

FPC Briefing: Turkey's Juggling Act

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When the Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told his countrymen that Turkey is not far away from war and they should prepare for it "if they wished for peace", it didn't come as a great surprise. Before him, President Abdullah Gul spoke of "the worst-case scenario that they had all been dreading".

As fighting continues to rage in Syria, fears that it would spread across borders into an "all-consuming" conflict have been growing by the day. While being publicly praised for its influential regional role and for providing humanitarian assistance to more than 100,000 fleeing Syrians, Turkey is practically alone dealing with the Syrian crisis.

With the US being pre-occupied with its presidential election campaign and the EU struggling to put its own house in order, there is very little appetite for another long-drawn out, costly and unpredictable conflict in the Middle East.

Turkey is asking for humanitarian assistance for the growing number of Syrian refugees but is refusing to allow the UNCHR and other international agencies into the refugee camps within its borders. Without opening its camps to international inspection, the kind of help Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq received for their efforts to shelter more than 200,000 Syrians is not likely to come to Turkey.

Escalating confrontation with Syria is not the only problem Turkey faces. Almost all its neighbours critical or even hostile towards its present policies, the government in Ankara has to walk on a tight rope especially with Russia, Iran and Iraq. As one German military source told me recently, "right now, Turkey has several balls in the air. Syria is just one of them".

Among its many balls of fire, the changing nature of the Kurdish threat is potentially the hottest. With the emergence of another autonomous Kurdish region along its border, Turkey now faces a new reality in its three-decades-long war against the Kurdish insurgency. When Assad's forces left the control of the Kurdish areas to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which is closely tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the risk of insurgents exploiting the power vacuum in Syria became imminent for Turkey.

A similar power vacuum in post-Saddam Iraq had overturned Turkey's gains against the PKK a decade earlier. However, unlike Northern Iraq, there isn't a Barzani-like figure in Northern Syria to forge close economic and political ties.

Neither is a cross-border operation into the flatlands of Syria's Kurdish area an easy option. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan warned that any attempt by the PKK to launch cross-border attacks would be met by force. He also sent a message to neighbouring countries not to use the PKK card against Turkey. "Countries directly or indirectly supporting the PKK will face that very gun, one day, themselves" he said.

It may be argued that Turkey had not fully calculated the possible consequences of its active anti-Assad policy on the Kurdish issue. There is no doubt it is now fully aware of the dangers; if only because of aggressive escalation of terrorist attacks by the PKK in recent weeks. The nature of the threat and circumstances in the region may have changed but there is little sign that the Turkish

government is coming up with a new strategy to deal with its Kurdish issue. Maintaining the same approach that created the problem is unlikely to produce a solution.

Escalating Tension

Following Syrian shell strikes into its territory, Turkey sent a large number of armed units to its 900 kilometre border area. Whilst maintaining they do not wish to fight a war with Syria, Turkey's military has been in a "high state of alert" in recent weeks. During an inspection of his troops stationed in the border town of Akcakale a week after Syrian shells landed there, the Chief of the General Staff Necdet Özel said "We are here, and we are standing tall. We have retaliated and if it continues, we'll respond more strongly."

A couple of days later, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took on both the Assad regime for its continuing attacks on its own population and the international community for its inaction. Speaking at the Istanbul World Forum on 13 October 2012, Erdogan accused the international community of "practically giving a green light to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to kill hundreds of people every day in his country". Erdogan also called for the UN Security Council to be reformed in order to change the "unequal and unfair system that failed to reflect the will of most countries". On the same day in New York, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu criticized the U.N. Security Council for not taking any action on Syria. He met with Arab and European leaders but failed to win international support for a UN-backed buffer zone within Syria.

Having called NATO members to meet twice since the start of the Syrian crisis, Turkey received support from the Alliance in the form of a statement condemning the Syrian attack in the strongest terms. "Obviously Turkey can rely on NATO solidarity," Secretary general Rasmussen said before a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels. "We have all necessary plans in place to protect and defend Turkey if necessary." ¹

Despite Turkish media reporting that NATO gave its full support to Turkey against Syria, NATO's response did not indicate any intention to get involved militarily. At that stage, Turkey did not ask for direct NATO intervention, either.

As the magnitude of the humanitarian and security aspects of the crisis became more apparent, Turkey started lobbying more forcefully for an international intervention. A German military source emphasized the unease felt in Berlin. "War has different connotations in our country. Germany would feel much better if there was a UN resolution from the Security Council. As for a buffer zone, we would see it as the beginning of Syria's permanent partition and that would have long-term, unforeseen consequences" he said.

Another concern from European sources is the danger of nationalizing international defense policies. "A dangerous path to go down" an official warned. "International alliances have to think long and hard before getting involved in their member nations' self-interested, narrow agendas". Besides, Turkey has been ruffling a few feathers in NATO, not only for paralyzing EU-NATO cooperation over Cyprus' EU membership but more recently, over its demands for the inclusion of the Organization of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) and the exclusion of Israel.

Bellicose statements coming from Turkish government circles don't help Turkey's argument, either.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/09/nato-turkey-syria>

Egemen Bağış, the minister for EU affairs, who is well known in crisis-ridden Europe for repeatedly saying “Hang on in there, Europe! Turkey will come to your rescue” was this time reported as claiming that if it wanted to, Turkey can destroy Syria in one hour. Şamil Tayyar, a ruling Justice and Development Party deputy predicted that Turkey would reach Damascus “within three hours”.

Mercifully, the Prime Minister’s speech accusing main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of siding with the Assad regime didn’t get much coverage outside for it would have baffled the already confused even further. “The CHP will not dare to go to Damascus tomorrow, you will see it. But we will go there in the shortest possible time, if Allah wills it; and embrace our brothers. That day is close. We will pray near the grave of Salahaddin Ayyubi and pray in the Umayyad Mosque” Erdogan said.² Did the visiting German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle partly have these statements in mind when he called for moderation and de-escalation, warning that no one should pour oil on the fire”?

Out of its depth?

The suspicion that Turkey may have bitten off more than it can chew with Syria seems to be growing. Turkey has been dragged into the conflict in a way that it did not expect. More than one person told me that they were worried about an accident, creating the spark leading to a full-scale war. My military source indicated that there were serious questions about the quality of Turkey’s intelligence and the efficiency of its various agencies sharing and analyzing available information.

The most obvious example of this was the loss of a Turkish war plane last June. Western leaders roundly condemned the downing of a Turkish military fighter jet by Syria but Turkey’s explanation of what has happened wasn’t fully satisfactory. There were noticeable discrepancies in Turkey’s account of how and where the Turkish jet was shot down by Syria. Similarly, questions have been raised over Turkey’s initial claim that it found weapons on board a Syrian passenger plane en route from Moscow to Damascus on the 10th October.

Russia rejected the claim and said the cargo included “dual use” electronic components for radar and they were not weapons. Turkish officials insisted it had been carrying Russian munitions. Russian President Vladimir Putin responded angrily saying that “no one” could tell Russia where, or to whom, it could sell weapons. Soon after, Turkey backtracked.

Speaking to Hurriyet Daily News, a Turkish official said Turkey had no problem with Russia. They were upset with Syria for violating international civilian aviation regulations. The Russian Foreign Ministry quickly responded, stating that the Turkish government had recognized that the cargo it seized was legitimate. On its official Twitter account the ministry wrote: “Turkey accepts the legitimacy of the confiscated cargo, but has complaints about the transportation notification procedure.

Foreign Minister Davutoglu who had initially declared that “objectionable” cargo had been confiscated from the plane, was later asked to comment on Russia’s statement. He denied there was any problem between Turkey and Russia. He described the issue as “transport of military equipment by a civilian aircraft via Turkey’s airspace”.

In the absence of a UN embargo against Syria, it wasn’t the Foreign Minister’s compromising tone that surprised people but the grounding of the plane in a very public manner in the first place. This seemed yet another miscalculation. “Shouldn’t you be sure of your intelligence before you act on it

² <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/premier-vows-to-pray-in-damascus-mosque-soon.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29505&NewsCatID=338>

to pick a quarrel with a major world power who also happens to be your key energy supplier”, people asked.

With the escalating crisis in Syria, the impact of Erdogan’s leadership style on foreign policy decision-making has become clearer. Turkey’s well established and experienced foreign ministry seemed to be increasingly sidelined. These days, it is not unusual to hear Turkey’s senior diplomats saying “only the prime minister knows” when asked about Turkey’s next possible steps. If the apparent lack of consultation between the decision makers and the experienced diplomats could be seen as one factor for lack of foresight, another must be the shortage of Middle East expertise within the establishment. Number of Turkish diplomats that speak a foreign language other than English and French are limited. There are even fewer diplomats that are proficient in Arabic. The crisis in Syria has come at a time when the Turkish foreign ministry was channelling its resources towards new areas of national interests such as in Africa. Syria has proved to be a tough test for the institutional capacity of Turkish bureaucracy.

Broken hearts, broken promises

Hugh Pope, International Crisis Group’s Project Director for Turkey and Cyprus told an international audience in Loccum, Germany ³ that the EU has been a major project that kept Turkey facing the future. As a self-confessed Europhile, he is one of shrinking number of people who still believes in the positive role of the European Union. Even Orhan Pamuk, Turkey’s first Nobel-Laureate in literature and a committed Europhile complained that the European Union has broken the hearts of many Euro-believers in Turkey.⁴ A recent survey by the Turkish-German Foundation for Education and Scientific Research (TAVAK) found that only 17% of Turks believe their country will one day be a member.

Presenting the 2012 Progress Report ⁵ on Turkey, EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule said “No one is trying to put Turkey’s negotiating process with the EU in the Guinness Book of Records, but efforts are needed by both sides”. The report contained harsh criticism, highlighting growing concerns regarding Turkey’s lack of substantial progress towards fully meeting the political criteria. The respect for fundamental rights continued to be a source of serious preoccupation. The Kurdish issue remained a key challenge for Turkey’s democracy; the democratic opening came to a virtual halt. Rights to liberty, security, fair trial and freedom of expression, assembly and association were of particular concern. As a consequence of government policies, self-censorship by the media was increasingly widespread.

Ankara was criticised for its poor cooperation with the EU in the second half of this year, as Cyprus took over the EU’s rotating presidency. There was some praise for Turkey, too. Its positive role in supporting reform movements in North Africa and the Middle East and its helpful cooperation regarding Syrian refugees were acknowledged. Turkey’s official response to the report was angry. “The 2012 progress report is a reflection of the desire of the EU, which is suffering an economic and political crisis, to delay Turkey’s membership through various excuses,” Egemen Bagis, the minister in charge of relations with EU said, adding that Turkey didn’t recognize itself in the EU’s broken mirror”.⁶

³ <http://www.loccum.de/english/p1256e.html>

⁴ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/europe-has-broken-hearts-in-turkey-nobel-laureate-says.aspx?pageID=238&nID=20687&NewsCatID=386>

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/tr_rapport_2012_en.pdf

⁶ <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/turkey-doesnt-recognise-commissi-news-515329>

Professor Burhan Kuzu, a Justice and Development Party deputy and the head of the Constitution Commission in Parliament was even angrier: He called the report “rubbish” and threw it on the floor. Awarding of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union proved to be the last straw for Turkey’s Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan.⁷ “EU is the most hypocritical union of all time and the most hypocritical association in the world. And this hypocrite has had Turkey wait at its door for 50 years” he retorted. It was left to the head of the Turkish Industry and Business Association Ümit Boyner to argue that the European Union membership remained a priority for the Turkish business community.⁸ But then, the last time she stepped out of line, she was told by the prime minister himself to “mind her own business”⁹

Many believe that the EU has lost its leverage on Turkey. This is partly because economically strong and still growing Turkey has a newfound confidence. It is also because Turkey has become increasingly frustrated with the slow progress of negotiations and negative attitudes in some EU capitals. Despite President Gul saying that the EU membership remained a strategic choice for Turkey, these days the Prime Minister Erdogan chooses to ignore Europe. During his nearly three-hour speech to his party’s annual congress earlier this month, Erdogan did not even mention the EU.

There have been visible internal splits within the ruling party over the Kurdish issue, democratic reforms, security and most recently fiscal and monetary policy. The EU question, too, may end up on the list of contentious issues in this ongoing power struggle. Yet, in a country where more than 40% of exports still go to the EU, the outcome of this showdown may not be so easily predictable. When it comes to protecting their newfound prosperity, the conservative and pious business communities of Anatolia may prove to be more pragmatic and long-sighted than the decision makers in Ankara. For the dwindling Europhiles, commercial interest may save the day where vision fails.

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⁷ <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/143882/turkish-min-eu-most-hypocritical-union-of-all-time.html>

⁸ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/eu-membership-still-priority-for-turkey-tusiads-head.aspx?pageID=238&nID=32584&NewsCatID=338>

⁹ <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-292592-defiant-pm-tells-tusiad-to-mind-its-own-business.html>