

## Turkey's Shift on Syria Gives West Room to Get Tougher on Assad

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Jun 9, 2011

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### Turkey's tough new stance against the Assad regime's crackdown gives the West an opportunity to adopt a more assertive stance on Syria.

**F**or the better part of last century, Turkish-Syrian relations were marred by a nasty territorial dispute that nearly escalated to war. It was only after the 2000 accession of Bashar al-Assad as dictator of Syria and the 2002 election of an Islamist government in Turkey led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that the bilateral dynamic improved dramatically. Ironically, however, while political transition paved the way for rapprochement a decade ago, today the potential for change in Syria threatens to undermine the foundations of the newfound alliance between Damascus and Ankara.

The present situation on the Syrian-Turkish frontier highlights the deteriorating relationship. Fearing another government-perpetrated massacre, hundreds of Syrian civilians are streaming into Turkey, a development that will exacerbate tensions, push Ankara to take a harder line on Damascus, and ultimately, further isolate the Assad regime. Turkey's shift should provide Washington and the West with the opportunity -- if not the impetus -- to adopt a more assertive stance on Syria.

### Remarkable Speed

**A**fter so many years of animosity, the speed with which Turkish-Syrian ties developed was remarkable. Between 2002 and 2009, Syria and Turkey signed nearly 50 agreements of cooperation, announced the establishment of a "Senior Strategic Cooperation Council," and conducted their first-ever joint military exercises.

More recently, in 2010, Turkey and Syria signed a historic counterterrorism agreement, followed up -- just two months ago -- by a counterinsurgency pact. By 2011, Turkey had become Syria's largest trading partner.

So promising were the ties, in 2009 Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared that the states shared a "common fate, history, and future."

The trajectory of Turkey's budding relations with Damascus was echoed by its burgeoning ties to former regional rival Tehran, made possible by the AKP's new foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Ankara's developing ties with these terrorist states coincided, perhaps not surprisingly, with a cooling of ties with Washington and Israel.

### Turning Sour

**B**ut then the Arab Spring came to Syria, and as quickly as relations with Damascus had improved, they started to deteriorate.

As the death toll of innocent civilian protesters mounted in Syria, Turkey ended its silence about developments to the south.

In March, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that it was "impossible to remain silent in the face of these events." Noting that he had already spoken with Assad twice, Erdogan stated that he hoped Assad would adopt a "positive, reformist approach" so as to avoid the "painful events" of Libya.

Then in April, Turkey dispatched Foreign Minister Davutoglu to meet with Assad in Damascus, where he offered "every possible assistance" to implement Assad's promised reforms to help stabilize Syria and secure the regime.

To no avail. Finally, in May, with the daily atrocities escalating -- the civilian casualties nearing 1,000 -- Erdogan publicly allied Turkey with the protesters, whom he described as engaged in a "fight for freedom." "We do not want to see another Hama massacre," Erdogan warned.

While Syrian protestors hailed Erdogan's stance, the Syrian government press attacked Ankara's position as hypocritical, "hasty and improvised."

### Principled, or Political?

**I**t's unclear what prompted Turkey's sudden foreign policy morality. After all, in 2009, Erdogan publicly congratulated President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad on his fraudulent re-election and made no comment when the clerical regime in Tehran suppressed subsequent peaceful demonstrations with deadly force.

Moreover, initially at least, in the face of clear atrocities, Ankara opposed NATO action in Libya.

It's possible that Erdogan's unprecedented position on Syria has been influenced by electoral politics. On June 12, Turkey goes to the polls for parliamentary elections, and the AKP surely recognizes that the massacres in Syria are an evocative issue for voters, custom made for political exploitation. Erdogan's cynical manipulation of the *Mavi Marmara* Gaza aid flotilla in May 2010 suggests that this kind of populist manipulation is not beyond the AKP.

Even for the AKP, though, it's possible that the massacre in Syria may have genuinely crossed the threshold of acceptability. For the Sunni Islamists in Ankara, the notion that an infidel Alawite regime in Damascus could kill a thousand Sunnis is probably beyond the pale.

On the other hand, the killing of thousands of Sunni Libyans earlier this year -- while troubling -- was at least perpetrated by a Sunni, and hence did not provoke the same outrage in Ankara. The same is true of the atrocities in Iran, where, according to some Sunni Islamists, the deaths of Shiites at the hands of their co-religionists is little cause for concern, much less mourning.

Or perhaps the AKP is just opportunistic, hoping that the end of the Alawite regime in Damascus provides an opportunity for a like-minded Islamist regime to come to power next door.

Regardless of why Ankara has changed its tune on Bashar Assad, it's a welcome development. Without Turkey, Assad is today less insulated and more susceptible to external pressures, and the regime is less secure. Indeed, Turkey is not only moving away from the Assad regime, it's looking to help organize its successor. Last week, in a bold and forward-leaning move, Turkey hosted a conference for the Syrian opposition on its territory. The conference was a clear statement by the AKP that it has assessed that Assad is irredeemable. With a little luck, Washington will follow Turkey's lead.

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