

The End of Pax Adana

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay), [Tyler Evans \(/experts/tyler-evans\)](/experts/tyler-evans)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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

[Tyler Evans \(/experts/tyler-evans\)](/experts/tyler-evans)



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One of the unintended consequences of the Arab Spring has been the PKK's reemergence as a player in Iran-Syria-Turkey relations.

Although Turkey is not an Arab country, the Arab Spring is shaping Turkish affairs in important ways. Political changes in the country's neighborhood have ended the equilibrium between Syria, Turkey, and Iran over the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that has waged a violent campaign against Turkey for decades. This has meant the end of the Pax Adana, a regional balance characterized by the Syrian and Iranian promise not to support the PKK.

In 1998, Damascus signed a protocol with Ankara in the southern Turkish city of Adana promising to cease its support for the PKK. Iran joined in on that consensus in 2003. Now, Syrian and Iranian support for the PKK is back in the spotlight as Syria's disintegration and Turkish-Iranian competition demolish the foundations of the former status quo.

Turkey has been down this road before. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran supported the PKK to undermine Turkey's secular democratic political system -- the regional antithesis to the Islamic republic's authoritarian style of religious governance. Syria saw usefulness in the PKK as well. For Hafez al-Assad, the PKK was a convenient instrument to help settle old scores over the disputed territory of Hatay -- and more directly -- to force Turkey's hand on water-sharing disagreements from the Euphrates and the Tigris.

By the late 1990s, Ankara had run out of patience against Syria. Turkey beat the war drums by conducting NATO exercises in the region as well as independent mobilizations on the border with Syria. In the face of Ankara's threats, Syria signed the Adana Protocol in October 1998, shut down the PKK bases on its territory, imprisoned hundreds of PKK militants, and expelled PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from Syria, leading to his capture in 1999.

For years since, Damascus has largely held up his end of the deal. One Turkish intelligence analyst even remarked that if Ankara wanted Syria to extradite a suspected PKK member, "Al-Assad would extradite not only that person, but all his cousins, as well."

This agreement underwrote a new pattern of friendly relations with Syria -- and Iran jumped on board in 2003, concluding that winning Turkey's approval should be part of its broader regional strategy. This shift was a reaction to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which prompted Tehran to decide it needed to win over its neighbor Turkey to balance the threat from the United States encircling Iran. Tehran therefore severed its ties with the PKK the day U.S. troops landed in Iraq.

These developments ushered in the era of Pax Adana. The PKK did not go away, but at least it was prevented from becoming an irritant to the stability of regional relationships.

With the advent of the Arab Spring, this era met its sudden demise: Syria's consequent implosion has placed Iran and Turkey in an unquestionably adversarial position as Turkey leads the anti-al-Assad camp while Iran is committed to supporting the essential regional asset it sees in the al-Assad regime.

Accordingly, Tehran has an incentive to bring the PKK card back into play in order to make Turkey take its concerns seriously. Last year, Iran's semi-official news agency, Press TV, reported that Iran had captured the PKK's second-in-command, Murat Karayilan. The air of mystery Iran cultivated around the alleged capture gave the clear impression that Iran was brandishing its PKK clout against Turkey. Recently, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc charged that the PKK had relocated some of its bases from Iraq to the Turkish-Iranian border. The U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Francis Ricciardone, echoed these charges when he claimed that Damascus was providing Iranian arms to the PKK.

For the PKK, the demise of the Pax Adana is a new opportunity. With newfound traction in Syria and Iran, the PKK has recently launched a renewed campaign of violence against Turkey.

Revolutions can usher in changes in unexpected ways. One of the unintended consequences of the Arab Spring has been the demolition of the Pax Adana and the reemergence of the PKK as a player in regional politics between Iran, Syria and Turkey, once again.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Tyler Evans is a research assistant in the program. ❖

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