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Turkey: Goodbye to Zero Problems with Neighbours

The Arab Awakening caught Turkey off-guard, challenging the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's emerging foreign policy. This policy, dubbed Zero Problems with Neighbours (ZPwN) by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, codified Ankara's growing independence from the Western tutelage under which most of Turkey's post-Second World War foreign policy had operated. The new policy aimed to position Turkey as a hub of regional integration. It boosted trade and investment ties across geopolitical boundaries and gave Turkey an activist mediation role in addressing such problems as the Iranian nuclear programme, the Syria–Israel conflict, the Fatah– Hamas power struggle, and Iraq's fractious post-Saddam politics. The goal was a new, post-Pax Americana system of regional stability that favoured Turkish interests.

Before the onset of the rebellion in Syria, the AKP government had managed to shift its relations with Damascus from the brink of war to a close partnership. Syria's expulsion of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, in 1998, cleared the most significant cause of friction between the two. Thereafter, the relationship grew stronger, especially after Bashar al-Assad's first visit to Turkey, in January 2004. Turkey saw Syria as a gateway to the Arab world, and Ankara and Damascus co-operated through joint cabinet meetings, combined military drills, and a free-trade agreement.

The Syrian rebellion presented a profound challenge to Ankara's new orientation towards Damascus, forcing it to adapt to changing conditions on the ground that confounded the expectations of Turkish policymakers. In response, Turkey's Syria policy has been driven by a domestic political need to merge the values of the AKP government with Turkish national interests, which include ensuring stability, preventing a regional war with sectarian spillover, and (crucially) limiting the impact of a weakening Syrian central state on Turkey's domestic Kurdish conflict.

Turkey's Syria policy has evolved through three distinct phases. In the early days of the Syrian uprising, Turkey had hoped to maintain its growing ties with Damascus while promoting reform and dialogue between the opposition and the Assad regime, rather than clearly taking sides. From March until late September 2011, Turkey tried to convince Assad to undertake reforms and outreach measures that might help to resolve the crisis. As it became clear that Assad had no intention of making meaningful reforms, and was instead determined to resolve the conflict through a harsh security crackdown, Turkey shifted to a policy of regime change. It empowered Syrian opposition elements, allowing them to organise and convene in Turkey, and it hosted defectors from the Syrian military, reportedly allowing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to set up its headquarters in the south-east of the country.³³ Turkey hoped that these measures might bring the regime to the negotiating table, although Ankara by now believed that the ouster of Assad was essential to resolving the conflict. The emphasis upon regime change, however, did not rule out a transition deal with elements of the old regime deemed to have "clean hands" (such as Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa).

In early 2012, Turkey tried to forge an international "Friends of Syria" coalition to secure regime change. However, it failed to gain the agreement of key players to any form of intervention, including the no-fly zone idea at one stage floated by Ankara. Key NATO partners, most importantly the United States, remained strongly opposed to any form of military intervention. Turkey's more forward-leaning posture at this early stage – including providing headquarters for the leadership of the FSA, combined with the failure of the opposition groups it had backed to make much headway on the ground – left it somewhat isolated. This picture started to change slightly as the US and others took a more active interest in the FSA. At the same time, refugees continued to stream across the border, deepening Turkey's stake in the outcome next door.

As a result, Ankara looked to diplomatic efforts, such as Egypt's September 2012 offer of a Regional Quartet (Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia), or a Russian plan to orchestrate a political settlement, neither of which gained any traction. Turkey had also assumed – incorrectly – that US reluctance to intervene in the Syrian conflict would give way to a more activist position following President Barack Obama's re-election.

³³ Selim Akan, "Main base in Turkey, says rebel Free Syrian Army", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 August 2012, available at www.hurriyetdailynews.com/main-base-in-turkey-says-rebel-free-syrian-army.aspx?pageID=238&nid=28967.

Frustrated with both its erstwhile ally Assad and its Western partners, Turkey began to operate more independently on the ground in support of the rebellion, notably in concert with Qatar. Despite their now active backing for the armed overthrow of the regime in Damascus, Turkey's policy elites insisted that this was consistent with its "Zero Problems" policy on the grounds that no stability was possible in Syria while Assad remained in power. But the Syria crisis is requiring a response from Ankara not easily articulated within the "Zero Problems" rubric. It is having to deal with around 250,000 refugees on Turkish soil; the control of territory between Aleppo and the Syrian border by forces seeking direct support from Turkey; and the fact that PKK-aligned groups have taken control of some key Kurdish towns within Syria.

Ankara's growing involvement in the effort to overthrow Assad has also become a growing source of political discord within Turkey itself. Because, although Turkey has tried to encourage opposition groups to be more inclusive and representative of the full diversity of Syria's communities, it has been unable to prevent the conflict from assuming a more factionalist character. As a result, Ankara's support for the rebellion is perceived by many in Turkey as a sectarian choice, backing Syria's Sunni majority – in the form of the Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council (SNC) and tolerating some (predominantly Sunni) armed rebel groups – against the minorities closest to the regime.

Many among Turkey's Alevi community – the country's single largest minority religious group – have been antagonised by Ankara's support for the rebellion and have therefore chosen to back the Assad regime. Turkey's main opposition party, the Republic People's Party (CHP), has used this sentiment to raise pressure on the AKP government, while a number of smaller, more radical Islamist and leftist groups have also criticised Ankara's Syria policy. CHP leaders have visited Damascus on a couple of occasions (most recently in March 2013) to declare support for Assad, although it more typically couches its opposition to the government's Syria policy on the basis of non-intervention and keeping Turkey out of the regional schemes of the US and the Gulf states. The recent Gezi Park protests, sparked by a police crackdown on environmentalist groups who wanted to protect a park from gentrification, spread out very quickly across the country partly because of tensions caused by the government's Syria policy. Yet, despite this opposition, the AKP government can count on the support of more than half of the electorate for its stance on Syria (even if it chooses to intervene more directly), not only from among its own political base, but also among a majority of conservatives, Sunni voters and Islamists, liberal interventionists, and Turkey's Arab minority.

The greatest challenge the Syrian rebellion has posed to Turkey's long-term national interests so far, however, came when Assad ceded control of key towns in northern Syria, such as Afrin, Kobani, and Rasulayn (Serekaniye), to the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), threatening the potential emergence of a territorial base from which PKK fighters could launch attacks into Turkey. The significance of this development may be muted by Ankara's negotiations with the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, over a political solution to Turkey's own Kurdish conflict (some media reports have suggested that these talks prompted the PYD to agree to a ceasefire with the Arab-Islamist rebel forces). If the negotiations between the PKK and the government fail, however, the PYD challenge is likely to be inflamed to the point of presenting a game-changing risk for Turkey's Syria policy.

Turkey's military has historically wielded a powerful influence over both domestic and foreign policy, although that influence has increasingly lessened (particularly after the 2010 referendum that reaffirmed popular support for the AKP's constitutional vision). The leadership of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) has remained silent on the government's response to the Syrian rebellion and ongoing court cases of military officials over alleged coup plots is likely to contain any dissent over Ankara's Syria policy. The precedent of Libya, where Turkish forces helped to train rebel fighters, suggests that the military will follow the orders of the civilian government. While the TAF may be reluctant to become embroiled in Syria, it would do so if ordered – although only on a multilateral basis in which its legality had been established, presumably via the United Nations Security Council.

Turkey's Syria policy has also raised new tensions in relations that had been steadily improving, with neighbours such as Iran, Iraq, and Russia (although relations with Moscow have proven more resilient, with both governments willing to maintain ties despite their differences over Syria). Conversely, relations with the Gulf states, which had been clouded by Turkey's attempts to forge a compromise agreement with Western powers over Iran's nuclear programme, have steadily improved as a result of Ankara distancing itself from Assad. Despite their common hostility to Assad, Turkey and Saudi Arabia differ over which opposition forces in Syria to support. By way of contrast, Turkey and Qatar concur on Syria in their support for the FSA and the SNC, just as they do over support for the Muslim Brotherhood-led transition in Egypt.

34 Güney Yıldız, "Salih Müslim: Türkiye'de PKK ile görüşmeler PYD'nin önünü açıyor", BBC Türkçe, 7 May 2013, available at www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/05/130506_salih_muslim.shtml.

Again, this sets them apart from Riyadh, whose hostility to the Brotherhood led it instead to support the old establishment in Cairo. For practical purposes, these differences are reflected in the Saudis' willingness to arm a wider array of rebel forces in Syria, including hard-line Salafi groups, while Turkey prefers to support groups vetted by the FSA for fear of empowering "unruly" elements that could threaten regional security.

Ankara has also been frustrated by Washington's hesitant approach, including its reluctance to impose a no-fly zone inside Syria or to arm rebel groups. Turkey has not shared US concerns over empowering anti-American forces, because Turkish officials feel that potential perils are exaggerated. Turkish officials were irked when, last November, the US moved without Ankara's consent to sideline the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood-leaning SNC, replacing it with what America considered to be a more inclusive political leadership in the form of the Syrian National Coalition. Similarly, Ankara was antagonised by Washington's decision to add the most effective rebel fighting force, Jabhat al-Nusra, to its list of international terror organisations (the group subsequently declared its fealty to the leadership of al-Qaeda). Turkish officials saw this as weakening the opposition and reinforcing the narrative of the Assad regime. Further tensions between Ankara and Washington may lie ahead over the Syrian endgame. The US appears more inclined to accept a role for Assad in negotiations and for his regime in a political transition, whereas Turkey strongly opposes any solution that does not see Assad immediately removed from power. However, towards Geneva II, the two countries share a common position that elements from within the Assad regime can join the transitional government to carry Syria through to presidential elections in 2014.

Despite the unmistakable tensions over Syria, the deployment of Patriot missile batteries in Turkey, providing protection from potential Syrian missile attacks, underscores the fact that US-Turkish relations have not been fundamentally damaged by differences in position. Within the EU, Ankara has welcomed French and British support for lifting the arms embargo. The complex Turkish-Israeli relationship, which has seen a long-term decline under AKP rule, has not been significantly altered by the Syria crisis. Both sides may share hostility to the Assad regime, a concern over its chemical weapons capability, and a desire to avoid a power vacuum emerging in Damascus, but they take very different views over the solution to these problems. Unlike Turkey, Israel is more ambiguous over the question of whether Assad should be brought down and is fearful of the rebellion being "hijacked by Islamists". The US-brokered rapprochement between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his

Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu should not be overplayed. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Turkey's Syria policy has strengthened its ties with Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt, as well as with civil society activists pressing for democratic changes in other Arab countries (in particular, with the Muslim Brotherhood forces that have been the greatest beneficiary of the opening-up of democratic political space across the region over the past two years).

The evolution of Turkey's Syria policy, from pressing Assad to undertake democratic reforms to aggressively seeking his ouster, has been a gradual and pragmatic one, although it may have also contained moments of strategic miscalculation. Turkey, like a number of other foreign stakeholders, assessed that Assad would fall within a year of the outbreak of open rebellion. It was the assumption that Assad's fall was imminent that persuaded Ankara, after seven months of pressing Assad to undertake reforms, to throw its weight behind the armed rebellion. Turkey did not want to end up "on the wrong side of history", especially after its previous attempts to mediate between Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and his opponents had drawn scorn and derision among Arab publics. But not only had Turkey overestimated the extent of its own leverage over Assad in the early period of the rebellion, it may also have underestimated the strength and resilience of his regime when choosing to back the armed opposition.

The Syria crisis has highlighted the limits of the AKP government's ZPwN policy, prompting Ankara to turn once more to hard-power elements alongside soft power and diplomacy. It has underscored the limits on Turkey's ability to remain aloof from, or simply to act as mediator in, escalating regional power struggles. But the experience has also hardened Turkey's decision-makers, boosting their confidence to mount more muscular cross-border interventions, and laying to rest any naivety over the prospects for resolving all regional conflicts through dialogue. Turkey's frustration with American restraint has prompted it to act independently of Washington, further boosting its confidence as a regional hard- and soft-power centre of influence.

Meanwhile, Ankara's Syria policy has jeopardised substantial economic ties, and has run the risk of Turkey being too closely identified with factionalist regional power games to an extent that undermines its ability to mediate in other conflicts. But, by accepting those risks, Turkey has matured as a regional strategic actor, forging new alliances and even taking a proactive approach to solving its biggest national security challenge: the PKK and Kurdish aspirations. Carefully managed, the new turn towards dialogue with the PKK

enhances the prospects for the long-term stabilisation of Turkey's Kurdish problem. Conversely, a breakdown in that dialogue runs the greater risk of regional conflict given Kurdish gains as a result of the Syrian rebellion.

Turkey hopes to see an inclusive democratic Syria emerge from the conflict, which would naturally be an ally of Ankara given Turkey's role in supporting the rebellion. But if Syria collapses into a failed state, Turkey's security interests will be further endangered. Even if this happens, Turkey's leadership has grown more confident in its ability to manage regional crises and in its central role as a stakeholder in a new Middle East political and security order. Indeed, the Syria crisis may herald an important evolution of thinking within the AKP government, forcing it to embrace the idea that the progressive regional stability it has sought will occasionally require the projection of Turkey's hard-power capabilities alongside its burgeoning soft power.