Syria's War Affecting Turkey in Unexpected Ways

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

Jan 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.

Brief Analysis

The fighting next door has potential economic, sectarian, political, and security repercussions that merit intense U.S. intelligence cooperation with Turkey.

This PolicyWatch is the first in ***a series on spillover from the Syrian conflict (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-spillover-perspectives-from-neighboring-states)****; subsequent installments will focus on the country's other neighbors.*

On January 21, members of the Turkish Youth Union (TGB), a far-left nationalist group, attacked German Patriot missile teams dispatched to help defend Turkey against threats from Syria. The incident served as a reminder of the unexpected ways in which the Syrian war could impact Turkey's stability. Ankara has become a direct player in the conflict through its support for armed and unarmed groups battling Bashar al-Assad's regime. Yet Turkey is also embroiled in the war in broader strategic terms, through its vulnerability to spillover along the 510-mile border with Syria. Washington should watch these spillover effects closely, as they risk straining Turkey's economy, accentuating its sectarian and political divisions, and compromising its overall stability.

THE COST OF SUPPORTING SYRIAN REFUGEES

Currently, over 163,000 Syrians are being housed in thirteen refugee camps and two temporary receiving centers in Turkey. Ankara is providing them with long-term accommodations, healthcare, and schooling opportunities; according to Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, such assistance is costing Turkey about $40 million per month.

In response to the influx, Ankara has established a Temporary Protection Regime based on an EU directive regarding mass displacements. The directive commits Turkey to guaranteeing temporary residence rights and access to basic services, but it does not give Syrian entrants access to the asylum system offered by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, nor does it include the right to work. Accordingly, Ankara is offering temporary asylum to anyone who crosses the border without a passport, but these people must agree to reside in a refugee camp. Many Syrians have reportedly evaded this rule by crossing the border illegally, while others enter with a

passport but overstay their three-month residence window (in all, an estimated 70,000 have used travel documents to enter Turkey).

Thousands more refugees are stuck on the Syrian side of the border, in camps such as Atima next to Turkey's Cilvegozu crossing. Despite the efforts of public and private Turkish aid groups and donations from abroad, they are living in dismal conditions. The backlog of refugees suggests that even Ankara's considerable capacity has been strained by the task of processing, monitoring, and providing for such a large flow of people fleeing the violence.

SECTARIAN SPILLOVER

Given the deep demographic ties between southern Turkey and northern Syria, Ankara also fears that sectarian violence next door could trigger parallel fault-lines at home. Turkey is home to over half-a-million Arab Alawites, coreligionists of Assad; most of them live in the southernmost Hatay province (they are sometimes called Nusayris; they are distinct from Turkish Alevis, a community that is not close to Syria's Alawites). Some Turkish Alawites are unabashedly pro-Assad, with demonstrators in the south reportedly carrying his portrait and chanting against Ankara and Washington's Syria policy.

More commonly, Alawites in Turkey acknowledge the necessity of Assad's demise but worry about how the regime's collapse will affect their safety. A nearly ubiquitous fear is that Sunni militants returning to Turkey from battling Assad will turn their rancor against them. Ankara has already taken some measures to prevent those sorts of sectarian conflagrations, such as moving certain Sunni Arab refugees into camps in interior Turkey, away from the Sunni-Alawite-mixed Hatay province. Yet the problem bears monitoring because Assad's fall could alter its nature and scope.

RALLYING THE EXTREME LEFT

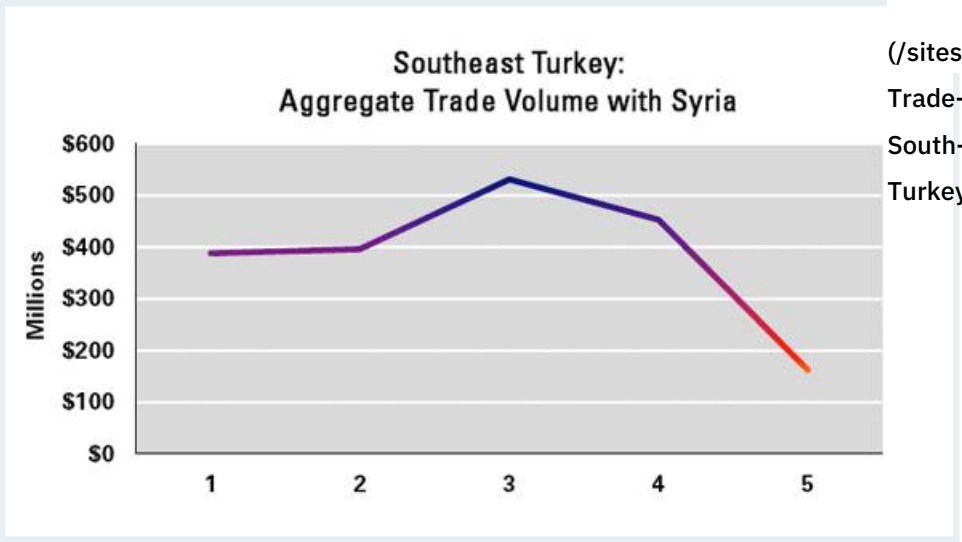
Turkey's radical leftist groups and other extremists have mobilized against Ankara's cooperation with NATO and Washington during the Syria crisis. The country's political landscape still bears vestiges of violent leftist movements from the 1970s, as well as deeply anti-American ultranationalism. More recently, these small but active movements have rallied against the deployment of Patriot missiles in the south; they were behind last week's attack on Patriot teams arriving in the Hatay port of Iskenderun, firing smoke grenades at NATO soldiers and burning American flags.

Although such groups represent a marginal political current, they could have an outsized impact. Iranian and Russian media have covered these incidents extensively in order to feed an anti-NATO slant and increase Ankara's political costs for supporting the Syrian opposition. This narrative could spur further unrest in Turkey, amplifying perceptions of instability.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Southern Turkey's economic integration with Iraq and Syria was one of Ankara's major successes of the past decade. Although the area's overall volume of trade was minor compared to Turkey's overall volume, it was an important factor in the economic development of a long-impoverished portion of the country.

The conflict in Syria has dramatically reversed this trend. As security conditions on the southern frontier deteriorated, Ankara closed the border with Syria to commercial traffic. Meanwhile, Baghdad has periodically blocked trade with Turkey to protest Ankara's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds. All of this has meant the closing of previously vibrant trade between southern Turkey and the northern Fertile Crescent. For instance, by November 2012, Hatay's exports to Syria had fallen to less than half their 2010 level, and similar drop-offs have occurred in every southern province (see chart).



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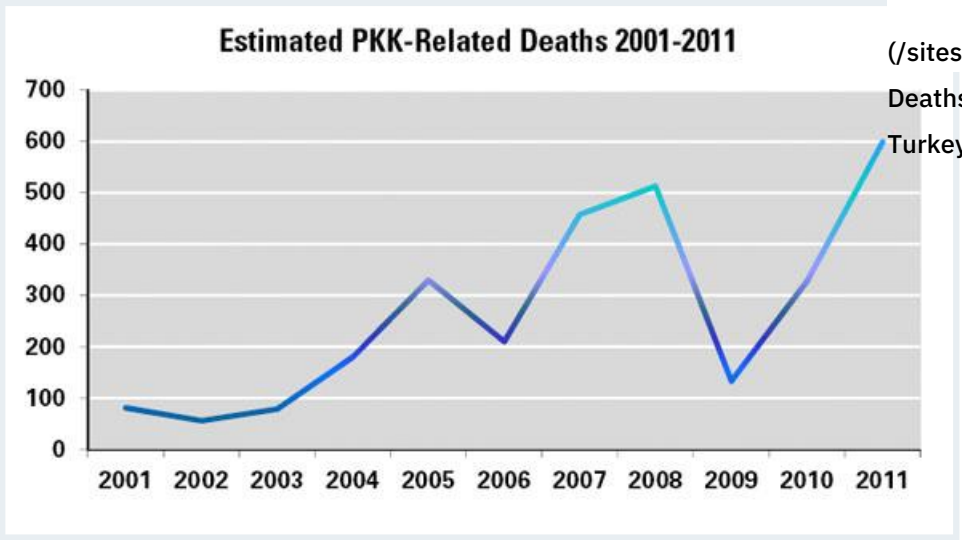
PKK REDUX

The resurgence of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) violence is the most severe repercussion of Turkey's exposure to the Syrian war. Following Ankara's break with Assad in fall 2011, Damascus abandoned its 1998 commitment to prevent the PKK from operating on its soil. Then as now, Assad had much to gain from fostering the perception that his continued reign was key to limiting the PKK's strength in northern Syria.

Bolstered by this newfound logistical and material support from Syria (and from Assad's patron, Iran), the PKK embarked on a renewed campaign of violence in late 2011 (see chart below). And in 2012, leader Murat Karayilan announced that the group was shifting from guerrilla warfare to a strategy of seizing territory in pitched battles. The fighting soon escalated into the most intense seen since 1999, when Turkey captured PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. In one attack late last year, for instance, the group destroyed the sole bridge leading to the small southeastern town of Beytussebap, then cut its electricity and raided the district governor's residence in darkness.



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Recent peace talks between Ankara and Ocalan have raised hopes of a ceasefire. Yet the connection between PKK militants in the field and Syrian-Iranian interests is perhaps the most serious obstacle to defusing the violence.

CONCLUSION

Washington should work closely with Ankara to monitor the many ways in which the Syria conflict is spilling into Turkey. This includes offering closer intelligence cooperation against the PKK and rallying European

governments to provide more help as well. Washington should also consider reviving the successful Turkish-Israeli intelligence cooperation against the terrorist group, which stopped following the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident. This could serve as a precursor to normalization of bilateral ties in the aftermath of the Israeli elections. Last but not least, Washington should pay special attention to the rise of extreme-left and nationalist groups in Turkish society, working with Ankara to prevent violence against present and future NATO deployments.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. His publications include the forthcoming book Turkey Rising: The 21st Century's First Muslim Power. *He would like to thank Tyler Evans and Esin Efe for their assistance with this article.* ❖

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