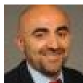
Testing Turkey

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

May 29, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Soner Cagaptay (/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

The war in Syria could bring Ankara and Washington closer together.

For all the talk of Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors," no amount of soft power has been able to protect the country from the protracted civil war in Syria. Now over two years old, that conflict has laid bare Ankara's inability to match Tehran's influence in the region -- or even to secure itself against violence as the conflict has spilled over its borders. After years of trying to go it alone in the Middle East, Turkey's leaders and public must face the fact that their country needs the United States and NATO for security and stability.

Soft power was not supposed to work this way: When Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the conventional wisdom in Ankara was that it was time for Turkey to stop looking to Europe, which continually snubbed it, and instead focus on regaining the regional leadership role it had lost with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. That, the AKP maintained, would best be accomplished not through displays of military force, but by building up soft power. The new style would be an antidote to the traditional way of doing business in the Middle East -- officials believed the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq was a perfect example -- which had resulted in tumult.

To that end, Turkey sought stronger diplomatic ties with all its neighbors in the Middle East. High-level visits to Baghdad, Damascus, Tehran, and other regional capitals became routine. Between November 2002 and April 2009, for instance, the Turkish foreign minister made at least eight trips to Iran and Syria alone. In addition, Turkey opened scores of new embassies and consulates across the Arab world. These gave the country a visibility in the region that had been missing since the Ottoman era, after which the Turks turned to Europe and the Arabs fell under British and French rule.

In all of this, Turkey made a point of standing apart from the United States to solidify its position as a legitimate regional player. For example, in 2005, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, then Turkey's president, visited Damascus over Washington's explicit objections. That bid for warmer ties with Syria seemed to work. After the meeting, Turkey lifted visa restrictions for Syrians and the two countries began to hold joint cabinet meetings. The new tone gave

Turkey ample influence over its smaller southern neighbor, which it hoped to peel away from Iran -- or so Turkey thought.

Beyond political ties, Turkey also made headway connecting itself socially and economically to its neighbors. Today, THY, Turkey's flagship airline, flies from Istanbul to more than 200 destinations, up from about 75 in 2002. In turn, more Middle Eastern visitors have come to Turkey. Whereas a decade ago, only seven percent of tourists in Turkey came from the Middle East, today over 12 percent do -- totaling more than three million each year.

Meanwhile, Turkey's economy has become the strongest in the region, outpacing even the energy behemoths Saudi Arabia and Iran. Much of the growth has come from a strong export sector. Turkish products -- which include everything from trucks to canned tomatoes -- have found happy consumers across the Middle East, bringing Turkey clout in the same way that cars did for Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Turkish soap operas, once obscure dramas produced solely for local audiences, are now beamed into the living rooms of families from Aleppo to Zamalek. To name just one example, Nur, a classic rags-to-riches show, has enthralled more than 85 million viewers. In 2012, such soap operas earned Turkey about $130 million from abroad, mostly from the Arab world. (If the soft-power value of this industry isn't clear, consider the Moroccan woman I met last year whose family had taken a four-hour flight to Istanbul just to see the house where her favorite soap was filmed.)

For a while, Turkey's quest for influence, and its country's apparent success as an affluent and highly functioning Muslim-majority society, seemed to be having the effect that Ankara desired. In a 2011 Brookings Institution poll of the Arab countries, Turkey was ranked first among countries believed to have played a "constructive role" in the Arab Spring. In the same survey, Erdogan's popularity towered above that of other world leaders.

But then the time came to use soft power toward hard-power ends. In 2011, open rebellion broke out against Assad. Turkish leaders initially encouraged him to reform, expecting him to heed their words. In August that year, Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, spent six hours pleading with the Syrian leader to stop killing civilians, hoping that Turkey's good ties with the regime would be enough to push it change its behavior. Assad not only disregarded Davutoglu, he sent tanks into Hama, a center of rebellion, within hours of the Turkish official's departure from Damascus. That day, Ankara severed all diplomatic ties with Assad.

Ankara then sought to extend an olive branch to Iran, thinking that a "Middle East Quartet" composed of Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia could peacefully resolve the conflict in Syria through negotiations. Tehran's response to Ankara's offer was a blunt no. Unlike Turkey, Iran had cultivated significant hard power in the region and has used it to arm the Assad regime, send advisers and fighters to support him, and mobilize its regional proxies, including Hezbollah, to help crush the Syrian uprising.

To be sure, Ankara has attempted some hard-power maneuvering of its own: It officially backs the rebels in northern Syria, providing them with safe haven on its territory and standing by as they pass weapons into Syria through the Turkish side of the border. But because of a lack of strong proxies, Ankara cannot hope to balance Tehran on its own. And even when the immediate crisis is over, Turkey will still be at a disadvantage, facing a made-in-Iran failed state at its doorstep.

What is more, Turkey's limited involvement in Syria has led to the unraveling of its soft-power gains. Turkey's decision to confront the Assad regime did not necessarily stem from sectarian feelings, but that has not prevented the decision from being interpreted as such. The coalition supporting Assad consists of Iran, Iraqi and Lebanese Shia, and the Syrian Alawites. Standing resolutely against this axis, Ankara is increasingly seen as a Sunni power that has joined Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the Sunni rebels. Yet the goal of Turkey's soft-power approach was always to transcend sectarianism and earn support in a diverse neighborhood.

Even so, Turkey's popularity among the region's Shia has taken a nosedive; the deteriorating relations between

Ankara and Iraq's Shiite-majority government, led by Nouri al-Maliki, are a case in point. The Iraqi leader has lambasted Ankara's Syria policy. His government has also blocked Turkey from using his country as a trade route, in an attempt to cut it off from the region at large. (Turkey has also lost its other land route to the Middle East, which ran through Syria.) Ankara's response has been to establish an oversea line from the Turkish port of Mersin to the Israeli port of Haifa. This indicates a certain amount of flexibility and at least one positive step forward for Turkish-Israeli ties: the Turks are selling their wares to the Saudis through Israel. Yet at the same time, it marks the end of Turkish influence in Baghdad.

The failure of Turkey's foreign policy approach has had tangible costs for Ankara. In May, Reyhanli, a Turkish town on the Syrian border, was rocked by a double car bombing. The attack, which killed 51, injured 140 more, and reduced much of the city's center to rubble, was the single most devastating act of terrorism modern Turkey has ever suffered. And the dangers extend beyond the country's hinterlands. Much of Turkey's recent economic success hinges on its reputation as a stable country in an otherwise unstable region. That reputation has won it a steady infusion of foreign investment, which has propelled growth and launched Turkey into the Group of 20 industrialized nations. So long as the war in Syria continues, Turkey's economic miracle will be in danger. And should the Turkish economy slow down, it would certainly upend Erdogan's plans to stand for re-election in 2014.

Ankara knows that it does not have the military means to contend with the disintegration of the Assad regime, which it fears will bring loosed chemical weapons and ballistic missiles. In a way, Turkey's struggles mirror Japan's. Even today, Japan, the consummate soft-power nation, relies on U.S. hard power for its security in East Asia. Japan needs U.S. bases, the nuclear umbrella, and treaties to guard itself against China and nuclear North Korea. Similarly, Turkey needs the United States to protect it against the challenges posed by the Syrian civil war. Moreover, Ankara needs U.S. hard power against Iran. The recent deployment of Patriot batteries in southern Turkey eased the country's mind on that front, even as it prompted demonstrations from Turkish ultranationalists. In turn, Turkey's pivot back toward Washington has led it to temper its bullish tone on Iran: until the Syrian war started, Ankara would often rise to defend Tehran's right to pursue nuclear energy research for peaceful use. Recently, though, Turkey has gone silent on Iran's nuclear ambitions. Privately, Turkish leaders point at Tehran as their greatest rival.

Just as Tokyo depends on the U.S. security guarantee, while many Japanese object to an American military presence, the Turks, too, tend to deny in public that their country needs the United States and NATO to maintain its security and continued economic success in a troubled region. The Japanese example suggests that the AKP might be forced to ignore public opinion as it seeks closer cooperation with Washington. At the very least, even if generating pro-U.S. sentiment is be difficult, formulating a security policy against Iran will be a somewhat easier sell, since Turkish perceptions of Iran have deteriorated in recent years.

The quest for soft power has made Ankara neither dominant nor secure. When facing regional crises, it turns out that good old hard power is most useful. Ten years ago, Turkey launched a policy to build soft power in the Middle East, hoping to use that power to shape regional events, as well as to stand on its own. The Syrian War has put all that to the test, and the Turkish model has come up wanting.

Soner Cagaptay, author of the forthcoming book The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power)** , *is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

Foreign Affairs

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)