

# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

Written by Danielle le Poidevin

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## The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

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DANIELLE LE POIDEVIN, AUG 4 2012

The Houla bloodshed – confirmed by UN observers to have killed 92 Syrian civilians- has signalled further deterioration in the Syrian Crisis (ABC News, 2012). After more than a year of unrest and a death toll now estimated by the UN to be more than 9000 (Carroll and Williams, 2012), [1] Syria's stability and role in regional security politics has steadily become uncertain. However in spite of worldwide condemnation,[2] with his regime remaining somewhat robust in the face of the uprising, President Bashar al-Assad has proven unwilling to undertake any political reforms or surrender power (Balci, 2012; Chatham House, 2012:4). As the Arab Spring metaphorically turns to an Arab Winter with the worsening Syrian Crisis,[3] having had now "spilled into Lebanon", urgent action remedying the lack of crisis management in Syria is becoming increasingly vital (Salem, 2012).

To date,[4] there has been little discussion addressing the implications of the Syrian Crisis for Turkish-European Union (EU) relations. In attempting to address this issue this essay contends that the *Syrian crisis has not only presented a litmus test for Turkey's role as a regional power in the Middle East and the EU's capability in the region, but has provided a platform for a unique recalibration of Turkey's relations with the EU*. This essay will be structured analytically to support my argument by first providing context to the relationship between Turkey and the EU and then secondly by noting the measures that have been taken by Ankara and Brussels in responding to Syria and the Syrian crisis so far. Whilst pre-Arab spring sentiments emanating from Ankara rendered Turkish-EU relations somewhat redundant in light of Turkey's rising regional and international role, Turkey (and indeed the EU) need to reevaluate such views as the Syrian crisis continues to unfold and deteriorate. In spite of a lack of crisis management on the part of Turkish and EU officials, there remains practical potential for Turkish-EU cooperation in crisis management. Lastly, this essay will provide recommendations as to how to best garner the potential of this recalibrated Turkish-EU relationship, reaping both short-term and long-term benefits for Turkey, the EU and ultimately the wider Middle East.

### **Context: Turkish -EU Accession Relations and Turkey's Rise to Regional Power**

As the longest-waiting country on the EU's accession list, Turkey's Chief EU affairs minister notes that "EU membership has been a strategic goal and a state policy of Turkey for more than half a century" (Simsek, 2012; Bıllıvac, 2011: 82). First concluding an Association Agreement with the EU in 1963 (which referred to the possibility of the country's accession), Turkey applied for membership in 1987, was granted candidate state status in 1999 and finally opened accession negotiations at the same time as Croatia in 2005 (House of Commons, 2012: 73).[5] During this period of time, the relationship between Turkey and the EU has long been vacillating between support for and doubt over future membership; so much so that "[e]strangement in Turkey-EU relations has [now] become a fact". This is because, in spite of what some have categorized as dynamic changes in Turkey, Turkey's EU accession process continues at a pace that Morelli has likened to a "comatose", much to the frustration of both the EU and Turkey (2011:12; Alessandri, 2011:1). Facing blocked accession negotiations (largely due to French opposition and tensions in Turkish-Cypriot relations),[6] Turkish progress in closing the 35 chapters of the *EU Acquis Communautaire* illustrates this point.[7] Whilst Croatia started accession negotiations in 2005 at the same time as Turkey and signed its Accession Treaty in December 2011, by early 2012 Turkey and the EU had opened only 13 of the 35 negotiating chapters, only one of which they had provisionally closed (House of Commons, 2012: 81). This stalemate raised key

# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

Written by Danielle le Poidevin

questions and frustrations in Turkey about its future with the EU, and has further perpetuated estrangement between Brussels and Ankara. These tensions were most aptly summarized by Prime Minister Erdogan's suggestion that "if they [the EU] do not want Turkey in, they should say so... and we will mind our own business and will not bother them" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2011).

Meanwhile, these uncertainties surrounding the accession process have led Turkey to consolidate its role as a regional power (Meltam, 2011: 280). Turkey's rise to international and especially regional influence (particularly in the Middle East) has resulted from the conscious pursuit of a proactive foreign policy by the post-2002 Justice and Development party ('AKP') government (House of Commons, 2012: 46).[8] In realising this goal of regional leadership, Turkish foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu articulated two foreign policy principles in the pre-Arab spring period (Davutoglu, 2008): namely the pursuit of 'strategic depth' in taking advantage of Turkey's unique strategic geography between Europe and Asia, and a 'zero problems with neighbors' in eliminating problems with neighboring countries (Davutoglu, 2008; Brjilvac, 2011: 73).[9] And as a result, it is now commonplace to cite Turkey as a regional power and important world actor participating actively in regional and world governance. One such example was Turkey's role in facilitating an agreement in May 2010 for a uranium swap with Iran and Brazil in order to "avert an international crisis" and find a peaceful solution to Iran's efforts to enrich nuclear fuel (Turan, 2010:5; Meltam, 2011: 280). In spite of Turkey's long and frustrated relationship with the EU, the Syrian Crisis may in hindsight provide a historical turning point in Turkish-EU relations.

## Crisis Management: Turkey

Whilst predictions for Syria's future vary considerably, it has been widely held that the Syrian crisis has become a litmus test for Turkish Foreign policy and its role as an international and regional actor (Keyman, 2012; Nasr, 2011). For Turkey, given the considerable investment of the AKP government in building relations with Bashar al-Assad over the past decade, the case of Syria has proved the most challenging in the Arab Spring uprisings (House of Commons, 2012: 52).[10] Due to improved Ankara-Damascus relations, Turkey retained confidence in President Assad's willingness to reform in the face of the uprisings of 2011 and made attempts to persuade Bashar al-Assad to carry out democratic reforms (Kujawa, 2011: 365). As mediation attempts failed and reports of escalating violence continued, Ankara finally made the call for President Assad to step aside in November (House of Commons, 2012:53). Once Turkey had broken with President Assad, the strength of Turkey's efforts to see Assad step down seemed to partly reflect Turkish concerns arising from the implications the Syrian crisis pose for Turkey's own security interests along its 900 kilometre border (Balci, 2012; Altunışık, 2011: 3).

By November 2011, Turkey had announced bilateral economic sanctions against Syria (BBC, 2011). Having broken with President Assad, Turkey became a leading force in coalescing international support and multilateral efforts to encourage Assad to leave office (Chatham House, 2011: 7; House of Commons, 2012: 52). In early February 2012 Ankara co-sponsored the draft UN Security Council resolution backing the Arab League plans for Syria (which was supported by the UK, France, and US but was vetoed by China and Russia), and has additionally played an active role in the meetings of the 'Friends of Syria' group (formed following the failure of the UNSC resolution) (House of Commons, 2012: 52). In continuing the offensive against the Assad regime, earlier this year Turkey hosted the most prominent opposition group to the Assad-regime, the Syrian National Council, all the while allowing leading personnel of the Free Syrian Army and other oppositionist military defectors to operate from Turkey (Stack, 2011; House of Commons 2012: 52).

Furthermore, in an audacious push following Syrian fire on a refugee camp in Turkey, Turkish Prime Minister has threatened to invoke NATO's Mutual defence Article 5 of the NATO Alliance treaty; demonstrating to the Middle East, the West and most importantly Syria that "Turkey currently dictates the rules of play in the Middle East" (Popp, 2012). Thus far it has become apparent that Turkey has been actively seeking to fulfil its regional role in managing the Syrian Crisis by imposing sanctions, coalescing and cooperating in international action against the Assad regime, publicly hosting Syrian opposition, and toughening rhetoric in raising the stakes for the Assad regime.[11]

## Crisis Management: The EU

# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

Written by Danielle le Poidevin

Backers of the EU point often point to its 'admirable' use of non-military crisis management tools (Gowan, 2012). However, like Turkey, the Syrian crisis has proven to be litmus test for EU Foreign policy and its ability to manage crisis in the Middle East. Owing to concerns over the human toll the crisis has claimed and issues relating to Syria's political transition (European Union, 2011: 11), the EU has pursued policies: supporting multilateral attempts to monitor the Syrian crisis and the Assad government, increasing the pressure on Syria through numerous sanctions and using its position as an international player to reinforce the case for continued pressure on Damascus. The EU has seen some success in each of these policies, as the EU's rhetorical support for the UN's monitoring of the human rights situation has been said to have "played a significant role in focusing international attention on Assad's behaviour" (Gowan, 2012), and the EU has been instrumental in advocating Kofi Annan's six-point plan and providing material support (including vehicles and other equipment) for the UN observers now in Syria (Lekic, 2012). Similarly, in spite of "Sino-Russian obstructionism, European diplomats have chosen to use the Security Council as a platform to publicise the case against Assad" (Gowan, 2012).

Furthermore, in seeking to "deprive the Syrian regime of financial revenues which it is using to maintain the violent crackdown", the EU has utilised sanctions "to assist the Syrian people in achieving their legitimate aspirations" (European Union, 2011). And as such, at the time of writing the EU has imposed its' fifteenth round of sanctions against the Assad regime (Huffington Post, 2012). The first of such sanctions, following the repression of anti-government protests from March 2011, was an internal embargo of arms and equipment used for internal oppression (European Union, 2011; Lekic, 2012). Likewise, as their association with the Assad regime has become known, individuals, institutions and companies have been gradually targeted with sanctions. Such sanctions (at the time of writing) have been extensively imposed upon 128 of Assad-supporters, with 43 Syrian Companies, banks and others organisations on the EU's boycott list (Lekic, 2012). From September 2011 with the continuing escalation of violence, the EU (who had represented 27.4% of Syria's total exports in 2010) had introduced a ban on the import of Syrian crude oil, which has caused a further negative effect on Syria's economic situation (European Union, 2012). The EU continues to expand its range of sanctions.

Therefore, in its efforts to manage the Syrian crisis, the EU has supported multilateral debate and initiative to help build a framework to manage the crisis, sought to exploit increasing sanctions as economic leverage over the Assad regime and ensured crisis in Syria has remained at the forefront of the international communities' minds. However, as with Turkey, these tactical initiatives have not yet seen strategic and political success.

## The Syrian Litmus Test and Its Assessment of Turkish and EU Foreign Policies.

Prior to the Arab Spring, prominent voices in the AKP had been questioning whether Turkey should continue pursuing the EU. Deputy Chairman of parliament's foreign affairs committee Suat Kiniklioglu had suggested that Turkey's "economy is strong enough to do without a union that is struggling with its own financial problems" (Migdalovitz, 2010: 27; Lagendik, 2010). In November 2010, President Gul, reflecting such sentiments, suggested that, "[m]aybe, when the time comes, the Turks will say 'we have fulfilled the reforms, we have upgraded the standards to EU level, this is enough for us' and maybe will not feel the need to become a member of the union" (Migdalovitz, 2010: 27). And indeed after years of accession negotiation and various iterations of reform, Turkey's citizenry had accepted that "EU accession might no longer be the desired end-point for Turkey" (Morelli, 2011: 15).[12]

This may no longer be the case following the Syrian Crisis, and its accompanying challenges for Turkish security. While events in the Syrian Crisis are mutable, some have made the observation that Turkey may not have the extensive influence that commentary may have initially suggested (House of Commons, 2012: 55). Indeed Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erogdan's repeated demands to al-Assad at the outbreak of the turmoil in Syria implied that Turkey could resolve the Syrian popular uprising swiftly and effortlessly (Hakura, 2011: 10). Ultimately, al-Assad's refusal exposed the limitations of Turkey's influence, which had been often praised for its soft power in the Middle Eastern region (Hakura, 2011:10).

Likewise, the Syrian Crisis has exposed EU leverage as somewhat limited. The sanctions that had been imposed earlier in the crisis had been criticised as having little effect on Syria, due to Syria's limited economic relations to the

# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

Written by Danielle le Poidevin

West (Sasnal, 2011: 535). Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad in has told Russian television recently that EU sanctions have “affected ordinary people but not the government”, noting that Syria would “find alternative” means of circumventing the Sanctions (The Telegraph, 2012). Thus, the Syrian crisis has indeed found a Turkish and EU crisis management policies wanting. It has also proved revealing for Turkish EU relations as Turkey may be forced to reconsider its pre-Arab Spring sentiments.

## Prospects for Turkish-EU Cooperation

As tactical initiatives have not yet seen strategic and political success, both the EU and Turkey have found themselves at an impasse with Syria over the Assad regime and its handling of the ongoing civilian protests. The European Council on Foreign Relations has aptly noted that, in spite of their overlapping interests and priorities (namely political and economic stability in the Middle Eastern region), Turkey and the EU have not managed to develop a common strategy nor coordinate their efforts in Libya, Egypt and thus far, Syria (2012). However as Syria descends into to further crisis, an opportunity is presented for Turkish-EU dialogue in an effort to overcome the current stalemate. Indeed, cooperation could prove to be in the best interests of both the EU and Turkish crisis management agendas, and in particular responding to the Syrian crisis and provides a new mode for engaging Turkey-EU relations (House of Commons, 2012: 86).[13]

As the prospect of political transition begins to loom, Turkey offers a unique position as a source of inspiration for democracy in the Middle East. Viewed as an island of freedom and democracy in the Islamic world (Kujawa, 2011: 1),<sup>[14]</sup> reform measures channelled through Ankara will have “more chance of success than those imposed by Europeans” (Islam, 2011: 6, Ulgen, 2012). Indeed, according to a 2010 survey by Turkish think tank TESEV, as many as 80% of Arabs have expressed a positive opinion about Turkey and more than two thirds believe that Turkey could be a model for Arab countries and that it is an example of a successful union between Islam and democracy (Morelli, 2011:15) However to facilitate such reform measures, the EU has valuable experience in institution-building and economic reform in addition to a significant aid budget (Barysch, 2011). This includes the EU’s May 2011 Neighbourhood Policy, which could help developments in Syria for the sake of democratic and human rights related standards (Islam, 2011: 6; European Union, 2012).

As the EU lacks the credibility that Turkey holds in the Middle East, it would benefit from cooperating with Turkey who has been able to maintain crucial channels of dialogue with the Arab League and Syrian Opposition (Islam, 2012; Barysch, 2011). Importantly, Turkey is aware that its’ rising reputation in the Middle East is deeply linked with its distinguished Western and European character and would therefore see acting alongside the EU in a cooperation agreement as an opportunity to cement this reputation (Islam, 2012). As Soner Cagaptay from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has pertinently noted, “[u]ltimately, Turkey [has come] to realize that its strategic value to the Middle East is not rooted in the fact it’s a Muslim power—the region has many such states—but that it is a Muslim power with strong ties to the U.S., access to NATO technology and muscle, and the ability to sit at the table with the Europeans” (2012). Thus with the unfolding of the events in Syria, Ankara and Brussels cannot overlook the potential (and indeed, necessity) of a partnership in managing the crisis in Syria.

## Where to go from here?

In the interests of ensuring future political and strategic success for both Ankara and Brussels in the Syrian crisis and Arab Uprisings, strategic dialogue should be implemented between the EU and Turkey. This need not be *defined* by Turkish accession to the EU, at least not in the immediate term.

Establishing a Turkey-EU Cooperation agreement – separate from Turkish-EU accession negotiation- will provide a framework agreement that establishes a comprehensive platform for enhancing ties and cooperation in managing crisis in the Middle East. In light of the continuously unfolding events of the Arab Spring, it is in the interests of both the EU and Turkey that such a cooperation agreement be concluded expediently. In the alternative, this dialogue may be achieved by associating the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, with the foreign affairs council of the EU (Islam, 2012). Such a form of inclusion is to be premised on an external agreement, which again is separate from Turkish-EU accession negotiations in order to guard the Turkish-EU special relationship against accession politics

# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

Written by Danielle le Poidevin

and ensure crisis management in the Middle East is the primary agenda.

In operation, the Ankara- Brussels crisis management cooperation will see the combination of Turkish and EU capabilities. In order to garner the full potential of this cooperation, a crisis-management cooperation agreement should include the sharing of intelligence and material resources, as well as regular dialogue concerning Turkish border protection and crisis management strategy. Furthermore, the Ankara-Brussels cooperation agreement should include the collaboration of strategy and resources in managing refugee assistance and humanitarian aid.

In the short term, this cooperation agreement will strengthen strategic and political initiatives against the Assad regime. In the longer term, these relations will provide a framework for improved crisis management initiatives in the Middle East. However importantly, a treaty-based cooperation will provide a platform for institutionalised socialisation. Within this rubric of crisis management cooperation, an agreement will provide an opportunity to reduce tensions and estrangement between the two actors and will provide Turkey institutional links to the EU (thus promulgating goodwill in spite of the actors' long accession history), whilst simultaneously providing an opportunity for the EU to build confidence in Turkey. This will, ultimately, have positive implications for Turkey's accession negotiations to the EU.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, as the Arab Spring metaphorically turns into the Arab winter,[15] Ankara and Brussels cannot overlook the necessity and potential for a partnership in managing the crisis in Syria. Although against the litmus test of the Syrian Crisis Turkish and the EU crisis management has proved inadequate, the Syrian crisis holds the potential as a historical turning point for the future of Turkish-EU relations. In the short term, cooperation will garner the actors combined capabilities to effectively manage not only the Syrian crisis, but provide a framework for improved crisis management initiatives in the Middle East at large. Such initiatives may have positive implications for Turkey's accession negotiations to the EU and for the Turkish relationship with the EU as a whole.

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[1] At the time of writing in May 2012.

[2] The chorus of international pressure on Syria has firmly increased as the reported death toll continues to rise.

<sup>[3]</sup> A notion examined by Brzezinski in the 2012 Brooking Institution forum (Brookings Institution, 2012: 23).

[4] At the time of writing in May 2012.

[5] See Morelli, Vincent. 2011. *European Union Enlargement: A Status Report on Turkey's Accession Negotiations*. Washington: Congressional Research Service, for an excellent overview of Turkey's EU accession process.

[6] Two factors have caused the accession talks to become blocked. The first has been adamant French opposition. In line with President Sarkozy's opposition to Turkey's EU membership, under his leadership France has blocked the opening of negotiations on five chapters which are 'irrelevant' if Turkey is not to acceded to the Union, since President Sarkozy has said that Turkey should be offered a privileged partnership rather than full membership (House of Commons, 2012: 81). Secondly, in November 2006 the EU suspended negotiation on eight of the 35 chapters when, due to ongoing tensions between Turkey and Cyprus, Turkey refused to open it ports and Airports to Cyprus (who has been a member of the EU since 2004) (Migdalovitz, 2010: 25). While Turkey may see a change in the French position regarding Turkish EU accession with its' change of leadership (Ülgen, 2012; The Journal of Turkkish Weekly, 2012), Turkey's eventual membership in the EU has been said to largely depend on the Cyprus issue which has consistently plagued Turkey's accession process (Morelli, 2011:14).

[7] Most recently, the 2011 European Commission 'Progress report on Turkey', a report describing the state of the relationship between Turkey and the European Union, only "strengthen[ed] the impression that while preparing the report the focus was on the expectations and shortcomings rather than the progress in Turkey" according to a recent statement by the Turkish Foreign Affairs (Alessandri, 2011: 1; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

[8] It must be noted that these changes have been due, in part, to the EU accession process. It has been noted to have "major influence on Turkey's internal march towards reform" as it stimulated democratisation and strengthened



# The Syrian Crystal Ball and the Unfolding of EU-Turkey Relations

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the hands of the political reformers to shape Turkish foreign policy significantly (Morelli: 2011: 12; Meltam, 2011: 280, 284).

[10] After the previous Turkish Government achieved a breakthrough in relations between Ankara and Damascus in 1998, Turkey under the AKP government had made a high-profile effort to cultivate good relations with Syrian President Assad under the auspices of the AKP's new policy of 'zero problems with neighbors' (House of Commons 2012: 52; Migdalovitz, 2010: 16), and as a result the two countries became successful in establishing close economic, political and diplomatic relations (See Altunışık, 2011: 3; Cook et al, 2011; House of Commons, 2012: 52; Migdalovitz, 2010:17).

<sup>[11]</sup>Which, since writing, has increased drastically as relations between Turkey and Syria have further deteriorated. Turkey's prime minister has told parliament that Syria is a "clear threat" to both its own people and to Turkey, days after a Turkish fighter jet was downed (Head, 2012).

[12] Indeed, by 2008 in Turkey, about one-third of the population wanted to see Turkey achieve EU Accession, dropping substantially from more than 80% in 2002 when the AKP had come to power (Marder, 2010:11).

[13] There have recently been a number of proposals to this effect: Katinka Barysch, "Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?", Centre for European Reform Policy Brief, January 2010; Heather Grabbe and Sinan Ulgen, "The way forward for Turkey and the EU: A strategic dialogue on foreign policy", Carnegie Endowment, December 2010; Philip Hanson, "On Europe's Fringes: Russia, Turkey and the European Union", Chatham House Briefing Paper July 2011; Katinka Barysch, "Why the EU and Turkey Need to Coordinate Their Foreign Policies", Carnegie Endowment, 31 August 2011.

[14] This was best illustrated by Rached Ghannouchi, one of the leaders of the Tunisian Islamic movement Ennahda (The Awakening). During his stay in Istanbul, Ghannouchi insisted: "We learn from the Turkish experience—particularly the peace that was achieved in the country between Islam and modernity; this is a true example (for the Arab world.) (...)democratic freedoms and economic development of Turkey—this is the most important support that Turkey gives to the Arab world." (Kujawa, 2011).

[15] A notion discussed by Brezenski from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (Brookings Institution, 2012: 23).

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