

TURKEY'S SYRIA PROBLEM: A TALKING TIMELINE OF EVENTS

This article analyzes the stages of the Syrian crisis' escalation and the various Turkish reactions. Each stage of Turkey's management of the crisis reveals certain features of its foreign policy. By examining its reactions throughout crisis we can observe the gap between the capabilities and aspirations of Turkish foreign policy. The result is a "talking timeline of events" which shows that the Syrian crisis has been a "reality check" for Turkey.

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The Syrian crisis has rightfully been at the center of international attention over the past months. It is a conflict of great complexity, where the domestic socio-political situation intersects with regional and international geopolitics, as well as strategic dynamics. In this context, Syria has not only become an arena for the struggle of the Syrian people against a repressive regime, but also a field for conflicting external interests. However, despite the importance and impact of the crisis, Turkey and its foreign policy have faced the top challenge since the conflict began. This is displayed in Turkey's nervous stance during the past year or so, as well as in the variability of Turkish foreign policy responses *vis-à-vis* the crisis.

This article analyzes the stages of Ankara's response to the Syrian crisis. Each stage reveals certain features of Turkey's foreign policy. By examining its reactions throughout the escalation of the conflict, we can clearly observe the gap between the capabilities and aspirations of Turkish foreign policy. To this end, the Turkish stance towards the Syrian crisis can be divided into six stages (five + one). Furthermore, by using some insights from coercive diplomacy theory this article enriches the understanding of Turkish foreign policy towards the Syria case. The result is a "talking timeline of events" which shows that the Syrian crisis has been a "reality check" for Turkey; namely, it forced Ankara to move from overplaying its capabilities (which were defined according to its aspirations) to adjusting its policies (not necessarily its rhetoric) to the means available.

Turkish-Syrian Relations and the Syrian Crisis

The relationship between Turkey and Syria was one that marked the change in Turkish foreign policy, especially from 2002 onwards. After the end of the Cold War, tension between the two countries increased over issues such as Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the territorial dispute over Turkey's Hatay province, and the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. This eventually led to a crisis in 1998 when Turkey threatened Syria with war in order to stop it from supporting the PKK and providing safe haven to its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Turkey's coercive diplomacy was successful – as Syria complied and relations between the two countries improved significantly. After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power in Turkey in 2002, the economic, diplomatic, commercial, and other relations between Turkey and Syria expanded significantly. Considering Ankara's vision for a policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors, especially after Ahmet Davutoğlu became the Minister

of Foreign Affairs, the development of Turkish-Syrian relations could be seen as a blessing and in line with Ankara's long-term goals.

The Arab uprisings, or alternatively the "Arab Spring", came to challenge Ankara's ambitious vision in an unexpected way. The overthrow of the decades-old Middle East authoritarian regimes, one after the other, overturned many good relations that Turkey had developed with the regional leaders up to that moment. This backlash brought about a new reality that Ankara appeared unprepared to

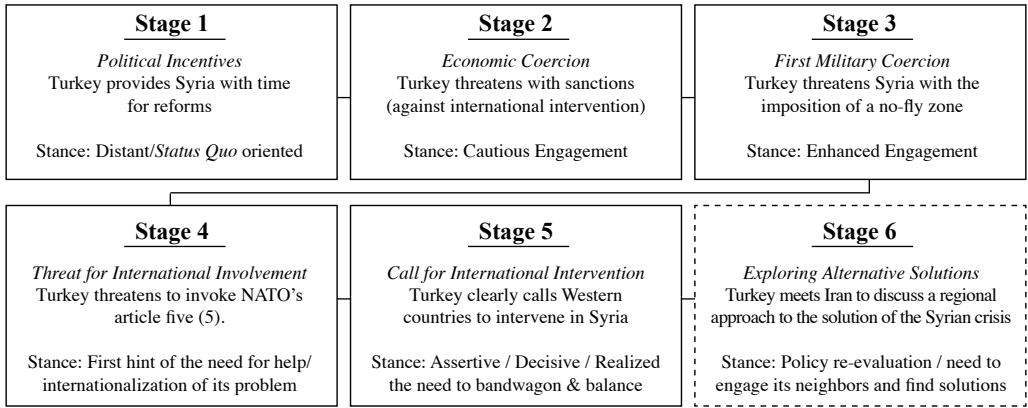
"Syria has not only become an arena for the struggle of the Syrian people against a repressive regime, but also a field for conflicting external interests."

handle. In the case of Syria, Turkey initially decided to provide time to President Bashar al-Assad for implementing the reforms he had promised, while opposing any military intervention in the country. But Ankara gradually changed its stance, strongly opposing the Syrian regime's crackdown on the protesters while threatening with intervention in northern Syria and calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone, as well as sanctions. Later in 2012, Turkey also threatened to invoke article five of NATO's charter following the Assad regime's attack on refugees on the Turkish-Syrian border, as well as with retaliation against Syria after the latter shot down a Turkish fighter jet. Further escalation followed, with Turkey seeking more help from its Western NATO Allies, calling for intervention. Ankara also held a meeting with Iran to discuss the adoption of a new (regional) approach to solving the crisis. It is noteworthy that throughout this time, Turkey played a central role in multi-party international negotiations and talks for the management and resolution of the Syrian crisis.

A Talking Timeline of Events

The Turkish responses during the period starting with the breakout of the Syrian crisis in March 2011 up until roughly the end of 2012, can be divided into five plus one stages. Although the first five stages already went by, the last one is ongoing and its outcome is still uncertain. What is also ambiguous is whether there will be more stages in the future. The five plus one stages of Turkey's crisis management are as follows:

Figure no.1: Stages in Turkey’s Response to the Syrian Crisis



First Stage

Ever since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, the Turkish government has been urging the Assad regime to implement reforms. Even as the waves of refugees were increasing and the violence within Syria mounting, the Turkish leaders –up until the end of summer 2011– insisted on providing the regime with time for reforms and refrained from asking Bashar al-Assad to step down.¹ Ankara was reluctant to take a clear stand against the Assad regime, preferring to give him political incentives. Turkey’s reaction at that stage could be understood within the context of the flourishing Turkish-Syrian relations of the past decade. At the same time, various regional and international actors involved in the crisis, as well as Syria’s historic association with the Kurdish issue, made the situation even more complicated and sensitive for Turkey. The close ties between the Syrian regime and Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, as well as Turkey’s developing relations with all these actors had created a fragile balance of power in the region and influenced Ankara’s stance. From this perspective, Ankara did not want to rush to judge the outcome of the Syrian uprisings, for major economic interests, and diplomatic/strategic balances were at stake.

Second Stage

By the winter of 2011, eight months after the uprisings and violence began in Syria, Prime Minister Erdoğan called upon Assad to step down for the first

¹ Ian Black, “Turkey tells Bashar al-Assad to cease Syria Repression,” *The Guardian*, 23 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/23/syria-bashar-al-assad-turkey-refugees> ; “Turkey’s Gul tells Assad: Don’t wait till too late,” *ahramonline*, 12 August 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/18687/World/Region/Turkeys-Gul-tells-Assad-Dont-wait-till-too-late.aspx>

time and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu threatened Syria with economic sanctions. The incident specifically concerned an Arab League proposal for the involvement of international observers in Syria. Turkey stated that it would join the Arab League in the imposition of economic sanctions should Syria decline the proposal.² Despite Turkey's further engagement in the crisis, the Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, publically opposed any foreign military intervention and argued that the solution should come from within Syria.³ Turkey, which, by the time of the Arab uprisings was trying to strike a balance between its regional policies and its Western allies and was thus becoming more autonomous in its foreign policy, found itself having to gradually side with its traditional partners in the West and decided to be on the "right side of history". In this context, early in 2012, Turkey installed a NATO anti-ballistic warning radar system on its territories. Needless to say, Iran and Russia were disturbed by this development and perceived it as a threat.⁴ President Gül's opposition to foreign military intervention in spite of Turkey's rather delayed change of heart on Syria was a reminder of how sensitive the situation was in Turkish eyes. The possibility of a Western intervention in Syria, caused an increase in regional and international tensions between the U.S. and Russia, China, and Iran. Moreover, a foreign intervention would have unexpected consequences for both Turkey's national security and the region's stability.

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Third Stage

In addition to increased efforts for the coordination of international pressure on the Assad regime, Turkey also reached the point in early 2012 where it threatened Syria with "military incursion."⁵ The threat was made following a large-scale offensive by the Syrian regime close to the Turkish-Syrian border, which

2 Marc Champion, "Turkey Threatens Syria with Sanctions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204630904577059813146005898.html>

3 "President says Turkey against Foreign Intervention in Syria," *Today's Zaman*, 21 November 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=263440

4 Serkan Demirtaş, "NATO Radar System in Turkey up, running," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 January 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/nato-radar-system-in-turkey-up-running.aspx?pageID=238&nID=11474&NewsCatID=338>

5 Adrian Blomfield, "Turkey Threatens Military Incursion into Northern Syria as Refugees flee across its Borders," *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9146900/Turkey-threatens-military-incursion-into-northern-syria-as-refugees-flee-across-its-borders.html>

led to a massive influx of refugees into Turkey. This was also an opportunity for Turkey to reignite discussion about the establishment of a no-fly/buffer zone; however, there were too many obstacles for something like that to be decided. In this stage, Ankara generally displayed willingness for enhanced engagement. Moreover, as the situation was getting worse Turkey's first military coercion and threat of establishing a no-fly zone in Syria displayed not only its willingness, but also the exigence to harden its stance as its security was increasingly threatened.

Fourth Stage

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In an important escalation of the crisis, after incidents of shootings on the Turkish-Syrian border threatened camped refugees, Erdoğan referred both to the need for the UN to take action over Syria as well as the possibility of Turkey invoking article five of NATO's charter. In such a scenario other NATO members would provide Turkey with military support. Although Erdoğan's move at that point could be seen as a diplomatic maneuver, it was also the first clear sign of Turkey's need for international diplo-

matic or military assistance.⁶ This signaled the intensification of the need for security that emerged in “stage four”, and further clarified which side Turkey was on.

Fifth Stage

Following the downing of a Turkish jet by the Syrian armed forces the situation worsened. Despite Turkey's warning to Syria that it would take decisive actions after the downing of the jet, Ankara's reaction was fairly measured.⁷ Yet the crisis culminated when Ankara decided to retaliate after the deadly Syrian shelling which cost the lives of five Turkish civilians. Turkey has not left any Syrian shelling unanswered ever since, thus a highly flammable situation has developed

⁶ Richard Spencer, “Syria: Turkey threatens to invoke NATO's Self-Defence Article,” *The Telegraph*, 13 April 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9200822/Syria-Turkey-threatens-to-invoke-Natos-self-defence-article.html>

⁷ Jonathon Burch and Oliver Holmes, “Syria downs Turkish Jet, Ankara to act Decisively,” *Reuters*, 23 June 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/06/22/uk-syria-crisis-idUKBRE84S0P320120622>

on the border.⁸ In this light, Ahmet Davutoğlu took a decisive step to deal with the Syrian problem and openly called upon major powers such as the U.S. and the UK, “to intervene in Syria to prevent a looming humanitarian ‘disaster’ that...threatens the lives of millions of internally displaced people and refugees as winter approaches and could soon ignite a region-wide conflagration.”⁹ At this stage Turkey was no longer merely threatening, but openly calling for intervention. Although there is little agreement over whether Turkey desires a structural change in Syria or a superficial arrangement and transition –which would not endanger its long-term interests– at this instance such a dilemma was not salient. On the other hand, the political aims of the urged intervention were not clear either. In the midst of the waves of refugees, the cross-border shelling, and the PKK’s guerilla warfare, to mention only a few issues, Turkey clearly found itself in a deadlock where seeking help was imperative. This is when the limitations of Turkey’s previously overplayed capabilities became clear.

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Sixth Stage

The UN, U.S., and NATO have been unable to make a considerable contribution to Turkey’s efforts for securing its borders and the management of the Syrian crisis. At the end of October 2011, the Turkish Prime Minister had an unscheduled meeting with the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Given the recent deterioration in Turkish-Iranian relations and Iran’s controversial role of supporting the Assad regime, this was regarded as an important meeting. Although no tangible result has come out yet, it appears to be the first step for a new approach to the crisis by Turkey. This would bring together regional powers that could play an instrumental role in the ousting of Assad.¹⁰ Russia was also quick

8 Christopher Torchia, “Syria Mortar Attack: Turkey Fires Back at Syrian Targets Following Deadly Cross-Border Shelling,” *Huffington Post*, 3 October 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/syria-mortar-attack-turkey_n_1936843.html

9 Simon Tisdall, “Turkey calls on Major Powers to Intervene in Syria,” *The Guardian*, 19 October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/19/turkey-britain-us-intervene-syria>

10 Simon Tisdall, “Iran and Turkey’s Meeting Reveals New Approach to Syria,” *The Guardian*, 25 October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/25/iran-turkey-new-approach-syria>

to declare its support for any effort for regional talks.¹¹ Such an approach would also be important since, it would signify a shift in Turkey's stance towards the Syrian problem based on its potential success in reaching a compromise with pro-Assad parties such as Iran and Russia. Yet even after this initiative Turkey continued to display its dependence on Western help by considering the request of the deployment of Patriot missiles in its territories from NATO, as a contingency plan against Assad's forces.¹²

A Strategic Element: Coercive Diplomacy

From a strategic point of view, Turkey has tried a range of tactics throughout the development of the crisis such as soft power, bandwagoning, balancing, coercion, and the use of force (or hard power). This section concerns coercive diplomacy and its relationship to the use of force.

A generally accepted definition of coercion is "the threat of force to influence the behavior of another entity."¹³ However, this is a rather simplistic approach since the concepts of coercion vary in terms of strategies and methods. For example, Lawrence Freedman wrote that "the deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to influence another's strategic choices" is "strategic coercion,"¹⁴ whereas Alexander George defines "coercive diplomacy" as the "efforts to persuade an opponent to stop or reverse an action."¹⁵ Thomas Shelling –whose work is the oldest of the three– made a clearer distinction between offensive and defensive coercion; that is, he divided coercion into two separate strategies: deterrence (defensive) and coercion/compellence (offensive).¹⁶ The main difference is that deterrence uses a threat with the intention of keeping the adversary from initiating something, thus maintaining the *status quo*, whereas coercion/compellence uses a threat to "make the adversary do something (or cease doing something)," thus changing the *status quo*.¹⁷ For the purpose of this article, Shelling's definition of coercion and George's definition of coercion diplomacy are seen as concurrent and are thus adopted as clearer and more comprehensible.

11 Turkey's proposal suggested itself, Iran, Egypt, Russia and Saudi Arabia for participation in regional talks for finding a solution to the Syrian crisis. See, "Russia supports Erdoğan's Call for Regional Talks on Syria," *Today's Zaman*, 5 November 2012, <http://todayszaman.com/news-297202-russia-supports-erdogans-call-for-regional-talks-on-syria.html>
12 Serkan Demirtaş, "Turkey to request Patriot Deployment from NATO," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 2 November 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-request-patriot-deployment-from-nato.aspx?PageID=2338&NID=33790&NewsCatID=338>

13 William H. Kincade, "Arms Control or Arms Coercion?," *Foreign Policy*, No.62 (Spring, 1986), p. 25.

14 Lawrence Freedman, "Strategic Coercion," in Lawrence Freedman (ed.), *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 15.

15 Alexander L. George, "Coercive Diplomacy: Definition and Characteristics," in Alexander L. George and William E. Simons (eds.), *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), p. 7.

16 Freedman (1998), p. 18-19.

17 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 195.

Apart from criteria that were established by other scholars later on, Schelling argued that the compellence (coercive diplomacy) success depends on five key elements: (a) the adversary must be convinced that “the costs of non-compliance will be unbearable;” (b) the adversary must believe that the coercer’s threat is credible; (c) there must be enough time for the adversary to comply; (d) the adversary must be convinced that there will be no more demands in the future; and (e) both sides must have a common interest in “avoiding full scale war” (not a zero-sum conflict).¹⁸

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Taking some of these insights under consideration while evaluating the development of Turkish foreign policy toward the Syrian crisis, several conclusions can be drawn. This article began with a point about the relationship between Turkey’s capabilities and aspirations. Coercive diplomacy, as outlined above, is one of Turkey’s main tactics in managing the Syrian crisis, and has also been an important feature of its foreign policy in general in the recent past. An assessment of the stages of the crisis reveals that the stages two to four involved coercive diplomacy to various degrees. Turkey successfully used coercive diplomacy twice during the Cyprus missile (S-300) and Syrian crises in 1998. Ankara also used coercive diplomacy in the fall of 2011 when it threatened both Cyprus and Israel regarding the recent discovery of gas reserves in the Mediterranean, and the *Mavi Marmara* incident.¹⁹

Ankara eventually did not carry out any of its threats against Cyprus and Israel, which was also the case in the early stages of the Syrian crisis, apart from sanctions. Hence Ankara fell short in meeting the first two criteria for successful coercion, thereby losing much of its credibility. This is a possible reason behind

¹⁸ See, Schelling cited in Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “Coercive Diplomacy,” in Alan Collins (ed.), *Contemporary Security Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 230.

¹⁹ Cem Barber, “Turkey threatens Naval Action over Cyprus Drilling,” *Famagusta Gazette*, 6 September 2011, <http://famagusta-gazette.com/turkey-threatens-naval-action-over-cyprus-drilling-p12883-69.htm> ;

“EU: Greek Cyprus may search for Gas,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 September 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=eu-greek-cyprus-may-search-for-gas-2011-09-08>. ; Şebnem Arsu, “Amid Tensions with Israel, Turkey threatens Increased Naval Presence,” *New York Times*, 6 September 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/07/world/middleeast/07turkey.html?_r=4&

Syria's non-compliance. Therefore, the fact that Turkey eventually resorted to the use of force –in the form of responding in kind to the shelling from Syria– means at least three things, mostly related to its credibility: i) it had to maintain/restore the image of the regional power that it had developed over the years; ii) it had to make sure that any future threats would be credible; and iii) it had to effectively deal with the security threats posed by Syria as other means had failed. It should also be noted that the use of force from Turkey came after the shelling from Syria which gave Turkey the needed legitimization for retaliation. The Syrian crisis, and generally the Arab Spring forced Turkey to employ these tactics, revealing that Ankara's aspirations of becoming a regional and supra-regional power or its soft power practice had serious limitations.

Conclusion

In the past decade, through the speeches of its leaders and a proactive foreign policy, Ankara has appeared as very ambitious, gradually autonomous, strengthened, and sometimes even arrogant – *vis-à-vis* the EU or other Western allies or policies. As the timeline of the Syrian crisis events indicates, Turkey had a hard time adapting to the structural changes that were taking place in its neighbor, for the alteration of the *status quo* would come with great costs. Additionally, although rather late, Turkey came to realize that its proactive foreign policy and “soft power” could not serve its interests in the case of Syria. Consequently, the Syrian crisis became a “reality check” for Turkey for it reveals that Ankara has thus far been overplaying its foreign policy capabilities through the projection of its aspirations.

As Turkey's capabilities were not enough for managing the crisis, traditional means had to be employed such as leaning to its Western allies and the use of coercion diplomacy. However, these tactics eventually endangered the diplomatic and strategic balances between East and West for Turkish foreign policy as, for example, it strained the relations between Turkey and Iran. Thereafter Turkey found itself trying a new approach to the Syrian problem which would be more inclusive of regional powers, in an effort to find once again the equilibrium between Western and non-Western interests in the Middle East.

Turkey's task is indeed extremely difficult. Geography seems to be a curse at this juncture while the exacerbation of the “Kurdish Problem” within Turkey is deepening Ankara's challenges. The answer to Turkey's Syrian problem may lie in a “hearts and minds” approach to the Kurdish issue, so as to lessen the insecurities that stem from it, coupled with a sincere regional dialogue and a relative distance from NATO – mainly for communicative purposes.