

## What If Turkey Invaded Syria?

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### As the Syrian crisis spills over into Turkey, the AKP's conflict-avoidance policy may not be sustainable.

**T**urkish-Syrian ties are unraveling. After becoming Assad's close ally, Ankara is now worried about the Syrian conflict. Turkey has expressed outrage at the situation, calling the crackdown in Syria a "savagery," and a Turkish army commander recently issued a tacit warning while visiting the Syrian border. Meanwhile, Damascus has positioned tanks along its border with Turkey.

Still, when reacting to the unrest in Syria, the instinct of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government in Ankara will be to avoid conflict and opt for a buffer zone inside Syria to manage the likely flow of refugees on Syrian territory. But if that does not work, Turkey could take matters into its own hands, sending troops into Syria. Did I just say Turkey might invade Syria? Yes. And what a can of worms such an intervention would open, humanitarian though it would be. As the Syrian crisis spills over into Turkey, the AKP's conflict avoidance policy may not be sustainable. Should the Assad regime carry out massacres in large cities, the AKP might find Turkish sympathies for the persecuted fellow Muslims next door too unbearable to ignore. Massacres in Syria, coupled with the breakdown of law and order, would make Turkish intervention almost inevitable. A Turkish intervention in Syria could change almost everything about the Turkey we know today. For instance, domestic politics. Although Turkey is split down the middle between the AKP's supporters and their opponents, war would unify domestic opposition behind the AKP leader and Turkish prime minister Erdogan. But it is worth considering that a successful military campaign would also re-empower the secular Turkish army, which has lost face in recent years for purported involvement in a coup plot against the AKP. As for foreign policy, a Turkish intervention would nearly revolutionize the AKP's regional agenda.

Strong ties with Syria that the AKP has cultivated since 2002 would crumble in the case of an invasion. In 1998, Damascus stopped allowing the Kurdistan Workers Party to use its territory to launch terror attacks into Turkey, when Ankara threatened to invade Syria. Since then, the Turks have come to believe that Syria is neither a threat nor a source of instability and that Israel is the true problem in the region. This view would change with a Turkish intrusion into Syria, as would Turkey's relationship with Israel, harkening back to the 1990s, when the two countries united against Damascus for its harboring of terrorist groups. The AKP's decision to pressure Turkey's NGOs to disengage from this year's Gaza flotilla signifies the renewal of a Turkish realization that Israel could be an ally in an unstable region. In addition to reconfiguring Turkish-Israeli-Syrian ties, a Turkish incursion would drive a wedge between Ankara and Tehran, thus ending the honeymoon Ankara has pursued with Tehran since the Iraq War, when the two countries found themselves allied in their opposition to the U.S.-led campaign. Today, Ankara and Tehran are at odds; their policies on Syria are diametrically opposed. In the event of a Turkish intervention in Syria, the competition between Ankara and Tehran for influence in Iraq would further compound the situation. Such an intervention would deteriorate Turkey and Iran's increasingly problematic relationship. A Turkish invasion would rejuvenate Turkish-U.S. ties, which have yet to recover fully from the Iraq War. Since 2003, many Turks have come to believe that the U.S. does not care for Turkey and that the two countries have conflicting interests in the Middle East. But now, Turkey and the U.S. are on the same page. Both countries resent crackdown and fear a likely refugee crisis. The crisis in Syria is leading the U.S. and Turkey to coordinate their Middle East policies to an extent not seen for nearly a decade. A Turkish intervention in Syria, backed by the U.S. to uphold the nascent doctrine of "responsibility to protect," would indeed warm up U.S.-Turkish ties beyond imagination. A can of worms, indeed.

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