

# The Right Way for Turkey to Intervene in Syria

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**The cost of intervention in Syria may be high now, but the price will only increase for all nations if civilian massacres continue unabated. If Syria radicalizes, becoming a jihadist safe haven, normalizing it could become a Sisyphean task.**

**T**urkey was the first country to take direct military action against the government of Bashar al-Assad since Syria's uprising began in the spring of 2011. And tensions are escalating further: earlier this week, the Turkish government sent 25 F-16 fighters to an air base near the border with Syria and on Wednesday it forced a Syrian passenger plane to land in the Turkish capital, Ankara, where suspected military aid shipments were taken off the plane.

The shelling along the Turkish-Syrian border is a critical development. The Assad regime is already busy fighting the Free Syrian Army near the Turkish border, where it has been bombing towns and villages. Precision artillery targeting is difficult, and the Syrian military is not known for its accuracy. What's more, many rebel-held areas lie right next to the Turkish border. Hence even if the Syrians try not to shell Turkish territory, they are quite likely to cause inadvertent damage, potentially killing Turkish citizens — as happened on Oct. 3, when Syrian artillery landed in Akcakale, a Turkish border town.

As long as Syrian shells continue to fall on Turkish territory, Turkey will respond in kind. As Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, "although Turkey does not want war, it is close to war." If the situation continues to escalate, Turkey's history suggests that it is likely to follow one of three paths: continued low-intensity shelling, cross-border strikes or an actual invasion.

The first response for Ankara would be to continue the current pattern of shelling across the border every time Syria targets Turkey. This would weaken Syrian forces in some areas near the Turkish border, letting the F.S.A. fill the vacuum. This wouldn't create a contiguous safe haven, but it would lead to pockets of F.S.A.-held territory inside

Syria under a de facto Turkish security umbrella.

The second would combine shelling with cross-border raids to target Kurdish militants in Syria. Turkey's policy, after all, is not just about Syria. It also depends on the Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as the P.K.K., and its Syrian affiliate, the Party for Democratic Unity, or P.Y.D. Turkey views the P.K.K. as an existential threat, and the P.Y.D. is reportedly already active in Syrian towns near the Turkish border, though the group has said it does not plan to fight Turkey. If Turkey believes that Kurdish militants are turning Syria into a staging ground for operations against Turkey, the Turkish military would strike decisively, as it did against Kurds in northern Iraq after Saddam Hussein's rule effectively ended there in the 1990s. Ankara might go for the "northern Iraq option" once again to prevent Kurdish militants from taking control of northern Syria.

Finally, if things get worse along the border, causing more Turkish casualties, Turkey may go even further, staging a limited invasion to contain the crisis as it did in Cyprus in the 1970s. At that time, Ankara waited patiently for the United States and the international community to come to its aid in Cyprus. When such help did not materialize, Turkey took matters into its own hands, and landed troops on the island.

NATO has already issued a statement that it will defend Turkey against Syria. Yet if Turkey decides that the international community is not going to actually help stave off the Assad regime's aggression, it may choose the Cyprus option. The Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, has suggested that Ankara may be getting closer to its threshold, declaring on Oct. 8 that "worse-case scenarios" are looming in Syria and calling upon the international community to act.

The Cyprus scenario is the least desirable for Turkey. Full-scale war is not in its interest, especially if Turkey launches such a campaign without American backing. And NATO support under Article 5 of the alliance's charter, which calls for all NATO members to come to the defense of any member that is attacked, would be harder to muster. Article 5 has been activated only once in NATO's history and that was after the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, European nations like France haven't in the past been keen to come to Turkey's defense. A unilateral war against the Assad regime would also irritate the United States and anger Russia and Iran, Ankara's rivals in Syria -- a serious concern because Moscow and Tehran have a track record of supporting Kurdish militants.

The northern Iraq option would not necessarily raise America's ire, but it would expose Turkey to further P.K.K. attacks, including ones backed by Iran. Tehran already appears to be encouraging the P.K.K. to punish Turkey for its stance in Syria. Major attacks could hurt Turkey's economy and erode Mr. Erdogan's popularity.

This leaves Turkey with the status quo -- retaliating to Syrian artillery fire by shelling across the border. Yet this will not solve the Syria crisis. Only an effective arms embargo and a multilateral intervention to create safe havens for civilians will stop the slaughter.

The cost of intervention in Syria may be high now, but the price will only increase for all nations if civilian massacres continue unabated. Currently, Syria looks eerily similar to Bosnia in the early 1990s. When the world did not act to end the slaughter of Muslims there, jihadists moved in to join the fight, and they sought to convince the otherwise staunchly secular-minded Bosnian Muslims that the world had abandoned them and that they were better off with jihadists. In Bosnia, the international community intervened before it was too late. If Syria radicalizes, becoming a jihadist safe haven, it could become a Sisyphean task to normalize it. Afghanistan is a case in point.

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