

Turkey's position towards Syria after the influx of refugees

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Beginning with its immediate neighbours, Turkey has, since 2002, been sending positive signals to the states of the region on issues ranging from stability and peace in the Middle East, and economic cooperation built on sound foundations to the spreading of democratic values. Turkey has also been proactive in working to create and develop a common position towards these goals through its bilateral relations with various states in the region. It has also sought to achieve this through regional conferences and meetings, as well as through the activities of its cooperative enterprises and development initiatives.

Within this framework, Turkey began its outreach with the closest of its neighbours – Syria. It thus worked on developing a strong relationship with Syria by identifying and dealing with issues that might hinder the development of a bilateral relationship. Turkey also adopted a diplomatic strategy effectively to overcome the obstacles posed by the dilemmas that plague the region, and which previously had hindered bilateral relations. Furthermore, it sought to overcome the historical and ideological obstacles in the relationship, especially those related to border security. This has seen Turkish-Syrian relations reaching new and exceptional heights.

Strengthening of relations between the two countries progressed well as a result of tangible initiatives – as can be seen in the exchange of high-level official visits by ministers, politicians and statesmen; the lifting of visa and travel restrictions between the two countries, and other countries of the region; the liberalisation of bilateral cross-border trade; and the development of common commercial and industrial projects. A major highlight in this regard was the agreement to include Iraq in a project that looked at establishing an economic cooperation formula with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

These relations reached a point where the border between Turkey and Syria came to be virtually disregarded. For people living along the border, the removal of travel restrictions between the two countries meant they could cross into the neighbouring country without passports. Additionally, at the outset of 2011, the countries' economic relations witnessed a spike in the volume of bilateral trade and tourism.

Turkey and the Syrian crisis

Despite the development of strong relations between the two countries, Turkey had conveyed several messages to Syria calling for the adoption of democratising political reforms, and for a transition to a multi-party political system. This call was very visible in the media and public opinion during the development of bilateral relations between the two countries, a factor that is particularly significant considering that these relations took place at the levels of the prime minister and foreign minister. In these messages, Turkey stressed the urgent need for rapid reform – to the same extent that the Turkish opposition had demanded reforms of the Turkish government for Turkey. These communiqués took the form of statements from Ankara on a number of issues concerning Syria, such as the Syrian emergency laws which had been in place for thirty years, issues of political exclusion, and the lack of free expression.

There is no doubt that the popular revolutionary movements that started in Tunisia at the outset of 2011 highlighted the need for change in Syria. During this period, Turkish media began to suggest that Turkish officials, particularly over the past four or five years, had increasingly stressed these views to their Syrian counterparts, and had called for urgent reform.

Assad's desire for reform: A point of contention

A prevailing view in Turkey during this period was that Bashar al-Assad was well-intentioned and determined to implement reforms in the democratisation of his country, but that Ba'ath party official surrounding him and his family did not share these intentions and did not have the same will for reform. During the same period, however, it also became apparent that Assad's desire for change was itself a point of contention. The result is that Turkey has begun to believe that the Syrian regime has maintained its talks with Turkey simply to stall for time – a sentiment that is increasingly being confirmed.

Turkey has patiently persevered and continued with its efforts to persuade the Syrian regime to abandon its position that its people did not have the right to the legitimate demands they were putting forward. Turkey believed that the Syrian regime was creating sectarian discordance amongst the Syrian people through its use of repressive methods against some sectors of the society and not others. This was in addition to arrests and state terrorism which had begun to escalate with the events in the town of Dar'a.

It was also clear that there was no genuine Syrian response to both the visits by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Turkish intelligence adviser Hakan Fidan. In addition, there was a lack of response to the recommendations by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Then, on 9th June and in the midst of the Turkish election campaign, Turkey found itself facing a flood of refugees after the violence that erupted in some Syrian towns and villages located close to the Syrian-Turkish border, particularly in Jisr al-Shughour.

Before these events, a number of Turkish politicians – led by Erdogan and Davutoglu – had repeatedly stressed the need to pave the way for changes of regimes in the Middle East. Speaking to the Financial Times on 7th June, Davutoglu's message was that leaders in the Arab world who resisted change would wither away. He also indicated that he had communicated this to Assad directly. This Turkish perspective began to create an atmosphere of discomfort in the Syrian regime, with the result that certain Syrian politicians – with Assad being most vociferous – voiced their discomfort on Turkey's position in the media.

In the meanwhile, Syrian citizens fearing for their lives crossed the border into Turkey in order to escape Syrian security forces. The number of Syrian refugees in Turkey passed 10 000, and prompted Turkey to communicate to its Syrian neighbour that the latter had 'gone down the path of no return'. Currently, thousands of Syrian refugees live in refugee camps within Turkey's borders, and the Turkish government is meeting its obligation to protect and provide for their needs. It is also noteworthy that, over the past few months, Turkey has offered its support to the Syrian opposition that was given a space in Turkey from where to broadcast its demands and concerns in its attempt to garner international support. This came amid the continuance of brutal repression in Syria, and as Syrian military units continued to kill and capture protesters and prevent the displaced from fleeing to Turkey.

Syria continues portraying Turkey's involvement provocatively. This is clear from the way in which Turkey is portrayed by Syria in some of the scenarios related to the killing of 120 Syrian policemen and security personnel in June in Jisr al-Shughour.

The first claims were that they were killed by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups, and that the weapons for this were obtained from Turkey. Such a scenario is unthinkable when we consider that Turkey, which has a manifest interest in Syria's stability, has made every effort to achieve such stability. The second claim is that these security forces were killed by the state for refusing to take up arms against the people. The truth is that many such individuals, especially those within the lower ranks of the Syrian army – of whom eighty-two

percent are Sunni – have indeed refused to take up arms against the people. This situation shows the extent to which the instability can escalate. The third claim, and the one closest to the truth, is that the Syrian regime is behind the killing of these people – regardless of whether they opposed taking up arms against the people or not – through an organised operation. The purpose of the operation would have been to incite division and show the people that they stand accused. The Syrian regime will thus work to prove that it is correct, allowing them to cast the protesters as ‘armed gangs’. The result will be that the Syrian regime will continue to commit such crimes against a people determined to continue its fight by peaceful means.

At a time when Syria has become infamous for not hesitating to shed the blood of its people, we find it accusing the demonstrators, who have to this day not thrown a single stone, of being seditious conspirators. Through these events the Syrian regime hopes to kill three birds with one stone. First, it strikes fear into the hearts of those soldiers and policemen considered at risk of insubordination. Second, it takes advantage of sectarian divisions amongst the Syrian people. Third, and most important, it enables the regime to send a message to the world that it is fighting armed insurgents. If this situation continues as it has, the legitimate demands of the people will be struck a mortal blow, while the Syrian regime will be able to present itself as a wounded pigeon.

Developments in the Turkish position

The Arab world, and, indeed, the rest of the world, is following the Turkish position on these events with great interest. Turkish officials have expressed dissatisfaction with the ‘lack of response from Syria’ to all the warnings and advice that Turkey has offered Damascus. Turkey, however, continues to urge the Syrian administration not to use force in dealing with the demonstrators, and continues to deal with the refugee influx from Syria as a humanitarian issue. The irony is that while Turkey has been lauded internationally for its reception of over 10 000 Syrian refugees, Syria has criticised this, describing it as interference in Syria’s domestic affairs.

Despite the decline of Turkey’s hopes that Assad will find a peaceful solution to the crisis, Turkey listened to his speech of 20 June, and felt that it fell short of convincing the Syrian people and the world of the government’s line. Turkey’s position in the wake of this seventy minute speech was: ‘If Assad can convince the Syrian people, we will also be convinced.’

The Syrian people’s dissatisfaction with the speech came immediately after the speech had ended. Syrians in Latakia, Homs, Hama and Damascus, and even the refugees in Turkey, had high hopes that the speech would signal a change. However, they all expressed a similar reaction: there was nothing new and nothing in his tone had changed from his previous speeches.

In Turkey, there were also expectations that the speech would usher in important changes such as the abolition of certain articles of the constitution – such as Article 8 which states that the Ba’ath Party is the state’s ruling party; and that new laws would be announced to allow political parties and entities the freedom to engage in political activity. Assad, it appears, was simply stalling for time, stating that his regime would work to change the constitution by the end of the year, and would issue directives for the commencement of a ‘national dialogue’ on reform. In addition, he said the regime would establish committees to fight corruption. He emphasised that the reforms would be coupled with what he called ‘eliminating the chaos’. He followed this saying he would arrest the ‘conspirators and corrupters who took advantage of the people’s legitimate demands’. This statement can be read as a veiled warning that the state would employ its security and intelligence apparatuses to end the uprising.

The Turkish press, in its coverage and analysis of Assad's speech, focused on a central theme: that Syria is not run solely by Assad, and that his family members intervene in the state. They added that such intervention, together with the intelligence apparatuses, corrupt gangs and the upper echelons of the army – had created a toxic web of power and corruption. It would thus be impossible to expect a road map for reform from Assad alone, without the consultation and input of all of the above.

Turkey after the elections

After its election, Turkey displayed its determination to do what needed to be done. On the one hand, it will assist Syrians who took refuge on its soil. On the other hand, Turkish politicians – from President Abdullah Gul to the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs – will issue statements and take a position that calls on the Syrian government to listen to the voice of the people. Turkey will also work to provide the Syrian opposition with the means to express itself.

It is noteworthy that Erdogan had held talks with Assad before the speech. As a result of these talks, Assad's representative, General Hassan al-Turkmani, visited Ankara on 15 June for hours of negotiations with Turkish officials. The visit was expected to create a more suitable environment for dialogue between the two countries, with the hope that Syria would pursue a more rational course, and that long-standing Turkish support for Syria could be resumed.

Assad's speech, however, was interpreted by both the Turkish media and Syrian opposition as an announcement that he had chosen a similar route as Gaddafi. Assad's invitation to Syrian refugees in Turkey to return home without threat of reprisal was reminiscent of a similar invitation by his father Hafez al-Assad. The result in that case was that all the returning refugees were killed.

Assad suggested in his speech that external forces were to be blamed for fuelling the crisis in Syria. The implications for Turkey emerged the next day, 22 June, when Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said events in Syria were an internal affair, and that no one had the right to 'teach us lessons from abroad.' His comment was intended as a response to President Abdullah Gul, who had said, 'the speech is not enough, but we say to him: Yes.'

Considering that Turkey has had to absorb 15 000 Syrian refugees – and is expecting many more in the future – it did not remain silent in the face of Syrian allegations. On 23 June, Davutoglu called Muallem, and the Syrian ambassador in Ankara was summoned to the ministry of foreign affairs. Although the content of the phone call was not made public, there can be no doubt that Turkey expressed concerns over Syria's accusations.

Assad and Muallem's statements and their accusations that the Syrian people were guilty of conspiracy and sedition, as well as the implication that al-Qaeda had played an invisible role in the uprisings are reminiscent of Gaddafi's response to events in Libya. Further, Muallem's contention that the continuation of good relations between Turkey and Syria was contingent on Turkey's reconsideration of its position towards the Syrian regime assumed that Turkey, and not Syria, had been in the wrong.

Turkey's major concern is that events in Syria will take a turn similar to that witnessed in Libya, and that, if Damascus resists implementing reforms, then all efforts for a peaceful solution would have been in vain, and Syria would have exploited Turkish efforts to buy time to suppress its people.

Indications are that the West has given up hope that Assad might implement reforms. This can read in US President Barack Obama's view of the situation in Syria, and the sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union. . In this situation where western powers will contend that they had exhausted all options, the consequence will be that Turkey, with its increased importance as a key Middle East power, will assume a level of importance above that of the international community and the United Nations.

In the crisis, Syria has forgotten the support provided by Turkey in recent years. Rather, Syria has chosen to accuse Turkey of undermining its sovereignty and issuing threats – all of which have raised fears amongst Turks. If the crisis deepens, Syria may choose to create problems for Turkey, such as support, as it has given in the past, to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group viewed by Turkey as a terrorist organisation; or to make a claim on the Iskenderun province. This means that the relations between the two countries could revert to what they were ten years ago. There is no doubt that despite the negative consequences this would have for Turkey, Syria would become increasingly isolated from the global community, and the consequences will be far graver for Syria.

The Syrian regime has expressed its anti-Turkish sentiment in the Al-Watan newspaper which is owned by Assad's nephew and one of his closest friends, Rami Makhlouf. The newspaper reported that the Muslim Brotherhood, which is represented in the Syrian opposition, not only met in Istanbul and Antioch with the permission of the Turkish authorities, but is closely aligned in thought and ideology to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party.

Despite these allegations, Turkey did not interfere in these meetings, but simply allowed them to be held. Furthermore, the meetings in Istanbul and Antioch included, alongside Islamist groups, various other factions, including Kurdish groups. These groups did not present themselves as representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, but as groups demanding the adoption of freedoms in Syria and the elimination of injustice and corruption. They also presented themselves as groups supporting peace initiatives that facilitate a position of national unity rather than looking to secure future leadership roles based on sectarian and political self-interest. These groups made continual efforts to maintain channels of dialogue with the Syrian regime. The regime, however, continued to view these groups in a similar manner as they did the demonstrators – merely as elements of sedition against the regime.

It could have proven beneficial to both countries had the Syrian authorities favoured cooperation with Turkey in order to work towards a solution instead of hurling accusations at it.

Most disturbing to Turkey is the situation of Syrians who have flocked to the Syrian-Turkish border. Those who were able to cross into Turkish territory struggle to survive in refugee camps. Regardless of the number of these refugees, and whatever consequences there might be for Turkey, Turkey will continue to host them for humanitarian reasons and out of respect for relations between the people of Turkey and Syria. This is in contrast to the Syrian regime that has prevented its citizens from crossing into Turkey, and which has used its army to oppress and persecute its people. Turkish popular opinion has been deeply influenced by the media's portrayal of the Syrian army's perpetual attacks on its citizens.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry now seeks to decide what action to take if Syria continues to prevent its citizens reaching Turkey, or in the event of its continued killing of its citizens. Syria's amassing of troops on its Turkish border has further increased the pressure on the Turkish government as this is seen as the Syrian regime attempting to send a message to Turkey.

The Turkish government's continued restrained handling of the situation in the face of all this pressure is due to Turkey's unwillingness to squander the time and effort spent in building a strong relationship between the two countries. A continuation of Syria's unacceptable behaviour towards its citizens leads us to expect a change in the Turkish position that has thus far called for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

We have good reason to believe that, behind closed doors, Turkish leaders have communicated a strong response to the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem. Such a tactic, that has been successful on a range of issues, is typical of Turkish diplomacy which prefers to deal with such issues discreetly before bringing them before public opinion. . If Syria, however, continues to snub such diplomatic efforts, we can expect that Turkey will not hesitate to carry out limited military intervention across the Syrian border.

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