

SYRIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS: AT WHAT PRICE?

If Turkey continues to support Arab dictatorships, especially Syria, not only will Arab democracies like Iraq and Lebanon distance themselves from Turkey, but so will the U.S. and European countries. Pointing out some recent moves of Turkey, the author accuses the Turkish government of being shortsighted and acting against the interests of Turkey itself.

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When President Sezer of Turkey visited Syria early in June of 2005, one stop on his agenda was a trip to the famous Hamiydiah market in Damascus with its colorful assortment of merchants hawking wares galore. As soon as Sezer stepped into the market accompanied by Bashar al-Assad, the installed ruler of Syria, merchants lifted prepared banners in Turkish welcoming Sezer and praising him the way they usually praise Assad. In fact, they broke into the chant so common in Syria “Bil Roh, Bil Dam, Noufdeek ya Bashar” which if translated literally means “With our soul, with our blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for you Bashar.”

Sezer took ten steps and then suddenly asked to leave the market. According to people who accompanied him, he was very much disturbed by the charade unfolding in front of his eyes. To Sezer, a visit to Hamiydiah was intended to approach the common man on the street and engage with him in a conversation of value and not see his visit turn into a propaganda ploy. His greeters knew nothing of him; their reaction was planned by the Syrian government and was not a normal reaction to a leader that the people intimately knew.

This incident speaks volumes about not only what is wrong with Syria but also about what is wrong with Sezer’s visit to Syria.

Rock Bottom History

The history of the Syrian-Turkish relationship had never, in the years following WWII, followed a pattern discernable enough to recognize mutual interests as congruent or in conflict

Turkey’s paths towards its present state of democracy lead the country away from Syria on many fronts. In the 1950’s, Syria opposed the Baghdad Pact while Turkey embraced it. Later, Syria fell into the Soviet satellite of influence while Turkey joined NATO.

Syria’s mixture of socialism and communism surrendered its political system to anarchy and many political coups that took place in the fifties and sixties. That chaos contributed succinctly to the weakening of relations between both countries and lead ultimately to disquieting diplomacy mired by some significant events.

Turkey’s construction of dams that held precious and irreplaceable water from flowing in the Euphrates downstream to Syria, created a crisis in the late eighties.¹ Turkey’s justification was purely economic but Syria viewed the dams as a political threat to its own survival as an agricultural society. Matters worsened when Syria started supporting the infamous PKK, a Kurdish supported terrorist organization. Hafez al-Assad gave Öcalan, the PKK leader, refuge and logistical support.

That support angered Turkey. With the relations soured by the issue of water resources, in 1998 Turkey amassed thousands of soldiers on the Syrian borders to demand that the

¹ Mohamed Alo Kazem and Khalil Osman, “Conflicting Claims to Euphrates water muddy Syrian-Turkish Relations,” available at: <http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/world98/euphrate.htm>.

head of the PKK, who operated with impunity from Damascus - the way other terrorists do today- be delivered; or else. The struggle against the PKK cost Turkey 35,000 lives and billions a year.² Assad could not get any support from the Clinton administration and gave in. For the first time, this showed how weak Syria really was in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the deteriorating health of Assad. That episode was a turning point in Syrian-Turkish history.

Analysis of Turkish demands during this episode in 1998 reveals how Syria operated in general. If one substitutes the dates and the type of the foreign terrorists, one can see that what Iraq demands from Syria today is what Turkey demanded in 1998. Here is the list of demands that Turkey made of Syria dating 22 October 1998³:

Syria should not:

- Permit camps for terrorist to operate in territories under its control,
- Provide weapons, logistic materials to the PKK,
- Provide fraudulent identification documents to PKK members,
- Help terrorists in obtaining legal passage and infiltration into Turkey,
- Permit the propaganda activities of the terrorist organization,
- Allow the PKK to operate in accommodations in its territory,
- Facilitate the passages of terrorists from third countries (Europe, Southern Cyprus, Iran, Libya, Armenia) to northern Iraq and Turkey.

Syria should provide:

- Cooperation in all activities aimed at fighting terrorism,
- Abstention from inciting other countries which are members of the Arab League against Turkey.

Dissidents seeking democracy in Syria, including ourselves, believe that Turkey should not support the Syria while Syria is supporting groups that are involved in the Iraqi insurgency. For the same reasons, Turkey did not want other countries to support Syria when the PKK issue was on the agenda of Turkey-Syria relations.

Arguments against Normalized Relationship with Syria

In late 2004, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Syria and helped sign a free trade agreement⁴ in support of the Assad regime. Ostensibly, the purpose was to help achieve a higher level of trade between Turkey and Syria, politically however, it was a ploy against America.⁵ Erdoğan chose Syria over the United States in a gesture of blind

² Sami Moubayad, "Turkish Honeymoon," *Al-Ahram Online*, 21 April 2005, available at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/739/re2.htm>

³ "Annex 2: Syrian-Turkish Agreement, 22 October 1998," *International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, available at: <http://www.ict.org.il/documents/documentdet.cfm?docid=16>

⁴ "Ankara for boosting trade relations with Syria", *Arabic News*, May 29, 2004, available at: <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040529/2004052904.html>

⁵ Bulent Aras, "Turkish-Iranian-Syrian Relations: Limits of Regional Politics in the Middle East," The Palmer Press, available at: <http://www.thepalmerpress.com/Report09.html>.

faith knowing well that the United States' complaints about Syrian interference in Iraq were increasing everyday. In fact, the complaints about Syria by Iraq, Lebanon, and even Israel gained momentum towards the end of 2004. It was obvious that the international community was heading in one direction and Erdoğan was heading in another.

Erdoğan bet on Europe. The EU membership prospect offered to Turkey and Europe's general stand against the Iraq War gave Erdoğan a "poke-in-the-eye" strategy against the United States and specifically against George W. Bush. When on 14 February, the former prime minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri was killed by a 1,000 pound bomb delivered by a truck, the world, including France and most of the European nations, saw the real dangers of a rogue Syria. The reaction by the international community was swift against Syria. Erdoğan's strategy of appeasement towards his neighboring country captures the weakness of his vision. What Erdoğan does not understand is the apparent determination of George W. Bush to make the Syrian regime pay for the killing of at least 700 US soldiers in Iraq. I believe, the US thinks they are at war against Syria and will, in due time, act against the Assad regime. This will leave Erdoğan's policy towards his Arab neighbor in shambles.

European Dreams, Packages of Reality

A recent article in the Washington Post (11 June 2005) questioned whether Turkey should pursue so feverishly a membership in the European club. To citizens of Turkey, the resources used may not be all that worth it, if in the end Turkey's European accession comes at the expense of the identity that Turkey has built based on Atatürk's vision.

Turkey's pursuit is weighed against myriad options, benefits, and costs that only Turkey can assess. One thing Turkey must take into account is that Europe does not have the will or inclination to ensure that its borders are safe, with peaceful democracies instead of violent autocracies, like Syria today, as neighbors. Thus the task is left to willing partners, and their will is measured by their self-interests. It is in the best interests of U.S. to change the regime in Damascus to help eradicate violence as a political and negotiating tool used by weak nations to extricate the maximum benefits from powerful ones.

For Turkey to enter the scene to save the Assad regime as it did when it signed numerous agreements and held high level visits has worked against its own interests. Firstly, it is supporting a regime that will not be acceptable for Europe to share borders with. As porous as the Syrian-Iraqi borders have been, Syria, with its present rulers, will find ways to spread violence in Europe. This may happen, if it does not, for example, get its way on the Association Agreement yet to be signed between the European Union (EU) and Syria. The discovery of a Lebanese government official's hit list which included close friends of European leaders will eventually not only lead to the indictment Syrian killers; but can affect relations between Turkey and Europe. Syria is a minefield today and any overture in support of the Assad regime has hidden costs that political leaders in Turkey are, as of yet, unaware.

Another reason that needs to be taken into account is how far Turkey is willing to go to test the elasticity of its relations with the United States. Is trade with Syria more important than trade with the United States? So far it seems, Turkish politicians are not thinking rationally.

One more crucial consideration is the relationship Turkey expects from Iraq and Israel, one a nemesis of the Assad regime and the other on its way. Syria is surrounded with by democracies; it is only a question of time before it is transformed. For Turkey to push to delay this inevitable fate is not boding well with Syria's other neighbors, Syria's democratic opposition, Europe, or the United States.

Turkey must take a regional strategic position regarding its foreign policy with Syria. Local, flawed, interests should not supersede larger, global, strategic interests. If Turkey continues on its path of supporting Arab dictatorships, it won't be long before the United States and Europe freeze or slow their engagement with Turkey. In addition, other Arab democracies, like Iraq and Lebanon, will distance themselves because these policies harm their interests.

Rapprochement with Syria does not punish the United States because, as a superpower, they are capable of sustaining short-term damaged relations for long term interests. The question is, can Turkey, understand how other powerful nations think today or will the men leading Turkey micromanage the country in a backward direction. Erdoğan's latest visit to the White House should be a wake-up call. Syria's Assad and its dictatorship will never outlast George W. Bush's second term in office. So why should Erdoğan try to extend their stay in power for a short time longer at the expense of the future interests of Turkey?