

Turkish-Syrian Relations:

A Crisis Delayed?

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Brief Analysis

Despite unconfirmed reports of Syrian willingness to expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and close PKK bases, Turkish-Syrian tensions are likely to persist; Syria's track record of renegeing on pledges to cease supporting the PKK will make Ankara skeptical about the durability of any agreement. For this reason, Turkish military action will remain a distinct possibility for the foreseeable future. Moreover, Turkey's rhetoric and reported troop mobilization suggest unprecedented resolve this time, unlike other occasions over the past decade when Turkey sporadically warned Syria to cease supporting the PKK.

Why now? The current tension marks the culmination of two trends in Turkey. One is Ankara's growing frustration with Syria's support for Kurdish separatists. This frustration is compounded by Ankara's insistence on seeing its problem with the PKK as strictly externally generated, an effort by Turkey's avowed enemies to weaken it, rather than as a problem that could be ameliorated by internal reform. Anger at Syria over its support for the PKK has been percolating in Turkey since 1984, when the PKK initiated its fight against Turkey, which, according to Turkish government figures, has taken more than 35,000 lives on all sides.

> Syria has heretofore denied that it supports the PKK or that it hosts PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan (who nevertheless has met with numerous Westerners in Damascus). Syria's main grievances against Turkey include water issues and, more recently, relations with Israel; resentment also remains at a slow-burn over Hatay, a small but strategically significant parcel of land effectively transferred to Turkey in the late 1930s when France was the ruling power in Syria. Damascus uses the PKK to press Turkey to meet its demands on these issues, or at least to punish it for failing to do so.

The second trend is Turkey's sense that the military gap between itself and Syria is steadily growing in its own favor. For a long time, Ankara lacked the self-confidence that it could make Syria pay for its support of the PKK, which

Turkey considers an assault on its regime.

> Turkey's ground forces are twice as large as Syria's and more combat-experienced, and most of Syria's ground order of battle are pinned down on the Golan or in Lebanon. Syria has been hurt by the demise of the Soviet Union and, in contrast to Turkey, has done little to upgrade its military in recent years. The most telling difference, however, is Turkey's air superiority. Turkey has roughly 175 F-16s and skilled pilots who regularly fly combat missions (though unchallenged by air defense) in northern Iraq. Syria, by contrast, has only about 40 modern combat aircraft (MIG-29s and Su-24s) in its inventory and has not had any active engagement since Israel shot 86 of its MIGs out of the sky in 1982. Both on the ground and in the air, Turkey's experience in northern Iraq over the past six years has immensely increased its military self-confidence.

This sense of military superiority over Syria is reinforced by Turkey's relationship with Israel. Ankara has reportedly received Israeli satellite intelligence about Syria. Moreover, Turkey reckons Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, fearing Turkish-Israeli military coordination, would feel uncomfortable redeploying significant forces to its border with Turkey. (Contrary to Arab world claims, Israel had no role in initiating this crisis. Indeed, a strong case could be made that a Turkish attack on Syria would not be in Israel's interest.) If Syria does indeed bow to Turkish PKK-related demands, as some reports now suggest, that will strengthen Turkey's conviction that threat of force is an effective tool against Damascus.

> There was no immediate triggering incident for the crisis Turkey has initiated. One factor that almost certainly led Turkey to find the current moment propitious was the U.S. declaration of "no safe havens for terrorists" made in the wake of the August 20 bombings of Sudan and Afghanistan; a Turkish journalist close to government circles immediately pointed out that Turkey could apply that same logic to Syria, a view subsequently widely echoed in the Turkish press. Growing European recognition of the PKK and the Kurdish cause may be another factor that convinced Turkey it needs to act quickly to try to finish off the separatists. Likewise, the eagerness of a new military leadership (installed in August) to show its mettle may have played a role.

Obstacles to solution. Key elements of Turkish and Syrian views complicate prospects for a long-term peaceful settlement:

- Syria would like to avert hostilities but is unlikely to accept and adhere over the long term to Turkey's demands. Expelling the PKK from the Bekaa and Syria would embarrass Asad, seeming to suggest virtual surrender to Turkish policies on water, Israel, and the Hatay. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that Turkey would agree to any concessions on those issues as trade-offs for a Syrian stand-down on the PKK.
- The PKK's strategic value to Damascus is not limited to Turkey-related issues. In 1995, for example, Syria successfully directed a PKK invasion of northern Iraq designed to derail an Iraqi Kurdish peace agreement opposed by Damascus. The PKK may also be useful for domestic reasons, siphoning off nationalist resentment among Syria's own Kurds; by many accounts, Syria allows, if not encourages, Syrian Kurds to join the PKK.
- It is doubtful that Syria is willing to avoid hostilities at all costs. From Asad's viewpoint, absorbing a Turkish military attack might even have its advantages, such as increased political support in the Arab world, increased Arab opposition to Turkey's relations with Israel (as well as its water policies), and increased pressure on neighboring Jordan to cease its own growing military ties with Ankara. Moreover, Asad probably calculates that international opprobrium, including from the U.S., is likely to deter Turkey from sustained or devastating military action.
- Turkey will not be easily convinced of Syrian good intentions, suddenly acquired. In 1992, there was much

fanfare about a Syrian decision to close a PKK camp in the Syrian-occupied Lebanese Bekaa valley; a few months later, however, aerial photography showed that the PKK camp had merely been relocated elsewhere in the Bekaa. A would-be mediator today probably will have to provide the Turks with airtight assurances that any Syrian concessions are permanent and strategic, not a ruse.

- For its part, Turkey sees Syrian support for the PKK as crucial to -- indeed as the sine qua non for -- that organization's ability to wage war against Turkey on all its Middle Eastern borders. Syria, the seat of the PKK leadership, is the nerve center of the PKK; the host to its main training facility in the Bekaa; and the jumping-off point for PKK fighters who infiltrate to more advantageous terrain in Iraq and Iran. Thus, Turkey will neither easily give up its pressure on Syria, nor will it long be mollified if PKK leader Ocalan is expelled from Syria but Damascus' support for the PKK otherwise continues unchecked.
- Turkey's military is likely to be the leading decisionmaker on this issue. For now, its statements remain hard-line (unlike the more publicly conciliatory civilian officials).
- Turkey attributes diminishing importance to ties with its closest Muslim neighbors for reasons both economic and diplomatic. In 1982, roughly 45% of Turkey's exports were bought by Iran and the Arab world. Today, that figure is less than 10%. On the diplomatic front, Turkey feels it has never received any return on its staunch backing of Arab positions regarding the Palestinians and the PLO over the years. (In 1988, for example, it was one of the first states, and the only European one, to recognize the Palestinian National Council's "Declaration of Independence.") Arab states and Iran have not supported Turkey's national cause, the Turkish Cypriots.

U.S. Policy. This confrontation between a NATO ally and a state sponsor of terrorism poses special challenges for the United States. Even as it tries to defuse the situation, Washington should make clear that its interest lies with the former's anti-terrorist stance. Despite its influence in Ankara, the U.S. may have limited ability indefinitely to forestall a Turkish attack on Syria, given the intensity of Turkish feelings. Perhaps the most effective tack the United States can take toward producing a peaceful outcome is to warn Syria that Washington cannot prevent Turkish military action if Syrian support for the PKK does not cease.

Alan Makovsky and Michael Eisenstadt are senior fellows at The Washington Institute. ❖

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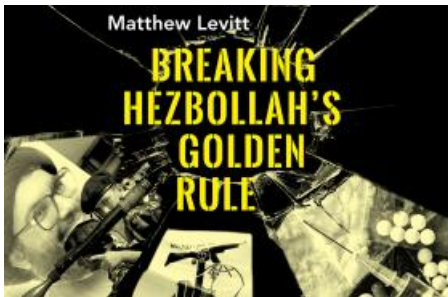


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