Beyond the Golan:

Prospects for Syrian-Turkish Confrontation

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Brief Analysis

Even as attention is focused on the outcome of Syrian-Israeli talks at Wye Plantation, potentially ominous developments are taking place on Syria's northern border, where the regime of Hafiz al-Assad has upped its challenge to Turkey. While tensions between the two states go back a half century, simmering largely beyond the sight of the outside world, strains have notably increased in the past two months.

Background

Three main problems roil bilateral relations: land, water, and terrorism.

Hatay. In 1921, the French government, then in control of Syria, ceded to Turkey (actually, still the Ottoman Empire) a territory the size of England lying south of the Taurus and Anti-Taurus Mountains. Eighteen years later, on the eve of World War II, Paris gave Turkey the region of Alexandretta (subsequently renamed Hatay) as the price it had to pay to win a nonaggression pact with Ankara. The 1921 area has receded in Syrian consciousness, but the 1939 one remains vivid; indeed, it appears on official Syrian maps and is mentioned along with the Golan as territory to be regained.

Euphrates River waters. With the building of the giant Southeast Anatolia Development Project, Turkey gained an ability to control the flow of the Euphrates River waters into Syria (and beyond it to Iraq). That river had carried on average 850 cubic meters of water to Syria each second; in July 1987, Ankara committed to ensure at least 500 cubic meters of water a second. On balance, it has fulfilled this obligation (that is to say, it makes up for any instances of dipping under the 500 cubic meters a second). Still, the Syrian government blames many of its electricity and agricultural problems on the Turkish dams. Those dams also constitute a new lever of power for Turkey, with major political implications. Simply put, Ankara can now threaten to withhold water from Syria, a prospect that Turkish politicians have on occasion publicly relished, though they have consistently foresworn the use of water as a diplomatic weapon.

PKK terrorism. The Worker's Party of Kurdistan (PKK), led by Abdullah Ocalan, took an active part in the spiral of violence and terror that enveloped Turkey in the late 1970s; by the early 1980s, it had become the single greatest menace to Turkish domestic security. Today, after nearly twenty thousand deaths, the PKK controls substantial parts of eastern Turkey, especially at night. Since 1979, the organization has relied heavily on Syrian help, to the point that is has become a virtual subsidiary of the Syrian state, receiving from it, among other benefits, money, weapons, ammunition, false passports, sanctuary in Syria, and training camps in the the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Until 1987, Syrian authorities categorically denied Ocalan's presence in their country or any state support for the PKK. Only when the Turks made clear how much they knew (including the address of Ocalan's domicile in Damascus) did the Syrians acknowledge his presence. Then the real diplomatic jousting began. In July 1987, the two governments signed a Security Protocol, during a state visit by then-Prime Minister Turgut Ozal to Damascus, in which they promised to "obstruct groups engaged in destructive activities directed against one another on their own

territory and would not turn a blind eye to them in any way." The Syrians did not live up to this promise, however, nor to the many others they made in August 1988, April 1992, November 1993, and April 1994.

A persistent pattern has emerged: After a number of Syrian-backed terrorist incidents, followed by Syrian denials of guilt, a Turkish delegation goes to Damascus and presents its hosts with hard evidence. The Syrians reject the evidence but at the same time assure the Turks that the problem will not recur. For a while, matters calm down.

Then, some months later, Syrian-backed terror against Turkey mounts again.

In Syrian eyes, Turkish control of Euphrates waters and Syrian sponsorship of the PKK are closely intertwined, with terrorism a means of putting pressure on the water issue. In Turkish eyes, however, the two issues cannot be connected, for water is a conventional diplomatic issue to be bargained over like many others (coastal shelves, fishing rights); terrorism is totally unacceptable behavior. As Ankara sees it, to reward Assad for sponsoring the PKK would encourage him to use this instrument to raise other questions.

Recent developments

Two problems have further heated this already warm confrontation. First, the imminent construction of a new Turkish dam, Birecik, has prompted Egyptian and GCC support for Syria; in a diplomatic breakthrough for Damascus, the communique of a "6+2" meeting on December 28, 1995 called on Ankara to reach "a just and acceptable agreement on the sharing of Euphrates waters." Second, favorable atmospherics at the Wye talks appear to have emboldened Assad. The Turkish Foreign Ministry believes, according to a leaked report, that "Middle East peace is increasingly linked to Turkey allocating a greater share of Euphrates waters to Syria." Kut, a Turkish academic specialist, sees Assad expecting to be rewarded for Wye by Turkey's allies pressuring Ankara to make concessions. (In a January 1996 address at The Washington Institute, Israel's envoy to the United States, Itamar Rabinovich, pledged that Turkish interests would be safeguarded and "integrated" into any regional peace agreement.)

So far, the Turks have responded to these political challenges with uncommon alacrity. In November 1995, they transferred a full division of troops to the border region with Syria. In January 1996, they dispatched a senior Foreign Ministry official for urgent talks in Jerusalem. Publicly, Turkey's rhetoric has heated up (Syrian leaders, according to the foreign minister, are trying "to wash blood off their hands with Euphrates waters") and Ankara has initiated its own high-stakes water campaign concerning the Orontes River (which begins in Lebanon, passes through Syria and ends up in Turkey's Hatay province). Ankara complains that it receives a "meager" 10 percent of the river's waters. Damascus replies with a refusal even to discuss this matter, arguing provocatively that Hatay is part of Syria and its water consumption is an internal Syrian affair.

Confrontation?

Both sides agree that a Syrian-Turkish face-off is not out of the question. Murhaf Jouejati, a Syrian-American who has consulted for the government in Damascus, has speculated that the two states "are on a collision course" unless they can resolve their differences. The Turkish media occasionally calls on its government to adopt the "methods used by Israel" and destroy PKK camps in Lebanon. Indeed, Syrian conflict with Turkey may present a more imminent danger than with Israel.

1) The conflict with Israel is an old one, which Damascus long ago lost and militarily can have few expectations of winning in the future. In contrast, the conflict with Turkey is yet growing.

2) The world closely follows the conflict with Israel, so for Damascus to make war against Israel would have great international costs. But the conflict with Turkey is obscure, so fighting presumably would not that much affect Assad's standing.

3) The U.S. government would more likely assist Israel in the case of war with Syria than it would Turkey, even though the latter is a NATO ally.

Syrian-Turkish relations proceed along two tracks, one publicly correct and at times even friendly, the other privately hostile and suspicious. Traditionally, the two discourses have remained largely separate, with foreign ministries handling the friendly portfolio and interior ministries the hostile one. There are reasons to expect Turkish-Syrian relations to remain calm. Indeed, the two sides have lived with each other in peace since Syrian independence and both governments know that more is to be lost from fighting than gained by it. But the relative quiet that has marked this relationship reflects not an absence of problems but a Turkish determination to contain them. At the same time, the Turkish position has gradually hardened as the leadership feels that Assad is trying to make fools of them; it may not be willing indefinitely to accept this treatment. Just last week, Turkey seized six truck-loads of weapons and ammunition on its way to PKK bases in the Bekaa Valley; it "is not new for Syria to use terrorist organizations to threaten other nations' internal security," said Interior Minister Teoman Unusan. The Turkish-Syrian border could unexpectedly and rapidly become a crisis point.

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