

Defusing the Turkish-Syrian Crisis:

Whose Triumph?

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Feb 1, 1999

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Articles & Testimony

Seemingly on the verge of hostilities with Turkey in mid-October 1998, President Hafez Assad of Syria did what almost nobody expected. He backed down, and quickly. Assad pledged to meet most -- though not all -- Turkish demands that he end support for the Turkish-Kurdish separatist group known as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK by its Kurdish acronym) and that he accept some form of monitoring to assure that he does so. As a notable first step, Assad expelled PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who had long made Damascus his base of operations but whose presence in the country had always been denied by Syria.

Some Turks now may question whether that turn of events overall was a blessing or a curse. The PKK chief wended his way from Damascus to Moscow (via Tehran, according to some rumors) to Rome, where he is bidding for political asylum. Two-thirds of Turks responding to a question proffered unscientifically at a newspaper's Web site said Turkey was better off with Ocalan waging war from Syria than waging propaganda in the West.

Setting aside the substance of the Kurdish-related issues facing Turkey, however, the face-off between Ankara and Damascus was important in its own right. Turkey's sustained threat of force and Syria's perceived near-capitulation marked departures for both states and left the entire region wondering about the consequences. History suggests that Syria's surrender may prove less than complete, however.

Background

Turkish-Syrian hostility has simmered for decades, showing remarkable durability considering that it has never devolved to open warfare. Each side imputes the other with historically unfriendly behavior. Arab nationalist dogma in Syria views the Turkish-ruled Ottoman Empire as the usurper, occupier and, ultimately, attempted Turkifier of Arab lands for the four centuries preceding World War I; likewise, it cites Ottoman administration as a primary cause for Syria's relative under-development today. Most Turks, in turn, will say that the Arabs "stabbed us in the back" by siding with the Allies rather than the pre-Axis Ottomans during World War I; accordingly, they often see Syria -- the self-proclaimed "beating heart of Arab nationalism" -- as the epitome of this treachery.

These persistent attitudes have been reinforced by other developments over the years. In 1938, with Syria under French mandate, Paris granted the northern Syrian territory of Alexandretta independence as a prelude to a

referendum in which -- as expected -- Alexandrettans opted to join Turkey. France took the action as an enticement to Turkish neutrality in its brewing war with Germany. To this day, Syria claims sovereignty over Alexandretta (known as "Hatay" in Turkey).

Turkey and Syria chose opposing camps in the Cold War, with Turkey a NATO member since 1952 and Syria a long-time Soviet arms client and supporter. That major difference reinforced pre-existing antagonisms until the end of the Cold War. In 1957, Turkey -- then a member of the Baghdad Pact -- mobilized troops on its Syrian border in response to what it saw as a growing pro-Soviet threat from Damascus.

In contemporary terms, however, two issues overshadow all other Syrian-Turkish problems: terrorism and water. Turkey, which controls the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, is constructing a vast multi-dam irrigation and power-generation network that in the view of Damascus limits the amount and threatens the quality of the water reaching Syria. In response, Syria backs anti-Turkish terrorism -- in recent years, primarily the PKK -- in order to coerce Turkey to send more and purer water and, if possible, to halt its dam project. Syrian support for anti-Turkish terrorists appears to date from the 1970s, around the time Ankara initiated the project, known widely as GAP (the Turkish acronym for Southeast Anatolia Project).

Syria's support for the PKK goes back at least to 1984, when the PKK began its cross-border attacks on Turkey, and possibly back to the late 1970s when the PKK began training in Lebanon. No issue is more emotional to Turks than that of the PKK. The separatist group has assaulted Turkey's territorial integrity, wounded its pride, and shed the blood of thousands of its citizens. According to a Turkish government estimate of November 1997, more than 35,000 people had died in the fighting.

During a visit to Damascus in 1987 by then-Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, Turkey agreed to guarantee Syria 500 cubic meters per second (cms) of Euphrates flow in exchange for anti-terrorist assurances by Damascus. With rare exception, Turkey has maintained the 500 cms level, despite Syria's continued support for the PKK.

Close Turkish-Israeli cooperation has emerged as yet another problematic element in Turkish-Syrian relations, particularly since it acquired a military-training (and, it is widely believed, a stepped-up intelligence-sharing) dimension in 1996. In July 1998, Syria's new military chief of staff Major General Ali Aslan thundered that the "Turkish-Israeli alliance is at controlling the Arab nation, threatening its national security and exerting pressure on Arabs in general and Syria in particular to accept expansionist Israeli plans."

Mainly at Syrian instigation, Arab League gatherings in recent years often have denounced Turkish-Israeli relations, Turkish water policies, and Turkish incursions into northern Iraq.

The Crisis

For most of 1998, tensions between Syria and Turkey appeared to ebb, under a deliberate policy of the new Turkish government that took office in mid-1997. The two sides even exchanged relatively senior-level diplomatic visits for the first time in years. The atmosphere was re-charged, however, when Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz visited Jordan and Israel late last summer. Symbolizing Damascus' nightmare of an anti-Syrian alliance among its neighbors, complete with an Arab Jordanian component, the trip evoked strong protests in the Syrian press. Yilmaz responded in kind, and a war of words ensued.

In late September 1998, Turkish military chief of staff Huseyin Kivrikoglu accused Syria of using terrorism to wage "undeclared war" against Turkey. Ankara also was threatening military action to force an end to Syrian support for the PKK, and reportedly sent 10,000 reinforcements to its Syrian border. Over the years, Ankara had occasionally warned Syria that it would "suffer consequences" if it continued to support the PKK. But never before had the threats been made so insistently, repeatedly, and explicitly over a short period of time.

Early on, Assad apparently decided that he could not take on the Turks. As Turkish threats heated up, Syria's rhetoric suddenly cooled off. Damascus emphasized the need for "discussions." With its troops overwhelmingly based in Lebanon and the Golan, Syria never even reinforced its lightly policed Turkish border. It is likely that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak -- who visited Damascus and Ankara to mediate, and hosted Assad in Cairo shortly thereafter -- helped convince the Syrian president that the Turks were serious about taking military action of some sort.

As Syria, in effect, sued for peace, senior Syrian and Turkish bureaucrats met in Adana, Turkey, on October 19 and 20. Turkey insisted that the only topic on the agenda would be Syrian support for terrorism, and the October 20 agreement reflected that viewpoint. With the exception of one mention of "reciprocity", the agreement was a catalogue of Syrian undertakings to halt virtually all forms of support for the PKK with which Ankara had charged Damascus.

The October 20 Agreement: Now Durable?

However abject Syria appeared in its seeming surrender, a close look at the agreement and recent history raises questions about just how definitive the Syrian capitulation is. First, although it is generally referred to as an "agreement", the document actually is entitled "minutes" -- suggesting that it is something short of a full-fledged agreement.

Second, the official texts are in Turkish and Arabic, apparently with both carrying equal weight; there was no official third-language text. The Turkish-language text was released (by the Turks, eager to broadcast its contents). The Arabic text was not released. Thus, it is difficult to know if the Arabic version contains ambiguities. The Syrians reportedly were dismayed with the Turks' decision to release the text at all.

Third, one can only infer what the Turks demanded and thus gauge how fully their demands were met. The "minutes" refers to an "annex 2" that details Turkish demands submitted to Egyptian President Mubarak. Annex 2 was not released, however. It seems like that one of the demands was that Syria extradite Ocalan to Turkey. Had the Turks imagined the headaches Ocalan's ultimate arrival in Italy would cause them, they undoubtedly would have pushed harder for extradition from Syria. As it was, Assad's expulsion of Ocalan, a far lesser humiliation for Syria than extradition to Turkey, was considered sufficient to avert Turkish military action. Turkey probably also made demands about expulsion of the PKK from Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. It won no more than Syria's agreement to include Lebanon in tripartite anti-PKK efforts, pending Lebanese government agreement.

Fourth, the "minutes" make explicit that Turkey did not win all its demands for the most innovative part of the agreement: a monitoring arrangement to assure Syrian compliance. The sides agreed to set up a direct phone link between "high-level security authorities," to appoint "special representatives" to their respective diplomatic missions (presumably for monitoring purposes), and to join Lebanon ("contingent on Lebanon's consent") in a tripartite effort aimed at combating the PKK. However, Syrian negotiators agreed merely to refer to Damascus another Turkish monitoring proposal -- vague but with seemingly far-reaching potential -- to "establish a system" to review and evaluate the effectiveness of monitoring measures.

Fifth, evidence from recent history shows that Syria's undertakings were not, for the most part, unprecedented, as was widely reported in the Western press. Damascus declared the PKK "a terrorist organization", prohibited "all activities of the PKK and its affiliated organizations . . . along with other terrorist organizations", and -- "on the basis of . . . reciprocity" -- promised not to permit any Syria-based activity "aimed at jeopardizing the security and stability of Turkey." Specifically, Damascus pledged to prevent, on Syrian territory,

(a) PKK propaganda activities,

(b) the supply of weapons and logistical and financial support to the PKK,

- (c) PKK commercial activities,
- (d) the establishment of PKK camps and "other (PKK) facilities for training and shelter",
- (e) entry of PKK members or their transit to third countries, and
- (f) the presence of PKK leader Ocalan.

According to the minutes, Syria asserted that Ocalan had already left Syria (which was true), that Syria-based PKK camps were already non-operational, and that Syria had arrested "many" PKK members and supplied their names to Turkey. Interestingly, the agreement did not commit Syria to extradite any PKK members to Turkey or even to arrest PKK members engaging in future operational or propagandistic activities.

Virtually every one of these declarations and commitments -- including labeling the PKK "terrorist" and proscribing its activities -- had been made on previous occasions. Certainly the main elements of the 1998 minutes could be found in agreements signed in 1987, 1992, and 1993. At the time of the 1993 agreement, the chief Turkish negotiator even claimed that Damascus had agreed to extradite Ocalan if he were caught in Syria. Adding to a sense of déjà vu, the Syrian official who signed the 1998 minutes also signed the 1993 protocol. Following each of the earlier agreements, Syrian support for the PKK seemed to ebb for a time but subsequently reverted to form.

What distinguished the 1998 agreement from its three predecessors was not so much its sweeping terms as the environment in which it took place: weeks-long verbal warfare, including the Turkish "undeclared war" charge; Turkish military threats, backed up by the widely reported -- though never confirmed -- build-up of Turkish troops on the border; and worldwide attention to the mounting crisis, including mediation trips by the Egyptian president and foreign minister and the Iranian foreign minister, behind-the-scenes efforts by the United States, and the crisis-related trip to Egypt by President Assad; the fact that Damascus's undertakings to behave itself seemed to be made as much to its crucial friend Egypt as to Turkey; Syria's decision early in the crisis not to try to match Turkey's bellicose rhetoric or its military build-up; and the surprising suddenness of Syria's agreement to sign a document that seemed to meet most of Turkey's demands.

These factors, together with the confirmed departure of Ocalan, convinced many observers (few of whom, outside Turkey, even seemed to remember that there had been previous agreements) that Syria had "surrendered" and was sincere about fulfilling its commitments. This perception was reinforced by post-agreement reports that 300-400 PKK fighters had been expelled from Syria to northern Iraq.

Turkey, however, reacted cautiously to the agreement, saying it would monitor compliance and respond accordingly. Indeed, one month after the minutes had been signed, Turkish officials were reportedly unhappy with the slow pace of Syrian implementation, particularly of the monitoring provisions. It thus may be some time before it is clear if Syria will fully comply with its pledges or whether the Turkish-Syrian dynamic reverts to the description Daniel Pipes applied to the 1987-1993 period: a "pattern [of] ... Turkish threats, a lull [in PKK attacks], a new round of attacks; then Turkish threats and the cycle repeats itself."^[1]

Perceptions and Implications

For now, regional perceptions of power balance are probably more important than realities of Syrian compliance, and two important perceptions emerged from the recent round of Turkish-Syrian tension: Turkey is getting stronger and Syria weaker.

The evidence for both propositions is impressive. Over the last decade, Turkey has acquired the building-blocks of a modern armed force. Its inventory boasts some 200 F-16 fighter jets (co-produced with Lockheed) and nearly 1,000 M-60 tanks (transferred by Washington as the United States pared its inventory down to limits imposed by the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe agreement). Turkish forces have gained battle experience fighting the PKK both at

home and in northern Iraq. Moreover, the Turkish economy has been growing steadily -- at an annual five-percent clip in the 1990s, with GDP having more than tripled since 1980 -- and Ankara is putting part of that increasing prosperity toward arms procurement. Turkish expenditure on military equipment more than doubled between 1985 and 1996 (in constant dollars). The 1999 draft defense budget envisions \$3.4 billion to be spent on equipment procurement, a nearly ten-percent hike over the previous year (again, in constant dollars), and Turkish officials speak boldly about plans to spend \$30 billion over the next 8 years and \$150 billion over the next 25 years on arms purchases.

By contrast, Syria has been hurt by the demise of the Soviet Union, from which it used to receive advanced weaponry on the easiest of terms, and has done little to upgrade its inventory in the 1990s. Syria has only about 40 modern combat aircraft; its ground forces are only half the size of Turkey's and are pinned down in Lebanon the Golan; and it hasn't fought a military engagement since Israel downed 86 of its MIGs in 1982.

For a long time -- probably at least until the middle of this decade -- Turkey lacked the self-confidence that it could make Syria pay militarily for its support of the PKK. That has now changed.

Turkey's sense of military superiority over Syria is reinforced by its relationship with Israel. For one, Ankara reportedly has received Israeli satellite intelligence about PKK -- and perhaps other -- sites in Syria. More importantly, Syria must reckon with the possibility of Turkish-Israeli military coordination and thus cannot comfortably redeploy significant forces to its border with Turkey. Even Israel's efforts, through public declaration and slightly lowered military profile on its Syrian border, to distance itself from the recent Turkish-Syrian crisis could not have fully alleviated Assad's concern about the prospect of a two-front battle.

Two traditional restraints on Turkish behavior towards Syria-Arab world reaction and peace-process-driven U.S. reaction-may also have eased. Although the Palestinian issue retains some domestic and foreign-policy resonance in Turkey, Ankara has given up on the Arab world as a source of diplomatic support. As markets for Turkish exports, the Arab world is in both relative and absolute decline. In 1982, 45 percent of Turkish exports went to the Arab world; in 1997, only 11 percent. Ankara seems to care increasingly less about what the Arabs think.

Second, the lack of an active Syrian-Israeli negotiating track meant that the peace-process stakes in Turkish-Syrian confrontation were low. Interestingly, in the midst of the crisis, Syria called publicly for a renewal of talks with Israel. (U.S. officials say that this Syrian initiative had actually begun on a private level before the crisis.) To some extent, this initiative had its desired effect. U.S. officials let it be known that they were unhappy with the Turkish role in creating, sustaining, and escalating the crisis. Though U.S. statements -- and, reportedly, U.S. diplomacy -- became more supportive of Turkey's position as the crisis progressed, Washington's pronouncements were surprisingly balanced when one considers that Turkey is a NATO ally and Syria is formally classified as a state-sponsor of terrorism. At one point, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk publicly coupled a call for an end to Syrian support for the PKK with blunt instructions to Ankara to "cool it."

Whatever the full explanation of the crisis and its denouement, the regional analysis that emerged was that Syria had backed down and had done so due to Turkish military pressure.

Regional perceptions that Turkey has grown stronger and more assertive while Syria has weakened, shaped and hardened by this crisis, likely will have important implications. For example, Greece and Greek Cyprus may assign more credibility to Turkish threats to destroy S-300 ground-to-air missiles that the Greek Cypriots have purchased from Russia and say they plan to deploy. Though a far worthier match for Turkey than is Syria, Iran may consider diminishing its support for the PKK as well rather than risking Ankara's wrath. Even Russia's decision not to grant Ocalan asylum was probably shaped by respect for other manifestations of Turkey's regional weight, its clout as a trading partner and as a potential influence on Muslims of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, Turkey's

neighbors maybe moved to seek more ways to undermine Ankara, perhaps through some form of cooperation; Armenia, Greece and Iran have been holding annual trilateral foreign-ministerial meetings, impelled in part-it is widely believed -- by concern about Turkey.

On the Syrian side, one must now wonder whether Israel will decide that Damascus can be pressured on Hezbollah and the various radical Palestinian groups it supports-or even on the peace process-as easily as it was on the PKK. Arab states, in particular Jordan, now may find Syria a less intimidating presence. For its part, Syria may find itself more than ever-in need of support from Egypt, enhancing Cairo's leverage in that growing relationship.

Regarding the specific issue of the PKK, it is not clear if Syria's retreat is strategic or tactical. History suggests that Syria will find an appropriate moment of Turkish distraction -- or perhaps of Syrian-Israeli peace-process engagement, when U.S. restraints on Turkish action might be considerable-to refuel its low-intensity war on Turkey. Even if weakened, Syria is not defenseless or bereft of its oft-demonstrated skill at managing from a state of weakness.

Nevertheless, for now, the widespread perception of Syrian surrender cannot be to Damascus' liking. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, perceptions shape strategy. Regional states will recalculate their strategic outlooks on the basis that Turkey now has more bite for its bark and Syria just the opposite.

1. Daniel Pipes, Syria Beyond the Peace Process (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), p. 61. For additional background on previous Turkish-Syrian agreements, see also Sibel Utku, Mustafa Erdogan and Alparslan Esmer, "Monitoring Syria," Turkish Probe, October 25, 1998, pp. 11-12. ❖

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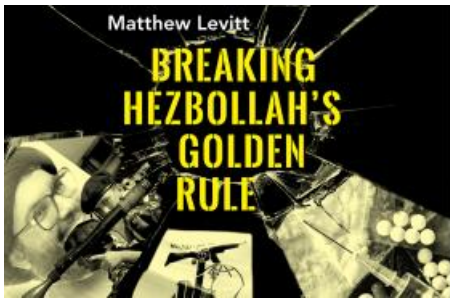
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