

## What does Turkey want in Syria and why?

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When the Arab Uprisings started in Tunisia and spread to Libya and Egypt, Turkish decision-makers saw a very different picture from the rest of the world. While a large part of the world saw the uprisings as a historic moment whereby Arab populations were toppling dictators with the urge to switch to more just and democratic governance orders, Ankara detected that the Muslim Brotherhood was on the rise in the region. In Tunisia the Ennahda Movement, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhvan) and in many other Middle Eastern countries - including Syria - Ikhvan-affiliated movements were on the march. It seemed to be a historic moment for Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), at the helm of which stood at the time Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu. After all, Turkey's international standing was visibly on the rise. The AKP had brought Turkey to the negotiation table for accession to the European Union, got Turkey elected to the UN Security Council for the period of 2008-2010, succeeded in having a Turkish Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) from 2004-2014 and was co-chair of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The sudden and unexpected Arab uprisings also came in the aftermath of Erdoğan's open challenges to Israel at the Davos Summit in

2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, which made Erdoğan a darling of the Arab street. Hence, the Arab Uprisings were seen by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu as a unique "Turkish moment" that could allow the country to regain its long-lost international grandeur. Erdoğan saw Turkey as the future leader of an Ikhvan-dominated Middle East. The U.S. and some European countries made it clear that they would welcome Turkey serving as a model to the transforming region.<sup>1</sup> While Western countries were hoping that Erdoğan's "New Turkey" would become a model and inspiration for transforming Arab societies in an orderly fashion, Erdoğan saw an opportunity to rebuild a neo-Ottoman space that would restore the glory and prestige of the Ottomans with, of course, Erdoğan himself at the helm of it.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this framework and outlook that Turkey approached the Syrian question from 2011. At the time, most Turkish decision-makers believed in the inevitability of Bashar al-Assad's fall. Turkish intelligence estimates predicted a 6-months period for Assad to leave the country. At the same time, Ankara initially tried to convince Assad to change the Syrian constitution and allow for new parties to be formed. Buoyed by their success in upgrading Turkey's standing in the international community and by

Ankara's determined investment in engaging with Syria, Erdoğan expected Assad to heed his advice. After all, Erdoğan was one of the first leaders to call for Mubarak to step down before his downfall.<sup>3</sup> Now, thought Erdoğan, it was time for Assad to listen. The Turkish Government offered technical assistance to change the Syrian constitution and draft a political parties law that would allow for democratic elections to be held. Erdoğan even conveyed to Assad that he would win a popular election given his large popularity then across the country. However, Ankara quickly changed course when it understood that Assad was not interested in Turkish advice. Consequently, Turkey began hosting the Syrian opposition, provided it with technical support and, over time, became host to a majority of the armed Syrian opposition.

Turkey's primary objective in Syria was since to facilitate the overthrow of President Assad. Ankara believes that both the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and other sources of instability are side-effects of Assad's clinch to power. To this day, Ankara has been unable to convince the U.S. and most European states about the need for active involvement in regime change. That said, there are signs that Washington may become more proactive in Syria in 2017 when the new president will come into office. Despite the extension of the conflict, Turkey remained one of the few staunch supporters of the rebels along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In western capitals, Turkey's insistence on regime change is seen as an unnecessary complication in the fight against ISIS and delays the achievement of a political solution to the fighting in Syria. Turkey's repeated demands for no-fly zones or safe zones inside Syria have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Ankara's uncompromising approach vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis has been costly for Turkish foreign and security policy. Ankara not only strained relations with Washington and Tehran and to different degrees with Moscow and Baghdad, it has also become the target of multiple IS attacks. Worse yet, the deteriorating

situation with Turkey's southeast and the Kurdistan Labour Party (PKK) and the regionalisation of the Kurdish issue have made Ankara's options more costly. At the same time, President Erdoğan has been extremely capable of using the Syrian refugee crisis for Turkey's advantage with the European Union, and Germany in particular. The humanitarian aspect of the refugee issue has been key in providing much-needed legitimacy both at home and abroad.

Turkey's second objective in Syria is to prevent a Kurdish political entity from emerging. Since the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) - through its armed wing, the People's Defence Units (YPG) - has been able to carve out extensive territory in northern Syria, tensions have risen between the Syrian Kurds and Turkey. As the YPG has proven to be an effective anti-IS fighting force and, thus, enjoys strong support from Washington, Ankara found itself very constrained. The Syrian Kurdish dimension has become Ankara's foremost concern as it fears a new Kurdish entity on its southern border. The Syrian Kurdish dimension has acquired even more significance since the Turkish government broke off a two-year peace process with the PKK in June 2015.<sup>4</sup> Needless to add, the internationalisation of the Kurdish dimension has complicated Ankara's options at home.

The Syrian Kurds now control considerable parts of Turkey's immediate southern neighbourhood, with the exception of a small pocket (Manbij), which has become a major source of contention between Ankara, Washington and the Syrian Kurds. The Russian entry into the Syrian theatre has further complicated the situation as the YPG also enjoys support from Russia.<sup>5</sup> Due to U.S. pressure, Ankara has so far refrained from attacking YPG positions heavily, except for the Manbij pocket which Turkey does not want to see fall into YPG hands. Turkey wants to prevent the YPG from completing the geographic contiguity of the Kurdish cantons on its southern border.

Since Russia entered the battlefield and impacted the situation forcefully, the military balance in

northern Syria has been changing significantly. Apart from providing strong support to the embattled Assad regime, the Russian presence has provided a counterweight to Turkish influence in northern Syria. Tensions between Ankara and Moscow have negatively impacted supply routes from Turkey to the rebels in Syria. Worse yet for Turkey, the downing of a Russian warplane in November 2015 had a disastrous effect on its air force activities in northern Syria and temporarily poisoned Ankara's relations with Moscow. Until recently, Turkish warplanes have difficulty in entering Syrian airspace since Moscow is keen to hit back via its Latakia-based S-400 surface-to-air missiles capability based.<sup>6</sup> Following a Turkish apology to the Kremlin and a bloody coup attempt in Turkey, Ankara and Moscow have begun to normalise their relations.

Turkey's Syria policy was never popular at home. Even the AKP base has not been convinced that regime change is a sound policy.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Erdoğan is blessed to have an extremely weak and divided opposition against him. He has managed to keep discontent within acceptable limits. Regrettably, Erdoğan's Syria policy has adopted strong sectarian tones and, thus, also creates tension at home. Among Turkey's opposition there has been widespread belief that Ankara has been turning a blind eye to IS activities. Turkey's role in the transfer of arms and ammunition has become highly publicised and continues to be a source of major contention. Not surprisingly, Turkey's border policy has been strongly criticised in the past. Accusations of material, ammunition and fighters reaching Syria via Turkey have considerably damaged the country's international standing.

Change in the AKP leadership, namely the dismissal of the architect of Turkey's Syria policy Ahmet Davutoğlu has offered President Erdoğan a face-saving opportunity for policy adjustment. Although Erdoğan has been heavily invested in regime change there are credible signs that Ankara is seeking a new arrangement in coordination with Moscow. Yet, as is

evident by Turkey's eagerness to take part in the Mosul Operation, Ankara appears intent to be more involved in northern Iraq and Syria.

What Turkey wants to achieve in Syria seems almost impossible to achieve in the short-run. Hence, Ankara is now much more focused on preventing the emergence of a political entity dominated by the PYD-YPG on its southern borders. Ankara has made some progress in sensitising the Obama Administration on this issue. Erdoğan also sees continued support to the rebels as a guarantee to have a seat at the negotiation table if and when a political process starts. Contrasting with the initial enthusiasm about a "Turkish Moment" when the Arab Uprisings erupted, Ankara will have to settle, it seems, for a much more modest outcome than originally envisaged in 2011.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There was similarity in the level and quality of encouragement shown toward Turkey in 2011 and the support lent to President Ozal in the 1990s when Turkey was portrayed as a model to the Turkic states of Central Asia. This time the “Turkish model” was seen as a useful example for the Middle East dominated by the Arab Uprisings.

<sup>2</sup> The term “New Turkey” signifies a new conservative / Islamist Turkey with a neo-Ottoman foreign policy identity built by R.T. Erdogan. The term is highly charged in the current Turkish political discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Hurriyet Daily News (1 February 2011), “Turkish PM Erdoğan urges Mubarak to heed Egyptian outcry”, available at: <[www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkey-calls-on-mubarak-to-heed-calls-for-change-2011-02-01](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkey-calls-on-mubarak-to-heed-calls-for-change-2011-02-01)> (accessed on 10.10.2016).

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable disagreement which side is to blame for the breaking of the peace process. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that renewed violence and a tough stance against the PKK has contributed immensely to the AKP’s election victory on 1 November 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Russia Today (10 February 2016), “Syrian Kurdistan mission opens in Moscow”, available at: <[www.rt.com/news/332077-kurdish-representative-office-moscow/](http://www.rt.com/news/332077-kurdish-representative-office-moscow/)> (accessed on 10.10.2016).

<sup>6</sup> BBC World (1 December 2015), “Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal”, available at: <[www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537)> (accessed on 12.10.2016).

Russia Beyond the Headlines (15 March 2016) “Russian S-400 systems may stay in Syria for a while - Federation Council”, available at: <[www.rbth.com/news/2016/03/15/russian-s-400-systems-may-stay-in-syria-for-a-while-federation-council\\_575905](http://www.rbth.com/news/2016/03/15/russian-s-400-systems-may-stay-in-syria-for-a-while-federation-council_575905)> (accessed on 12.10.2016).

<sup>7</sup> Erdogan’s Syria policy has never been truly popular among the AKP base either. Numerous public opinion polls indicated that an overwhelming majority of Turks were cool to the idea of regime change in Syria. According to an August 2013 poll, 74.2 per cent of Turks disapproved of Erdogan’s Syria policy. Source: SÖZCÜ (28 August 2013), “Bu anket Başbakanı gerçekten ağlatacak!...”, available at: <[www.sozcu.com.tr/2013/yazarlar/ugur-dundar/bu-anket-basbakani-gercekten-aglatacak-362019/](http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2013/yazarlar/ugur-dundar/bu-anket-basbakani-gercekten-aglatacak-362019/)> (accessed on 12.10.2016).

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