exchange, the two states are locked even more deeply in a slow-brewing sort of warfare.

In fact, given that Wednesday's shelling of the Turkish town was accidental -- the Syrians overshot as they were trying to bomb rebel positions on their side of the border -- Turkey's response appears to be a delayed, if calculated, act of revenge for the plane incident. This is the Turks saying to Assad, "We will make you pay. Just not when you expect it."

Turkey will likely get away with this week's reprisal, thereby giving a considerable morale boost to the Syrian rebels. Assad's regime got markedly weaker this week, and will get weaker still as Turkey paves the way for action against Assad, one strike at a time.

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