



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Report

# Determinants of the Turkish Position on Intervention in Syria

**Ali Hussein Bakir\***

23 April 2012



Turkish action on the Syrian issue is based on a broad assessment central to which is the evaluation that the Syrian regime headed by President Bashar al-Asad has lost its legitimacy and that Asad, his words and his promises cannot be trusted.

Despite its support for the initiative of joint UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan which has not called for Asad's abdication, there is an almost complete conviction in Ankara that the situation in Syria does not allow for the continuation of the Asad regime under any circumstances. For Turkey, this is evidenced by the continuing popular upheaval against him despite the 'mass killing operations' carried out by his regime. Accordingly, the Turkish leadership does not accept the possibility of the persistence of the Syrian regime or a return to what the situation was before the outbreak of the revolution in Syria.

Turkey regards it as a matter of time before the Syrian regime falls and regards a rapid fall as being in the interests of the Syrian state, Syrian people and regional stability. However, regional and international complications and complexities have prevented the fall of the regime and prevented the possibility of decisive intervention on the ground to protect the Syrian people. This is especially the case since the Syrian issue has turned into a matter along which regional and international axes are being drawn.

### **Constraints on the Turkish Position**

Turkey approaches the issue of the Syrian crisis through a series of factors that it considers to be basic axioms. These include:

- The Syrian situation is a collective responsibility borne by the international community and requires collective action at the regional and international levels. Ankara cannot take sole responsibility for the Syrian crisis, especially since regional and international axes and alignments have been formed around the crisis.
- Coordination with Arab initiatives and the Arab League is a necessity, followed by work with regional and international powers – especially the United States and the European Union – to reach a resolution. This must be done, however, without engaging in axes or alliances that would show Turkey to be a tool for the West or be a Sunni sectarian current.
- Rejection of foreign military intervention in Syria as a matter of principle. There is a current in the Turkish government and the foreign ministry that believes that Turkey should oppose any option that might involve military action directly or indirectly (such as arming the Free Syrian Army) because it may lead to war with the Syrian regime or to a regional war that would complicate domestic matters.
- If the crisis reaches a situation where it becomes necessary to undertake direct or indirect military intervention in which Turkey will be somehow involved, this must be based either on a UN Security Council resolution – that is, through international consensus, given that Turkey cannot contravene international law – or through a parallel international institution that will provide international legitimacy to meet Turkey's requirements.

Given the general context, these factors have hampered and will continue to constrain Turkey's position, limiting its ability to manoeuvre and react as required as regards developments on the ground in Syria. This results in a discrepancy between, on the one hand, political positions expressed by Turkish leaders and officials – especially Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan – and, on the other hand, what Turkey does not want to bear the burden for regarding the Syrian crisis.

This delicate balance has effectively stymied the development of the Turkish position, creating a state of hesitation and confusion among Turkish decision-makers about how to manage the Syrian issue, especially in light of the regional and international context in which Turkey finds itself. The polarisation around Syria has resulted in the formation of three axes.

1. The Western axis: This includes the USA and the European Union, which offer the Syrian people only verbal support accompanied by a minimum of political and financial support and reject a military option led by Washington or NATO or any other course of action associated with a military option. This axis has proven that it is not prepared to take action along the lines of its stated position of 'defending the Syrian revolution' or to fulfil the duty of the international community in a way that would alter the existing balance of power or even limit the support received by the Syrian regime.
2. The Eastern axis: This includes Russia, Iran, and – to some extent – China lurking in the shadows. Not only does this axis provide cover for the Syrian regime in the UN Security Council, allowing it to continue its security and military strategy in the face of the Syrian Revolution, it also provides economic support and military support through providing weapons, supplies and even advisers, experts, and special units. This axis has proven that it is ready to back up its political discourse with practical support to the Syrian regime on the ground.
3. The Arab-Gulf axis: The political position of this axis is embodied in the Arab initiative, despite the fact that there are some countries within it that still support the Syrian regime and stand on the opposite side of the group led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The latter stream has called for a maximalist regional and international position on Syria and is more open to options that could help the Syrian people defend themselves, such as the arming of the FSA.

The emergence of these axes has constrained the Turkish role which has been determined by its own particular factors. Turkey is not in agreement with the Iranian-Russian axis on the one hand and, on the other hand, it does not find sufficient incentives or guarantees that would motivate it unilaterally to join the Saudi-Qatari axis. It also does not want to take any measure that could lead to an escalation in Syria without a UNSC resolution as that would put Turkey in conflict with other regional and international players, especially as there is no cover thus far from the USA or NATO.

Therefore, the positions of parties within Syria's circle of friends have turned to a 'wait and see' policy in anticipation of events that might lead to a change in the balance of forces that might allow Turkey decisively to intervene. That would be the point at which an international settlement sought by some regional and international parties would be worked out.

### **Turkish Options**

Turkish foreign policy utilises a virtual ladder of possible actions that can be taken to deal with emerging complex situations. Such a ladder has been used especially since the beginning of the Arab revolutions. It includes the absolute and theoretical options for dealing with the relevant situation followed by more realistic elements, thus forming the priorities of the Turkish foreign policy agenda which helps determine what action needs to be taken to address the situation and to gradually move towards the best or ideal course of action.

Six absolute theoretical Turkish options, broken into two phases, regarding the Syrian situation have taken shape since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution over a year ago.

The first phase, which included:

- A call for reform while the Asad regime remained in power;

- Political, diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime; and
- Adoption of the Arab initiative.

The second phase, which includes:

- Adoption of the Kofi Annan plan;
- Coercive diplomacy; and
- Other options, including ones that could lead to intervention that at some stage may include military options, and that range from the establishment of safe passage corridors to a military buffer zone to military intervention limited to aerial support to a comprehensive military campaign. Other options may take a different path, such as arming the FSA which would carry out the task unilaterally or turn into a Libyan scenario.

In following the first three options Turkey failed to push for a real shift in the position of the Syrian regime or even to make Turkey an influential player in the Syrian arena. This was because these options did not involve practical coercive action or an intervention that would deter the Syrian regime and transform its policies, especially at a time when it still had the support of the eastern axis which has shifted the balance of power in the region in favour of the Syrian regime, albeit temporarily, in the absence of regional and international players' intervention with equal force.

The current Turkish policy is to attempt to alter the Syrian equation through diplomatic efforts at three levels: First, to increase the capacity of the Syrian opposition to take more effective and influential action; second, to ensure necessary humanitarian assistance to the affected Syrian people, and third, to secure international support for these objectives.

The main Turkish priority, to which all other actions are meant to contribute, is to stop the killing in Syria, if not through the mobilization that took place at the Friends of Syria 2 conference in Istanbul and the mechanisms that resulted from it, then through attempts to work through the Iranian-Russian axis – especially as there are some in Turkey that believe that Tehran can play a positive role in helping reach a solution in Syria. Many in Turkey believe this attitude is politically naive, especially given that Turkey does not hold cards with which to put pressure on Tehran or to otherwise convince it to play such a role and that Iran and Russia have made no proposals that do not involve maintaining the Asad regime.

The Turks believe that the Annan initiative will fail because of their having experienced the Syrian regime's broken promises, foot-dragging and mendacity. Anticipating the failure of this initiative, whether it is actual failure or the failure to obtain guarantees required by the regime, Turkey has begun preparations to take action through Article VII of the Charter of the United Nations Security Council, to move to coercive diplomacy in the absence of serious indications about Turkey's readiness at this time for the adoption of any military option.

Coercive diplomacy entails action on several levels:

1. To work to completely isolate the Syrian regime and tighten the political, diplomatic, economic and financial noose on it through the establishment of stringent measures at the regional and international levels for monitoring of the sanctions regime that was previously approved by Turkey, the Arab League, Washington and the European Union.
2. To raise the level of the Syrian opposition's work and provide it with increased support to enable it to present itself as a credible and viable alternative to the

regime and to prepare the submissions with which to prosecute Assad and other regime officials for the International Criminal Court as a form of personal pressure and a catalyst for internal divisions and conflicts within the regime.

3. To mobilise an international coalition – the nucleus of which may be composed of members of the Friends of Syria conference – that would be fortified by resolutions of international or regional bodies such as the UN General Assembly so as to obtain legitimacy beyond the constraints of the UNSC and show that a small number of states, no more than nine, have been impeding efforts to assist the Syrian people. Further, to act upon this mobilisation under the banner of humanitarian intervention.
4. To prepare for an intervention that involves either the establishment of safe passage corridors or a safe zone, so long as this meets Turkey's conditions associated with such action, with a parallel option of supporting the FSA which has, to date, not been suitable for Turkey.

### **Prospects for Turkish Intervention**

Although discussions around military intervention in Syria are ongoing, remarks by the Turkish prime minister last month suggesting that Turkey was seriously considering the creation of a buffer zone within Syrian territory stirred a great deal of controversy, as it was the first time that this option was put forward with such seriousness. On 5 April 2012, these remarks were followed by those of the Turkish president who stressed the necessity for Turkey to be diplomatically and militarily prepared for all possibilities. Increasingly, the debate is focusing on the nature, type, conditions, and justifications of intervention and the consequences that Turkey might face if such intervention were to take place.

### **Turkish Conditions for Intervention**

When the Turks discussed possible scenarios for Syria over the past year, they established conditions relating to the scenario of military intervention that would be tied to, or impacted by, developments in Syria. These unwritten conditions – which have come to hold a kind of customary status determining Turkish calculations as they pertain to military or quasi-military intervention in Syria – have come to include criteria through which to determine the timing at which intervention would be converted from an option to a duty. The most prominent of these conditions are:

- Placing Turkish national security at risk. This could result from several factors including: if Syria becomes a base for PKK attacks on a large scale, the collapse of the Syrian state – as opposed to the fall of the Syrian regime – which may unleash attempts to divide Syria or bring about the emergence of mini-states along ethnic or sectarian lines and which is a major Turkish concern, as well other possibilities that would be seen as putting Turkey's national security in peril.
- An exceptional mass exodus. To date, the number of displaced Syrians in Turkey alone has reached approximately 24 000. A sharp rise in the number of refugees could potentially create great pressure on Turkish authorities or possess security, sectarian and/or national threats to Turkey's interior. This would drive Ankara to decide to establish a buffer zone within Syrian territory.
- A UN Security Council resolution. The Turkish position is that Ankara cannot operate beyond or outside of international law and that Turkey would adhere to a UNSC resolution. If such a resolution does not pass because certain states have worked to obstruct its passage, Turkey will not join in an intervention with anything less than an international coalition that acts with the Syrian people's consent, the support of Washington and NATO and with Arab participation.



The more the Syrian situation approaches one or more of these conditions, the more possibility will there be that Turkey is moving towards intervention, starting with statements and developing into diplomatic mobilisation and towards a statement that that all options are on the table including military intervention. Unless at least one of these conditions is met, the matter of Turkish intervention becomes more difficult and complex, especially with regards to unilateral Turkish action.

### **Turkish Trepidation towards Unilateral Intervention**

With the exception of the refugee influx condition, which has begun to create great pressure on Turkish authorities, especially after the recent influx coinciding with the Annan initiative, there is no strong evidence at this time that we may witness unilateral Turkish intervention in Syria that would act as a prelude to military intervention later given the current context. This is because of Turkish fears as they pertain to the unilateral intervention option, which include:

- Direct collision with the Eastern axis. Turkey fears that any unilateral intervention in Syria will, by definition, force Turkey into a confrontation with Russia, China, Iran and Iraq. This will place more pressures on Turkey than it is able to endure. Such an outcome would be very costly at the political, economic, financial and military levels, especially insofar as:
  - Russia, China, Iran and Iraq occupy the second, third, fifth and sixth ranks in terms of Ankara's trading partners, which means that any confrontation will effectively undermine Ankara's economic capacities. Russia and Iran, for example, secure about 75 per cent of Turkey's gas needs.
  - All these players have decided to support the Syrian regime and have also declared their absolute rejection of any military intervention. This means that Turkey's chances of carrying out any unilateral military intervention is almost non-existent, especially given that any Arab or Gulf support for Ankara will not be sufficient to balance out the eastern axis in the absence of any Western support for this option.
- The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) card. There is a Turkish fear that Syria and Iran will try to use the Kurdish question in case of a confrontation with Turkey by giving their support to the PKK. Indeed, Turkish assessments of the most recent PKK operations concluded that there was Syrian and Iranian support for these operations. Furthermore, the PKK's training camps are spread throughout Syrian territory where party leaders such as Hussein Fahmi and Nouredine Sufi are based, leaders who are believed to be responsible for most of the bloody operations against Turkey and who have close links with Syrian intelligence services.
- The collapse of Turkish soft power. This is also an important factor in Turkey's calculations, as there are those who consider military intervention as being inconsistent with the traditions of Turkish foreign policy, especially since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power and its adoption of the 'zero problems' foreign policy that many still see as being, in essence, viable. There is also fear in some circles that any form of intervention in Syria will damage Turkey's reputation in the region and on the attitudes of a large segment of Arabs towards it. This is especially so given that many parties will emphasise the representation of Turkey as an occupying power if it opts for military intervention, in which case Turkey's credibility and popularity would be undermined, as would the legitimacy of its soft power and its policies in general, thereby resulting in the loss of what it has built in the region over the past decade.

## The Possibility of Turkey Participating in Collective Intervention

Collective intervention would take place through a regional or international coalition which would act as a prelude for later military intervention. This option is currently unavailable for three main reasons:

- The United Nations: efforts at the UN Security Council have reached an insurmountable barrier because of the use of Russian and Chinese veto powers.
- The US position: The Barack Obama administration has no desire to even discuss the possibility of military options because of the upcoming presidential elections, the current state of the US economy and the political, financial and military costs that such an option entails at this particular time. Indeed, some of the main pillars of the Obama administration have resorted to playing the 'al-Qa'ida card' to ease pressure coming from the Republican Party that has pushed for the adoption of a military option or support for the FSA, as the mere mention of al-Qa'ida in Washington serves as a warning siren for retreat.
- The position of NATO: Given that Turkey is a member of NATO and has the second largest army in the organisation after the USA, the cover that NATO can provide for intervention, whether direct or indirect, is important. No green light, however, has been forthcoming from NATO, and there have been repeated statements by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to the effect that the alliance did not intend, and was not ready, for such a move, a position that seems to be best explained by US and European positions.

## Assessment of Future Scenarios

If the available conditions lead us to the assessment that there will be no military intervention in Syria in the short term, future developments may change these conditions and the positions of the various key players and parties, driving them to resort to direct or indirect intervention as a kind of inevitability. The most noteworthy of such developments that may alter the playing field in favour of intervention are:

- The continuation of large scale killing by the regime. The main purpose of the strategy adopted by the Syrian regime appears to be to crush the Syrian revolution through military and security action. If this policy fails and the revolution continues, the regime will have to kill even more of its people, a policy that will be accompanied by the sectarian politics that might threaten the entire region. This will increase the real pressures on the different regional and international parties and at some point may lead them to take action. Turkey will be among the parties that take action because it is at the forefront of those affected by the continuation of the Syrian regime's actions.
- The possibility that current political initiatives arrive at a dead end. Perhaps the most recent of these initiatives within this framework, it seems, is that of the Arab and UN envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan. There is no doubt that the failure of this initiative will confront the different players, Turkey particularly, with new realities and pressures, the crux of which will be that political initiatives will not succeed in bringing about a meaningful change in the situation, and that this option has failed as a whole. This, in turn, will necessitate a transition to another phase.
- The failure of coercive diplomacy. After the failure of the Annan initiative, the parties may move towards coercive diplomacy, in which case we will have entered into a new phase which will stretch from the convening of the conference of the Friends of Syria in Paris to the US presidential elections. This is especially the case given that some assessments of the situation indicate that if there is an escalation in the pace of events in the Syrian interior, especially the Syrian military clamp down, Turkish intervention may become inevitable.

These developments mean that, despite the Turkish leadership's attempts to avoid the more difficult options – and particularly those that involve intervention – the factor of time will be a critical element pressuring the spectrum of options available to Turkey, which are undoubtedly tending towards precisely those options which are more difficult and costly, options that will be impossible to avoid or ignore and which will transform intervention from a possible option to an outright obligation.

---

*\*Ali Hussein Bakir is a researcher at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK).*

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

*Copyright © 2012, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.*

