

# THE OBAMA - ERDOĞAN PARTNERSHIP OVER SYRIA: ADVANCING WESTERN VALUES?

*Two years into the Syrian Civil War, the U.S. and Turkey have been closely coordinating their efforts to bring about regime change in Damascus. But this policy of regime change in a neighboring country is fraught with grave dangers both for Turkey and the U.S. Not only does this ongoing war threaten Turkey's carefully nurtured image of a stable country, but the further radicalization of the armed opposition groups cast aside the hopes of a pluralistic post-Assad Syria. Ankara's unconditional support to Sunni militant groups in Syria carries the risk of inflaming sectarian divisions all across the Middle East.*

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**P**resident Barack Obama has invested considerable political capital in Turkey, cultivating a close working relationship with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In an interview last year, he listed Erdoğan among five world leaders with whom he has been able to forge “friendships and the bonds of trust.” (The others were the leaders of Britain, Germany, India, and South Korea.)

The meeting in the White House between Obama and Erdoğan on 16 May 2013 represents the culmination of what has been a steadily developing relationship. “As friends and NATO allies, the United States and Turkey are partners in addressing a range of critical global and regional issues. The President looks forward to discussing these issues with the Prime Minister, to include Syria,” stated the White House. The stated goal of the U.S. is to remove Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from power, and President Obama has relied heavily on Turkey in seeking to oust the Syrian leader.

The U.S. and Turkey have been closely coordinating their efforts to bring about regime change in Damascus. American and Turkish officials have held regular operational planning meetings since last summer, aimed at hastening the downfall of Assad. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has traveled to Turkey three times since he took office, on 1 March 2013, on April 6, and on 19-21 April 2013. He has held talks with his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoğlu as well as with Prime Minister Erdoğan. On the last occasion Kerry also met with the representatives of the Syrian rebel movement in Istanbul.

Turkey has provided a crucial sanctuary for the Sunni rebels fighting Assad’s regime and has helped to arm and train them. Soner Çağaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute, observes that the intervention in the Syrian civil war is “Turkey’s most brazen foreign policy gambit ever.” For the first time, Ankara is openly pursuing a policy of regime change in a neighboring country. The endeavor is fraught with grave dangers; but Çağaptay asserts that the Syrian War has ushered in “springtime for U.S.-Turkish ties.” He sees the foundations “for a truly interdependent relationship” arising from the Syrian conflagration. Faced with what could prove to be its “most existential threat to date”, Turkey needs its old and trusted ally the U.S. more than ever. “In years past, U.S. policymakers lamented that Washington needed Turkey more than the other way around. This is no longer true.”<sup>1</sup>

It is undeniable that the Syrian War –and notably Ankara’s intervention in it– has exposed Turkey to unprecedented threats. The Sunni-Alawite civil war threatens to

<sup>1</sup> Soner Çağaptay, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Gambit,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 29 April 2013.

stoke conflict between Sunni and Arab Alawite Turkish citizens in southern Turkey. Furthermore the war next door threatens Turkey's carefully nurtured image of a stable country. The border between Turkey and Syria has been blurred, as suggested by the title of a recent report from the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) – “Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey”. The recommendations of the ICG to the Turkish government are to “minimize border crossings by Syrian opposition fighters; not to allow them to use refugee camps as rear bases, and to ensure that there is no pressure on young camp residents to join militias.”<sup>2</sup> There is however little reason to anticipate that these recommendations are going to be heeded.

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Turkey has committed itself to bringing down the Syrian regime, and recent statements from the U.S. administration are sure to have strengthened Ankara's resolve and heightened its expectations that the U.S. is going to become more directly involved in the effort to oust Assad. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has acknowledged that the administration is no longer ruling out arming Syrian rebels. “You look at and rethink all options,” said Hagel at a Pentagon press conference.<sup>3</sup> President Obama, who rejected a proposal last year from then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to arm the rebels, subsequently confirmed that the U.S. is indeed now looking at “all options”.<sup>4</sup>

Prime Minister Erdoğan has not made his frustration with President Obama's reluctance to commit militarily in Syria any secret; but as the U.S. seems to be edging closer to Turkey on this matter, it may indeed herald “springtime for U.S.-Turkish ties”. However, a U.S. decision to arm the Sunni rebels, as well as taking other concomitant military steps such as declaring a no-fly zone –something that the Turkish government has long been pleading for– would amount to a painful trade-off: it would be tantamount to sacrificing values held dear by the U.S. –tolerance and pluralism– for the sake of strategic interests in Syria. Indeed, Obama is reportedly worried that arming the rebels can lead to genocide against the Alawites.<sup>5</sup>

2 International Crisis Group, “Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey,” *Europe Report No.225*, 30 April 2013.

3 “Hagel Confirms U.S. is Considering Arming Syria Rebels,” *New York Times*, 2 May 2013.

4 “U.S. Rethinks Arming Syria Rebels, Says Chuck Hagel,” *BBC News*, 2 May 2013.

5 Dexter Filkins, “The Thin Red Line, Inside the White House Debate over Syria,” *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2013.

The strategic interest of the U.S. in Syria is obvious: to deprive Iran of its main regional ally and gateway to the Mediterranean, severing its land link to Hezbollah in Lebanon, thereby enhancing the security of Israel. As Vali Nasr, the dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, points out, “Washington has seen the developments in Syria as a humiliating strategic defeat for Iran.”<sup>6</sup>

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But Washington also insists that any solution to the Syrian crisis should guarantee religious and ethnic pluralism. Their rhetoric conjures a rosy vision of a moderate and secular Syria after Assad. Yet the American strategic interest in Syria can only be advanced at the expense of those very values that the Obama administration insists are safeguarded. Arming the Sunni rebels will

bring more, not less, violence. It will empower a rebel movement that is anything but moderate or secular, and invite more atrocities that will indefinitely bury any remaining hopes there may still be of ushering in a pluralistic post-Assad Syria.

The Obama administration has employed itself to midwife a broad Syrian opposition coalition, in which the influence of Islamists would be circumscribed, but without success. The effort has failed, in part because none of the partners on which the U.S. depends, neither the Sunni autocracies Saudi Arabia and Qatar –unsurprisingly– nor Turkey –a NATO ally– has been of any assistance whatsoever. Instead, Turkey, alongside Qatar, has continued to throw its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood.

Owing in part to Turkish support, the Muslim Brotherhood has succeeded –even though its social base within Syria is relatively small– in eclipsing other groups, first in the Syrian National Council, which is headquartered in Istanbul, and then within the new opposition umbrella group that was assembled by the U.S. at the end of 2012, effectively thwarting the American effort to empower non-Islamists. And while sponsoring the Sunni cause in Syria, the Turkish government has made no attempt to show sympathy for the fears and plight of the country’s minorities, the Alawites, Christians, and Kurds. The International Crisis Group observes that “Turkey’s recent interventions have increased perceptions that it is a sectarian Sunni Muslim player.” Those interventions include not only Ankara’s attempt to bring about regime change in Damascus, but also its quarrels with the Shiite-ruled Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> Vali Nasr, “Syria After the Fall,” *New York Times*, 28 July 2012.

Even more ominously, Turkey has not interfered with the jihadists crossing the Turkish-Syrian border. The Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra militia –whose commander has pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al Qaeda, and which is one of the most militarily successful rebel groups– entered the Syrian town Ras al-Nain from Turkey last November to attack the militia of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (known as the PYD), which had wrested control of the Kurdish parts of north-eastern Syria. In the following months, the Nusra fighters continued their incursions into Syria across the Turkish border.

However, the Turkish government denies the charges that it is pursuing a sectarian agenda. Speaking to *Al-Monitor* in April 2013, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that his government is also worried over the presence of extremists among the rebels, but he played down the implications of the jihadist implantation, saying that it should not serve as an excuse for passivity. On his latest visit to Tehran, Davutoğlu called attention to the risk of a Cold War-style sectarian confrontation, and warned that a Shiite-Sunni war would spell “suicide” for the Middle East.

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Abdülhamit Bilici, a foreign affairs commentator in the Turkish daily *Zaman* (which is affiliated with the Islamic Fethullah Gülen movement) wrote that:

Even though the accusation (that Turkey has become a Sunni power) is groundless, it must nonetheless be recognized that there are things that have contributed to this negative perception: as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has simultaneously broken off its relations with Baghdad and Damascus, it has established special relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and similar Islamic groups, which has created a sense of exclusion among other groups; and the impression has been conveyed that Turkey is eager to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and such mistakes must be avoided.<sup>7</sup>

“Turkey’s most brazen foreign policy gambit ever,” poses a threat not only to Turkey’s internal stability, but more importantly, contributes to inflaming sectarian divisions across the Middle East. As French scholar Gilles Kepel points out,

<sup>7</sup> Abdülhamit Bilici, “Türkiye Sünnici mi?,” [Is Turkey Pro-Sunni?], *Zaman*, 23 April 2013.

Syria has become the battleground of a regional, sectarian war.<sup>8</sup> A decade after the U.S. disempowered the ruling Sunni minority and handed Iraq over to the Shiite majority –unintentionally boosting the power of Shiite Iran– the Sunni Arab powers are seeking to redress the geopolitical balance, subsidizing the Sunni rebels fighting the Iranian-allied Syrian regime. The “Shiite revival” has set the stage for a “Sunni revenge”.

The International Crisis Group in its report on Turkey and Syria asserts that “the Syria crisis has pushed [Turkey] into firm alignment with mainly Sunni Muslim opposition fighters and conservative Sunni powers Saudi Arabia and Qatar”; it suggests that the “Sunnification” of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East represents less of a conscious choice than a coincidence. What is true is that Turkey’s Syrian involvement is not driven by any anti-Shiite, Sunni resentment in the wake of the “loss” of Iraq; Turkey is not out to settle accounts with Iran as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are. But neither is the Turkish alignment with Sunni conservatism a pure geopolitical –or for that matter, ideological– coincidence.

Turkey’s Middle Eastern policies are determined by power ambitions; in the words of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, “We will continue to be the master, the leader, and the servant of this new Middle East.”<sup>9</sup> The Turkish government has proven to be unabashedly pragmatic, not to say unsentimental, in its pursuit of neo-Ottoman ambitions. A case in point is the speed with which Bashar al-Assad went from being a best friend of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan –the Erdoğan and Assad couples had even vacationed together– to becoming a foe to be removed from power. Holding on to an Alawite-dominated regime that deployed indiscriminate violence against protesting Sunnis obviously could not have been an option for Turkey’s ruling Sunni conservative party, AKP. Yet arguably, the Turks got carried away by sectarian reflexes when they hurriedly called for Assad’s ouster and without any hesitation adopted the cause of the Sunni rebels.

Turkey may have been prompted to make a quick break with its erstwhile partner, wrongly anticipating the precipitous collapse of the Syrian regime. Ankara may have wanted to avoid losing initiative to other powers, as was the case in Libya, where it took some time before the Turks joined the alliance against Muammar el-Qaddafi. But there can be no doubt that ideological and sectarian considerations weighed heavily as well. What beckons enticingly for Turkey is the rise of a pro-Turkish “Sunni crescent” stretching from Gaza over Syria to northern Iraq. The relation of the AKP with Hamas –the rulers of Gaza– is longstanding, while the

8 “Gilles Kepel: Dans les Pays Arabes, les Islamistes Sont à Leur Tour Confrontés à L’Épreuve du Réel,” [In Arab Countries, the Islamists in Turn Face the Test of Reality], *L’Express*, 23 March 2013.

9 “Davutoğlu: Turkey Poised to Lead in Syria and New Middle East,” *Middle East Voices*, *VOA News*, 27 April 2012.

self-governing Kurds in northern Iraq form a Sunni alliance with Turkey against Iran's proxy in Baghdad.

Yet it was only three years ago that Turkey, today deeply involved in the Western-backed Sunni effort to inflict a strategic defeat on Iran in Syria, had voted against new sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council (in 2010, when it held a temporary seat), drawing the ire of the United States. The joint effort of Turkey and Brazil to broker a deal that held out the promise of defusing the Iranian nuclear crisis had infuriated the Obama administration. Indeed, Turkey's "zero problems" policy toward Iran led Western observers to worry that

Turkey was "drifting eastward". It is indeed unlikely that Turkey would have ventured into the Syrian civil war, seeking the overthrow of a regime championed by Iran, if the uprising against Assad had started a year earlier, in 2010, at the height of the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement.

What prompted Ankara to abandon its stated ambition to have "zero problems with neighbors", and the aspiration to mediate between Iran and America, was the realization that the Obama administration was determined to pursue a hard-line policy against Iran. Turkey had no option but to line up alongside its Western allies when the decision was taken at the November 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon to develop a ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability, in part to deter a perceived threat from Iran. Turkey agreed to host an early warning radar station, and the installation in Kürecik, Malatya went operational in January 2012. Turkey's shift from trying to be a mediator to joining the American-led effort to contain –and ultimately roll back– Iranian power ambitions was foregone once Washington had demonstrated its determination to increase the pressure on Tehran. Ankara's shift also flowed from the belief that it would gain power and stature and reap the benefits if the U.S. succeeded in restraining Iran's nuclear ambitions.

It is safe to assume that the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood, an ideological kin to the AKP, ascending to power in Syria excites the ruling Sunni conservatives of Turkey; nonetheless it is ultimately Washington's policy of punitive sanctions and military threats toward Iran that has encouraged Turkey to assert itself as a

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Sunni power. It was the perception that Turkey enjoys American “cover” for a foreign policy that does not refrain from confronting Iranian interests that emboldened the Turkish government to throw its weight behind the armed Sunni rebellion against Assad, Iran’s main regional ally. Paradoxically, the “Sunnification” of Turkish foreign policy is a consequence, at least in the case of Syria, of Turkey’s “Westward shift”.

By contrast however, the Turkish pursuit of a Sunni agenda in Iraq has put it at odds with the American interest of maintaining the integrity of the Iraqi state. So far, Turkey has not displayed any inclination to accommodate American interests in Iraq. It seems like Ankara is intent to pursue the development of an independent oil-relation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq to which Baghdad –and Washington– objects. But Turkey is acting from a position of strength in Iraq, as it is well entrenched –economically as well as politically– in Iraqi Kurdistan, and can afford to ignore American pleas. In Syria on the other hand, where it faces its “most existential threat to date”, Turkey is not in a position to challenge American decisions; Erdoğan may be disappointed with Obama’s unwillingness so far to apply military force to oust Assad, but if Obama were to make clear that the military option is off the table, Turkey would start to pay attention to the kind of advice that the International Crisis Group is offering: “Turkey must stop betting its reputation on a quick resolution of the Syria crisis, give full support for a negotiated solution, and take steps to avoid any perception in the region that it is seeking to act as a partisan, Sunni Muslim hegemon,” ensuring that it can talk to all parties “from a position of greater moral authority.”<sup>10</sup>

If Turkey persists with its present approach to the Syrian crisis, its regional power ambitions stand to suffer; its loss of credibility among Shiites across the Middle East will de-legitimize its claim to be a regional force for good. Meanwhile, the Obama administration needs to take a hard look at its own role in contributing to religious strife; it must above all reconsider its strategy of rolling back Iran, in light of how it is dangerously encouraging opportunistic Sunni assertiveness. It should by now be obvious that more and lethal Western support to the Sunni rebels in Syria would not in any way advance tolerance and pluralism in the region.

Yet, as British historian and author Timothy Garton Ash recently noted, “some, especially in America, Britain, and France, are tempted by the notion that, if we allow the EU arms embargo on Syria to lapse in mid-May, we could tip the balance in favor of the rebels – correction: of the right rebels, not the nasty, Al Qaeda-connected ones. We could then broker a negotiated transition to a new, post-Assad Syria.”<sup>11</sup>

10 International Crisis Group (2013).

11 Timothy Garton Ash, “We glimpse in Syria the Ghosts of Wars to Come,” *The Guardian*, 24 April 2013.

Ash cites Julien Barnes-Dacey of the European Council on Foreign Relations, who argues that this is unlikely: “Not only will Assad continue to fight furiously. Not only will he have support from the country’s Alawite, Christian, Shiite, and Druze minorities, against an opposition now overwhelmingly identified with Sunni Islam. Most important, he will have backing from outside powers, above all Iran, which feels that its own future is at stake.”

The radical –and eminently sensible– alternative, proposed by the European Council on Foreign Relations, is a negotiated de-escalation between all the external powers involved, who would agree to turn off, rather than increase, the flow of arms, and urge all their proxies on the ground to negotiate a political compromise. American scholar Vali Nasr has similarly urged the U.S. and its allies to “enlist the cooperation of Mr. Assad’s allies –Russia and, especially, Iran– to find a power-sharing arrangement for a post-Assad Syria that all sides can support, however difficult that may be to achieve.” Writing in the *New York Times* last summer, Nasr predicted that:

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The administration and its critics alike may think that involving Iran in any resolution to the conflict would throw Tehran a lifeline and set back talks on Iran’s nuclear program. But a breakup of Syria –and the chain of events that such a breakup would inevitably set in motion– poses a graver threat to the Middle East and to America’s long-run interests in the region than does Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>12</sup>

Barack Obama once famously called the Iraq War a “stupid war”. For the U.S. to team up with Sunnis in their quest to avenge the Shiite ascension that the U.S. itself engineered in Iraq by arming the Sunni radical rebellion in Syria would not only be tragically ironic, but similarly, if not even more, “stupid”. Under more peaceful circumstances, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his moderate Sunni conservatism might indeed be able to live up to American expectations and promote a pluralistic vision for the Middle East. That will not happen if the region is increasingly torn apart by violent religious strife and its leaders, including Erdoğan who might otherwise be a force for good, believe that playing the sectarian card will enhance their power.

<sup>12</sup> Vali Nasr (2012).



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