

# Under the Influence: Syria's Unique Relationship with Turkey

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## Among all the countries experiencing Arab Spring protests, Syria is uniquely positioned to fall under Turkish influence once its dictator is toppled.

**T**urkey has recently emerged as a patron country of the Arab Spring -- defying dictators, standing with protestors and building prestige across Arab societies. This, however, does not mean unfettered Turkish sway over Arab countries apres dictators: Egypt is too nationalist and too big to simply fall under Turkish influence, Tunisia is too far and too Francophone and Libya is too complex and laden with resources to the point that one country cannot singlehandedly wield significant control over it.

Syria, though, is different: small and close to Ankara, its identity bears the same Ottoman imprint as does Turkey. In addition to the economic and soft power Turkey has built in Syria over the past decade, Ankara now hosts the Syrian opposition (i.e. the future Damascene government). Among all the countries experiencing Arab Spring protests, Syria is uniquely positioned to fall under Turkish influence once the dictator in Damascus is vanquished.

Like Anatolia and the Balkans, Syria was "Ottomanized," becoming an integral part of the Ottoman social and political system while more distant Arab countries remained autonomous. While Syria was ruled by the sultans in Istanbul, other Arab lands such as Egypt, Arabia and the Maghreb were ruled by local khedives, beys, deys, sheikhs and sharifs. Their autonomy impacted these countries' future political identities as distinct from that of modern Turkey and Syria.

Today, Syria is dominated by hallmarks of Ottoman civilization, from architecture to social structure. Like Turkish and Balkan cities, Syrian cities boast "mini Blue Mosques," reminiscent of Istanbul's Blue Mosque, which projected the imperial capital's image across the Ottoman provinces. Turkey and Syria's urban elites also share a laissez-faire, mercantile, Sufi worldview.

The Syrians are the Turks' only Arab neighbors. (Turkey's Iraqi neighbors are Kurds, not the Arabs of further south). This has resulted in much commingling of Turks and Syrian Arabs. Today, members of the same Turkish and Arab --

as well as Kurdish and Christian -- communities often bridge the Turkish-Syrian border. This 500-mile line, Turkey's longest, is therefore less a boundary than a formality. In effect, Turkey has a unique kinship network inside Syria that it does not find in other Arab countries.

Over the past decade, Ankara has pursued rapprochement with Syria. This process, which opened the borders, has not produced a two-way economic flow. Instead, the vibrant Turkish economy, totaling 1.1 trillion U.S. dollars, has overwhelmed its much smaller and stale counterpart, worth only 100 billion U.S. dollars. Turkey is among Syria's top trading partners and the dominant source of its foreign investment. Turkey is not even close to having similar economic sway in any other Arab country.

Turkey also enjoys significant political clout in Syria. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Ankara has played an active role in organizing the opposition and lending it valuable international legitimacy by hosting its gatherings.

Compared with other Arab capitals, Ankara is uniquely positioned in Damascus and armed with soft power. Take, for instance, the debate over the "Turkish model." Islamist parties from Egypt to Tunis to Rabat have rejected suggestions that they model themselves after Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), saying they want to be uniquely "Egyptian," "Tunisian," "Moroccan." This is not the case with Syria: in fact, as recently as Nov. 28, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood stated that it "favors the Turkish model."

The end of al-Assad's rule in Damascus could mark a period of much-increased Turkish influence in Syria. Turkey's role, however, is dependent on its ability to actively promote al-Assad's departure without being too heavy handed. If Turkey succeeds, Damascus will again be linked to Istanbul.

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