

Turkey's Alawite Opening

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Turkey can minimize its exposure to long-term chaos next door by building bridges with the Syrian Alawites, and the opposition Republican People's Party could be the perfect partner for the job.

In recent months, Turkey has done the unthinkable, launching peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization Ankara designates as a terrorist group. An important motivation for this breakthrough has been Turkey's Syria policy. Turkey is pursuing regime change in Syria, supporting the rebels to oust the Assad regime. To this end, Ankara needs all the friends it can get, even if it means reaching out to its former foes. The PKK has a strong presence inside Syria, and by making peace with the group, Turkey hopes to bring this organization to its side against the Assad regime.

Now, the Syrian crisis is making it imperative that Turkey do the next unthinkable thing: reach out to the Alawites, both in Syria and at home. This would help Ankara stave-off instability emanating from Syria. "With Syria becoming a weak and divided state, and with no end to the conflict in sight," as a recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report bluntly puts it, Turkey needs to make friends with all Syrian groups to ensure that it can manage the chaos there.

Also, reaching out to the Syrian Alawites would be an important gesture for the Turkish Alawite community, which is mostly concentrated in the country's southernmost Hatay province, next to Syria.

Tensions are brimming to the surface between the government and the Turkish Alawites. After Ankara began providing safe haven to Syrian opposition groups and armed rebels in fall 2011, Turkey's Alawites grew suspicious of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's policies. The Alawites have played a disproportionately large role in anti-AKP rallies, including a March 9 demonstration that drew two thousand people and a late-2012 protest attended by some eight thousand. Turkey's Alawites are angry at Ankara's Syria policy which they see as thinly-veiled support for the Syrian Sunnis to the detriment of their kin, the Syrian Alawites.

In pursuing an Alawite opening, the AKP government in Ankara has an unlikely, yet invaluable, partner: Turkey

opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP). The CHP is popular among Turkish Alawites and has already reached out to the Ba'athist regime in Damascus, gaining recognition with the Syrian Alawites who support this regime.

These CHP delegations have been rather sympathetic to the Assad regime in Syria. In October 2011, the party sent a delegation over the border on invitation from the Syrian Women's Union. After visiting Damascus, Hama, and Latakia, the delegation stated its opposition to "foreign intervention in Syria's domestic affairs." More recently, four CHP deputies visited Assad in Damascus in early March. In a public relations stunt, they undermined the AKP's Syria policy, asserting that the Turkish people "reject intervention in Syria."

Today, whereas many Alawite supporters of the Assad regime deeply distrust the Ankara government, it would not be far-fetched to say that these Alawites have warmer feelings towards the CHP. The Turkish Alawites, a community of about a half-million people, also favor the CHP. A recent poll by CHP parliamentarian Sabahat Akkiraz indicated that 83 percent of Turkish Alawites supported her party in the 2011 elections.

Reaching out to the Syrian Alawites would bring tremendous benefit to both Turkey and the peoples of Syria.

Ankara fears that the Alawite-Sunni conflict in Syria could eventually spillover into its territory, stoking tensions between Sunnis and Alawites in the Hatay province. This is why an "Alawite opening" -- led by the CHP, and encouraged by the AKP -- makes sense. The AKP may not want to share Syria policy with the CHP, but it is clearly in the AKP's interests to engage the opposition party, filling in the gaps of its Syria policy.

The CHP may be tempted to work with the AKP if the governing party includes it in the decision making process regarding Syria in Ankara, providing the CHP with cache. Turkey has already taken some positive steps towards the Syrian Alawites, for instance establishing separate quarters in Hatay for Alawites who want to abandon the Assad regime. An AKP-CHP joint committee to discuss Syria would send the right message to the Syrian and Turkish Alawites, alike.

Syria is disintegrating into a weak and divided state, and whether Assad stays or goes, Turkey will face growing instability at its doorstep in the coming years. Unfortunately, Sunni-Alawite conflict will be a major axis of this instability. Ankara, which already has strong ties with the Syrian Sunnis, can minimize its exposure to these risks by building bridges with the Syrian Alawites. And the CHP could be the perfect partner for the job.

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