

Syria's War Could Inflamm Turkey's Hatay Province

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Brief Analysis

Pro-Assad sentiment and sectarian tensions in the south have made Ankara think twice about intervention and could bring the fighting over the border.

Despite Ankara's sharp turn away from Bashar al-Assad over the course of Syria's civil war, domestic complications have prevented it from taking the lead on overthrowing him. Several unique demographic, political, and historical factors are at play in Turkey's Hatay border province, increasing the risk of violent sectarian spillover from next door. Curbing this trend will require Washington to work closely with Ankara on keeping sectarian sentiment out of its Syria policy.

HATAY: BETWEEN TURKEY AND SYRIA

Hatay is Turkey's southernmost province, a panhandle sandwiched between Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. It is also demographically unique, containing the country's largest proportion of Arabs (nearly a third of the province's population of 1.5 million).

As the only province to join Turkey after its establishment in 1923, Hatay is politically unique as well. In 1921, Turkey signed the Ankara Treaty with France, which controlled Syria at the time. The agreement stipulated that Hatay -- then called Sanjak of Alexandretta -- would remain within French Syria under a special regime. This changed in 1936, when French colonial rule came to an end next door and Turkey pressed Paris to make Hatay independent. France acquiesced, not wishing to alienate Ankara and push it toward the nascent Nazi-led Axis -- the province gained independence in 1938 and was annexed by Turkey in 1939.

By that date, Hatay had avoided the powerful Kemalism campaign that swept the country in the 1930s, spreading nationalist consciousness and rooting the Turkish language among non-Turkish groups. As a result, Hatay Arabs still differ from ethnic groups elsewhere in the country today, maintaining a strong Arab identity and continuing to speak Arabic even among the educated elite.

Hatay is also the only province that mirrors Syria's key ethnic divides. In addition to ethnic Turks, it is home to

Alawite Arabs (co-religionists of the Assad regime), Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Armenians, and Arab Christians. Moreover, Hatay's Alawite and Sunni Arabs are connected to Syrian Alawites and Sunnis through familial and tribal links.

Given its history and demography, Hatay is exposed more directly to developments in Syria than Turkey's other provinces. If the war across the border becomes explicitly Sunni versus Alawite, their sectarian brethren in Hatay could be pitted against each other, whether in terms of upping the current political tension, sparking violence within Turkey, or joining the fight in Syria.

Warning signs of this have been evident for months. For example, local Alawite groups such as the "Platform Against Imperialistic Interference in Syria" have been organizing pro-Assad rallies for some time -- the largest, held last September, drew over ten thousand people. As one Alawite put it during an interview with Aljazeera, "Western imperialistic powers, along with Sunni-led regimes, are trying to topple a legitimate regime in Syria." Minor tensions between Sunni refugees from Syria and Hatay Alawites have been reported as well. Alawite business owners and civil servants complain of Syrian refugees questioning them over their sectarian identity, with some claiming they have been blacklisted and harassed by Sunni Arab emigres.

HATAY AND THE TURKISH OPPOSITION

Alawites in Hatay are staunchly secular and therefore at odds with the conservative and occasionally Islamist bent of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Most of them support the country's main opposition faction, the Republican People's Party (CHP). After Ankara began providing safe haven to Syrian opposition groups and armed rebels in fall 2011, Hatay Alawites grew even more critical of the AKP's policies. They 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.

Some Hatay Alawites see the Syrian Sunnis who have fled to their province not as refugees, but as fighters who have killed or endangered their families in Syria. Others depict them as jihadists who threaten Alawites on both sides of the border. For example, one business owner recently told of a Syrian who asked a Hatay shopkeeper if he was Alawite. Upon receiving an affirmative response, the Syrian went on to say that Turkish Alawites would meet the same fate as Syrian Alawites -- in short, that their turn would come. Security forces had to intervene to break up the ensuing fight.

Ankara has taken steps to alleviate these grievances. Since September, it has steered away from settling large numbers of Syrian refugees in Hatay, moving many of them to interior provinces. Today, only 14,500 of the country's 261,000 registered refugees remain in Hatay. Yet Ankara still has cause for concern, since wider sectarian conflict in Syria would likely spur a larger refugee flow into the province and, in turn, a local Sunni-Alawite conflagration.

Meanwhile, Turkish Alevis -- who comprise about 15 percent of the country's population -- could complicate matters as well. Although they are not related to the nearly eponymous Alawites, they too are staunchly secular, opposed to the AKP's Syria policy, and overwhelmingly supportive of the CHP. A recent poll by CHP parliamentarian Sabahat Akkiraz indicated that 83 percent of Alevis and Alawites supported his party in the 2011 elections. If Hatay Alawites rally more forcefully against the government's Syria policy, Alevis would almost certainly follow.

For its part, the CHP has long taken a contrarian stance on the war. 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 to examine conditions there, 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 with claims that the Turkish people "reject intervention in Syria and want nothing more than neighborly relations" with Assad, to which the dictator purportedly responded: "I appreciate the stance of the Turkish people

and political parties, who unlike the Turkish government favor stability in Syria."

The party will likely continue its unabashed opposition to the AKP's Syria policy. In a recent parliamentary debate, CHP deputy Umit Ozgumus ranted at Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, telling him, "The allegations that Assad is perpetrating massacres are lies!" The party's fierce posture on the issue is driven in part by its 1970s-style anti-American stance, which leads it to intrinsically oppose U.S. military policies (and military action in general) on ideological grounds. It would therefore become even more belligerent if Turkey adopted an actively interventionist policy or worked with Washington toward similar ends. The CHP's strong Alevi base could also force it to harden its stance if the Syrian conflict pits Turkish Alevis against the government.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

The potential for spillover from Syria into Turkey is just one more reason why the United States should step out in front rather than waiting for Ankara. At the same time, Washington should encourage Turkey to adopt an explicitly nonsectarian policy toward Syria, particularly with regard to ethnic cleansing. This means condemning Sunni and Alawite atrocities alike, as well as making a special effort to provide relief for Alawite civilians, open its doors to refugees of that persuasion, and publicize such initiatives. That is the only way to prevent the worst of the war's effects from crossing the border.

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

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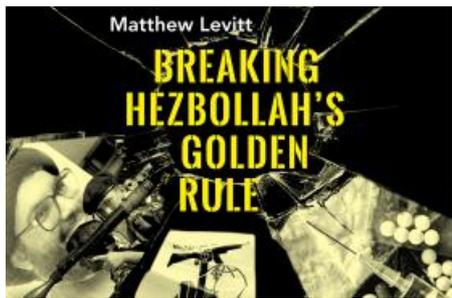
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