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Turkey and Syria: The Tensions Heighten

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On November 28, 2011 Turkey announced that it will follow the Arab League (and previous policies of the EU) in imposing economic sanctions on Syria. As Turkey is Syria's largest trading partner, these actions (albeit a bit more softened than the sanctions of the Arab League) clearly mark a low point in relations. In addition, this measure can be seen as one in a series of events that have brought about a sharp deterioration in Turkish-Syrian relations. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently demanded publicly that Assad resign, and adding insult to injury, compared his former friend to Hitler, Mussolini, and Qaddafi. Prior to this, Turkey expressed its anger towards Syria regarding the mob attacks on the Turkish embassy in Damascus and consulates in Aleppo and Latakia, and regarding Syrian armed attacks on Turkish pilgrims traveling through Syria. Against the background of the friction, an Iranian news report suggested that Syria has turned some of its Scud missiles to face Turkey. Moreover, Bashar al-Asad struck a Turkish nerve when criticizing Turkey's change of position toward his regime as part of Turkey's neo-Ottomanist tendencies. Syria has also declared it has "suspended all relations with Turkey coming out of the free trade agreement" between the two as a response to Turkish sanctions.

While historically relations between the two states have been tense, Syria has in many respects been one of the showcases of Turkish rapprochement policy toward its neighbors in recent years. This has changed dramatically with the developments of the Arab spring. More specifically, while it can be claimed that Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy was a reasonable theory at the time it was implemented, even if only measured by the increase in Turkish trade and soft power, the rapid shift in the Middle East has rendered "zero-problems" irrelevant, at least temporarily. Turkey has updated its policies and is now emphasizing its support of "people's power" in the Middle East. This new emphasis creates problems in maintaining "zero problems" with authoritarian regimes.

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When the uprisings began in Syria, Erdoğan limited his response and merely called on Asad to undertake major reforms. However, as the death toll in Syria rose and Asad continued to be unresponsive to Turkish demands, the Turkish position toward Syria hardened. Furthermore, Turkey has been vocal in requesting that the international community respond to the events in Syria and has been critical of what it sees as limited action (although it has not supported calls for a major multilateral intervention in Syria). In addition, it has set up camps for Syrian refugees and has helped Syrian opposition groups organize on its territory. Thus the recent announcement that it is following the Arab League (and the EU) in imposing economic sanctions is the materialization of the threats Turkey voiced to Asad when the uprisings intensified.

While Turkey will most likely try to continue with its present mode of action – that is, measures short of military action against the Asad regime – the situation might very well escalate. Large scale violence and an accompanying massive refugee flow might affect the balance. Since multilateral intervention in Syria is unlikely, Turkey has considered taking unilateral steps. However, because Ankara is wary of major intervention in Syria, discussion has focused on whether Turkey will maintain some sort of buffer zone on the border between the two states or in Syrian territory.

The idea of creating a buffer zone was discussed when the uprisings began as a way to deal with a possible refugee problem. Now media reports have suggested that Turkey will also allow Syrian opposition groups to operate, perhaps even militarily, in such a buffer zone. It appears that Turkey would enjoy at least some international legitimacy in instituting such a zone, or at least international apathy. According to the 2011 Arab Public Opinion Survey released recently by the Brookings Institute, Turkey was perceived as the most constructive state in dealing with the developments of the Arab spring. Turkey has emphasized its cooperation with the Arab League and with the steps it is initiating against Syria. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan even boasted that Turkey was the "glue" enabling the Arab League to reach an agreement on sanctions against Syria.

Turkish-US relations are now strong and there is also support among European countries such as France for a harsher stance against Asad's regime. The ability of Turkey and France to cooperate on the Syrian issue has actually been a surprising development of recent months, after tense relations between the two in the past. Russia and China oppose a possible UN Security Council resolution that authorizes a multilateral intervention similar to the one taken in Libya, but would probably turn a blind eye to "just" a buffer zone. Such a zone will cause more tension with Iran that still supports Asad's regime, but the Syria issue has already shaken Turkish-Iranian relations, and there are shared strategic and economic interests that keep the two states eager to see working relations continue.

Questions that arise are: what will happen to this buffer zone if Asad falls and the situation in Syria deteriorates into a prolonged civil war? How long will Turkey maintain such a zone? How will it ensure the safe return of refugees to their homes, or how lenient will Turkey be toward accepting some of these refugees into its territory proper? What will happen if the PKK uses such a zone as another battleground with the Turkish army? While managing such a zone is difficult and might cause resentment by some, the zone could provide the grounds for furthering cooperation with the emerging forces in Syria. In such a scenario, and in the long run, the "zero-problems" policy just might make a comeback.

