Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement:

Causes and Consequences

Jun 21, 2002

Brief Analysis

Since October 1998, Turkey has moved from the brink of war with Syria to the brink of signing a military cooperation agreement: Syrian chief of staff Gen. Hassan al-Turkomani will pay an official visit to Turkey on June 19, the first such visit by a Syrian chief of staff. The changes that have occurred in the Turkish-Syrian relationship are illustrative of the volatility of Turkey's general Middle East policy during the last decade.

Background

Turkish security strategy can be summarized in a slogan commonly attributed to Kemal Ataturk: "Peace at home, peace in the world." In the early 1990s, however, the two agendas implied by this formula seemed to be irreconcilable. "Peace at home" required a secular, republican regime to confront the challenges of Kurdish separatism (manifested in the Kurdistan Workers Party [PKK] insurgency of the 1990s) and Islamist radicalism. But confronting those challenges necessitated conflict with neighboring countries (particularly Syria and Iran) that have given refuge and support to the PKK and to Islamist radicals. In other words, maintaining "peace at home" made "peace in the world" increasingly difficult to sustain.

Turkey's conflict with Syria during the 1990s was largely a result of this phenomenon. Former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad saw the PKK as a lever that could be used against a northern neighbor that had suddenly, at the turn of the decade, become a player in the Middle East after a virtual absence of more than three decades. Confronted with growing Turkish capabilities and engagement, Syria began to formulate counterstrategies, encouraging Greece and Iran to cooperate against the rising Turkish power. Support for the PKK was a prominent element in this strategy.

Turkish-Syrian Conflict and Rapprochement

As a result of Syria's support for the PKK, the tensions between the two countries threatened to break out into overt conflict in the latter half of the decade. Several border skirmishes were reported in 1996, along with a series of bombings in Damascus and other Syrian cities, purportedly carried out by Turkish intelligence. In 1998, Turkey massed its forces on the Syrian border and threatened to attack unless Syria met its demands. Damascus acquiesced.

On October 20, 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana Accord, which met all of Turkey's main demands, including a serious crackdown on PKK bases in Syria and the expulsion of PKK fighters and leaders. Within a year, full rapprochement was well underway. Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer surprised everyone by leading his country's delegation to Hafiz al-Asad's funeral in June 2000; and in November of that year, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad sent Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam to Ankara with a letter pledging to "turn over a new leaf" in bilateral relations.

Turkish-Syrian relations have further improved over the past few months. Land mines along the border have been cleared, and border restrictions were eased in February 2002. Bilateral trade has increased significantly. And, as mentioned previously, the security contacts that have taken place regularly since 1998 will soon culminate in al-Turkomani's historic visit to Ankara, where he is to sign a military training agreement first proposed by Turkey a

year ago.

Despite this rapprochement, Turkish-Syrian relations have not simply reverted to what they had been prior to the 1996 and 1998 crises. Turkey's balance of power with Syria has changed dramatically; indeed, Syria's regional influence has generally decreased since Hafiz al-Asad's death. Moreover, the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement could be severely strained if the United States launches a military campaign against Iraq, particularly if Turkey participates substantially in that campaign. In such a case, the current convergence of Turkish and Syrian policies on Iraq -- based on a shared interest in maintaining the status quo there -- could quickly give way to divergence and conflict once again.

Alliances

A second aspect of Turkey's striking departure from its conventional, noninterventionist Middle East policy was its participation in what seemed to be an emerging network of rival alliances in the region.

In late March 1996, Greek defense minister Yerasimos Arsenis declared that Greece and Syria had concluded a military-cooperation agreement, and called for the formation of an anti-Turkish coalition comprising Greece, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Bulgaria, and Russia. Around the same time, however, reports surfaced of a proposal by Jordan's King Hussein for regime change in Iraq, to be followed by the creation of a regional alliance between Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and a reconstituted Iraq. Although not much came of that idea, Turkish-Israeli relations did blossom during this same period, with deeper ties formed in the economic, political, and security fields.

For both technical and geopolitical reasons, the Turkish Armed Forces are likely to continue security cooperation with Israel; indeed, joint military exercises, intelligence exchange, and strategic coordination continue on a regular basis.

A series of sour notes have been struck recently, however, particularly since the Israeli incursion into Palestinian areas at the end of March 2002. Turkish sentiments in favor of the Palestinians and against Israel -- not often heard in the past -- have been voiced not only by Turkish labor unions and bar associations, but also by government officials such as Foreign Minister Ismail Cem and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, who asserted in early April that a "genocide against the Palestinian people is being carried out before the eyes of the world." All these, coupled with the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, suggest that Ankara -- having dealt with the PKK issue to its satisfaction -- once again views the Middle East through the conventional prism of disengagement and balance.

Conclusion

In a very real sense, Turkey has tied its national strategy -- externally and ultimately even internally -- to maintaining the regional status quo. The question is whether that status quo can endure.

If, for example, the United States launches a military campaign against Iraq, the prospects for Turkish intervention, Turkish conflict with Syria and other regional actors, and greater Turkish cooperation with Israel and Jordan -- in other words, a reversion to a Middle East characterized by rival alliances -- will become more likely.

If, however, the regional status quo is about to undergo fundamental change -- in particular, if the twentieth-century Arab political order, based on authoritarianism and chauvinism, gives way to a more inclusive and representative order -- then new popular forces (ethnic, sectarian, ideological, and so forth) will inevitably be unleashed. Such changes would have even more profound implications for Turkey and its "peace at home, peace in the world" paradigm than the Syrian crises of 1996 and 1998.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem.

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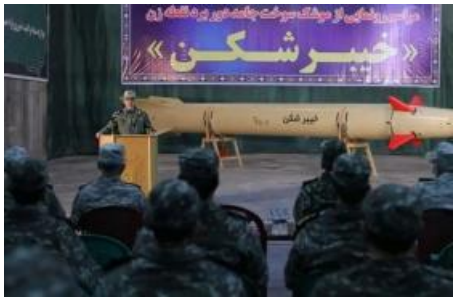

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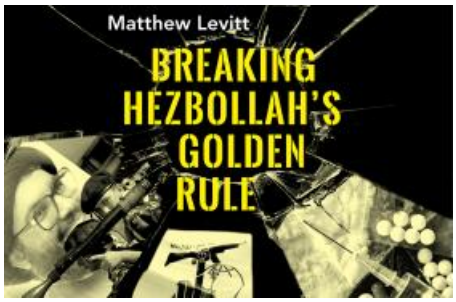

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