

WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE “ZERO PROBLEM WITH NEIGHBORS” DOCTRINE?

With the “Arab Spring”, long-standing institutional structures have turned upside down both within the region and in Turkey’s relations with the regional states. Turkey’s “zero problem” doctrine has been called into question ever since the demonstrations in Syria have turned into violent clashes between the supporters of Assad’s regime and the protestors, leading Turkey to take on a tough stance against the Syrian regime, and marring Turkey’s relations with Iran and Iraq. In addition to the domestic factors that affected the pace of events in Syria, it is equally crucial to consider a number of external factors. The position of Iran and Russia on the one side, and Israel and the United States on the other, have had a decisive impact on the course of events in Syria, significantly constraining Turkey from pursuing its own interests in the region.

Mustafa Kibaroglu*



*Prof. Dr. Mustafa Kibaroglu is the Head of the International Relations Department of the Okan University in Istanbul.

The “zero problems with neighbors” doctrine is a brainchild of Ahmet Davutoğlu, an international relations professor who had the unique opportunity to put his own theoretical work into practice as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey. Until recently, Davutoğlu was being compared to legendary figures in diplomatic history such as Henry Kissinger, particularly for his success in injecting a positive mood into the highly complex and volatile intra and inter-state politics of the Middle East. However, he has lately become the target of harsh criticisms leveled against the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.

With the onset of the events taking place across the greater Middle East that have culminated into what is now widely known as the “Arab Spring”, long-standing institutional structures have turned upside down both within the region and in Turkey’s relations with the regional states. The demonstrations in Syria that have turned into violent clashes between supporters and protestors of Assad’s regime, have caused Turkey to take a tough stance against Damascus, thereby marring its relations with Iran and Iraq. Consequently, many security and foreign policy analysts inside and outside of Turkey have called the “zero problem” doctrine into question.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to explore the background of the developments in the region, with a view to understanding which external and domestic factors may have had an impact on the evolution of the relations between Turkey and Syria, and Turkey’s foreign policy toward the region in general.

The “Good Old Days”

Scholars and experts of international affairs and diplomacy admit that Turkey is located in a difficult neighborhood. Its relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors, namely Iran, Iraq, and Syria have constituted the lion’s share in the preoccupation of Turkish diplomats, politicians, as well as civil and military security analysts.¹

Despite the nuclear ambitions of Iran, the unwavering attitude of Syria with its claims on the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and the *de facto* partitioning of Iraqi territory among the Sunni and Shi’a Arabs, and the Kurds, Turkey’s stance toward its Middle Eastern neighbors exhibited significant improvements over the last several years.

A number of factors contributed to the creation of a mild climate between Turkey and its Middle Eastern neighbors. First and foremost has been the attitude of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan toward Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. On a number of

¹ For a comprehensive coverage of Turkey’s relations with its neighbors see, Mustafa Kibaroglu and Aysegül Kibaroglu, *Global Security Watch – Turkey: A Reference Handbook*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009).

occasions, Erdoğan harshly criticized Israel in his public speeches, especially after the targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders by Israeli security forces in 2008. Moreover, Israel's offensives on south Lebanon in 2006 and particularly on Gaza in 2009 caused extreme anger among the Turkish public, more so among the supporters of the AKP as well as Erdoğan himself. The tone of statements made by the Turkish Premier toward Israel went beyond mere criticism as he accused the Israeli government of committing "state terror" against the innocent Palestinians. Erdoğan has also emphasized, time and again, that he does not consider Hamas a terrorist organization.

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These and other similar statements by Erdoğan have elevated him to the position of a “heroic” political figure in the streets of most Middle Eastern countries. The public sentiment in these countries toward Turkey and Turks has significantly improved, putting a positive spin on the inter-personal relations of Turks with their regional counterparts, thereby strongly facilitating the exchange of goods and services between Turkey and the greater region. In 2009 alone, Turkey held joint ministerial cabinet meetings with Iraq in October and with Syria in December. These were unprecedented in Turkey’s foreign policy toward its southern neighbors, for Turkey has long treated these countries as foes rather than friends.

The Middle East, to which Turkey had turned its back during the Cold War years and long considered as being a source of all evil by most Turkish policy-makers as well as civil and military strategists, has recently become a neighborhood with which Turks were happy to do business.² Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu considered this situation to be an important step in normalization of Turkey’s relations with the members of the same family of nations in the region, which were deeply disturbed by the imperialist policies of the great powers.³

The uprisings in the Arab countries that started in Tunisia and followed by Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and so forth were closely monitored by the Turkish government and political analysts. Initially, the prevailing feeling among most of them was that the Arab uprisings would eventually lead to the democratization of the region, paving the

² Turan Yılmaz, “Ekonomik Partner Olduk,” [We became Economic Partners], *Hürriyet*, 23 December 2004, <http://webarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/2004/12/23/573781.asp>

³ Author’s recollection from his conversation with Ahmet Davutoğlu during a one-day workshop convened in Vienna, Austria, 20 October 2008.

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way to a more peaceful environment and more friendly relations among the regional countries, as envisaged by the “democratic peace” theory.⁴ The uprisings were not necessarily interpreted by Turkish observers as being likely to take a turn that would have serious negative implications for Turkey, thanks to its democracy and economic power, combined with its increasing political weight in the region.

However, the “unanticipated” brutality of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s strategy to crush the protesters –as demonstrated in cities like Hama and Homs– greatly affected and determined the level of Turkey’s involvement in the fast evolving Arab Spring. The intensification of the events in Syria gradually forced Turkey to take a clearer stance *vis-à-vis* the actors involved in the clashes, namely the Assad regime on one side and the opposition groups on the other.⁵

Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan accused the Syrian President of having a major role in the evolution of the events and the deterioration of the security situation all over Syria, and invited Assad to step down. Erdoğan also criticized him for being unable or unwilling to keep the promises he made during the exchange of visits in the good old days experienced in the bilateral relations.

The Role of External Actors

That said, however, would Bashar al-Assad’s personal stance alone determine the pace of events so strongly? Had he been committed to reforming the country as suggested by Erdoğan, could he still stay in power in Syria? There is no way to give exact answers to these questions. However, in addition to the domestic factors that affected the pace of events, it is equally crucial to consider a number of external factors, which may have had even bigger impacts. The positions of countries like Iran and Russia on one side, and those of Israel and the United States on the other, have had a decisive impact on the course of events in Syria and thus, significantly constrained Turkey in pursuing its own interests in the region.

4 Jack Levy, “The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence,” in Philip E. Tetlock *et al.*(eds.), *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

5 The existing regime in Syria is based on a long-standing coalition among the Baath Party, the Army and the Intelligence (*Al Muhaberat*), each of which has been controlled by members of the Assad family for decades.

Iran's Concerns

Syria is probably the one and only country in the world with which Iran has alliance-like strategic relations. The axis formed by the Hezbollah rule in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Molla regime in Iran provides Tehran enormous leverage in its stance toward Israel and the U.S. Therefore, anything that would have the potential to disrupt the harmony in this axis, such as the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, or worse, a Syrian-Israeli rapprochement or peace accord, would deeply disturb Iran's supreme national interests.

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Prior to the Syrian crisis, the unprecedented level of close and comprehensive relations between Turkey and Syria had enabled a renewed round of talks between Syria and Israel, which were facilitated by the Turkish government from 2008 to 2010. Hence, it was not unrealistic to expect Iran to take a serious of economic, political, military, and social measures that would put an end to, or at least slow down, relations between Ankara and Damascus. Turkish and Western intelligence services should have expected Iran to make such a move in order to keep Syria firmly on its side, and thus informed their respective policy makers about the possible implications of such a contingency by Tehran.

Russia's Concerns

Like Iran, the Russian Federation also has the capability to influence regional politics. In addition to being a former superpower that still keeps some 10,000 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, Russia is a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and has stakes in Syria. To a great extent, Russia's attitude has determined the pace of events in Syria, as the Assad leadership felt they could act with impunity while using brutal military force against their own population. Moscow made it clear from the onset of the events that, unlike the situation in Libya where the Russian abstention facilitated the passage of the UNSC Resolution 1973 authorizing the use of force against the Gaddafi regime, this time Russia would not allow a military operation against Syria.⁶ A factor in the Russian and Chinese opposition to Security Council action against Syria was the misuse of Resolution 1973, which originally aimed at achieving a ceasefire

6 “Russia calls Syria Resolution ‘blatant’ Support for Rebels,” *Channel News Asia*, 4 August 2012, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_world/view/1217896/1/.html

“Israeli authorities have serious concerns regarding the large stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) currently located in Syria.”

and a no-fly-zone but ended up bombing Gaddafi’s strongholds.

Since the Cold War years, Russian strategists have displayed a genuine interest in having a strong foothold in the Middle East. Then Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad’s close relations with the Soviet Union had enabled Syria to develop a strong deterrent against Israel and possible interventions from the West (i.e. the United States). Soviet military experts helped the

Syrian military in the 1970s and 1980s in building their weapons of mass destruction capability (i.e. chemical and possibly biological weapons) and their delivery vehicles (e.g. SCUD missiles), which is one of the largest in the region and the world.⁷

In return for the military aid and assistance from Moscow, Damascus provided the Soviet leadership the ability to strengthen their hands in the regional (i.e. the Middle East and the Mediterranean), as well as global chess game against its major antagonist the U.S. during the height of the Cold War. The web of relations between the Russian political-security elite and the Syrian leadership has remained alive ever since, even though it was somewhat dormant for about a decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the reconstitution of Russian influence on world events following the arrival of Vladimir Putin to the helm at the beginning of the new millennium, Russia has become further involved in Middle Eastern affairs. To a large extent, like the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program, Russia is one of the key actors whose stance continues to determine the pace of events with respect to the situation in Syria.

Concerns of Israel and the United States

Regarding the situation in Syria, Israel is supposedly one of the countries that will be affected from the way the events unfold. Israel and Syria are the two most important actors involved in the deeply-rooted Arab-Israeli conflict and have fought each other several times. Nevertheless, Jerusalem and Damascus have developed a *modus operandi* amongst themselves since the Middle East Peace Process that took place in the first half of the 1990s.⁸ The secret talks in Oslo between the Arabs and Israelis resulted in a number of achievements in regional politics. These included Jordan’s official recognition of the sovereignty of Israel in 1993, the second Arab country to do so after Anwar

7 Anthony H. Cordesman, “Syrian Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Overview,” CSIS (2008), http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080602_syrianwmd.pdf

8 Ben Smith and Tim Youngs, *Middle East Peace Process: Historical Background and a Detailed Chronology from 1990 to Present* (House of Commons Library, 2010), http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/Middle_East_Peace_Process.pdf

el-Sadat's Egypt, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. The prevailing view among the Israeli political and security elite has been that peace in the Middle East cannot be achieved without Syria's active involvement and contribution. For this reason, the stance of the Syrian leadership toward Israel in particular and the peace process in general, always mattered for Israel.

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The powerful one-man rule in Syria established by the father Hafez al-Assad has passed to his son Bashar al-Assad rather smoothly, and that the control of the triad (the Army, Party, and Intelligence service) would depend heavily on the man at the top. In considering this context, Israeli political analysts have been extremely cautious about scenarios involving a possible post-Assad period.

Thus, Israel has been reluctant in lending support to the Syrian rebels. Israeli authorities have serious concerns regarding the large stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) currently located in Syria. These include chemical weapons and their delivery vehicles, such as SCUD missiles with ranges that can hit any target in Israel. This issue is further complicated by ambiguity over the precise identities and agendas of the various rebel groups. If radical and/or religious extremist groups were to acquire these weapons, they may turn them onto Israel. Therefore, the Israeli government does not want to support potential enemies of its own.

The U.S. was reluctant to give tangible support to the opposition in Syria beyond some rhetorical statements, for reasons related to its strategic partner Israel on the one hand, and the approaching presidential elections on the other. The U.S. State Department is closely following the events –as it should be– and apparently working in close cooperation with its regional allies, including Turkey. However, the Obama administration appears to be reluctant to get further involved in the Syrian debacle.

Implications for Turkey

In the absence of significant pressure from the U.S. and Israel, and thanks to the political and military support that it receives from Iran and Russia, the Assad regime continues to act with impunity. Moreover, by crushing the opposition groups with excessive power, the regime is exacerbating the tension between Turkey and Syria. Consequently, as of November 2012, Turkish-Syrian relations are in a true deadlock. With nearly 120,000 refugees on the Turkish side of the border, Ankara appears to be alone in its tough stance against the Assad regime. Prime Minister Erdoğan has clearly stated that this tough

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stance will continue until Assad agrees to step down.⁹

In addition to the deteriorated relations between the Turkish government and the Assad administration, problems surfaced emanating from the emergence of Kurdish groups in Syria. These groups claim to control a significant amount of territory in northern Syria alongside the Turkish frontier.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization, PKK was used to getting ample logistical support from the Syrian government. This was brought to an end by Turkey’s threat of force against Syria in 1998, which paved the way to the Adana Protocol.¹⁰ The resurgence of terrorist groups in northern Syria and the possibility of a loose coalition among the Kurdish groups in Iraq, Iran, as well as in Turkey are causing serious concerns among the Turkish political and security elite. Erdoğan has drawn a “red line”, saying that “Turkey would not allow northern Syria to become a sanctuary for the PKK and other related terrorist organizations,” implying that the use of limited military force would be possible in order to prevent such an eventuality.¹¹

The toll of the Arab Spring appears to have become a major headache for Ankara, especially due to the events in Syria. As a result of the crisis in its neighbor, Turkey has experienced a refugee problem that started to cause additional social, economic, and political problems. Furthermore, Turkey has recently faced security challenges emerging from northern Syria where the Assad regime is either transferring or losing control of territories.

Iraqi-Turkish relations had reached their climax in 2009 with the signing of dozens of protocols and joint ministerial cabinet meetings. Nevertheless, these relations have also soured along with Turkish-Syrian relations. That is due to the close cooperation between the Maliki government and Tehran, and its spillover effects on their relations with Syria. The ongoing crisis over the status of the “former” Iraqi Vice-President al-Hashimi, who sought refuge in Turkey after being found guilty by the Iraqi courts, has been the tipping point in the further deterioration of the relations between Baghdad and Ankara.¹²

9 Jonathan Burch and Pinar Aydınlı, “Turkish PM says Syria has become ‘Terrorist State’,” *Reuters*, 5 September 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/05/us-syria-crisis-turkey-erdogan-idUSBRE8840G120120905>

10 “Türkiye-Suriye İlişkileri,” *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-suriye-siyasi-iliskileri-tr.mfa>

11 “Erdoğan warns Turkey could strike PKK Fighters inside Syria,” *Al Arabiya News*, 26 July 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/26/228476.html>

12 Chelsea J. Carter and Mohammed Tawfeeq, “Iraq’s Sunni VP on his Death Sentence: ‘Unjust, political and illegitimate’,” *CNN International*, 10 September 2012, http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/10/world/meast/iraq-politics-violence/index.html?hpt=hp_t1

Conclusion

First and foremost an academic, Davutoğlu devised his “zero problem” doctrine for overcoming disputes in the region. In short, Davutoğlu’s doctrine can be considered as giving peace a chance, an attempt rarely seen in the area of international relations due to the concepts like “national interest” or “power politics” which dominate the minds of most practitioners and theoreticians, leaving little room for hopes of peace to flourish. In that sense, Davutoğlu’s aspirations for improving the bilateral relations between Turkey and its neighbors and thereby enhancing the relations among the regional states in the Middle East is commendable.

However, “it takes two to tango” and for this approach to work, similar intentions must be shared by all involved actors. Should one of them cheat or not fully cooperate with the same intent, realization of the objectives set out by the doctrine may not be possible. This has been the case in Turkish-Syrian relation in particular as well as in Turkey’s relations with Iraq and Iran to varying extents, as discussed earlier.

On a number of occasions, Davutoğlu has said that, in order to discuss issues of mutual concern with his Syrian counterparts as well as with President Bashar al-Assad himself, he visited Damascus more than 60 times prior to, during, and after the events started to take place in Syrian cities. Given the assurances that may have been provided to Davutoğlu (either in person, or conveyed to him or to Prime Minister Erdoğan through various channels, such as Turkish intelligence services as well as involved political analysts), he must have been wary of such contingencies. It should have been considered that neither Bashar al-Assad nor any body that may have replaced him would have been able to behave in a significantly different manner. This is not only due to personalities but also the structural reasons discussed above that have been exploited by Iran and Russia. In short, it must have been clear that Syria would soon get bogged down into a domestic turmoil.

For the settlement of the conflict in Syria, Iran and Russia’s cooperation and collaboration are essential. Iran has the capacity to control and, if need be, to manipulate the situation on the ground at the operational level by means of the units close to or controlled by Tehran that are reportedly entrenched in key strategic places. Iran is also able to control the flow of arms and munitions supplied to the regime’s supporters. Russia’s support for the Assad regime is of strategic importance by virtue of its possibility to use veto power at the UNSC, should there be an attempt to use force against the regime. Short of an alternative balancing power, Iran and Russia’s leverages outweigh Turkey’s ability to find a breakthrough in the conflict and thus pursue its own national interests.