

The Inflexibility of Turkey's Policy in Syria

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Turkey's foreign policy has been in a significant predicament in recent years and the Syrian crisis has been the main source of it. The developments in Syria have affected Turkey at two levels. First, there has been a plethora of problems spilling over to Turkey from Syria, including security threats, the refugee crisis and the worsening of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Second, Turkey's position in Syria has led to a deterioration of Turkey's relations with several countries, particularly Russia and Iran, as well as to an estrangement from its Western allies. This article will analyze the evolution of Turkey's policy towards Syria through different stages of the conflict, the challenges to Turkey arising from the crisis and, finally, focus on some recent developments that point to attempts made by Turkey to get out of this imbroglio, but which, so far, remain highly limited.

Turkey and Syria before the Arab Uprisings

Turkey and Syria had been at odds with each other since their establishments as separate entities after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, they were able to positively transform their relations after they came to the brink of war in 1998 due to the crisis over Syrian support for the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey, the PKK, and Syria's harbouring of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Especially after the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), relations became a strategic partnership. The Free Trade Agreement that was

ratified in 2007 led to burgeoning economic ties, and the introduction of a visa-free travel scheme in 2009 contributed to the proliferation of tourism. The establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council meant that the cabinets of the two countries started to have joint meetings from time to time. Erdogan and Assad's families developed close personal relations and even holidayed together. Turkey tried to broker a peace deal between Syria and Israel. There was also some progress made in one of the problematic areas in bilateral relations: the water issue. The two countries began working on collaborative management of the Euphrates water resources. They also agreed on a dam project on the Asi/Orontes River, called the Friendship Dam, on the Turkish-Syrian border. The agreement was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries a few months before the beginning of the Syrian uprising. This agreement not only signified deepening relations between the two countries but also had a political importance, since it meant Syria's recognition of the border.

For Syria, relations with Turkey mainly helped to end its isolation in the post-2003 era, particularly after the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Having good relations with Turkey also saved the Assad regime from only relying on Iran, a position that Syria has always avoided as part of its multiple alliances policy. Syria also expected economic benefits from this relationship in the context of controlled economic liberalization initiated by the Assad regime. For Turkey, on the other hand, there were clear economic benefits: Syria was considered both as an untapped market and a gateway to the Arab world. Moreover, engagement with Syria was also part of the policy of soft balancing the US, as Turkey was concerned about the Bush Administration's policies in Iraq and beyond.

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Four Stages of the Syrian Crisis and Turkey's Policy

Thus, when the uprisings hit Syria in March 2011, Turkey was well positioned to have an influence in this country. In the first few months several trips were made to Damascus by Turkish officials, including Foreign Minister Davutoglu, during which attempts were made to convince Assad to initiate reforms. In those early months, the Assad regime adopted a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it tried to initiate limited measures similar to the ones the regime implemented in the early 1990s when it was again under pressure, such as the release of political prisoners and allowing more moderate and controlled opposition to emerge. Yet, on the other hand, the Baath regime also started violently suppressing demonstrations. Turkey's response to this was also twofold: while efforts to persuade Assad to reform continued, both Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu became increasingly vocal in their criticism of the regime's crackdown. For instance, in early August 2011, ahead of Davutoglu's visit to Damascus, Erdogan said that they were running out of patience and that Turkey could not remain indifferent to developments in Syria, as the Syrian crisis was "almost an internal problem for Turkey."¹ Upon his return from what turned out to be his last visit to Damascus, Davutoglu described the methods used by Syrian security forces as "unacceptable" and announced that, "We discussed ways to prevent confrontation between the army and the people, and tensions like those in Hama, in the most open and clear way."²

Contrary to the government's presentation of its policy in the following years, it seems that in those early months of the uprising Turkey did not only en-

gage the regime to introduce political reforms. Even while trying to convince Bashar to open up the country's political system, the AKP government was involved in activities with the opposition. On 1 June, 2011 the first meeting of the Syrian opposition was convened in Antalya, Turkey. Then in August 2011 the establishment of the Syrian National Council (SNC) was announced in Istanbul. Thus, it is clear that Turkey became involved early on in the process of consolidating Syrian opposition groups, a move probably perceived as being useful irrespective of Assad's decision about reforms. This **first stage** ended in the autumn of 2011, when the regime opted for an open crackdown of the opposition and Turkey left its policy of dialogue with the Syrian regime. On 21 September, 2011 Turkey formally cut all its ties with the Syrian regime.³ In this first stage of the conflict the AKP government clearly overestimated its influence over the Assad regime. It soon became obvious that the regime would not follow Turkey's advice to reform and expand the regime to include opposition figures, but rather decided to crackdown on the opposition. On the other hand, the AKP government, eager to be part of the developments in Syria, became actively involved in organizing the opposition.

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The **second stage** started in the autumn of 2011 and ended in the summer of 2013, with the rise of generally armed Islamist groups on the ground in Syria. During this stage, Turkey actively supported regime change in Syria. The SNC was mainly based in Turkey and cooperated closely with An-

¹ Thomas SEIBERT. "Turkey losing patience with Syria." *The National*. 8 August 2011. www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/turkey-losing-patience-with-syria

² "Syria unrest: Turkey presses Assad to end crackdown," www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14454175

³ Christopher PHILIPS. "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy." *Chatham House Briefing Paper*: 6 2012.

kara. The so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed by a group of defected Syrian army officers and soldiers in July 2011, established its command and headquarters in Hatay, Turkey in October 2011.⁴ The SNC and FSA struck a deal in January 2012 to work together. During this period the number of refugees started to increase as the Syrian uprising began to turn into a civil war. Turkey's 910-kilometre border with Syria became porous. There were allegations that those who fought in Syria against the regime would come in and out of Turkey quite easily. Turkey, together with other countries that put their weight behind the opposition, was thought to be supporting various anti-regime forces on the ground, providing training and logistical and material support. The same group of countries were also helping to organize the opposition outside of the country to come together and act as a group.

During this period, although growing, the situation regarding refugees, from Turkey's perspective, was still manageable. According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2012 Turkey had received 250,000 Syrian refugees and 14 camps had been built in seven border provinces to host them. At this stage the government did not ask for help from the international community and the camps it established were widely praised.⁵

At the same time Turkey was at the centre of regional and international diplomatic efforts. In November 2011 and January 2012, the Arab League introduced two peace plans and dispatched an observer mission to Syria. In 2012, the UN started a peace mission under the former Secretary General Kofi Annan. Turkey supported these plans, yet was quick to realize their limitations.

Thus, Turkey became actively involved in regime change in Syria through diplomatic activities, as well as by providing all kinds of support to the opposition. The explicit policy of regime change as well as organizing and aiding political and military opposition became highly controversial within Turkey. This policy was a clear novelty for Turkey's tra-

ditional foreign policy approach. The AKP government itself was highly critical of regime change via international intervention in its early years, as demonstrated by its discourse during the discussions leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Now the same government was calling for the international community, especially the US, to intervene in Syria to help to topple the Assad regime. After it became clear that the Annan plan was not working, the government insisted that "the international community needs to take action" and that the creation of "humanitarian corridors" was the most viable option.⁶

A related element of Turkey's Syria policy was the escalation of rhetoric by the AKP officials, who referred to their 'red lines' and threatened the Bashar regime. Turkey openly advocated a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors, which would require military intervention. Yet despite its rhetoric and military-related proposals, it was also clear that the AKP government was unwilling to act unilaterally.

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During this stage Turkey worked in closer cooperation with its allies, particularly the US, the UK and France as well as regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The US and Turkey were allegedly training and sending weapons to the FSA.⁷ Turkey took the leadership role with France in the so-called Friends of Syria initiative. Thus, during this period, Turkey cooperated with its global and regional allies. While using the opportunity provided by Obama's doctrine of relying on regional allies and its ties with certain political and military opposition groups, the AKP government tried to play an important role in the Syrian crisis.

⁴ Due to domestic criticism in Turkey, in September 2012 it was announced that the FSA Head Office had been moved to Idlib in northern Syria.

⁵ UNCHR, *Global Report-Turkey 2012*, www.unhcr.org/51b1d643b.html

⁶ "Annan briefs Turkey on Syria Peace Plan." *Hurriyet Daily News*. 4 May 2012. www.hurriyetdailynews.com/annan-briefs-turkey-on-syria-peace-plan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=19920&NewsCatID=352

⁷ PHILIPPS. "Into the Quagmire": 6-7.

Yet in helping to organize the opposition Turkey alienated certain groups. From the beginning, the SNC was seen as dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, an accusation made frequently since its founding in Antalya. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was careful about this issue and ready to work with non-Muslim Brotherhood figures as the head of the SNC, the accusations continued. In fact, in the final analysis as “their internal cohesion and political organization stands in stark contrast to the fragmentation and shifting alliances which characterize the rest of the Syrian opposition,” in practice they ended up dominating it.⁸ This fact alienated especially secular groups, particularly as they became increasingly concerned that the Islamists would hijack the uprising as they did in the context of other Arab Spring experiences, like Egypt. These groups accused the AKP government of putting its support behind the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, certain Kurdish groups did not want to become part of the SNC because of what they saw as Turkish influence in the organization, and, in the end, only one major Kurdish Party, the Kurdish Future Movement became part of the Council. Its founder and leader Mashaal Tammo was assassinated in Syria in October 2011. All these developments meant that the opposition was, from the beginning, highly fragmented; a fact that not only undermined the AKP government’s policy of consolidating the opposition but also increasingly brought Turkey into the internal conflicts of different Syrian groups.

At the same time, the spillover effects of the Syrian crisis began to be felt in Turkey. The number of refugees started to increase dramatically, although Turkey was still able to manage the situation effectively at that stage. There were also direct security threats. In June 2012, when Syria shot down a Turkish jet, the government announced that they had changed the rules of engagement. On 3 October 2012, mortar fire from Syria killed five people in the border town of Akçakale. In response, Turkey returned fire and intercepted a Syrian plane allegedly carrying arms to Syria. On 11 February 2013, there

was a bomb attack at the gate of Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa border crossing where 17 people were killed. Two car bombs exploded in the town of Reyhanlı near the border, killing more than 50 people. The government blamed the Syrian regime for the attacks and called for an “urgent, result-oriented diplomatic initiative” to find a solution to the Syrian crisis and declared that “Turkey has the right to take any kind of measure” in response to the killings.⁹

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Another characteristic of Turkey’s Syria policy during this second stage of the conflict was related to its relations with Russia and Iran. During this period these two countries engaged openly in the Syrian civil war in support of Bashar’s regime. Despite the fact that Turkey’s position was diametrically opposed to theirs, they were able to ‘compartmentalize’ their relations. At this stage, Turkey even proposed talks with Russia, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to help resolve the Syrian Crisis.¹⁰

Turkey’s activism in the Syrian crisis and its active and open involvement in toppling the regime of a neighbour in this early stage of the conflict was based on two miscalculations. Firstly, the AKP government expected the uprising to end in a short time as it had in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Secondly, they also believed there would be an international intervention to this end. Prime Minister Erdogan, speaking at an extended group meeting of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), held at the party’s headquarters, said: “we will go there in the shortest possible time, if Allah wills it; and embrace our brothers. That day is close. We will pray near the grave of Salahaddin Ayyubi and pray in the

⁸ Raphaël LEFÈVRE. “Islamism within a Civil War: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s Struggle for Survival.” *Working Paper*. Brookings Institute, 2015. www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Syria_Lefevre-FINALE.pdf?la=en

⁹ “Turkey blames ‘inaction’ on Syria for attacks,” *Al Jazeera*, 13 May 2013, www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/05/2013512143710733143.html; “Syria behind Reyhanlı attack, Turkish minister says,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 7 April 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-absolutely-behind-reyhanli-attack-says-turkish-ministry.aspx?pageID=238&nID=64634&NewsCatID=509>

¹⁰ PHILIPPS. “Into the Quagmire”: 10-11.

Umayyad Mosque. We will pray for our brotherhood freely in Hejaz Railway Station.”¹¹ So, the government believed that when the regime fell, the refugees would go back and a friendly regime would be established in Syria.

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The **third stage** started in the summer of 2013 and ended in the summer of 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The prolongation of the conflict, the unprecedented violence and the weakness of the outside opposition led to increased radicalization of the opposition forces inside Syria. In 2013, the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front, now better armed, financed and motivated, emerged as an important actor in the opposition. Overall, it was the more radicalized groups in Syria that took over the fight against the regime, although Hezbollah and Iran’s involvement in the Syrian civil war also became more robust and open. During this period the conflict acquired a more sectarian character as the parties began to use sectarian identities as part of their struggle.

During this period, Turkey’s international allies began to revise their policy of supporting the opposition in Syria. For instance, in December 2013 the US and the UK suspended ‘non-lethal’ support for rebels in northern Syria.¹² Thus, Turkey became increasingly alone in its insistence on supporting the opposition. The **last stage** began in June 2014 when ISIL proclaimed the ‘caliphate.’ In August 2014 Raqqa fell, which led to the consolidation of its dominance in parts of Syria. As a result of ISIL atrocities more

Syrians became refugees. The fragmentation and radicalization of the opposition and the rise of ISIL led to the transformation of the conflict. In September 2014 a US-led coalition started to launch airstrikes inside Syria to destroy ISIL. The possibility of the regime’s collapse in the summer of 2015 led to Russia’s direct intervention in the conflict in September of that year. This time, Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria was legitimized as they were also fighting against ISIL. For all these actors and under these circumstances, the fall of the regime was now starting to look problematic. The US also started to rely on the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) as part of the Obama Administration’s “surrogate war doctrine”¹³ to fight the war against ISIL on the ground. In the meantime, UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva were resumed and have continued on and off ever since. The terms of the new negotiations accepted Bashar’s remaining in power in a possible transition.

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These developments further undermined Turkey’s policies in Syria. Turkey’s reluctance to participate in the anti-ISIL coalition at the beginning and slowness to control its border led to criticism from the anti-ISIL coalition countries. Instead, Turkey continued to support Arab and Turkmen anti-Assad opposition groups, now deemed by many as part of the radical Islamist scene in Syria. The PYD, meanwhile, gained popularity due to its success against ISIL and was able to dominate large chunks of territory in the northern part of the country. These developments prompted the PKK in Turkey to start a war against the State, particularly in the wake of the

¹¹ “Premier vows to pray in Damascus ‘soon’” *Hurriyet Daily News*, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/premier-vows-to-pray-in-damascus-mosque-soon.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29505&NewsCatID=338

¹² “Britain and US suspend non-lethal aid to Syrian rebels.” *The Telegraph*. 11 December 2013. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10510498/Britain-and-US-suspend-non-lethal-aid-to-Syrian-rebels.html

¹³ Andreas KRIEG. “Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East.” *International Affairs*. 92, 2016.

AKP government's decision to end the peace process. Meanwhile, the number of refugees in Turkey increased significantly, reaching almost 3 million, the majority of whom, as of 2013, began to live outside of the camps, thereby creating social, economic and political challenges. Finally, Turkey downed a Russian plane in November 2015, which not only led to a crisis in Russian-Turkish relations but also further limited any role for Turkey in northern Syria. During this stage Turkey became increasingly isolated in its policy in Syria. The two global actors, the US and Russia, agreed in February on a ceasefire and the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which also identified a roadmap after the cessation of hostilities. They also agreed that the ceasefire would not include the war against groups like ISIL and Al-Nusra. This new global constellation has put Turkey in a difficult position. On the one hand, there is a deep crisis in Turkish-Russian relations since Turkey's downing of the Russian jet. Furthermore, Russia is an ardent ally of the Syrian regime, which Turkey has been fighting to topple, and now also a supporter of the PYD. On the other hand, there is a divide between the US and Turkey over the role of Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIL, and Washington refuses to consider the PYD as a 'terrorist organization' as Turkey would wish. The new geostrategic context has led to a strengthening of ties with Saudi Arabia. Yet the two countries also face limitations in achieving their objectives.

Are We Entering Another Stage?

Feeling cornered due to the recent evolution of the Syrian crisis, the AKP government seems to have engaged more recently in three initiatives. First, the government has been trying to convince the US that non-YPG forces should fight against ISIL at the Menbic-Jarablus front, the only segment of the Turkish-Syrian border that has not been controlled by the PYD. It has been reported that this issue was the main subject of discussions during Erdogan's recent Washington trip. The limitations of this strat-

egy were exposed as Arab and Turkmen groups managed to recapture al-Rai, after a weeklong operation, only to then lose it.

The second initiative is related to improving relations with Iran. Tehran having its own concerns about the developments in Syria has opened up a space for developing a common understanding between the two countries. As President Rouhani's recent visit demonstrated, they are not there yet, although it has been shown that they have the resolve to work towards bridging their differences.

Finally, Turkey has agreed with the EU to manage the refugee crisis together. Despite the difficulties in its implementation, the deal has allowed the AKP government to strengthen its ties with the EU.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, except for a very brief period when it tried to find a negotiated solution to the conflict, the AKP government has been the most consistent actor in its fight against the Assad regime. While the conflict itself went through several stages with different sets of parameters, both inside and outside Syria, Turkey stuck firmly to its policy. This position led to the deterioration of Turkey's relations with its allies and other countries with whom it had previously enjoyed reasonably close relations. It also created new problems for Turkey, such as dealing with security threats, and exacerbated the refugee crisis. The situation begs the question as to why it has been allowed to come to this. Barring an explanation that analyzes the policy as a series of misperceptions and miscalculations, it is clear that an explanation based on interest fails to explain Turkey's policy. Another way of explaining the AKP's policy in Syria is to focus on ideological and/or personal reasons. Such an analysis should particularly focus on the influence of Erdogan and Davutoglu on the development of this policy. In any case, it is clear that Turkey has so far failed to achieve any of its objectives in Syria and its room for manoeuvre has progressively diminished.