

## Turkish-Syrian Ties Worsen

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 Brief Analysis

### Unless conditions in Syria somehow magically revert to normalcy, Turkey will likely lead the international community in taking a tougher line against the brutal crackdown.

Today's six-hour meeting in Damascus between Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad is a turning point for the two countries, ending the already frayed rapprochement between Ankara and the Asad regime. Unless conditions in Syria somehow magically revert to normalcy, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will likely lead the international community in taking a tougher line against the brutal crackdown.

Even as Davutoglu was meeting with Asad and asking him to stop using violence against protestors, Syrian tanks entered Binnish, a town near the Turkish border, and attacked civilians. Moreover, in a clear snub to Turkish pride, Asad sent his deputy foreign minister, not his foreign minister, to greet Davutoglu upon his arrival in Damascus.

Until now, Ankara has kept lines of communication with the Syrian regime open while also criticizing Damascus for using force against demonstrators. Unless Asad satisfies the AKP's wishes by completely halting the crackdown, and unless the Syrian people go back to business as usual under his rule, today's events make it more difficult for Turkey to retain its two-legged Syria policy. Ankara will likely pursue strong rhetoric -- and some actions -- against the Baath regime should the crackdown persist. This hardening is even more probable given that the violence has continued during Ramadan, a time of heightened emotional and religious sensitivities when Turkey is even less likely to tolerate the persecution of fellow Muslims next door.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it promoted rapprochement with Syria through its "zero problems with neighbors" policy. This brought the two countries so close together that their cabinets began to hold joint meetings at one point. Bilateral trade boomed, mutual visa restrictions were lifted, and Ankara and Damascus appeared to have become each other's best friend.

All of this has changed in the wake of the Syrian revolt. When the unrest began in March, Ankara tried to take the high road, with Davutoglu repeatedly asking Asad to stop using violence and reform immediately. Gradually, however, it became obvious that Damascus was not interested in listening to Ankara's advice. Tensions increased as the regime began to crack down on protestors in the north, spurring more than 12,000 refugees to flee to Turkey in June.

The refugee flow brought the Syria crisis back to television screens in Turkey, boosting the public's sympathy for the plight of their persecuted neighbors. Even then, Ankara kept its communication with Syria alive, hoping to exert leverage over Asad. This attitude began to shift when Davutoglu canceled his planned visit to Damascus in July, after it became clear that the regime was not interested in listening.

Yet Ankara still wanted to give Syria one more chance. Following a phone conversation with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Sunday, Davutoglu decided to make one more attempt at swaying Asad, resulting in today's meeting. His trip also appeared necessary in light of a recent Turkish media story citing an intelligence report that Syria appears to be reneging on its bilateral cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in retaliation for Turkish criticism of Asad's crackdown. Given the results of that parley and the assault on Binnish, Washington will likely be happy to follow the Turkish lead on Syria going forward.

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