

Turkey's New Policy on Syria

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Brief Analysis

Ankara may soon slap the Asad regime with mild sanctions, but most of its Syria policy will remain just rhetoric in the absence of international consensus regarding stronger action.

Although Turkey has gradually distanced itself from Syria, policymakers in Ankara believe that their options for further action are limited. Without a proper game plan and international consensus, the United States and others cannot count on Turkey to make the Syria problem "disappear."

The Arab Spring has posed a particular challenge to Turkish foreign policy under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Once characterized by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's catchy phrase "zero problems with neighbors," in reality this policy has centered on "zero problems with regimes." As the AKP successfully pursued its goal of turning Turkey's EU-obsessed foreign policy eastward and boosting ties with the Arab world, its top new ally became the half-century-old Baath Party dictatorship in Syria.

From Ankara's perspective, getting closer to the Bashar al-Asad regime made economic and political sense. Long gone were the days when Syria was a Soviet ally or proud host of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan. Over the past decade, Ankara no longer saw a strategic threat in Syria, but instead a convenient opening into the Arab world befitting the AKP's neo-Ottomanist ideas of regional leadership. Relations steadily grew closer, resulting in a free-trade agreement in 2004 and an unprecedented three-day joint military exercise in 2009. That same year, the two countries lifted visa requirements and began the highly symbolic practice of joint cabinet meetings. No longer interested in a close alliance with Israel, Turkish officials began to speak openly of a "strategic pact" with Damascus, describing the Asad regime, somewhat naively, as Turkey's "protege." And on a personal level, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his family developed warm ties with Syria's young leader and his stylish, Western-educated wife.

Lesson from Libya

As the regional uprisings started unfolding earlier this year, Erdogan was quick to call for Hosni Mubarak's ouster in Egypt. Yet when it came to Libya and Syria, he initially advocated engagement. In the former case, he held numerous phone conversations with Muammar Qadhafi and his sons to broker a ceasefire and at first publicly refused a NATO involvement. Yet in this new era of people power in the Arab world, Erdogan's seemingly pro-Qadhafi stance quickly backfired, sparking anti-Turkish demonstrations in Benghazi and strong anti-Turkish sentiment among the rebel forces. This was a huge affront to AKP leaders, who saw their party as the prototype for both democracy in the Middle East and the resurgence of conservative Islamist movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere.

It took several months of painstaking diplomacy to reassure the Libyan public and interim government that Turkey was "with the Libyan people," as Erdogan proclaimed in a recent visit to Benghazi, and not with Qadhafi. Libya therefore served as a useful reminder about the pitfalls of reliance on unpopular dictators at the expense of the public. As demonstrations raged on in Syria throughout the summer, Ankara was determined not to lose the people again.

Asad Angers Erdogan

As with Libya, both Erdogan and Davutoglu at first assumed that their personal leverage would be enough to steer Asad into a controlled, top-down process of gradual reform. But numerous visits by the foreign minister and other officials -- including Hakan Fidan, head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization -- resulted in no tangible easing of repression, despite hours of private conversations with the Syrian leader. Against this backdrop, four main factors drove Ankara to drop its support for the Asad regime:

1. *Assessment that Asad was either too weak or unwilling to reform.* During private meetings, Davutoglu and other officials often heard Asad express willingness to reform. Yet the president seemed too weak within the ruling family to effect any real change. Ankara was encouraged somewhat in June and August when Asad announced reform packages that including some of Turkey's suggestions, such as abolishing the decades-old emergency law, allowing the opposition to form political parties, and conducting a national dialogue. But no concrete steps were taken to implement these reforms. Disappointment eventually turned to frustration and, finally, anger.
2. *Influx of refugees.* In June, thousands of refugees fleeing repression crossed the border into Turkey, focusing international attention on the brutality of the Syrian regime. Once he received firsthand reports about Syrian atrocities, Erdogan described the regime's behavior as "savagery" and urged Asad to sack his brother Maher, whom Turkish officials saw as the mastermind of the brutal crackdown. Although the Syrian military sealed off the border area to prevent further exodus into Turkey, the presence of the camps sowed seeds of mistrust and sparked a low-intensity propaganda war between the two countries.
3. *Sunni sentiments and Hama.* The Islamist and overwhelmingly Sunni character of Turkey's ruling party also contributed to its shift away from the Asad regime, which is tightly controlled by a clan from the minority Alawite sect. Throughout the holy month of Ramadan, news of mass killings and random shootings by Syrian security forces resonated with particular force among the conservative Turkish public. In response, groups such as the Humanitarian Relief Fund (IHH) -- the Islamist NGO responsible for the 2010 flotilla to Gaza -- began organizing protests and becoming involved with the Syrian refugee crisis.

All of this came on the heels of a June electoral campaign in which the AKP stooped to sectarian innuendo,

deliberately highlighting the Alevi origin of its secular opponents (including main opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu). In doing so, the party conflated the Alevi tradition of Islam in Turkey with the Alawite nature of the Syrian regime, conveniently eliding the significant historical and theological differences between the two traditions. This in turn made it easier for the AKP to turn its back on Asad. The coup de grace was the brutal siege of Hama on August 1, the eve of Ramadan, when the Syrian military killed dozens of civilians in an effort to put down the uprising. For the AKP leadership, this was a bitter reminder of Hafez al-Asad's bloody crackdown on the same area some thirty years earlier -- an event that still looms large in the Islamist consciousness.

4. *Iran's influence.* With the Asad regime's growing international isolation came a growing reliance on Iran. One of the foremost characteristics of the AKP's foreign policy has been its determination to forge better ties with Tehran. Rather than clashing with the Iranian regime on the subject of Syria, Turkey hoped to persuade Tehran into pushing Asad toward reform -- as Erdogan tried to do in his recent meeting with President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad at the UN -- or else into helping Ankara prepare for a post-Asad region. Yet the prospect of leaving Syria in a state of instability and under Iran's influence poses a strategic concern for Ankara. Moreover, Turkish officials now believe that Syria's backers in Tehran only embolden Asad's brutality.

Much Rhetoric, But Little Room for Action

Over the past few months, Ankara has decisively moved to the anti-Asad camp. By midsummer, senior Turkish officials started talking about "losing hope in Asad," and despite warnings from Damascus, Turkey began hosting gatherings of Syrian opposition activists, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. By late summer, Turkish officials were musing publicly -- though anonymously -- about the regime's fall as an unavoidable prospect. Finally, toward the end of September, Erdogan announced that he had "cut off all dialogue with the Syrian regime," and that Asad had "lied [to him] continuously." A few days later, he took a bolder tone: "This process might be extended a little bit more, but sooner or later in Syria, if people take a different decision, just as in Egypt, as in Tunisia and as in Libya," the regime would self-destruct.

At the same time, Turkey is convinced that its options are limited. Ankara is ready to slap the regime with mild sanctions, as Erdogan told President Obama in New York late September, and it has already intercepted some weapons shipments to Damascus. Erdogan will also be visiting the refugee camps on the border with Syria, further stepping up his rhetoric against the regime and bringing renewed international attention to Syria. But beyond that, Turkey's Syria policy will remain rhetoric in the absence of a clear international consensus regarding further action. Much like Turkey's opposition to the Iraq war a decade ago, Ankara will be highly resistant to military intervention. Consequently, as the United States considers its own options in Syria, it should regard on Turkey as a facilitator and a potential partner-- but not the designer of a decisive policy toward its increasingly unstable neighbor.

Asli Aydintasbas is a columnist for the Turkish daily Milliyet, specializing in Turkish politics and foreign policy. ❖

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