

How Washington Can Work with Turkey on Syria

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/), [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet/\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet/)

Jul 14, 2011

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.



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet/\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet/)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Brief Analysis

The United States should work with Turkey and other allies to halt the Asad regime's violence, avoid anarchy in the event of regime collapse, and prepare for a post-Asad era.

Despite recent problems in the U.S.-Turkish relationship, Washington has an ally in Ankara when it comes to concerns about Syria's bloody uprising. Although Turkish-Syrian ties warmed over the past decade, the Asad regime's brutal crackdown has disappointed Ankara and brought it closer to the United States in considering how to deal with the unrest.

Turkey's Changing Syria Policy

In reacting to the unrest in Syria, Ankara's instinctive reaction is to avoid conflict. Since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has followed a "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which has included rapprochement with Syria. Only a few months ago, for example, the two countries were holding joint cabinet meetings. Bilateral ties began improving as early as 1998, when Damascus stopped allowing the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to launch attacks from Syrian territory after Turkey threatened to invade. Since then, Turks have come to view Syria as neither a threat nor a source of instability, while Syrians see Turkey as a regional mercantile power that is increasingly skeptical of Western Middle East policy.

Recently, however, unrest along Turkey's longest land border and the possibility of millions of inflowing refugees have rekindled Ankara's threat perception regarding Syria. The AKP is especially concerned about what would

happen if President Bashar al-Asad ordered a bloody crackdown in Aleppo, a Syrian city of 3 million inhabitants only twenty-six miles from the Turkish border. The resulting refugee flows could place millions of displaced people in Ankara's care and potentially allow al-Qaeda and PKK members to slip into Turkey. A breakdown of law and order in Syria would also hurt Turkey economically, given the increased economic activity in southeastern Syria due to the recent surge in Turkish exports to and investments in Syria.

In light of these issues -- along with the fact that Turkey has been more critical of Asad's crackdown than Syria's other neighbors -- Washington should expect Ankara to take an active role going forward. Currently, Turkish policymakers are studying several potential measures for exerting leverage in Syria, outlined below in approximate order of descending likelihood:

- *Contact with the opposition.* On July 13, Ankara allowed exiled Syrian opposition figures to meet in Turkey, and another session is scheduled for July 16. These meetings follow a prominent May 19 gathering in Antalya, Turkey, as well as regular meetings in Istanbul by the "Executive Committee of the Antalya Gathering." At the same time, Ankara continues to engage Asad, with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly (and sometimes dramatically) divulging key areas of disagreement.

This approach seems designed to drive up Asad's insecurities and force him to make larger concessions while driving down the cost of what he can ask for in return. And as his authority disintegrates, Ankara's two-track strategy is also a way of showing the Syrian population that Turkey seeks a lasting relationship with Syria the country, not just its regime.

- *Buffer zone inside Syria.* If the violence spins out of control, Turkey will likely try to avoid military intervention, instead establishing a buffer zone inside Syria to provide the people with some relief. Avoiding military action would help the AKP maintain the growing soft power it has built in the Arab world since 2002.

Turkey established a similar zone in Iraq in 1991, when Saddam Hussein unleashed violence on the country's Kurdish population. Within a matter of weeks, around 1.5 million Kurds had fled to the zone. In April of that year, the United States launched Operation Provide Comfort, establishing bases in Turkey to deliver humanitarian aid to refugees and sending a coalition force into northern Iraq to create a demilitarized zone and construct resettlement areas. Turkey might establish such a zone inside Syria if it had international backing (e.g., a UN resolution). Unlike in 1991, however, Ankara would likely request Turkish authority over the zone.

- *Economic sanctions.* Part of the AKP's "zero problems" policy has been reliance on trade. In January 2004, Ankara and Damascus signed a free trade agreement to reinforce Syria's unwritten concession of Hatay, a disputed border region that had been handed over to Turkey following a referendum in 1939. Once the trade agreement went into effect in 2007, Turkey lifted all customs duties on Syrian products, while Syria, which has much less efficient industries, agreed to reduce its customs on Turkish goods gradually over a twelve-year period. Despite this disparity, Turkish goods flooded the Syrian market, causing a Syrian industrial contraction of 15 percent in the first few years of the agreement. To compensate, a number of Turkish businessmen set up factories in Aleppo, situated along the frontier.

Given this soft power and Syria's deep economic crisis, Turkey -- presumably with backing from the UN or other international body -- could restrict or cut off trade as a means of convincing the regime to halt its crackdown. And given the ongoing customs disparity, Ankara would have little to fear if Damascus reciprocated with trade sanctions of its own. In addition to their direct impact on the regime, sanctions would remove Turkish goods from the Syrian market, causing many middle- and upper-class Syrians to question their continued support for Asad. Moreover, any temporary closing of Turkish-financed factories in Syria would hit the working classes hard, creating tension with that demographic and giving the regime an even bigger unemployment headache.

- *Military deterrence.* If the flow of refugees became too much for a buffer zone to handle, or if Asad continued to carry out massacres in large cities such as Aleppo, the AKP might find the public sympathy for persecuted fellow Muslims next door impossible to ignore. Such developments could lead Ankara to threaten military intervention as a means of deterring Asad from further crackdowns. This approach has some grounding in history -- as mentioned previously, Turkey forced Damascus to curb PKK attacks by reportedly massing troops on the border in 1998. Ankara might resort to deterrence again if it comes to believe that military action is the only viable option.
- *Military intervention.* If deterrence does not work, or should Syria collapse into anarchy, Turkey might consider a limited military intervention. In this scenario, Ankara would likely try to keep NATO and the United States out of the mission -- the leitmotiv of Turkish foreign policy has changed over the past decade, and Ankara does not want to be seen as the "West's man" in the region. Yet President Obama's relationship with Prime Minister Erdogan could help circumvent such exclusion. For example, during recent and reportedly friendly contacts between the two leaders, Obama convinced Erdogan to stop opposing U.S. Middle East policy on Libya.

Conclusion

Russia, China, and India continue to oppose UN Security Council action on Syria, while the Arab League remains ambivalent about the Asad regime's crackdown. Accordingly, Turkey will play a key role in Washington's approach to the crisis. No matter what option Turkey chooses, the United States will continue to take action of its own in conjunction with the European Union. The challenge will be to coordinate between Washington, Brussels, and Ankara on pushing Asad into key dilemmas, with the goal of halting the bloody crackdown and facilitating Syria's transition to democratic rule.

Toward that end, Ankara could use the measures outlined in this article singly or in tandem. For example, it could establish a buffer zone in Turkey while pursuing a military deterrence policy, or continue its contacts with the opposition while implementing economic sanctions. Whatever the approach, all parties should keep in mind that Asad relishes having multiple interlocutors, which helps him divide his opponents. Only by closely comparing notes and maintaining tight diplomatic discipline will Washington and Ankara have a hope of changing Asad's ways.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics and author of the forthcoming book In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)