



# Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy

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## Summary points

- After a decade of cooperation and closeness with Syria, Turkey's policy has changed radically as a result of the 2011–12 crisis in Syria. It is now openly calling for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and actively sponsoring the opposition.
- Since March 2011 Turkey has escalated its policy towards Syria in four stages: trying to persuade Assad to reform; cutting diplomatic ties; supporting regional and international political solutions; and, supporting and aiding Syria's political and armed opposition. While advocating a fifth stage – direct military intervention against the Assad regime, such as a no-fly zone or humanitarian corridor – Turkey is unwilling to act unilaterally.
- Turkey has already received over 135,000 Syrian refugees, has been bombarded by Assad's forces and fears the use of chemical weapons. Any further disintegration of the Syrian state could provide a launch pad for Turkish Kurdish separatists and might raise questions about Turkey's own territorial integrity. Economic concerns have also been raised should the crisis spread into the key market of northern Iraq.
- Turkey has recently proposed talks with Russia, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to help resolve the Syria crisis. While unlikely to lead anywhere in the foreseeable future, such a multilateral process may be needed to help stabilize Syria and prevent state collapse if and when Assad eventually falls.

## Introduction

Few international neighbours have had such a dramatic and volatile relationship as Turkey and Syria have in recent years. In 1998 Turkey deployed tanks along the two countries' 910km border, threatening to invade unless Damascus ceased its support for Kurdish-Turkish separatists. After Syria relented, a period of *détente* rapidly blossomed into a full friendship in the late 2000s, when joint cabinet meetings were held and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even holidayed with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. As one Turkish foreign ministry official remarked, Syria was Turkey's biggest diplomatic investment in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Yet after Assad rejected Turkey's pleas to democratize in the wake of the uprising that began in 2011, opting instead for violent repression, bilateral ties have again been seriously weakened. Turkey now supports the political and armed opposition seeking to topple Assad, and the two countries' armed forces have exchanged fire along the border since the summer of 2012, raising the prospect of an inadvertent deterioration into war.

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This paper examines the changing nature of Turkey's policy towards Syria, outlining their relationship prior to 2011, before discussing how and why it soured so quickly, and focusing on the problems that the Syria crisis presents to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its regional ambitions.<sup>2</sup> The paper considers the many domestic issues within Turkey that the Syria crisis threatens to create or exacerbate: the economy, the Kurdish issue, political opposition to AKP rule, and ethnic

and sectarian tensions. It questions whether Turkey's response has been as proactive as its policy-makers claim, or whether the escalation in rhetoric and action against the Assad regime has been more the result of frustration and reaction. It sets Turkey's policy towards Syria in the context of the emerging regional and international rivalry over the fate of Syria, finally considering options for both Turkey and the West.

This paper is the result of field research conducted in Turkey over the summer of 2012. The author interviewed several policy-makers, commentators, academics, opposition figures and business leaders in Istanbul and Ankara and along the Syrian border to gain a sense of what is driving Turkey's Syria policy and the impact it is having domestically. As such it considers both the stance of the AKP government and the different criticisms levelled at it from within Turkey.

## Syria: Turkey's gateway to the Arab world

For most of its history Turkey has had a poor relationship with its southern neighbour. After independence Turkey showed little interest in the states carved out of the Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces, propelled by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's desire to face westwards and a lingering sense of betrayal directed towards the Arabs for having sided with Britain in the First World War.<sup>3</sup> Syria was particularly problematic. Turkey and Syria were on opposite sides in the Cold War, with Ankara a founding member of NATO and Damascus becoming the USSR's closest regional ally. Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, promoted a centralized socialist economy. This meant trade relations between the two countries got nowhere – unlike Turkey's growing ties with Iraq and Iran during the 1980s. Instead, Hafez al-Assad continued to clash with Turkey: championing Syrian claims to the Turkish province of Hatay, demanding a greater share of water from the Euphrates River, which runs from Turkey into Syria, and giving military support

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with officials from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 16 July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, 'Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring,' SAM Vision Papers No. 3, April 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Robbins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (London: Hurst, 2003), p. 99.

to the Turkish-Kurdish separatist group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>4</sup> The end of the Cold War and a military alliance with Israel in 1996 enabled Ankara to take a much more confrontational stance in the 1990s, culminating in the 1998 threat to invade if Syria did not hand over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, whom it was sheltering. Yet when Hafez al-Assad swiftly relented to defuse the crisis, the Adana Accords signed soon afterwards opened the door to a decade of Turkish–Syrian cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

Once Syria had agreed to cease its support for the PKK, other historical grievances were soon resolved. Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000 and partially opened up Syria's economy, providing a booming Turkey with new markets. Similarly, he sidelined the issue of Turkish sovereignty over Hatay in 2005, while agreement was reached on water resources in 2008. An enhanced economic, diplomatic and cultural relationship followed. A bilateral free trade agreement, signed in 2004 and initiated in 2007, and a visa-free travel arrangement in 2009 saw Turkish–Syrian trade flourish. Syria's exports to Turkey more than tripled from \$187m in 2006 to \$662m in 2010, while Turkish exports to Syria grew from \$609m to \$1.85bn in the same period.<sup>6</sup> Syrian visitors to Turkey increased more than sevenfold between 2002 and 2011 to just under a million a year, significant enough to prompt a mini-tourist boom in the southern Turkish cities of Antakya and Gaziantep.<sup>7</sup> Foreign direct investment by Turkey grew, with one leading Gaziantep company even relocating 40% of its production capacity to northern Syria, drawn by cheaper labour.<sup>8</sup> Syria's economic benefits were more modest: it enjoyed a reciprocal surge in Turkish tourism, particularly in Aleppo, but also saw

some of its commercial enterprises bankrupted by an inability to compete with Turkish imports.<sup>9</sup>

Syria did receive political rewards, however. The blossoming friendship helped Assad out of the diplomatic isolation imposed on him by the United States and the European Union after his alleged involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Assad worked hard to foster ties with Turkey, becoming the first Syrian president to visit Ankara in 2004 and shrewdly rushing to endorse Turkey's military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq in 2007, at a time when Erdoğan's Western allies were cautious.<sup>10</sup>

Erdoğan rewarded Assad by facilitating the breaking of Syria's diplomatic isolation. First he mediated indirect Syrian–Israeli peace talks, which, though ultimately unsuccessful following Israel's Operation Cast Lead in 2008–09 that began the unravelling of Turkey's own relationship with Israel, helped to soften Syria's international image. Then, when French President Nicolas Sarkozy became the first Western leader to break the boycott of the Syrian leader by visiting Damascus in 2007, Erdoğan facilitated the meeting by greeting Sarkozy alongside Assad in the capital.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Erdoğan benefited as well. While in the 1990s Syria had proved a 910km-long obstacle to Turkey's political and economic penetration of the wider Arab world, the détente of the 2000s transformed Syria into the gateway to the south. Economically, the reduced-tariff overland trade route through Syria increased Turkish exports to Jordan and the Gulf. At the cultural level, the dubbing of Turkish soap operas into Arabic by Syrian production companies improved the image of Turkey in Arab living rooms everywhere and boosted its regional 'soft power'.<sup>12</sup> Politically, Erdoğan's public friendship with the

4 Meliha Benli Altunışık, 'From Distant Neighbours to Partners? Changing Syrian–Turkish Relations,' *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37 (2006).

5 Mahmut Bali Aykan, 'The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View,' *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 4, June 1999.

6 Turkish Statistical Institute, *The Syria Report*, 31 January 2011, [http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?alt\\_id=12](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?alt_id=12).

7 Interview with official from Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 17 July 2012.

8 Interview with spokesman from Akteks, Gaziantep, 31 July 2012.

9 James Gavin, 'Syria confronts Turkish trade dilemma' *The National*, 2 September 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/syria-confronts-turkish-trade-dilemma>.

10 Andrew E. Kramer, 'Iraq President assails Syria's support for Turkish cross-border threat,' *New York Times*, 21 October 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/October/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html>.

11 Bill Park, *Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 113.

12 Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, 'Leave it to Turkish Soap Operas to Conquer Hearts and Minds,' *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2010, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/15/leave\\_it\\_to\\_turkish\\_soap\\_operas\\_to\\_conquer\\_hearts\\_and\\_minds](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/15/leave_it_to_turkish_soap_operas_to_conquer_hearts_and_minds).

anti-Western Assad built his profile on the 'Arab Street' as a regional leader. This was later boosted by his public outrage at Israel's attacks on Gaza in 2008–09 and the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* flotilla in 2010.

Why did the dramatic improvement in ties after 1998 occur? Much has been made of the policies of Ahmet Davutoğlu, AKP ideologue and foreign minister since 2009, of encouraging 'strategic depth' in foreign relations and seeking 'zero problems with neighbours' in order for Turkey to become a 'central country' in the region and beyond.<sup>13</sup> In many ways Syria was 'the poster child for zero problems,' with a hostile relationship transformed into friendship within years.<sup>14</sup> However, Davutoğlu's 'zero problems' approach alone does not explain Turkey's improved ties with Syria. Reconciliation began before the mildly Islamist AKP first won power in 2002. Two secular 'Kemalist' Turkish politicians laid much of the groundwork. First, the Democratic Left Party's İsmail Cem, who was foreign minister in 1997–2002, played a key role in the Adana Accords and the improved ties thereafter. Second, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, president in 2000–07, took several symbolic steps such as attending Hafez al-Assad's funeral in 2000 and defying a US request to cancel a scheduled visit to Damascus at the height of the 2005 Hariri crisis. The AKP's policies might thus be seen as catalysing the friendship rather than creating it.

The circumstances in which the AKP government has operated have been markedly different from those influencing previous governments.<sup>15</sup> The reforms of the 1980s created an export-driven economy that boomed after the 2001 crash, which contributed to the AKP's coming to power. Turkey became a 'trading state' that incorporated the search for new markets into its foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> This was accompanied by the emergence of strong business groups such as the Independent Industrialists and

Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD) which, along with increasingly influential Chambers of Commerce in the booming cities of southern Anatolia, pressed for a policy of engagement and trade with neighbouring states including Syria. Geostrategic politics in the 2000s also favoured greater accommodation. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 Turkey found itself disagreeing strongly with its Cold War ally's regional approach. Although Erdoğan originally backed the invasion, The Turkish parliament's vote against allowing US troops to use southern Turkey as a launch pad, and popular opposition eventually shifted government policy against the attack. Similarly, the resulting fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq created a power vacuum to Turkey's south that was rapidly filled by militant Islamists, sectarian fighting and Kurdish separatists, all of which worried Ankara. Turkey thus engaged with its southern neighbours to guard against prolonged instability, and Assad's Syria proved an obvious diplomatic partner in this.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, with concerns that President George W. Bush would seek further destabilizing regime changes in Damascus and Tehran after Baghdad, Ankara's vision for the region increasingly diverged from Washington's. The idea of Turkey becoming a 'central country' in the region, and moving closer to Syria as part of that strategy, was thus as much a reaction to the power vacuum following the Iraq war as it was Davutoğlu's ideological project.

### From zero problems to many problems

While the Turkish authorities have been keen to highlight the moral case for the rapid decline in their relations with Syria during 2011, by this stage many of the conditions that had pushed the two countries together during the 2000s had lessened in importance.<sup>18</sup> Economically, Syria had served its purpose as the gateway to the Arab world, and other more hospitable markets had since emerged in the region. In 2011

13 Şaban Kardaş, 'From Zero Problems to Leading the Change: Making Sense of Transformation in Turkey's Regional Policy,' TEPAV *Turkish Policy Brief Series*, No. 5 (2012).

14 Interview with Şaban Kardaş, Assistant Professor, TOBB University, Ankara, 17 July 2012.

15 William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774* (London: Routledge, 2000, 3rd edn forthcoming 2013), p. 253.

16 Kemal Kirişçi, 'The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009).

17 In reality, Assad's effectiveness in aiding Turkish goals was mixed. On the one hand Syria facilitated the spread of jihadist fighters into Iraq that prolonged Iraq's civil wars, creating destabilization. On the other hand, Assad provided diplomatic support for Turkey's operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, notably the PKK crisis of 2007–08. See Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 169.

18 Davutoğlu, 'Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy', p. 11.

Syria was only the seventh largest market in the Middle East and North Africa for Turkey, which exported ten times more to Iraq.<sup>19</sup> When Syrian–Turkish trade eventually halted in 2012, a few regions were badly hit, but the general consensus among big business was that the economy could survive.<sup>20</sup> Unlike in Libya, where substantial Turkish construction contracts with the regime of Muammar Gaddafi and the presence of thousands of Turkish workers and businessmen had made Erdoğan reluctant to approve NATO intervention, the prime minister faced little economic pressure to stand by Assad.<sup>21</sup> Geopolitical circumstances had shifted too. Kurdish northern Iraq had stabilized and Turkey reached an understanding with the Kurdistan Regional Government' (KRG) president Massoud Barzani, making the booming area a major market for Turkish goods.<sup>22</sup> As such, any need for Assad's diplomatic support lessened. Finally, in terms of soft power, having acquired hero-status on the Arab Street, Erdoğan no longer needed Assad. Indeed, as the Arab uprisings broke out, his association with Assad compromised this status. These shifting circumstances alone did not prompt Turkey's volte-face on Syria in 2011, but they diminished the price of turning on Assad.

Turkey did not cut its ties with Syria the moment the Assad regime started its violent crackdown in March 2011. Its response has been gradual and has evolved in four stages. In many ways this has reflected the two forces currently influencing Turkish foreign policy: the traditional security-focused caution of the (severely weakened) military-dominated establishment and the more impulsive

instincts of the AKP, and particularly of Erdoğan himself.<sup>23</sup> The first stage saw Turkey try to persuade Assad to halt his attacks and initiate reform. Erdoğan assured international allies of his influence with Assad, and Davutoğlu and other officials made repeated trips to Damascus between March and August 2011.<sup>24</sup> Turkish officials claim to have even prepared speeches on reform that Assad agreed to make, only for him to renege later. As one official stated, 'Assad just kept reading from the same script, he didn't want to change.'<sup>25</sup>

Yet the government's critics in Turkey argue that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu greatly over-estimated their real influence with Assad.<sup>26</sup> Soli Özel, a columnist for the Turkish daily *Haberturk*, argues that Turkey's leadership was naïve, failing to realize that reform was a matter of life and death for the Assad regime.<sup>27</sup> Ankara University's İlhan Uzgel argues their behaviour was more arrogant, and that they assumed they knew Syria on the basis of their interactions over the past decade, despite the lack of Syria specialists (and Arabists in general) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs owing to its traditional westward-facing orientation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, only six of the 135 Turkish diplomats working in the Arab world speak Arabic, the same number as the United Kingdom has in its Tripoli embassy alone.<sup>29</sup> While it is forgivable to be deceived by a leader believed to be an ally, there were clearly gaps in Turkish knowledge and intelligence when it came to Syria that exposed Erdoğan's assurances to the international community as wishful thinking.<sup>30</sup>

19 Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Syria Country Report', March 2011; interview with official from Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, Gaziantep, 30 July 2012.

20 Interview with Gökhan Bacik, Zirve University, Gaziantep, 1 August 2012.

21 Fadi Hakura, *Turkey and the Middle East: Internal Confidence, External Assertiveness*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, November 2011, <http://www.chatham-house.org/publications/papers/view/179761>.

22 Interview with spokesman from Naksan Plastik, Gaziantep, 1 August 2012.

23 Some would argue that the older forces are now so weak that in fact the AKP has become the establishment. Ahmet Kuru, 'The Rise and Fall of Military Tutelage in Turkey: Fears of Islamism, Kurdism and Communism', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2012); Robbins, *Suits and Uniforms* (2003), pp. 382–84.

24 Interview with Soli Özel, Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University, Istanbul, 10 July 2012; interview with Taha Özhan, Director General of the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), Ankara, 17 July 2012.

25 Interview with officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 16 July 2012.

26 Interview with İlhan Uzgel, Professor of International Relations, Ankara University, Ankara, 18 July 2012; interview with Soli Özel, 10 July 2012; interview with Faruk Lojoğlu, foreign affairs spokesman for the CHP, Ankara, 16 July 2012.

27 Interview with Soli Özel, 10 July 2012.

28 Interview with İlhan Uzgel, 18 July 2012.

29 'Turkey's Power Capacity in the Middle East', USAK Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies Report No. 12-04, June 2012, p. 2, <http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/rapor/ctZTC1gAenLx7HaF8Gi7oip20CoDVX.pdf>; 'British Foreign Policy and the "Arab Spring"', House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report, 3 July 2012, p. 65, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfa/80/80.pdf>.

30 Interview with Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar (Director) and Gökçe Perçinoğlu (Project Officer), Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Istanbul, 10 July 2012.

Turkey did not formally cut ties with Syria until 21 September 2011, but the decision appears to have been made earlier. Even before Davutoğlu's final visit to Damascus on 9 August, Erdoğan had made public his exasperation with Assad's lack of cooperation, deploring the crackdown in Hama over Ramadan.<sup>31</sup> As early as June 2011, Turkey showed signs of tacit support for Assad's opponents when it permitted the first serious opposition conference to be held in Antalya. With the first Syrian refugees crossing into Turkey, Erdoğan then permitted the formation of the embryonic armed opposition, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), in Hatay province on 29 July, and the first attempt to coordinate the exiled political opposition into a single Syrian National Council (SNC) took place in Istanbul on 23 August.

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Although the decision to cut ties was apparently made by Erdoğan, officials insist that the foreign service and armed forces concurred.<sup>32</sup> However, critics argue that bridges were burned too quickly, with Erdoğan rushing from offering to help Assad reform to backing his opponents within a month.<sup>33</sup> They argue he swiftly adopted a confrontational stance for personal reasons, i.e. out of anger that his former friend had humiliated him by exposing his limited influence. A few opposition members of parliament maintain that Assad could still have been reasoned with; others argue that Turkey could have cut

ties without going so far as to back the opposition.<sup>34</sup> In response, officials argue that as ties were cut, a confrontational stance was necessary, since Turkey was risking its 'regional credibility' by not joining the international chorus of condemnation.<sup>35</sup> This desire for credibility was particularly pertinent, given that Erdoğan's initial reluctance to condemn Gaddafi had cost him some of his precious Arab street legitimacy. Turkey shared the international assumption at the time that Assad's regime was brittle and, like those in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, would soon fall.

In hindsight it is easy to condemn the speed of Erdoğan's decision, particularly since it was based partly on an emotional response, but at the time it was in line with most Western thinking. This also reflects the AKP's regional ambitions for Turkey. While their critics tend to be inward-facing secular nationalists, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu aim for Turkey to be a 'central country' in the region and the world, meaning that 'regional credibility' on Syria was important. Notably, this strategy worked and support on the Arab Street was retained. A 2012 poll found that 64% of those polled in the Middle East approved of Turkey's response to the Arab Spring, a figure that would have been higher had not only 30% of Syrians and 42% of Iranians backed Ankara's approach.<sup>36</sup>

The presence of the SNC and FSA on Turkish soil from the summer of 2011 did not mean that Turkey backed both with equal measure. At first it restrained the FSA in its Hatay base as the government pursued its third stage, i.e. various political solutions to the crisis. At a diplomatic level, Turkey supported both the Arab League's plan (November 2011–January 2012) and the UN's 'Annan Plan' (February–August 2012), both of which ultimately failed to prevent an escalation of violence, let alone find a negotiated solution. Similarly, Erdoğan called on Assad to resign on 21 November and joined the Arab League in

31 Nada Bakri, 'Turkish minister and other envoys press Syrian leader', *New York Times*, 9 August 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/October20world/middleeast/10syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/October20world/middleeast/10syria.html?_r=0).

32 Interview with officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 16 July 2012.

33 Erol Cebeci and Kadir Ustun, 'The Syrian Quagmire: What's Holding Turkey Back?' *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No. 2 (2012).

34 Interview with Refik Eryılmaz, CHP MP for Sweida (Hatay), Antakya, 7 August 2012; interview with İlhan Uzgel, 18 July 2012; interview with Faruk Loçoğlu, 16 July 2012; interview with Gökhan Bacık, 1 August 2012.

35 Interview with officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 16 July 2012.

36 Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, 'The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011', TESEV Foreign Policy Programme, January 2012, p. 19.

imposing economic sanctions on his regime, adding to those from the EU and United States.<sup>37</sup> Yet these initiatives came no closer to toppling Assad, who was aided by the inability of the opposition to unite against him. Erdoğan's critics partly blame him and his government for this disunity.

Although Turkey sponsored the SNC, among its members Ankara most favoured the Muslim Brotherhood, an 'ideological bedfellow' of the AKP that it had been trying to persuade Assad to accommodate since 2009.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood having a voice that many of Syria's secular opposition felt was disproportionate to its actual following inside the country. This included controlling the largest number of council seats and the influential relief committee that distributed aid to fighters inside Syria.<sup>39</sup> The situation served to deter several anti-Muslim Brotherhood opposition groups among the Kurds, non-Sunni minorities such as Christians, and secularists from supporting the SNC, and ensured its failure. However, after 40 years of repression, it was highly unlikely that the different Syrian opposition factions would unite easily, irrespective of any interference by Turkey.

The SNC's inability to turn itself into a realistic government-in-waiting, the failure of diplomatic initiatives to topple Assad and the growth of violence inside Syria pushed Turkey towards its fourth stage of response: backing the armed opposition. While Turkey maintained its public support for the SNC, there was a marked escalation in the spring of 2012 in favour of toppling Assad through military means. Although Turkey continues to deny arming the various militias that form the FSA, Western journalists and residents interviewed in the

border regions claim the Turkish military is training and arming the rebels.<sup>40</sup> Turkey, alongside Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and aided by US's Central Intelligence Agency, reportedly established a joint operations base in İncirlik, Adana, to coordinate the rebels.<sup>41</sup>

Turning to armed militias was based on the perception, first, that the diplomatic initiatives were failing and, second, that other regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were (albeit indirectly) providing arms anyway. This strategy also seeks to control who gets weapons, with the hope of restricting the emergence of radical Jihadist groups in Syria.<sup>42</sup> However, this too has earned criticism. The AKP's political opponents argue that, by offering the rebels arms, it has inflated their sense of power, making them less likely to negotiate, which in the view of the critics is the only realistic way the conflict will end.<sup>43</sup> However, given that other states were already providing weapons before Turkey, this effect was beyond the AKP's control and the authorities have merely reacted in an attempt to maintain some control over the rebels. Others argue that by providing the rebels with arms but not sufficient firepower to actually defeat a regime with a large and well-equipped army, in the hope that this will prompt sufficient defections to cause the collapse of the regime, Turkey is merely prolonging the stalemate and hence the civil war. Indeed, this strategy has failed thus far. Despite some leading Sunni figures switching sides, alongside a large number of soldiers and officers with high-ranking titles but not influence, the core of Assad's regime has remained intact. Syria may be ripped apart before these hoped-for decisive defections come about.

Cross-border violence in the summer and autumn of 2012 suggested that Turkey was considering a fifth

37 Jonathon Burch, 'Turkish PM calls on Syria's Assad to quit', Reuters, 22 November 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011.November.2022/us-turkey-syria-idUSTRE7ALOWJ20111122>.

38 Interview with Soli Özel, 10 July 2012; interview with Taha Özhan, 17 July 2012.

39 'The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,' Carnegie Middle East Center, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48370>; Liz Sly, 'Syria's Muslim Brotherhood is gaining influence over anti-Assad revolt', *Washington Post*, 13 May 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-muslim-brotherhood-is-gaining-influence-over-anti-assad-revolt/2012/05/December.20glQAtloJLU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-muslim-brotherhood-is-gaining-influence-over-anti-assad-revolt/2012/05/December.20glQAtloJLU_story.html).

40 Interview with officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 16 July 2012; interviews conducted in Hatay province, 3–8 August 2012; M. Weiss, 'Syrian rebels say Turkey is arming and training them', *The Telegraph*, 22 May 2012, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/michaelweiss/100159613/syrian-rebels-say-turkey-is-arming-and-training-them/>.

41 Regan Doherty and Amana Bakr, 'Secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels', Reuters, 27 July 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/27/us-syria-crisis-centre-idUSBRE86Q0JM20120727>.

42 Aron Lund, 'Syrian Jihadism', *UI Brief*, 14 September 2012, <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/77409.pdf>.

43 Interview with Faruk Loğoğlu, 16 July 2012.

stage in its evolving response to the crisis: direct military intervention. In April the Syrian military, in pursuit of refugees, fired into Turkey, killing two Turkish civilians and wounding 18.<sup>44</sup> In June, the military itself was targeted when Syria shot down a Turkish fighter jet it claimed had crossed into its airspace, killing both pilots. Finally, after Syrian shells were fired into the Turkish town of Ackcakale in October, Turkey responded by shelling Syrian positions to push Assad's forces from the border.

Moreover, as the Syrian regime edges closer to defeat and appears more desperate, Turkey has raised fears of Assad using his declared stockpile of chemical weapons, either on its own people, possibly affecting southern Turks as well, or on Turkey itself. On 4 October, in a closed session, the Turkish parliament approved Erdoğan's request for 'a one-year-long permission to make the necessary arrangements for sending the Turkish Armed Forces to foreign countries', i.e. Syria.<sup>45</sup> Although this provides a Turkish legal mandate for invasion, Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay insisted this was intended as a deterrent to Syria rather than a precursor to war. With Turkey choosing to add further sanctions at the same time, including banning commercial flights to Syria from crossing Turkish airspace, it seemed that war was still far from the primary policy, despite low-level retaliatory fire continuing along the border.

Turkey finds itself in a difficult position. Erdoğan, Davutoğlu and other leaders have repeatedly said that Turkey would rather act as part of a NATO-mandated force and not alone, being wary of becoming bogged down in the Syrian quagmire without support and fearing that Iran and Russia might retaliate on behalf of Assad.<sup>46</sup> However, they do want a buffer zone inside Syria to act as a safe haven for refugees and to provide the rebels with a defended Syrian base to continue the war against Assad, something that various Syrian opposition representatives have been calling for since late 2011.

Yet NATO is reluctant. As the Libya conflict showed, only the United States has the firepower to sustain a prolonged air campaign and, despite his willingness to lead from behind in Libya, President Barack Obama's priorities have been to end US wars in the Middle East, not start new ones. In addition, Syria would require considerably more NATO resources than Libya did: it is more geographically diverse and densely populated than the comparatively easy desert terrain of Libya and Assad has far more sophisticated air defences than Gaddafi had. These would be harder to disable and could cost lives. While the Libya campaign was UN-approved, the blocking by China and Russia of all criticism of Syria makes a similar mandate for NATO action unlikely. Finally, with the unity of Syria's rebel fighters unclear, many NATO members, including the United States, question whether such a safe zone would actually be effective in ending the conflict or just usher in the next stage of violence.<sup>48</sup> Unwilling to act alone, Erdoğan has shown frustration at times at the unwillingness of NATO and the UN to take action, lamenting in a conference in Istanbul in October 2012, 'how can the injustice and weakness displayed in the Syrian issue be explained today?'<sup>48</sup> Of course, as a NATO member, Turkey retains the right to invoke Article 5 to claim that an armed attack on it by Syria constitutes an attack on all members and to demand help. However, this may provoke a crisis in NATO were members unwilling to stand by their obligations, and all involved would hope to avoid this.<sup>49</sup>

## The regional challenge

Turkey's response to the Syria crisis has largely been reactive. However, now that it is involved, removing Assad from power is only one of its goals and Erdoğan wants to ensure that whatever emerges after Assad serves Turkey's local and regional interests. Turkey's stated goal

44 'Turkey protests as Syrians open fire at border', BBC News, 9 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17656657>.

45 'Turkish Parliament passes Syria cross-border motion', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 October 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-parliament-passes-syria-cross-border-motion.aspx?pageID=238&nid=31639>.

46 Interview with Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar and Gökçe Perçinoğlu, 10 July 2012.

47 Various meetings with British government officials.

48 Şebnem Arsu and Hwaida Saad, 'Turkey faults U.N. inaction over Syria' *New York Times*, 13 October 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/world/middleeast/syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0).

49 NATO, 'What is Article 5?', <http://www.nato.int/terrorism/five.htm>.



in Syria today is to support the creation of a stable democratic post-Assad regime.<sup>50</sup> Many Turkish commentators suggest that the AKP would most like to see a moderate Sunni Islamist party elected to power that would then revive the close economic and political Syrian–Turkish ties of the mid-2000s.<sup>51</sup> Yet even without this best-case scenario, Turkey still wants certain outcomes for its vital national interests. First, it needs to stem the inflow of refugees. Since 2011 over 135,000 Syrians have crossed the border into Turkey, with a sharp increase in the summer of 2012.<sup>52</sup> While Turkey is better financially equipped than Jordan and Lebanon to house and feed them, their presence strains local economies, threatens to cause internal ethnic tensions (see below) and cannot be sustained indefinitely.<sup>53</sup>

‘ Turkey’s second goal is to ensure the continuation of a territorially integrated Syrian state ’

A possible buffer zone solution has been mooted by Davutoğlu, who stated in September, ‘If you don’t take certain measures or certain steps on time in the future you will be facing more risks [...] and if you do not take certain decisions today for the women, children escaping from these attacks, then we will be facing more risks in the future.’<sup>54</sup> Yet Turkey knows that such a buffer zone or ‘humanitarian corridor’, like a no-fly zone, would require international military action that currently seems unlikely to come. The continued lack of international appetite for direct military engagement in

Syria has finally prompted Erdoğan to soften his stance. He stated in late October that it was up to the UN and the Arab League to decide on whether there should be a no-fly zone for Syria, and reaffirmed that Turkey would not act unilaterally.<sup>55</sup> The climb-down continued further in November when, following the request for Patriot missiles from NATO to defend against any possible Syrian chemical weapons attacks, the Turkish military issued a statement saying it was ‘out of the question’ that these would be used for a no-fly zone or for an offensive operation.<sup>56</sup>

Turkey’s second goal is to ensure the continuation of a territorially integrated Syrian state. It has long opposed any revision of the post-colonial borders of Middle Eastern states, primarily because its own territory is subject to Armenian, Greek and Kurdish claims, as well as Syria’s claims over Hatay. The breakdown of Syria along ethnic or sectarian lines, as was threatened in Iraq after 2003, might set a precedent that would boost those wishing to break up the Turkish state. This relates to Turkey’s third priority, which is to ensure the Syria crisis does not boost the PKK (see below).

Turkey also has several regional goals. In the mid-2000s it was the second most influential regional power, after Iran, *vis-à-vis* the Assad regime, yet the considerable diplomatic and financial backing given to the opposition by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both politically and militarily, presents the possibility that post-Assad Syria might fall out of Turkey’s sphere of influence. Ankara’s reluctant decision allegedly to arm the opposition itself in cooperation with these Gulf states might be a means of ensuring its own continued influence and checking the latter’s growing power. Indeed, although Saudi Arabia has officially only financed the SNC and FSA, it has struggled to prevent private donors and organizations from backing Salafist

50 Davutoğlu, ‘Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy’, p.10.

51 Interview with Fuat Keyman, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul, 29 June 2012; interview with Kemal Kirişçi, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 12 July 2012; interview with Taha Özhan, 17 July 2012.

52 UNHCR, ‘Syria Regional Refugee Response’, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

53 Christopher Phillips, ‘The impact of Syrian refugees on Turkey and Jordan,’ *The World Today*, Vol. 68, No. 8/9, October 2012.

54 Jeremy Bowen, ‘Turkey: Risk worth taking for Syria safe zones’ BBC News, 28 September 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19753795>.

55 Frank Jordans, ‘Turkish PM: Too soon to call for Syria no-fly zone’, Associated Press, 31 October 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/2012-10-31/turkish-pm-too-soon-to-call-for-syria-no-fly-zone>.

56 NATO missiles not for Syria no-fly zone: Turkish military’, Reuters, 26 November 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/26/us-syria-crisis-turkey-patriot-idUSBRE8APOBA20121126>.

and Jihadist fighters in Syria.<sup>57</sup> Given that elsewhere in the region Saudi Arabia has tended to back Salafists over the Muslim Brotherhood, in spite of their current cooperation, there remains the potential for future Saudi–Turkish rivalry to develop in Syria, with the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood clashing with Saudi-backed Salafists. The AKP hopes to consolidate Turkey's position as a leading regional force by backing 'moderate' Islamists after the Arab Spring, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia's Ennahdha. Restricting the influence of Salafists in the battle against Assad is part of this.

Turkey's mixed reaction to the Syria crisis reflects its historical ambivalence towards involvement in the Middle East. While Davutoğlu and Erdoğan aspire to being regional players, Turkey lacks the more underhand tools of influence used by regional rivals. Whereas Iran, Saudi Arabia and others have long-established relationships with proxy militia and non-state actors in the region, Turkey has few. At an international level, Turkey's actions must be viewed in the context of a broader failure by the international community to prevent Syria's descent into chaos. On the one hand, Russia, Syria's principal international backer, has along with China steadfastly opposed any condemnation of Assad at the UN, upholding the right of a fellow autocrat to rule as he pleases, gaining revenge for NATO's overstepping of its UN mandate in Libya, and protecting the last Russian Mediterranean base in the Syrian port of Tartus. On the other hand, the United States and EU have been cautious and reactive, refusing to commit military resources as in Libya, and seemingly making statements of condemnation and initiating sanctions through a desire to be seen to be acting rather than as part of a concerted strategy. Turkey's mistakes on Syria thus reflect those of its Western allies and, with few alternatives being offered by either international or regional players, excessive criticism of it seems harsh.

In particular, the AKP's opponents unfairly accuse the Turkish government of being a puppet of the United States in its designs on Syria. While the US dynamic has helped shape Turkey's response to the crisis, it is pursuing its own agenda that only partly overlaps with the White House's.<sup>58</sup> Although Erdoğan's frustration with the Bush agenda and recent anti-Israel rhetoric soured relations, the United States remains a key Turkish ally. When the Arab uprisings prompted regional uncertainty, Turkey tacked back towards the safety of its Western alliance, eventually endorsing NATO's Libya campaign and agreeing to host radar for the US missile shield.<sup>59</sup> Both allies share the goal of toppling Assad and Washington has repeatedly turned to Ankara for counsel on Syria, with Obama listing Erdoğan as one of the world leaders he is personally closest to.<sup>60</sup> Despite Turkey's frustration at US reluctance over NATO intervention, both countries have been cautious about extending the alternative military option – providing the rebels with more serious anti-aircraft firepower – fearing it may fall into the wrong hands, whether those of al-Qaeda or the PKK.

Yet the two allies disagree on a key aspect of the Syria crisis: Iran. The United States shares Saudi Arabia's interpretation that it presents an opportunity to strike a blow against Iran's regional ambitions by weakening its key Arab ally. In contrast Turkey is less opposed to Iran, maintaining cordial, though at times strained, relations, and even accepts the possibility of some Iranian role in post-Assad Syria. Key to this is a flourishing trade relationship, worth \$15bn in 2011, underpinned by a Turkish reliance on Iranian fuel, with the Tabriz–Ezurum pipeline providing 19% of Turkey's natural gas in 2010.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in 2011 1.9 million Iranians visited Turkey.<sup>62</sup> Turkey opposes Iran's support of Assad, not Iran itself – a key difference between it and the United States and Saudi Arabia. In October Erdoğan suggested several trilateral mechanisms involving key regional powers to try to

57 Lund, 'Syrian Jihadism'.

58 Interview with Soli Özel, 10 July 2012.

59 Thom Shanker, 'U.S. hails deal with Turkey on missile shield', *New York Times*, 15 September 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/world/europe/turkey-accepts-missile-radar-for-nato-defense-against-iran.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/world/europe/turkey-accepts-missile-radar-for-nato-defense-against-iran.html?_r=0).

60 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 258; 'Obama names Turkish PM Erdoğan among trusted friends', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 20 January 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/obama-names-turkish-pmerdogan-among-trusted-friends.aspx?pageID=238&nid=11897>.

61 Emre Uslu, 'Is Turkey benefiting from its good relations with Iran?', *Today's Zaman*, 25 January 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-269603-is-turkey-benefiting-from-its-good-relations-with-iran.html>; Also see Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 241.

62 Interview with official from Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 17 July 2012.

seek a solution – primarily Turkey–Iran–Egypt, but also Turkey–Saudi Arabia–Egypt and Turkey–Iran–Russia. These initiatives have not progressed far as yet and, indeed, may not do so until the situation on the ground shifts, forcing either the rebels or Assad to compromise.

However, Erdoğan's suggestion represents a further softening of Turkey's own stance, perhaps in recognition of the need for an exit strategy from the Syrian quagmire and a willingness to revive diplomatic options. Moreover, opening these channels now might prove useful when the situation on the ground does eventually shift. Turkey's continued relationship with Iran is a vital asset not available to Western states or Saudi Arabia, and its ties to Russia may similarly prove useful. After further rebel gains, Moscow or Tehran or both might consider using their leverage in Damascus to ease out Assad in favour of a transition government cobbled together from former regime figures well-disposed to them but willing to negotiate with the rebels. This option would appeal to both Turkey and the wider international community as it may prevent the total collapse of the Syrian state that an unchecked rebel victory could produce. Turkey's ties to Iran and Russia could prove vital for any such solution to be reached in the future, and therefore opening these channels now is a positive step, despite the limited immediate returns.

## The domestic challenge

The Turkish government's handling of the Syria crisis has met with a negative reaction at home, which may have a long-lasting impact. As Gökhan Bacik, a columnist for *Today's Zaman*, remarked, whatever the initial reasons for becoming embroiled in the crisis, its impact on the Kurdish issue has become the main concern.<sup>63</sup> Despite promising to improve the treatment of Turkey's 15 million Kurds (18% of the population) on coming to power, and launching several initiatives to enhance their cultural rights, Erdoğan has failed to diminish the secessionist ambitions of the PKK and its supporters. Although the

AKP's decade in power has seen ceasefires and periods of relative calm in the Kurdish eastern provinces, the long-running conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military has continued, and has further escalated in parallel with the Syrian civil war.

There are several reasons for this. First, since Erdoğan turned on Assad in 2011, Damascus has revived its ties with the PKK, trying to increase the price Turkey will pay for backing the rebels. Ankara accuses Assad of handing control of several Syrian-Kurdish areas to the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), from where PKK fighters can train and launch attacks in Turkey via the Iraqi mountains.<sup>64</sup> A car bomb that killed eight civilians in August 2012, in Gaziantep, a city out of the PKK's usual striking range, was blamed on the militant Kurdish group and illustrated the cost of this resurgence. Similarly, Assad's decision to withdraw his forces from Syrian-Kurdish areas, banking on the mostly secular Kurds to stay neutral and deny entry to the Islamist-dominated armed opposition, has emboldened Turkey's Kurds. Just as the creation of the KRG in Iraq after the 2003 war boosted the PKK, the creation of a *de facto* Kurdish autonomous zone in Syria has been similarly invigorating and has heightened Ankara's concerns about the PKK's separatist ambitions in Turkey. The considerable increase in PKK violence within Turkey since 2011, alongside a 68-day hunger strike by PKK prisoners in Turkish jails, prompted the government to announce talks with the separatist group in November 2012, although without offering specifics.<sup>65</sup> While this appeared to be an attempt to decouple the Kurdish issue from the growing crisis in Syria, it may prove harder to achieve than Erdoğan and his government hope.

The Syria crisis is also contributing to sectarian tensions within Turkey. The location of some Syrian refugee camps in Hatay has proved particularly provocative. Hatay, as a province of French-mandate Syria until 1938, has a sizeable Arabic-speaking population, including many who are members of Assad's Alawi sect. Consequently in Antakya,

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Gökhan Bacik, 1 August 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Nihat Ali Özcan, Economic Policy Research Foundation (TEPAV), Ankara, 16 July 2012.

<sup>65</sup> 'Turkey says it will hold talks with Kurdish militants', Reuters, 19 November 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/19/us-turkey-kurds-talks-idUSBRE8AI09Y20121119>.

Hatay's provincial capital, there is much sympathy for both Assad and Syria's Alawis, who mostly still support him. Moreover Antakyans fear that Syria's rising sectarianism will be exported to their traditionally tolerant city, viewing the (mainly Sunni) refugees and the (often Sunni Islamist) rebel fighters who use Hatay as a base as harbingers of war. One local doctor remarked: 'They walk around with their long beards looking like al-Qaeda. I've heard they have told some Turkish Alawis, "after Bashar, you're next!"'<sup>66</sup> Erdoğan can probably handle the criticism of the 500,000 Hatayan Alawis who blame the government for supporting both the rebels and the refugees (often seeing them as synonymous), given that they have long opposed the AKP anyway, being mostly secularists. However, beyond Hatay, 15–20 million (18–25%) of Turkey's Turkish and Kurdish population are Alevis who share spiritual roots with the Alawis and are often viewed by Hatay's Alawis as one and the same. Many Alevis also oppose Erdoğan's policy of backing Syria's rebels.

‘ A poll in *Today's Zaman* in July 2012 found that only 33% of Turks supported the government's Syria policy ’

Beyond historical Alevi-Alawi sympathies, the secular Alevis fear the fall of Assad's secular regime will create an arc of Islamist governments to Turkey's south, emboldening the AKP's conservative tendencies. Moreover, they fear that Turkey has abandoned its traditional stance above the fray of Middle Eastern sectarian politics. Turkey's new allies against Assad, particularly Saudi Arabia, often use

the sectarian language of fighting for the 'Sunnis' against 'Shia' Iran and its Syrian ally. Alevis fear that this may encourage Turkey's usually non-sectarian Sunni majority to turn on them, considered by some to be a Shia sect, in the future.<sup>67</sup> Alevis have a long history of oppression by Sunnis and 109 of them were massacred in Maras in 1978 by right-wing Turkish nationalist groups, the likes of which they fear could return.<sup>68</sup>

Opposition is not restricted to the Alevis. A poll in *Zaman* in July 2012 found that only 33% of Turks supported the government's Syria policy.<sup>69</sup> Coming barely a year after the AKP won its third parliamentary elections with 50% of the vote, the poll suggests that Syria could prove a serious vote-loser for the ruling party. The main opposition force, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has staunchly opposed Erdoğan's Syria policy. 'There is nothing we agree with the AKP on over Syria,' said Faruk Loğoğlu, its spokesman for foreign affairs. 'This is not how a neighbour treats a neighbour, how a Turk talks to an Arab, or how the leader of one country speaks to the leader of another country.'<sup>70</sup> Though the secular, Kemalist CHP has struggled to match the popular appeal of the AKP in recent years, lagging far behind in the 2011 election with only 25% of the vote, reaction against an unpopular Syria policy might give it a much-needed boost. This would be the case in particular if the Syria crisis damaged the buoyant Turkish economy – one of the main sources of the AKP's popularity. So far the crisis has only hit the economy in a few regions previously dependent on Syrian – most notably Antakya whose Chamber of Commerce decried the impact of the government's Syria policy – but most of Turkey's major industrial cities, the 'Anatolian Tigers', are unaffected.<sup>71</sup> However, many businesses express fears that the Kurdish element of the Syria crisis could draw in northern Iraq,

66 Interview with 'Olgun', Antakya, 6 August 2012.

67 'The ephemeral Alevi opening', *The Economist*, 11 August 2012; interview with Soli Özel, 10 July 2012; 'Alevi family's home stoned, stable torched in south-eastern Turkey', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 July 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/alevi-familys-home-stoned-stable-torched-in-southeastern-turkey-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=26648>.

68 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I B Tauris, 1996), p. 415.

69 'Polls reveal Turks against military intervention in Syria', *Today's Zaman*, 5 July 2012, [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=285689](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=285689).

70 Interview with Faruk Loğoğlu, 16 July 2012.

71 'Syria's crisis is killing off trade in Turkey's borderland bazaars', *Milliyet*, 26 October 2012 (translation provided by *Al Monitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2012%20October%20turkey-syria-trade-hatay.html>); interviews conducted in Hatay province, 3–8 August 2012.

with the KRG's Barzani arming and training some Syrian Kurdish militia.<sup>72</sup> Since the KRG is now a key Turkish market, this could seriously damage the southern Turkish economy and raise questions about the AKP's leadership.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, with friction growing between Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül over various domestic issues in late 2012, the Syrian crisis could also prompt divisions within the AKP.<sup>74</sup>

A Syrian–Turkish war would further exacerbate these domestic tensions. Much would depend on what kind of conflict took place: whether it would involve Turkish ground troops; whether Turkey would act alone or as part of a NATO coalition; whether Iran, Russia and Lebanon's Hizbollah would intervene against the Turkish military; and, importantly, the scale of Turkish military and civilian casualties. Currently, 72% of Turks oppose war and, in all likelihood, the longer war dragged on the more Erdoğan could see his popularity erode.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, any use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in northern Syria could result in casualties in southern Turkey even without war – a fear that prompted Turkey to request and obtain the deployment of six NATO Patriot missile batteries under Dutch, German and US supervision in December 2012. High casualties could seriously dent Erdoğan's reported ambitions to redraft the constitution to become a more powerful president in a Putin-esque role swap with Gül in 2014.<sup>76</sup>

Another unwanted result could be the reassertion of the Turkish military in Turkish politics. Erdoğan and the AKP have spent the last decade delicately (and at times indelicately) reducing the military's political influence. A prolonged reliance on it in a war with Syria might reawaken the army's domestic interventionist impulses.

Beyond the AKP's power base, many fear that Turkey's long-term regional position could be damaged by a misguided military intervention. Several commentators fear the damage to Turkey's credibility in the Arab world if it invaded an Arab country – reawakening memories of Ottoman dominance.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, İlhan Uzgel has noted that, for the first time in the Turkish Republic's history, its leaders were calling for the toppling of a neighbouring regime and actively supporting its opponents, which could set a dangerous precedent for enemies to justify their support of the PKK and other domestic enemies in the future.<sup>78</sup> Finally, many feared the damage that a war with Syria would have on Turkey's relationship with Iran and Russia, Assad's principal allies but Turkey's main energy suppliers.

## Back to zero?

While Syria was the poster child of Turkey's 'zero problems' foreign policy approach of the 2000s, the crisis engulfing it since 2011 has ushered in a new direction in Ankara. The desire to be on the right side of history after the Arab Awakenings has prompted Davutoğlu to argue for a proactive post-'zero problems', 'values-based' strategy. This still pursues his original goal of placing Turkey as a 'central country' in the Middle East, but rather than the kind of pragmatism expressed in 'zero problems', it instead requires 'a balance between promoting democratic values and defending national interests'.<sup>79</sup> However, for all this good intention, it is unclear whether Turkey's current approach to Syria is actually achieving this balance. The longer the conflict goes on unresolved, the more Turkish national interests are threatened, whether these relate to the Kurdish problem, a healthy regional

72 'Iraqi Kurds train their Syrian brethren', *Al-Jazeera*, 23 July 2012, <http://m.aljazeera.com/SE/201272393251722498>.

73 Interview with Gökhan Bacik, 1 August 2012; interview with spokesman from Aktoks, Gaziantep, 31 July 2012; interview with spokesman from Naksan Plastik, Gaziantep, 1 August 2012.

74 Yavuz Baydar, 'AKP at crossroads: the historic paradox', *Today's Zaman*, 1 November 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-296867-akp-at-crossroads-the-historic-paradox.html>.

75 Anthony Faiola, 'In Turkey, Syria poses a new test for Erdoğan's authority', *Washington Post*, 3 November 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-turkey-syria-poses-a-new-test-for-erdogans-authority/2012.November.03/12c5cfce-2445-11e2-92f8-7f9c4daf276a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-turkey-syria-poses-a-new-test-for-erdogans-authority/2012.November.03/12c5cfce-2445-11e2-92f8-7f9c4daf276a_story.html).

76 Pinar Aydınli, 'Erdoğan's party submits plan for Turkish presidency' Reuters, 6 November 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012.November.06/uk-turkey-presidency-proposal-idUKBRE8A50ND20121106>.

77 Interview with Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar and Gökçe Perçinoğlu, 10 July 2012.

78 Interview with İlhan Uzgel, 18 July 2012.

79 Davutoğlu, 'Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy', p. 5; Kardas, 'From zero problems to leading the change'.

trading environment, Turkey's own internal ethnic tensions or stemming the flood of refugees pouring over its borders.

Far from being proactive, each stage of Turkey's response to the crisis has been reactive, following the failure of the previous policy. Though some critics have attacked the speed with which Erdoğan and his government abandoned Assad and supported the opposition, it is difficult to see what else could have been done, especially given Assad's persistent duplicity. That said, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, it is increasingly clear that mistakes were made on the Turkish side. Turkey's overestimate of its influence with Assad and its knowledge of Syria led to some miscalculations. Disproportionately favourable support for the Muslim Brotherhood within the SNC contributed to its alienation of other key Syrian groups and the SNC's consequent failure to unite the opposition. Insensitivity towards the concerns of Turkey's Alevis, Alawis and Kurds regarding the Syria crisis has heightened internal tension unnecessarily. Erdoğan has, perhaps too impulsively, invested a lot of political capital in opposing Assad, unnecessarily raising the stakes of success or failure in Syria for himself and his government.

Major international support will be important if the new coalition is to gain the loyalty of Syrian fighters

Turkey remains an important actor in the Syria crisis and will play a key role in a resolution, if it comes, and in the civil war if it continues for several years. The latter scenario is not desirable for Turkey. Even though Ankara would be likely to prove influential over the northern swathe of Syrian territory that might form a 'liberated zone' fighting Assad, this might prove the precursor to the permanent partition of Syria that Turkey wants to avoid. Turkey will thus continue to seek as swift an end to the

crisis as is realistically possible. While it will maintain pressure for a NATO intervention following Obama's re-election, this remains unlikely and Ankara should focus on alternative solutions. Continuing to arm the opposition is one, but giving the rebels anti-aircraft weaponry risks a clash with Turkish national interests if it were to end up in the hands of PKK fighters in the future. Diplomatic solutions thus remain an important avenue to pursue. Turkey's recognition in November 2012 of the united Syrian opposition group formed in Doha, the Syrian National Coalition, is a step in the right direction, finally acknowledging the ineffectiveness of the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council. Major international support will be important if the new coalition is to gain the loyalty of Syrian fighters on the ground and be in a position to form a realistic government in exile. Yet this formation is unlikely to topple Assad alone, with the regime likely to fight on in a prolonged civil war even if it loses permanent control of large swathes of territory.

With the Syrian civil war set to drag on long into 2013 and even beyond, Turkey's leaders thus face a difficult balancing act. The Assad regime's rapid demise is their goal, and they will continue to back the rebels militarily and politically to achieve this, but this cannot be at the expense of domestic stability, which may be threatened by either heavy arming of the rebels or unilateral direct military intervention. While Turkey has made several mistakes regarding the Syria crisis, so have most of its international allies; none of them have produced credible alternative policies and, arguably, all may have been over-reliant on Turkish counsel. In this respect, as one of Syria's nearest neighbours, Turkey stands to pay a heavier price than its more distant Western allies.

While Turkey should not be expected to find a solution to the Syria crisis, as this is a conflict thrust upon it and not of its choosing, a slight glimmer of hope has recently emerged. Turkey's promotion of various trilateral mechanisms that involve Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt offers a forum that may eventually help stabilize Syria and prevent total state collapse if and when the military balance on the ground shifts decisively against Assad. Unlike most states involved in the crisis, Turkey

has a functioning relationship with Iran and Russia, and any discussions that could sway Moscow and/or Tehran to push Assad out in exchange for their retaining influence over a post-Assad Syria should be encouraged. While this may seem an unlikely path today, as the conflict progresses and the quagmire deepens, it may provide a possible route

out towards some form of settlement. On this matter Turkey might consider momentarily deferring its desire to become the region's 'central country' to revive its zero-problems-era goal of acting as a bridge between East (in this instance Iran and Russia), West and the Gulf states in the interests of ending the Syrian conflict.

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