

# A Test for Turkey's Foreign Policy: The Syria Crisis

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Having erupted in March 2011 and claiming approximately 10,000 civil deaths since, the Syria Crisis, once again, showed how fragile regional alliances are in this part of the Middle East. The resistance against its proactive policy, in turn, allowed us to see the limits of Turkey's foreign policy, which had significantly expanded under the AKP (Justice and Development Party – AKP). In the context of Turkey-Iran relations, this article discusses the impact of the Syria Crisis on Turkey's foreign policy and the fragile regional balances.

First of all, unlike Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, Turkey not only served as a 'source of inspiration' in the Syria Crisis but has also wanted to play a more active role in the process, revising its policies in response to emerging risks. Between March 2011 and May 2012, Turkey's overall Syrian policy can be separated into 3 periods: a) pressure on the Bashar al-Assad government for constitutional reform b) attempts at unifying dissident groups under a single roof and promoting international sanctions c) a return to efforts towards a UN-based solution (the Annan Plan). Since the beginning of this process, although Turkey has continuously said "we cannot ignore such a humanitarian plight in our region", its policy has changed from - in the words of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan - "Syria is not a foreign affair but a domestic affair for us" to "the Annan Plan is an opportunity for Syria".

First, Turkey which gained significant leverage in the Middle East following the Arab Spring, was testing the limits of its regional power and its capacity to lead the demand for revolution in the Middle East - and consequently it needed to review its relations with regional actors. Turkey's policy, based on the rhetoric of being "a playmaker country in the Middle East" - defined by some as "neo-ottomanism", encountered strong resistance in Syria. Despite strong political and military support for opposition groups (some claim that support ranges from training dissidents to providing them with small arms), the policy failed to achieve its aim over the last 15 months.

This 'failure' seems to be comparable to the Ottoman Empire's stagnation period, which started when the state reached the natural limits of its power. Actually, Turkey's objective of establishing an EU-like union in the Middle East, which started with its 'zero problem' discourse and its claim to be a 'model' for the countries of the region, suffered because of the Syria crisis. Indeed, Turkey verged to the brink of fighting with some of these countries. Since the beginning of the crisis, the countries of the region have separated into two irreconcilable fronts. As is well known, the Sunni-Salafist and 'pro-western' axis, which included Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan, actively worked to change the Ba'ath regime, while the Shi'ite and 'anti-western' axis, which included Iran, Russia, Iraq and Lebanon, actively worked

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for its continuity. Interestingly enough, despite being the country that would likely be most affected by a change of regime in Damascus, Israel has remained aloof - perhaps because Israeli support would put both the regime and dissidents in a tight spot, undermining their legitimacy in the Arab world. Certainly the most important regional or global actor in this picture is Russia. While the US – in the midst of presidential elections – has chosen not to interfere directly, only stating its wishes during Friends of Syria meetings, Moscow has returned to the Middle East. After years of absence, Russia has chosen to act as a protective shield to the Assad government from day one of the crisis. Moscow first limited the options of the international community by vetoing sanctions sought at the UN Security Council. In order to retain its authority over the process, it then ensured a UN decision that aimed at achieving a ceasefire and political solution was set within a loose time frame. The government in Damascus responded to this gesture from its old Cold War ally, declaring Russian and Chinese leaders heroes. The welcoming of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov by thousands of regime supporters in Damascus with “Shukran Russia” (Thank you Russia) slogans, on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, right after they vetoed the sanctions decision at the UN Security Council, has arguably become one of the unforgettable moments in the history of the Arab street. Ultimately, the Syria crisis has presented Russia with a chance for a late honeymoon with the government in Damascus, one of its most important allies during the Cold War years.

## **TURKEY’S SYRIA POLICY**

Determined to balance its global expectations and regional objectives, Turkey, in turn, aimed towards the ‘downfall of the Assad regime’, relying on its strength in the Arab street to ensure a rapid outcome. Up until then, Ankara had very good relations with the regime and had engaged in efforts for constitutional reform. However, Ankara did not calculate for the Syrian regime’s experience in countering dissident activities and even armed resistance. In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan, who even in the fourth month of turmoil still anticipated that “Assad would fall in a few months”, had revised his estimation to ½ to 2 years by the end of the first year of demonstrations. Furthermore, Ankara’s call on Damascus to “put down its weapons, meet people’s demands and resign” has turned into a simple call for early elections.

The reasons why Ankara’s predictions on Syria did not come to fruition can be listed as its failure to perceive: 1) the regime’s resistance 2) the structure of the dissidents and 3) the effectiveness of regional actors. Indeed, during the early days of the crisis, both the government and strategists close to it saw the developments in Syria - in perfect accordance with an Islamist perception – as a revolt of the Sunni majority, which constitutes 70 percent of the population, against the Nusayri-Alawite minority, which constitutes only 10 percent of the population.

While the Ba’ath regime is based on an absolute Nusayri-Alawite minority in the military and civilian bureaucracy, Turkey neither calculated for Ba’ath support among both the urban Sunni majority and Christians, who are estimated to constitute 15 percent of the population, nor these groups’ concerns

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related to a Sunni Islamist (or mainly Salafist) government. Despite Ankara's backing, Syrian opposition groups' efforts to engage Syrian Christians in the revolution remain insufficient. Similarly, the overall structure of the dissidents was perceived as only comprising the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the country's most influential religious, political and social organization. But the fact that Salafist groups achieved 27 percent of votes in the Egyptian parliamentary elections - an unsettling number especially in the Shi'ite wing of the Arab world - was not considered.

Furthermore, according to the press, when Assad responded to Prime Minister Erdoğan's call to "stop military operations" by saying "no way unless we take the Salafists under control", Erdoğan said "we know that there are no Salafists in Syria". However, for instance, the Tehran-Riyadh rivalry in Syria was based on Salafist elements. Indeed, the armed resistance in 1982 in cities such as Hama, which faced a massacre by the Ba'ath regime's operation against armed Sunni dissidents, was started by Salafist groups that were supported by Saudi Arabia. Recently, in a televised appearance, Sheikh Adnan Arur, a Saudi cleric with influence over dissidents, likened insurgents to the armies of Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan, who was in dispute with the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali over the Caliphate. As such, he declared some kind of a Salafist jihad against the Shi'ite-Nusayri regime in Syria. These statements received reaction not only from Shi'ites but Sunni groups in the country as well. At the same time, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah's call for the destruction of all churches in the Arabian Peninsula has eliminated opportunities for rapprochement between the country's

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Islamist groups and Christians. Such differences between opposition groups has caused Turkey to stand on the brakes, and demonstrated that Ankara should revise its assumptions on the success of anti-regime protest. President Gül's comments that "The opposition does not appear ready for a new Syria. There is no consensus even on basic issues. They are not ready to take over the country" showed that Turkey adapted late to the process. On the other hand, the armed struggle and even the disputes related to foreign support between the two largest groups that represent Syria internationally - National Council and National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change - have not yet been solved. The Friends of Syria summits held in Tunisia, France and Istanbul, in which these groups were present, resulted in nothing more than expressions of hope from the Arab League, France, USA and Turkey.

## **IRAN'S SYRIA POLICY**

Since the start of the Arab Spring, the perception in Arab and Persian streets is that a revolution that reaches Iran and Saudi Arabia after Syria would be comparable to the collapse of the Eastern Block and may result in a new world order. Therefore, from its perspective, the government in Tehran has understood the revolutions' potential and tried to guarantee its red lines by indexing them to competition between global powers. Unlike Tunisia and Libya, Tehran has seen that a change of regime in Syria - an important part

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and indispensable military and strategic ally of the anti-western Shi'ite Crescent that it wants to build against the Sunni Arab world - would have the potential to undo the Islamic Revolution and maybe even the balances established after World War II. For Iran, both the possible accession of a Sunni Islamist government in the wake of the Ba'ath regime and the breakdown of the unitary structure in Syria would radically change relations with Damascus. Although Supreme Leader Khamenei himself openly supported the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, he was uncomfortable with probable Brotherhood-Salafist rule.

Therefore, a possible Sunni-Salafist alliance or a western-orientated new government of secular-liberal groups in Damascus will weaken Iran's regional influence, and become a disadvantage in regards to Israel and the Arab world. Today the Syrian regime is the Iranian government's primary front (in both strategic and military terms) against both Israel, which is the "radical other" in Khomeini's reformulated Shi'ite ideology, and the Sunni Arab world. Seeing itself as the target of a military operation - by Israel - because of its nuclear programme, Iran puts pressure on Israel through the Syria-Lebanon/ Hezbollah line. It can even be said that Iran considered the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2007 as an exercise to test its strength in Lebanon.

Syria has critical importance for Iran in terms of its relations with the Sunni world. Both against the Salafist ideology represented by Saudi Arabia as well as the Sunni community led by Egypt and Qatar in the Arab world, Damascus is Iran's most important ally. The invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, whose likening of the Iran-Iraq War to the Battle of Qadisiyyah received notable

support in the Arab world, presented Tehran with a gilt edged opportunity to restore a Shi'ite government in Baghdad. However, even the presence of a Shi'ite government in Baghdad, did not reduce Syria's importance for Iran; a Syria that is in opposite camps with and an enemy of Egypt and Saudi Arabia as its insurance in the Arab world. Known to have sent support, including arms, for the suppression of dissidents in Syria, Iran reacted strongly to Saudi Arabia sending troops to predominantly Shi'ite Bahrain to quash anti-regime demonstrations. It is also known that Saudi Arabia has proposed significant financial aid to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt, which came to power after the overthrow of Mubarak, in return for not establishing relations with Iran. For the very same reasons, Saudi Arabia strongly supported regime change in Syria that might weaken Iran and, through former US Ambassador Prince Turki al-Faisal, declared that they will not remain silent against the situation in Syria.

## **ANKARA – TEHRAN RIVALRY**

However, the biggest regional impact of the Syrian crisis was on relations between Turkey and Iran. As was the case in Libya, the UN's inability to reach a decision on the use of force in support of a revolution left Turkey facing a critical juncture in its relations with all its neighbours, especially Iran. Although there was serious competition behind the scenes until recently, Turkish-Iranian relations - as both parties happily cite frequently - have been continuing since the Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin, hitting a peak during AKP rule. However, relations have recently become strained due to their differing interpretation of the results of potential regime change in Syria.

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With its seemingly endless ability 'to manage the process', the government in Tehran has stayed away from efforts aimed at regime change, which it describes as a Zionist conspiracy. On the other hand, Tehran has been giving the message that a change might be supported if it does not turn into an "attempt to weaken Iran" and is allowed to "follow a course that appreciates the Islamic Republic's security concerns". Iranian newspapers with close links to Supreme Leader Khamenei published comments that Turkey and Iran would be able to manage the process of change in Syria together, without the Zionists. However, it is also clear that the change Iran proposes to manage together with Turkey would be limited to constitutional reforms; it does not mean a new era, especially in terms of its relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

It can be said that the turning point for Turkey's Syria policy was Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Tehran following his trip to China. During that visit, for which details were not widely shared, it was alleged that an Israeli attack against Iran was the number one item on the agenda, with Syria in second place. Erdoğan first met with President Ahmadinejad in Tehran and then with Supreme Leader Khamenei at his summerhouse in Mashhad to seek joint action in Syria - including the halt to military operations, the urgent implementation of constitutional reforms and, more importantly, the resignation of Assad. But, to the best of our knowledge, he achieved no positive outcome from negotiations. To Ankara's long-voiced calls for intervention - including the establishment of a buffer zone near the border and the use of force - the Iranian government argued that Assad should be given a second chance, time should be allowed for reform and

that Turkey should act together with the countries of the region instead of partnering with western powers. Apparently carried out in a highly tense environment due to the dubious illness of President Ahmadinejad with a crisis only just avoided, Prime Minister Erdoğan employed more critical language instead of the moderate discourse he had long been using after such meetings, accusing Iran of "acting insincerely in a manner that is not suitable for neighbourly relations".

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Another important detail was Prime Minister Erdoğan's statement on his way back home in which he said that an election in Syria within the next 6 months would lower tensions and might create a new opportunity to solve the crisis. Erdoğan's recent call to Assad for early elections within 6 months signifies a backtracking given his calls for Assad to "listen to the people's voice", i.e. for his resignation, and the claims he made that Assad had lost his political legitimacy - something that was echoed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu on various national and international platforms. It is possible to read this statement as Turkey's search for a new road map given Iran's recent maneuvers, which have great influence on the Syrian government.

Indeed, using every opportunity to express its lack of trust in the Assad government after this meeting, Turkey started to use more positive language towards the Annan Plan, which, despite having entered into force on April 12th,

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failed to ensure its fundamental objective, namely a ceasefire. Furthermore, in a statement on May 12th President Abdullah Gül said that the Annan Plan - from which Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu had remained distant since day one and claimed that it would achieve nothing but give more time to Assad - was an opportunity for the solution of the Syria crisis, and that the government in Damascus should evaluate it well.

The deep and apparently irreconcilable difference of opinion on Syria has also uncovered the regional competition between Turkey and Iran. The reason why the rhetoric became harsher is that the future of Syria has become a show of force for both parties. This show of force also quickly spread to another area of intense rivalry, namely Iraq. Having not supported Maliki in the 10-months search for a government in 2010, Iran changed its position after the decision to arrest Sunni Vice President Hashemi, who had good relations with Turkey. Then the Baghdad administration, which had previously held High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings and signed countless agreements with Ankara, accused Turkey of acting like a hostile country. Maliki's tough stance towards Turkey is likely to have been made in coordination with Iran. Indeed, the fact that the Iraqi prime minister cannot criticize Turkey so harshly without Tehran's knowledge and approval has also been confirmed by Iraqi Sunni groups and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Against this attitude of Baghdad and Tehran, Ankara prioritized the Kurdistan Regional Government, which it maintained fluctuating relations with due to the presence of the PKK in Iraq. Ankara sees the KRG as its ally against the Maliki administration, thus further

cooperating with Barzani. At this point, it is clear that Ankara's target is to see the establishment of an Iraqi government by someone other than Maliki - someone who will reduce Iran's effectiveness in the region. However, it should be underlined that Iran became the playmaker of Iraqi politics after the US invasion and has very close ties with all Shi'ite groups in the country. Therefore, it would be realistic to expect any Shi'ite dominated government in Baghdad - the prime minister must be a Shi'ite - will pursue a policy close to Tehran's.

## **IS TURKEY STILL A MODEL COUNTRY?**

The failure of the support given to opposition groups in the Syrian crisis, and the sense that Turkish foreign policy is zig-zagging, has undermined the perception of Turkey as a 'model country'. As may be recalled, Turkey became hugely popular during the Tahrir demonstrations in Egypt, which resulted with Hosni Mubarak's resignation in February 2011. Throughout the Sunni Arab world, Prime Minister Erdoğan was compared with Nasser, the legendary leader of Egypt, thanks to the great momentum he created with his "one minute" rebuke to Israeli President Shimon Peres during the Davos Summit. In fact, Erdoğan's call on Mubarak to resign was broadcast live throughout the Arab world, and his speech at Tahrir Square during the SCAF period strengthened his image as the leader of the Arab street. However, this image of a model embodied in Erdoğan's charismatic personality has declined. The most notable reason for this is - contrary to Egypt - that an anti-regime rhetoric, in the context of Syria, is not supported by the Arab world. Iran has also been plagued by the fact that its most important ally in the region was subject to

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attempts towards its demise. And then, by pressing the argument that Turkey had collaborated with the Zionists and imperialists in an attempt to overthrow the regime in Damascus, while at the same time ignoring the demonstrations of Shi'ite masses in Bahrain, Iran has chosen Turkey's image in the Arab streets as an open target. This discourse of Iran, and the campaign it started in the Middle East, quickly proved successful, and considerably ruined Turkey's image in the Arab street. All these developments have led to a change in the government's Middle East discourse. The most striking traces can be seen in its rhetoric. The "fate of Istanbul,

Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad is one; the future of Ankara and Bursa cannot be separated from the future of Tripoli, Benghazi, and Beirut" rhetoric, which Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu frequently voiced during the Arab Spring, is referred to far less. The risk for Turkey's foreign policy is not associated with the nature of the language used; the Syria crisis has damaged Turkey's assertion that it is a model country. Therefore, in order to repair the damage to its foreign policy, Turkey must return to visionary yet realistic policies that are well aware of the limits of its power.



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