

Turkey's Dilemma: How to Act on Syria without Losing Soft Power

Written by Benedetta Berti and Gonca Noyan

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BENEDETTA BERTI AND GONCA NOYAN, MAR 24 2012

In the past year the so-called Arab Spring has shaken up the status quo in the Middle East, showing the importance and power of civil society and strategic non-violence. However, the non-violent protests have also escalated into violent confrontations between the state and its citizens, like in the cases of Libya and Syria. The ongoing internal violence in Syria—which has been raging for over a year—has quickly escalated into a fully-fledged armed confrontation between the authoritarian regime led by Bashar al-Assad and the internally divided Syrian opposition.

The regime has responded to the protests by implementing cosmetic political reforms and by cracking down on internal dissent through its coercive apparatus. This has resulted in violent repression and massive civilian suffering, with the UN-backed independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria not hesitating to refer to ongoing “crimes against humanity.”

Despite the worldwide condemnation for the Assad regime—resulting in both sanctions as well as in a large number of Western and Middle Eastern states cutting direct diplomatic ties— the international community has been extremely reluctant to get involved in the Syrian crisis. This is especially true since the UNSC—*de facto* blocked by the Russian and Chinese veto—has failed to pass a resolution, strongly condemning the regime and urging the international community to act through either strong sanctions or intervention. Therefore, given the current paralysis of the UNSC and the widespread reluctance of Western powers to get directly involved, regional actors have an ever greater role to play in the ongoing crisis.

In this context, it is especially important to look at Syria’s northern neighbor, Turkey—which shares its longest common border with Syria. The relationship between the two countries has in the past been quite rocky: Syria’s territorial claims on Turkey’s Hatay province, a conflict over the shared water resources of the Euphrates river, and Syrian support for the PKK in Turkey have all created frictions in the past between the two countries, with the last issue bringing the two countries to the brink of war in 1998.

However, since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been in power in 2002, economic, political, and diplomatic relations between the two countries had been gradually improving. It is therefore not surprising to learn that, when the protests began to intensify in Syria, Turkey first attempted to mediate and diffuse the violence. However, as time passed and more reports regarding Assad’s brutality against its own people started to emerge, Turkey changed its initial accommodating tone and began to criticize the Syrian regime more harshly.

The deterioration of the relationship between the two countries has been exemplified by the attacks perpetrated by pro-Assad supporters against the Turkish Embassy in Damascus on November 12, 2011. Since then, Turkey has increased its criticism of the regime further, urging Assad to stop the violence and step down, and going as far as advocating the establishment of a “buffer zone” or a “safe zone” to help civilians, particularly Syrian refugees, as recently stated by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan.

Turkey is uniquely positioned, to play a role in the context of the ongoing Syrian crisis, as it has both the interest and the credibility to do so.

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Firstly, the escalation of violence has direct repercussions on Turkish security, not just because the instability in Syria is potentially contagious, but also because of the massive influx of Syrian refugees—conservative estimates mention at least 16,000 people—that have sought refuge in Turkey since the bloody crackdown by the Assad regime began.

Secondly, Turkey's credibility and influence in the region have been rising steadily in the past few years, with the country currently being the most popular regional actor amongst the "Arab street." Turkey has relied on its economic and financial stability as well as on its shared cultural, historic, and religious heritage to boost its role and power within the MENA region. In doing this, the country has been betting especially on its "soft power," relying precisely on a combination of economic, political and cultural tools to redefine its regional involvement. In addition, Turkey has invested in a "zero-problems with neighbors" foreign policy, diffusing tensions and trying to boost its bilateral relations with countries such as Syria or Iran.

However, the ongoing Syrian crisis is challenging both strategies, testing whether reliance on soft power alone is enough to shift the regional balance of power in Turkey's favor, and questioning whether it is possible to focus on "zero problems" strategies when dealing with brutal and authoritarian regimes, like the Syrian one.

So, what are Turkey's options with respect to Syria?

On the one hand of the spectrum, the country could bid farewell to its "soft" approach and it could intervene militarily in Syria. While militarily the option is feasible, the political costs of intervention are extremely high: by going alone the country would have to commit enormous financial and military resources, and it would likely be dragged and bogged down into a highly unstable and divided country, it would risk being stuck in the role of "occupier." What's more this would undermine the country's soft power in the region, also affecting its legitimacy, popularity, and credibility.

This second risk would also be present if Turkey managed to act either as part of a "coalition of the willing," or backed by NATO—a very unlikely option given the organization's repeated declaration against becoming militarily involved in the Syrian conflict.

A more cautious approach would be for Turkey to establish humanitarian corridors, to facilitate the entry of international humanitarian organizations, and provide a way out for the Syrian people. Creating such a humanitarian corridor without Assad's consent would also require military intervention, albeit on a smaller scale. However the political feasibility of this option is dubious as, within Turkey, the public opinion is sharply divided on the question of military involvement in Syria, also in light of the rising losses resulting from Turkish involvement in Afghanistan.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are a number of non-military options for Turkey:

Firstly, the country can maintain a safe zone within Turkey to assist the refugees and continue to back the political opposition to Assad. However, while assisting the refugees and offering a safe haven to the opposition is both legal and feasible for Turkey, this is unlikely to change the dynamics of the conflict. This option is also relatively risk free; as it is highly unlikely that Syria would militarily retaliate against Turkey, as the country is a full member of NATO (meaning that any attack on Turkish soil would trigger article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, giving NATO a powerful reason to intervene militarily).

Secondly, Turkey can act diplomatically by putting pressure on the Arab League, on members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as well as on EU members and the US, asking to come down more harshly on Assad. In addition, Turkey can coordinate political support for the opposition with the Gulf countries—including Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia— while also using its influence on the Russians, urging them to give up their support for Assad.

Finally, Turkey can also attempt to convince Assad to step down in exchange for exile and protection, although this would be harder to achieve given the current strain in the relationship between the two countries. This would be a continuation of the Turkish policy on Libya, where the country protested the Qaddafi regime but refrained from being involved militarily. This approach paid off in the region, as a recent public opinion poll by Turkish think-tank TESEV revealed that 93 percent of the people in the region approved of Turkey's role in the Libya crisis.

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As the second Friends of Syria meeting, to be held in Istanbul on April 1, 2012, is fast approaching, Turkey should aim to persuade all the participants on the urgency of providing humanitarian assistance to Syrians as well as putting serious political pressure on the Assad regime, by using both diplomacy and sanctions. Implementing these measures would continue to focus on Turkey's main asset, its soft power, while also pushing the country to assume a leading role in the international community in both condemning the Assad regime and supporting the opposition. Although not cost-free, this policy would probably entail re-thinking the "zero-policy" paradigm, it also allows Turkey to heighten the pressure on the Assad regime, leading the regional efforts to oust the regime.

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