

A Turkish Buffer Zone inside Syria?

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Growing unrest in Syria is increasingly spilling over the border into Turkey. So far 12,000 Syrian refugees have crossed into Turkey, and with a crackdown on the way in Idlib near the border, thousands more could be heading that way.

Ankara has expressed outrage at the situation, calling the Syrian regime's oppression of civilians a "savagery." It has also said it might set up a buffer zone inside Syria to manage the flow of refugees on the Syrian side of the international line.

Wait, could Turkish troops actually enter Syria, without seeking Damascus' permission first, and set up shop there?

You bet. To start with, the Turks are restless, for they are now stuck between a rock and a hard place. The first instinct of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government in Ankara in reacting to the unrest in Syria is to avoid conflict and try to maintain good relations with Damascus. Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has put in place a "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which included promoting rapprochement with Syria, and subsequently becoming one of Damascus' best friends.

However, as the Syrian crisis threatens to spill over into Turkey, the "zero problems" policy may not be sustainable. If unrest moves into Aleppo, a Syrian city with 3 million inhabitants located only 26 miles from the Turkish border, there could be a massive wave of refugees into Turkey. And do not forget the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK. This group, which has launched destructive terrorist attacks in Turkey, is well organized in the ethnically Kurdish areas of northern Syria along the Turkish border, including Azez. The Syrian membership of the PKK also represents the group's hard-line, violence-is-the-best-policy branch. A flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey would mean at least a few undetected hard-line PKK members slipping across the border, which is something that Ankara does not want.

Ankara's first reaction to the spiraling violence in Syria will be to contain the crisis in Syria. This would also help Turkey maintain the growing soft power it has painstakingly built in the Arab world since the AKP rose to power in 2002. So, expect Turkey to avoid direct military intervention to the extent possible. Instead, expect Ankara be serious about its proposal to set up a buffer zone inside Syria, in which the Turkish government and military would provide the Syrian citizens with security and relief. This happened once before in 1991 when during the Gulf War, Saddam unleashed violence on Iraq's Kurdish population in the north. Around 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds fled towards Turkey. Ankara set up a buffer zone inside Iraq to contain the flow of refugees. In April 1991, following these efforts, the United States began Operation "Provide Comfort," which set up bases to deliver humanitarian aid to refugees from inside southern Turkey, and sent a U.S.-led coalition force into northern Iraq to establish a de-militarized zone and construct resettlement areas. In July, Operation Provide Comfort II began, which served mainly to protect the Kurds from Iraqi attacks. Ankara might pursue at least the first, Turkish-led part of this model again so that the refugee problem does not end up in its lap.

But there is always a chance that Syria might turn out to be worse than Iraq. Should the Assad regime carry out massacres in large cities such as Aleppo -- certainly a possibility, given that Assad's father bombed downtown Hama in 1982, killing at least 10,000 to crush an uprising there -- the AKP might find Turkish public sympathies for the persecuted fellow Muslims next door too unbearable to ignore. Genocidal massacres in Syria, coupled with the breakdown of law and order, would make Turkish intervention almost unavoidable. So, a Turkish buffer zone inside Syria might well be Turkey's best option to avoid a direct military intervention for humanitarian reasons, but only so long as Assad does not turn genocidal on his own people.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/templateI02.php?](#)

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