

The Escalating Syrian Crisis and US-Turkey Relations

As we are all witnessing, the Syrian Crisis is escalating. For months the Assad regime has appeared to be doomed. But it is still there and when and how it goes or what will follow is unclear. What is clear is that the consequence of the prolonged struggle in Syria for the unfortunate citizens of that troubled country, virtually the entire region and Turkey itself will be significant.

Today I want to dwell not so much on the Syrian Crisis itself but on its current and possible future impact on US-Turkey relations. What is also clear after Prime Minister Erdogan's comments on CNN the other day, in which he regretted the absence of more concrete actions by the Obama Administration, is that the Syrian Crisis is producing real strains in what has been hailed in recent years in both Washington and Ankara as a very close partnership.

However, before focusing on this, let me quickly review the Turkish involvement in and exposure to the crisis.

Prime Minister Erdogan was the first foreign leader to openly break with Assad almost a year ago. He has been stressing constantly since then that Assad's downfall is inevitable while upgrading Turkey's involvement.

Turkey has refrained from direct military intervention to hasten Assad's departure, but it is sheltering close to 100,000 refugees, and that number could well increase dramatically depending on the turn of events in Syria, hosting the Syrian National Council as well as the Free Syrian Army working to overthrow Assad, quietly allowing the passage through its territory of volunteers from other Moslem countries to fight in Syria, permitting wounded fighters to come into Turkey for treatment, and allowing the transfer of arms reportedly paid for by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

It has also effectively established a de facto 'no-fly zone' for Syrian aircraft just beyond its border through a warning by Prime Minister Erdogan that they would be shot if they came close to the border after Syria shot down a Turkish jet in June.

During the past decade under the current government, Turkish-Syrian relations were elevated from a level which was frosty at best – mainly because of past Syrian support for the PKK and claims over the Turkish province of Hatay – to one in which Syria frankly became the showcase of Turkey's new foreign policy.

Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu devoted considerable time and attention to relations with neighbors as well as their parallel goal of enhancing Turkey's strategic depth and influence by promoting interaction with Arab countries near and far.

Foreign Minister Davutoglu has noted that he had visited Damascus no less than 60 times while Erdogan and Assad established a close personal relationship. Visas were lifted, there were joint cabinet meetings and even a joint military exercise and as cross-border trade increased. There was preliminary planning for a new Middle East free trade grouping spearheaded by the two countries. In short, Syria was the crown jewel of Turkey's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" and opening to the Middle East.

The affair ended when the Syrian regime's harsh response to the dissent and the subsequent uprising forced Ankara to choose between sticking to Assad and maintaining its declared policy of support for the region-wide mass stirring of the Arab Spring. As part of the later policy, Erdogan had supported the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and been at the forefront of leaders calling for Mubarak's ouster in Egypt.

Turkey chose the latter option, as the prime minister explained, because Assad rejected his advice to reform and Turkey had to side with his opponents who were fighting for freedom and democracy. However, his decision was also a product of the joint approach and close coordination with President Obama throughout the Arab Spring. In fact, trying to manage the difficult and complicated transition away from autocratic regimes in the Middle East became the primary theme in the Ankara-Washington relationship in 2011 and Assad was seen by both Washington and Ankara as the next domino to fall.

To be sure, the current Turkish government has been more interested in the Middle East than any previous government. However, this engagement also fit into its relationship with the US, particularly after Obama had outlined in 2009 a special role for Turkey in helping to improve relations between the US and the Islamic World and even more so with the advent of the Arab Spring.

At the core of the US-Turkish cooperation in the Middle East was the implementation of what has often been called the 'Turkish Model' according to which Islamists and others previously shut out of the ossified political systems in the Middle East were encouraged and even supported to seek power through the ballot box. The common goal was to defuse the appeal of the extremists while helping to enhance Turkey's influence and simultaneously facilitate a smoother relationship between the US and the New Middle East.

All might have continued to go well if Assad had gone as quickly as Ben Ali or Mubarak. However, his continuation in power and the associated and growing burden on Turkey threatens to undercut the essence of the joint approach to transformation in the Middle East which emphasized Turkey's ability to influence events decisively in its Arab neighbors. After all, Syria is a relatively weak country immediately beyond its southern border. The reality is that even if Assad were to fall tomorrow, the prolonged bloody process through which he is ousted has undermined the Washington-Ankara approach. Notwithstanding the events in Libya, this stressed the need to avoid, as much as possible, prolonged turmoil and extremism.

The savagery of the Assad Regime and its open sectarianism has begun to provoke a similar response from the insurgents and consequently it seems inevitable that sectarian extremism will be a major factor in the post-Assad equation in Syria and beyond. This is especially unwelcome for Ankara as it opens it to accusations by not just the Nusayris/Alawites in Syria but also Shias elsewhere in the Middle East and even within Turkey itself that it is pursuing a purely Sunni agenda with Qatar and Saudi Arabia through its support for the radical insurgents.

At the same time, having fought mostly with Sunni extremists for over a decade since 9/11, there is a very real reluctance on the part of the US and particularly very influential counterterrorism specialists in Washington to arming the Syrian opposition because of the radicals in its ranks. The paradox is that the current US policy of giving only non-lethal assistance has forced the opposition to look elsewhere not only for arms but also for additional volunteers from the extremist fringe.

There is also resistance on the part of the US military establishment to the kind of US involvement in Syria desired by Ankara. This was confirmed recently and publicly by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey. While military action of the Libya variety was not in the cards, Dempsey also seemed to rule out the creation of a 'safe zone' in northern Syria.

The US diplomatic machinery, while publicly committed to the end of the Assad Regime, has also been unenthusiastic about pushing for additional major steps that would serve to match its actions to its rhetoric. The absence of Secretary of State Clinton from the recent fruitless special United Nations Security Council session on Syria not only confirmed this impression but also annoyed Foreign Minister Davutoglu, as he showed by his comments.

To be sure, the cautious attitude of the other parts of the US decision making system is reinforced by the stance of the influential Obama campaign team which is focused on the task of getting the president re-elected. Knowing that foreign entanglements since 9/11 have wearied the American electorate, which is focused on economic problems, the Obama team have fashioned a message that is essentially one of "We pulled out of Iraq, we will pull out of Afghanistan and we will not get involved militarily in Iran or Syria."

So what about President Obama himself? It is worth noting in this regard that his foreign policy doctrine is based on 'leading from behind' as one of his aides in the White House unfortunately termed it. So while everyone is looking to Washington to take the lead on Syria, Obama has characteristically preferred to look for cooperation with other countries to help form an international consensus before giving support, as in Libya where Cameron and Sarkozy took the lead. Consequently his reticence on Syria and his apparent desire to see Turkey take the lead should not have come as a surprise to his good friend Tayyip Erdogan.

Having essentially hidden his reluctance to intervene more forcefully behind Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council according to his detractors, Obama's preferred course of action is to use the covert means provided by the CIA. Columnist David Ignatius, who closely reflects the thinking of both the White House and the CIA recently drew attention to increasing parallels between the long proxy war the US fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan through

the CIA three decades ago and the US approach in Syria. If his analysis is correct, then Turkey is Pakistan and Antakya is Peshawar.

So what does all this mean for US-Turkey relations? The fact that Obama who reportedly spoke to Erdogan 18 times last year as the Arab Spring unfolded spoke to him only once this year in early January prior to a call by Erdogan in August – the famous baseball bat conversation – is significant. Although that conversation was followed by a hastily arranged visit by Secretary Clinton to Turkey and a follow up visit by a senior State Department official, it is difficult to believe that the two countries have fashioned a revised joint strategy incorporating specific steps beginning with a security belt inside Syria that will quickly alleviate the growing pressures on Turkey.

Consequently and unfortunately, it seems safe to predict that unless the Assad Regime, which enjoys the hitherto decisive backing of Russia at the diplomatic level and Iran at the operational level, collapses soon these pressures, which include the upsurge of deadly PKK terrorism supported by the desperate regime in Damascus and possibly also Tehran, will inevitably produce growing disillusionment in official Ankara and even more importantly on the part of the Turkish public over Washington's policies. While the relationship appears to be sufficiently robust to resist such dissatisfaction, a prolongation of the current situation could ultimately even lead to a questioning of the efficacy of the model partnership itself.