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Middle East and North Africa Programme Meeting Summary

Syria, Turkey and Iran: Regional Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of discussions that took place at a Chatham House roundtable meeting in December 2012. [Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy](#), a recently published Briefing Paper by Associate Fellow Dr Christopher Phillips, was used as a springboard for wide-ranging discussions on the rationale and future of Turkish and Iranian policy towards the ongoing crisis in Syria.

Some of the main findings of the meeting include:

- While Turkey has been advocating military intervention such as a NATO no-fly zone, it is unwilling to act unilaterally and accepts that the UN will need to take the decision.
- Turkey continues to support the political opposition in Syria, but fears that should heavy weapons be provided to militias they may fall into the hands of PKK militants.
- If Bashar al-Assad's regime falls it will be a sizeable strategic setback for its ally Iran, as Syria gives Iran access to Lebanon and Israel.
- Although Iran continues to support Assad's regime, it is also reaching out to the opposition. Iran's greatest concern is for military and intelligence cooperation to continue between the two countries.
- Iran's policy towards Syria will be strongly affected if Russia decides to reduce or terminate its support for the Assad regime.

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Turkey's response to the Syria crisis

Turkey's response to the Syria crisis has evolved through a number of distinct phases. After initially focusing on diplomatic efforts to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to introduce reforms, the Turkish government swiftly cut ties with the Syrian regime in August 2011. This was followed by two overlapping phases: backing the fall of the Assad regime, and then actively supporting and aiding Syria's political and armed opposition.. Finally, the fifth stage of the response has been to advocate direct military intervention, although Turkey is unwilling to act unilaterally.

Turkish concerns

Turkey's concerns relating to the Syrian conflict include refugee flows, Syria's large stockpile of chemical weapons, the implications of Syrian territorial disintegration (especially if a new Kurdish autonomous zone results) and preserving its economic interests in Northern Iraq. 90% of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) trade is with Turkey.

The increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict is also particularly worrying to Turkey's Arabic-speaking Alawi population concentrated close to the Syrian border. Strongly secularist, they are worried by the prospect of Assad's secular regime being replaced by a Sunni Islamist one.

Developments in the Turkish response

Refugee flows into Turkey are decreasing as many Syrians are now choosing to remain in rebel-held territory in northern Syria. It seems unlikely that Bashar al-Assad's regime will be able to recapture lost territory, but nor is it clear when his government might fall. The rebels need military intervention, more arms and more time in order to topple Assad. Turkey is neither willing to undertake direct military intervention unilaterally, nor to provide heavy weapons which it fears might fall into the hands of the PKK. Instead it is continuing to support the political opposition and looking to mitigate the risk of state collapse in Syria by taking part in multilateral discussions including with Russia and Iran.

While Turkey has been advocating a NATO no-fly zone, there has been a growing acceptance that the UN needs to make the decision on military intervention and that it is unlikely to happen. As such, Turkey has begun to make more defensive moves, including requesting the deployment of NATO Patriot missiles close to the Syrian border.

Iran's response to the Syria crisis

The 33-year old alliance between Syria and Iran has formed a key strategic axis in the region. The relationship is underpinned by pragmatic concerns and is based on common strategic goals. If the Assad regime falls, this will be seen as a sizeable strategic and foreign policy setback for Iran. Not only does Syria provide its ally with access to Lebanon and Israel, but it has also provided assistance and arms to Hezbollah, commonly seen as an Iranian proxy. Hezbollah's survival is seen as one of Iran's most vital interests in the region.

Iran's response to the Syria crisis has revealed the difficult position in which it found itself at the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Iran had initially voiced its support for revolutions against the pro-Western regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, portraying them as part of an Islamist wave sweeping the region. However, the outbreak of demonstrations in Syria appears to have taken the Iranian leadership by surprise, presenting the dilemma of whether to stand against the demonstrations and risk being perceived as hypocritical, or to watch from the sidelines and hope that future political elites will choose to maintain the existing alliance. Iran chose the former option.

Iranian assistance to the Syrian regime has taken various forms: providing crowd control weapons to the security services; guidance on surveillance and internet monitoring; and financial resources to circumvent sanctions.

Although Iran's support for the Assad regime has remained constant throughout the crisis, it has nevertheless been subject to subtle shifts in motivation and strategy. By the summer of 2011, the inability of the Syrian regime to bring the nationwide unrest under control had become a source of great unease in Tehran, and sections of the political elite feared that they had positioned themselves on the wrong side of history. During this period, Iran reached out to members of Syria's nascent opposition groups, in order to sound out their positions on relations with Iran, Israel and the United States. However, these talks do not appear to have been fruitful.

As Assad's hold on power grows increasingly tenuous, there are now signs that Iran is reaching out to the Syrian opposition once again. As Iran seeks face-saving measures to salvage the situation in Syria, it seems likely that it would support a solution in which Assad steps aside as other trusted elements within the Syrian political elite take his place. Its priority will be to maintain military and intelligence cooperation.

Iran's reliance on Russia

Iran's close relationship with Russia has important implications for the Syria crisis. Both share a vested interest in ensuring that a post-Assad Syria would not fall directly into a Western sphere of influence.

As the situation has worsened and Iran has struggled to exert direct influence over events in Syria, it has become increasingly dependent on Russia. As a result, Russia has called many of the shots over the strategy towards Syria, publicly continuing to honour existing arms contracts with the Syrian regime, for example. However, since neither Russia nor Iran wishes to lose any more political capital than it has already expended on managing the crisis, both have continued to participate in broader multilateral negotiations while simultaneously offering sufficient support for Assad to maintain his grip on power.

Questions remain over the possible Iranian strategy, should Russia turn against Assad. Iran remains under a great deal of pressure, owing to international sanctions, and finds itself increasingly isolated. If one of its closest allies were to perform a *volte-face* in its policy towards Syria, Iran would have to weigh the pros and cons of continued support very carefully.

Although both Russia and Iran would suffer in a post-Assad Syria on account of their previous support for the regime, sectarian narratives in Syria make it likely that Iran would be the greatest loser since it would be perceived as being directly allied with the Shi'a elements that had been forced from power.

The Syria crisis: Iranian concerns

Iranian political elites have spent decades developing relations with a trusted set of interlocutors within Syria's military and security services. The prospect of a change of the guard, and the accompanying uncertainty regarding whether the country's new power-brokers will preserve Iranian strategic interests, is a real concern for Iran.

Since Iran does not share a border with Syria, it appears more willing than Turkey to risk Syria's long-term territorial disintegration, as long as this would result in the maintenance of power by Assad or elements of the current regime. However, the break-up of the Syrian state would still be a cause for concern, as it would directly affect Iran's allies and states with which they share land borders.

ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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