

# The Turkey-Syria military balance

The influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey has led Ankara to consider military action. **Soner Çağaptay** and **Coşkun Ünal** assess the military capabilities of Turkey and Syria, and whether a conflict is likely.

## ► KEY POINTS

■ Public statements by senior Turkish officials have raised the possibility of Turkish military action against Syria after the number of Syrian refugees entering the country reached 25,000 in April.

■ Ankara has hinted at the possibility of establishing a buffer zone or safe haven inside Syria to defend the civilian population and contain the developing humanitarian crisis on the border.

■ Turkey's final decision on intervention will be shaped as much by regional and global politics, as whether Ankara believes it can defeat the Syrian military.

Turkey has been at the forefront of international efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria and has taken an increasingly hostile stance against its one-time ally since violence erupted in Syria in March 2011. A major reason for this is the destabilising effect of the increasing number of Syrian refugees fleeing the violence and crossing the border into southern Turkey. Ankara first suggested the establishment of humanitarian 'safe zones' in northern Syria – protected by either Turkish, NATO or Arab states – in mid-2011 and the idea has been considered on recurrent occasions since. Notwithstanding the ongoing UN-backed peace efforts, the intensification of the violence in 2012 has again raised the spectre of military intervention, with Turkey among the most likely contributors or instigators of such an operation.

The highly disciplined Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) is equipped with relatively modern and upgraded NATO-type weaponry. Mechanised and armoured units, including those currently deployed along the Syrian border, have been modernised and upgraded with thermal optics and advanced fire control systems. The TAF, Turkish Air Force (TurAF) and

Navy (TNFC) are stronger and technologically superior to their Syrian counterparts. Turkey's technical superiority has been further bolstered through annual large-scale NATO-style military exercises and training, which the Syrian military sorely lacks. If Turkish intervention in Syria successfully established safe havens to protect civilians, Turkish superiority could prove useful in defending such areas.

The TAF's equipment inventory includes M-60 and Leopard tanks, upgraded M-113 armoured personnel carriers (APCs), Turkish-made ACV-300 armoured combat vehicle,

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FNSS Pars armoured vehicles, and M48-A5T2 tanks that were modernised by the weapons manufacturer Israel Military Industries before the downturn in Turkish-Israeli ties. Turkish weaponry matches or outclasses Syria's inventory of T-72, T-62, and T-54-55 tanks, and BMP-1, BMP-2 and BTR-60/80s in terms of firepower and armour capabilities.

The Turkish Land Forces Command (TLFC) has well-functioning and modern communications systems equivalent to NATO standards. Additionally, the TLFC has three broadcast satellite networks (Turksat 1B, Turksat 1C and Turksat 3A) with a range that covers the entire Middle East region. This technology could assist in offensive operations, allowing closer and more responsive command

and control of forces in the field. Meanwhile, Syrian radio systems are Russian-made and can be jammed by NATO technology. It is possible to intercept Syrian military communication by using NATO airborne early warning and control systems (AWACS) if they were deployed to help Turkish forces. The Kuwaiti-based GulfSat Communications Corporation allocates satellite and communications services to the Syrian military. If the Arab League were to implement stricter sanctions against the Bashar al-Assad regime, including disruption of Damascus' access to such satellite technology, it could cut off Kuwaiti-provided satellite-based communications for the Syrian government. That said, Iran possesses some satellite-jamming capability that Tehran could offer Damascus to use against Ankara.

Turkish field artillery, self-propelled field artillery, and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) appear advanced in range and firing power when compared to similar Syrian weapons. Turkish tube artillery includes US-made 105 mm, 155 mm, 175 mm and 203 mm howitzers, which are all currently deployed to the Syria border. Rocket artillery includes Turkish-Chinese jointly produced 302 mm rocket systems, known as the T-300 Hurricane, with a 100 km range; and other MLRS units, such as T-122 Sakarya, with a 40 km range; the US-made M-270, with a 30 km range; and the Turkish-made Toros 230/260 Truck-Mounted Rocket Systems, with a 65-100 km range. Such systems could potentially overwhelm Syrian ground forces and air defence systems near the border, although some of the Turkish-made systems would be tested in battle for the first time.

In contrast, Syria has a number of 122 mm, 130 mm, 152 mm and 180 mm howitzer batteries along the Aleppo-Latakia-Idlib-Al Bab-Al Thawrah axis. Most Syrian multiple rocket launch (MRL) batteries consist of the Chinese-made T-63, with a 10 km range; Russian-made BM-21, with a 20 km range; Syrian-Chinese made Khaibar, with a 60 km range; and Iranian-made Fajr and Ra'ad MLR systems, with a 45/100 km range. Possible Syrian artillery

deployment in the north includes: 122 mm A-19 or M-30 howitzers, with a 17 km range (made in 1949); 122 mm D-30 howitzers, with a 15 km range (made in 1950); 130 mm M-46 Field Guns, with a 27 km range (made in 1949); 152 mm ML-20 howitzers, with a 17 km range (made in 1939); 180 mm S-23 howitzers, with a 44 km range, currently covering the Golan Heights and expected to be deployed north in case of a war (made in 1950); and 122 mm 2S-1 Gvozdika Self Propelled, with a 15-22 km range (made in 1960).

Although the Syrian batteries are older and have a shorter range than their Turkish counterparts, Syria has battle tested all of its systems. At the same time, while many Syrian batteries are positioned along the Israeli border, it remains to be seen whether Damascus would be able to deploy them north to the Turkish border in the event of a conflict.

The TLFC has significant experience in special operations warfare and airborne/air-assault operations. Three commando brigades and most of its regular infantry brigades can perform special operations when necessary, a capability cultivated predominantly through Turkey's long fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK). Accordingly, the TLFC specialises in small-scale operations. This could work to Turkey's advantage in a conflict with Syria if Ankara's aim were to capture small sectors of Syrian territory on which to establish safe havens. Moreover, the Turkish military can deploy up to 150 Sikorsky UH-60 helicopters on the Syrian border in support of such operations. In addition, the TurAF has 13 C-130 Hercules, 20 C-160 Transall and approximately 50 CN-235 CASA cargo aircrafts, totalling 83 aircrafts that can transport troops. Alternatively, the Turkish military could drop battalion size lead elements of three commando brigades into Syrian territory, probably choosing the flatter eastern section of the Turkish-Syrian border to this end. Turkey also appears capable of air dropping tanks and artillery units in eastern Syria for use in surprise attacks. Additionally, Turkish Special Forces Command, which is made up of approximately 1,000 officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with combat experience, could complete mission-critical objectives before the outbreak of war with Syria.

The Syrian Special Forces are made up of approximately 15,000 soldiers. Damascus might

choose to deploy its special forces within urban areas, as paramilitary forces and anti-tank weapons could pose a serious threat to Turkish troops should they enter any Syrian cities. Unlike Turkish Special Forces, their Syrian counterparts do not appear to have the ability to perform special operations as an integrated part of modern warfare, such as infiltrating Turkish lines or conducting direct action and special reconnaissance operations. Similarly, they do not seem to have the capability to laser-designate critical targets for the Syrian Air Force or conduct long-range sniper reconnaissance and sniper assaults against enemy command posts or high-value targets. While Turkey should not underestimate Syrian Special Forces, it should also consider the possibility of this gap in the operational theatre being filled by Syria with groups such as the PKK.

'Due to its military limitations, Turkey would be likely to limit the geographic scope of any intervention on Syrian soil'

Unsubstantiated Turkish media reports in early 2012 alleged that Damascus had allowed the PKK to operate freely in Syrian territory. What is more, Turkish government sources said in March 2012 that the PKK had moved between 1,500 and 2,000 of its members into Syria from the Qandil mountains along the Iraq-Iran border, where the group has maintained its headquarters and camps over the past decade.

The TAF has a slow but well-functioning supply network directly connected with the Turkish defence industry. Within this network, the TAF can easily access production and supply lines – including weapons manufacturing plants run by MKE, Roketsan and Fiseksan – for machine guns, artillery and tanks. In the advanced stages of a conflict with Syria, the Turkish Army would be unlikely to suffer a depletion of ammunition and essential spare parts. For Syria, the opposite

appears likely, especially if Ankara and its allies implement an effective arms blockade of the country. Syrian vehicles and weapons are predominantly of Russian manufacture, while rockets, missile systems and some armoured vehicles are provided by Iran and North Korea, meaning their spare parts are not produced in Syria and are therefore not easily available. Small-scale production facilities stationed in the north and east of Damascus are capable of producing T34/D30 122mm self-propelled artillery copying 122 mm Russian D-30s, AK-47 and AKM barrels, ammunition, magazines, springs, 6x6 2.5-tonne military trucks, as well as limited amounts of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. However, the Syrian military is heavily dependent on foreign supplies. As a consequence, Damascus would not be able to replenish its military stock without the support of Russia, Iran and other countries.

### Turkey's military vulnerabilities

The Turkish military's key weakness is its lack of urban warfare training. Accordingly, the TLFC will want to avoid combat within Syrian cities. Instead, the Turkish military would probably focus operations in rural areas, with the goal of establishing safe havens across the Turkish-Syrian border. In the unlikely event that the TAF is forced into Syrian cities, civilian and military casualties are likely to be high, giving Syria a potentially significant military leverage over Turkey.

Turkey also does not have a vast amount of recent experience in modern conventional warfare. Turkey's most recent experience in such warfare was in 1974, when it invaded Cyprus in response to a Greek military-backed coup on the island. Turkey's participation in various NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan has been valuable, but its role has been limited to state-building operations. Even though the TAF conducts regular military exercises and drills, battles in Syria would be very different. However, given that neither side has recent experience in large-scale manoeuvre warfare, it is unlikely that either side would implement a strategy that relies on this kind of engagement.

The Turkish military does not appear to have an effective edge in attack-helicopter warfare. The TAF inventory consists of approximately 30 US Bell AH-1P and AH-1W attack helicopters. Meanwhile, Syria has 35 SA 342 Gazelle (French), 35 MI-25 Hind

(Russian), and 20 MI-2 Hoplite (Polish) helicopters that can be used in certain phases of a defence operation. If Turkey could render Syrian helicopters ineffective at the start of any conflict, it would have a better chance of performing a successful intervention.

The TAF appears weak in terms of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) warfare. Although the 1st Army Corps Command in Istanbul has a CBRN training school, there are not, for instance, enough gas masks, protective clothes and CBRN-specific medical equipment to meet the needs of all combat units. Although the Turkish Armed Forces logistics system appears to be efficient, realistic CBRN warfare training level is low among regular troops. Syria might be better trained than Turkey in CBRN warfare, which could cause high numbers of Turkish and civilian casualties, although it is unlikely Syria would choose to use such systems.

Turkish air defence capabilities are limited to Oerlikon and Stinger batteries. Although Syria lacks a comprehensive and capable air defence network and its Russian-made systems have been defeated several times by the Israeli Air Force (most recently in the September 2009 air strike on a suspected nuclear facility in the east of the country), Syria's Pantsir S-1 and BUK M2E SAM systems could still present a serious threat to the TurAF. In addition, Syria has approximately 30 units of Scud-B and Scud-C, up to 24 units of FROG-7, and up to 36 OTR-21 Viper Tactical Ballistic Missile Systems. These could target not only Turkish troops, but also potentially threaten large cities. The Scud-B/C missiles would pose a particular threat to Turkish industrial hubs such as Mersin and Adana, as well as other large cities including Urfa and Diyarbakir. Turkey would need NATO/United States defence systems such as PATRIOT in order to protect these areas against ballistic missile attack. At the same time, the TurAF's strike capabilities may help offset these Syrian advantages.

### Political-military considerations

Given Turkey's reactive military strengths and weaknesses in relation to Syria, Ankara will not rush into conflict with Damascus unless or until it receives support from its allies. At the same time, should the Syrian uprising spread further during a possible Turkish intervention, this could tie up more Syrian forces, making it easier for the Turkish military to

establish local superiority, especially if its goal were to capture small parts of Syrian territory in which to set up safe havens.

Due to its military limitations, Turkey would also be likely to limit the geographic scope of any intervention on Syrian soil, for instance only positioning troops in northern parts of Syria near the Turkish border. This strategy also falls in line with Turkey's political objective in Syria and the broader Middle East. Ankara has built significant soft power in the Arab world in the past decade and would therefore want to avoid a full-scale invasion. A limited intervention would help Turkey prevent a deeper erosion of its image as a soft power nation.

'Ankara would want to secure the support of its NATO and Arab League allies in an attempt to portray intervention in as passive a way as possible'

Another factor discouraging a full-scale invasion is that the Turkish military has been set up by NATO as a defensive force to repel and absorb an invasion and is not predominantly configured to go onto the offensive. An additional key political-military dynamic limiting a Turkish invasion is Ankara's concern that such a step could make Turkey a party to the Syrian war, opening up a new front against the PKK, a group that has traditionally possessed a significant infrastructure inside Syria. The Syrian regime froze all anti-Turkish PKK activity in Syria in 1998 when Ankara threatened Damascus with war; however, according to unsubstantiated Turkish media reports in 2012, Damascus has allegedly allowed the PKK to operate again in northwest Syria in the Kurdish enclave between Aleppo and the Turkish border, although there is no independent verification of these reports. This

is one more reason Ankara would probably opt for a limited campaign aimed at capturing small pockets of Syrian territory.

Turkey would also need to limit civilian casualties. Therefore, Ankara would make a sustained effort to destroy Syrian units outside of densely populated urban areas. Correspondingly, Syria might choose to deploy its air defence and missile systems to urban centres in order to provoke Turkey to attack these heavily populated cities. Moreover, Damascus could decide, in the event of potential and imminent military catastrophe, to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as a last resort against Turkey. This scenario lessens the likelihood of a Turkish operation, at least before Ankara receives assistance from its allies to prepare for such a contingency.

### Conclusion

Turkey is unlikely to be interested in a general invasion of Syria. Rather, Ankara's strategy is likely to be aimed at getting forces to the border, conducting a limited incursion or incursions, and securing captured territory with the aim of providing humanitarian safe havens. However, to do this risks open conflict with Syria, and in making such a move, Ankara would want to secure the support – tacit or otherwise – of its NATO and Arab League allies in an attempt to portray any intervention in as passive a way as possible. This would be unlikely to assuage Syrian anger at what would be a breach of its territorial sovereignty. It therefore remains difficult to see any form of military intervention in Syria being restricted in the way that Turkey and its allies undoubtedly hope and could actually rapidly escalate to a wider regional conflict. ■

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