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From Endearment to Estrangement: Turkey's Interests and Concerns in Syria

Summary

- Turkish relations with the Syrian regime have developed at a dizzying pace over the last 15 years, going from outright hostility to close cooperation and back to estrangement.
- Prior to the current uprising, Turkey looked at Syria as a cornerstone in its plans to become a political, economic and “moral” leader in the Middle East.
- Ankara has deep concerns regarding developments in Syria, particularly in terms of the domestic repercussions of any Syrian political instability or social upheaval.
- These concerns shaped Ankara’s initial caution in completely breaking with Damascus and could still limit the scope of Turkish action against the Assad regime.

“For Ankara, Syria was going to be the proving ground for Turkey’s moderating effects on its neighbors and the place to showcase Turkey’s role as a kind of regional reform whisperer.”

Relations between Turkey and Syria have developed at a dramatic and even dizzying pace over the last decade, both rapidly improving and—in recent months—rapidly worsening. Despite the recent strains in the two countries’ relations due to the Assad regime’s crackdown of its opponents, Syria remains for Turkey a dominant actor in its plans to become a political, economic and self-described “moral” leader in the Middle East. At the same time, Ankara has deep and practical concerns over developments in Syria that have little to do with its regional aspirations and more to do with the perceived domestic repercussions of Syrian political instability or social upheaval, particularly in terms of economic losses with respect to the Kurdish issue.

While these goals were instrumental in driving Turkey’s diplomatic outreach to Damascus in recent years, concerns about the domestic impact of the uprising in Syria have been the prime force in shaping Ankara’s caution about making a complete break with the Assad regime and about the use of stronger tools at its disposal, such as sanctions or the threat of military force, to rein in the regime’s brutal response to the protests it is facing.

In addition to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s verbal lashing of the Assad regime, Ankara has expressed its willingness to introduce tougher sanctions against Damascus. But the extent of those sanctions could again be limited by concerns about their domestic impact in Turkey.

From Antagonism to Partnership and Back

Tensions between Turkey and Syria run as far back as the 1930’s, when the disputed Hatay, or Alexandretta, region, claimed by both Turkey and Syria as their own, was incorporated into the

nascent Turkish state by referendum. During the Cold War, meanwhile, the two countries found themselves on opposite sides of that era's ideological divide. Relations between Turkey and Syria truly reached a breaking point in 1998, when Ankara threatened military action against Damascus because of its support for the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its sheltering of the organization's leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

Although Turkey's improved relations with Syria are usually credited to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its "zero problems with neighbors" policy, the groundwork for that policy was put in place during the late 1990's by the late Ismail Cem, as the former foreign minister. During Cem's tenure Turkey's problematic relations with Greece normalized and began to take off. Even the improvement of relations with Syria and Iran trace their roots to this period. The first major breakthrough in Turkish-Syrian relations in recent years occurred in 2000, when arch-secularist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer went to Damascus for the funeral of longtime Syrian leader Hafez Al-Assad.

Still, the warming of relations between the two countries gained significant momentum under the watch of the AKP and its chief foreign policy architect, Ahmet Davutoglu. Bashar Al-Assad visited Turkey in 2004, marking the first such visit ever by a Syrian president. In that same year, Ankara and Damascus signed a free trade agreement and a strategic partnership treaty. The two countries went even further in 2009, establishing a visa-free travel regime and holding a previously unimaginable three-day joint military exercise. In yet another sign of deepening ties, Turkey announced the creation of an economic council to work toward creating a free-trade zone between itself, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

Turkish Interests versus Ankara's Ambitions

The corollary to Ankara's "zero problems" approach is "maximum trade." At its heart, Turkey's effort to minimize conflict in its immediate neighborhood—an effort that, admittedly, is now being tested by the fallout from the Arab Spring and other regional developments—is about creating an environment that is conducive to the flowering of Turkish trade and the expansion of the Turkish economy. In that sense, one of Ankara's main interests vis-à-vis Syria is to use the country as an outlet for Turkish exporters, particularly from the highly entrepreneurial regions bordering Syria, such as Gaziantep and Hatay. The statistics from the last few years demonstrate the success of this policy: Turkish exports to Syria skyrocketed from \$266 million in 2002 to \$1.6 billion in 2010. The abolishing of visa requirements, meanwhile, has led to an increasing number of Syrians crossing the border, especially to shop for Turkish goods. And the number of Syrian tourists visiting Turkey has skyrocketed from 122,000 in 2002 to under 900,000 last year.

On the political front, Turkey's interests in Syria connect to Damascus' close relations with Iran. While Turkey has been working towards improving its political and economic relations with Iran, the two countries remain rivals in terms of their regional influence and Syria can be seen as one of the arenas where this rivalry is playing out. Turkish officials, upon encountering American resistance when they initially began their outreach to the Assad regime, frequently justified their efforts by explaining that improving Turkish ties with Syria would blunt Tehran's influence there.

In a 2005 State Department cable released by Wikileaks, American diplomats in Ankara took a rather dim view of Turkey's approach to Syria, describing it as a mixture of "wishful thinking and a form of neo-Ottoman nostalgia." While Turkish officials would obviously object to that characterization, it's clear that Ankara's intensive efforts to improve ties with Damascus went much deeper than simple economic or political interests. For the AKP's top leadership, Erdogan and Davutoglu in particular, Syria was going to be the proving ground for Turkey's moderating effects on its

neighbors and the place to showcase Turkey's role as a kind of regional reform whisperer. Ties to Syria were seen as the cornerstone of a new regional order, one based on more open borders and the free flow of goods and people (some Turkish pundits and officials even started talking about the creation of a "Shamgen" zone—a term that fuses the name of the old Ottoman Sham province, which encompassed modern-day Syria, with Europe's visa-free Schengen area).

A Test for the "No Problems" Policy?

Turkey's initially slow and ambiguous response to the brutal events unfolding in Syria has been shaped in part by Ankara's inability to let go of its own vision of itself as the country that would to crack the code of the Assad regime. But that failure to respond decisively has also been shaped by concerns that unrest in Syria could affect its interests, both regionally and domestically.

On the regional level, Turkey is worried about the opportunities that the uprising in Syria might offer its rivals, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia. From Ankara's perspective, completely cutting off ties to the Assad regime provides Iran with an opportunity to increase its influence in Syria by filling the space once occupied by Turkey. On the other hand, the possibility of the demise of the Alawite Assad regime and its replacement by a Sunni-dominated government provides Saudi Arabia with a golden opportunity to ramp up its influence in Syria, perhaps at Turkey's expense.

Beyond these regional issues, Ankara's response to the developments in Syria appears to be shaped more significantly by concerns about their domestic impact on Turkey. As Erdogan said in early August, and much to the dismay of the Syrian authorities: "We do not consider the problems in Syria a question of foreign policy but a domestic matter."

One of Turkey's main worries is the economic impact of Syrian instability and the loss of access to the country for Turkish exporters, who see economic opportunity there as well as valuable transit routes in Syria for other parts of the Middle East. But Turkey is more concerned about how Syrian instability might affect its own Kurdish problem. As Ankara sees it, any significant unrest among Syria's Kurdish population could lead to problems among Turkey's own Kurds, particularly in the already tense and predominantly-Kurdish southeast region. Syrian instability could also make Syria an ideal place for PKK activity once again. But with its own problems on the Kurdish front, the last thing Ankara wants right now is to see something that could further inflame the Kurdish issue.

Because of these concerns, Ankara appears to be terrified by the thought of a rapid disintegration of the Assad regime that could create a power vacuum and might allow Syria's Kurds to carve out a more independent space. Instead, it has been pushing for what would be a gradual easing from power of the Assad regime and the implementation of reforms that, in many ways, would create a state that emulates many of the political and economic reforms made in recent years by Turkey itself. Although it refrains from using the term, Ankara in many ways, would like to see the "Turkish model" employed in Syria.

But Ankara's ability to influence events in Syria—at least through Damascus—is rapidly diminishing. Turkey had initially tried to use its close relations with Assad to convince him to institute quick reforms and heed calls of protesters. But those efforts quickly proved to be fruitless, and the line to Damascus was shut off as soon as Ankara's rhetoric against Assad heated up. Ankara is now clearly working to exert some influence on events by moving toward more punitive measures. It's hosting meetings of Syrian opposition groups, for example, and intercepted arms shipment headed to Syria. And, recent Turkish military exercises near the Syrian border hint to Damascus that some form of military intervention isn't off the table. Turkish officials have also promised that stronger sanctions targeting the regime will be forthcoming, even if they are as yet unspecified.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and the Middle East to identify key vectors of influence Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict, to forecast how the situation there will affect the regional balance of power and to examine how the opposition and the Syria regime are responding to these regional dynamics. Through this series the Institute aims to provide analysis and tools for on-the-ground conflict management in support of political transitions across the Arab world. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives, and Scott Lasensky, a senior program officer.

This study on Turkey was written by Yigal Schleifer, a Washington-based journalist and analyst covering Turkey. He was based in Istanbul between 2002 and 2010 as a correspondent for the *The Christian Science Monitor* and Eurasianet.org. He is also the author of "Istanbul Calling" (istanbulcalling.blogspot.com), a blog about Turkish foreign and domestic affairs.



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But those actions will likely be limited due to Turkey's concerns about their domestic blowback and the absence of an obvious international consensus on how to punish the Assad regime. For now Ankara risks becoming a spectator, as violence engulfs a crucial neighbor and a regime that, up until recently, was thought to be among its most important allies.