

THE TURKISH POSITION ON SYRIA: the Hour of Truth



ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

8 SEPTEMBER 2011

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Tuesday, August 9 in marathon talks on the Syrian crisis and al-Assad's policy toward the popular movement demanding freedom and change. In light of the angry comments made by both Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Bülent Arınç and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a few days before Davutoglu's talks in Damascus, there was no doubt – locally, regionally and internationally – about the extreme importance of the visit.

The following is an account of Davutoğlu's task in Damascus and what may have resulted as well as the impact of his task on the Turkish position on the situation in Syria.

The Visit: Mutual Warnings

The position of the Turkish government on Syria has come under mounting pressure since the beginning of Ramadan, the month of fasting (corresponding to the beginning of August), not only from the cries of the people in the streets of Syrian cities, but also from the conservative and Islamic Turkish popular base of the ruling Justice and Development Party. The head of the Turkish government had warned al-Assad's regime against committing massacres against the popular uprising. Although Ankara had put continued pressure on al-Assad in April and May, Turkey's official voice subsided relatively afterwards. No sooner had the forces loyal to President al-Assad began campaigning against the Syrian cities of Hama and others at the end of July than Ankara seemed to be in a critical position, especially since there is a general understanding that Turkey has an extremely important role to play in Syrian affairs.

The Turkish Foreign Minister was received with comments from the Syrian President's advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, when she responded to Erdogan's warning that his foreign minister would send President al-Assad a firm message, saying that Davutoğlu would reciprocally hear a firm response. It was clear that the failure of the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem to receive his Turkish counterpart at the airport in Damascus is in itself a snub and an early message of protest.

The meeting of the two delegations began coolly to a large extent and lasted for three hours, after which President al-Assad and Minister Davutoğlu met in private for three more hours. This certainly was the most important meeting. It is believed that the Turkish Foreign Minister informed the Syrian president that the remaining opportunity was very short; that he must either respond to the popular demands or otherwise meet the fate of Saddam Hussein or Gaddafi, and that Iran would not be of any benefit to him at that point. He stressed that should al-Assad continue with his policy, Turkey would finally side with the international community to support the Syrian opposition and escalate sanctions against his regime and isolate it completely.

Results of the Visit: Empty Promises

The Turkish Foreign Minister told reporters after returning to Ankara that he had expected a quick end to the Syrian regime's suppression of its own people, especially in Hama, and that he was waiting for Damascus to declare procedures for radical reform within 10-15 days to ensure "a peaceful transition of power." This is certainly what Davutoğlu believed was the promise he was made: an immediate end to the official campaign of violence, and then al-Assad's announcement of radical amendments to the constitution and the holding of parliamentary and presidential pluralist elections, under international supervision, by the end of this year. In his speech to a group of the Justice and Development Party's parliament members, Prime Minister Erdogan reiterated the content of his Foreign Minister's statements, stressing that Ankara was monitoring the situation in Syria closely and suggesting that the Turkish position was not final.

However, it is clear that Syrian official media ignored the visit completely and only referred to it when the official statement was issued at the end by the official news agency "SANA," which indicated that the Syrian regime had informed the Turkish delegation of its determination to continue chasing "armed gangs" throughout the country, a phrase used by the regime to justify its military-security campaign on Syrian cities and towns. This was the first sign of the lack of seriousness in al-Assad's promises to Davutoğlu.

The official killing machine did not stop, neither on the day of the visit nor in the following days. After the controversy over the withdrawal or non-withdrawal of troops from the city of Hama, Damascus allowed the Turkish ambassador and the Turkish press delegation to visit the city. The armed troops had indeed withdrawn from the city, but elements of the army, security forces, and security service militias were still spread throughout Hama on Friday, August 12th, which prevented civilians from protesting after Friday prayers and caused the deaths of two civilians on the same day.

In other cities and towns, such as Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Damascus, Latakia, Idleb, and Dara, the official killing machine has continued the usual work it has carried out since the start of the revolution. It was noteworthy that some Syrian demonstrators, on Friday, August 12th, raised banners criticizing Turkish statements following Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus, calling on Ankara to clarify its position or to remain silent.

Turkish Position: A Way Out of the Impasse

It is no exaggeration to say that Ankara is facing a very complex dilemma in its position on the Syrian crisis. Although it did not stop advising al-Assad to introduce democratic reforms, it expected neither a popular revolution of this magnitude and persistence, nor such massive perpetual official repression. It is likely that the level of confidence between Ankara and Damascus collapsed dramatically since mid-May, and Turkish officials have concluded that al-Assad is employing dishonesty and deception, and that his policy is based on gaining time to liquidate the popular movement by force, relying on the loyalty of the army, security services, and the bureaucracy of the system. Soon a general feeling of despair evolved among the Turks during the summer months because al-Assad ignored advice and pressure, the international community has failed to reach a consensus on a UN resolution, and the conviction of Turkish leadership that outside military intervention, whether Turkish or Western, is not legally unacceptable and practically impossible.

Alongside the complexities of the Turkish impasse are other regional positions. The angry statement by Erdoğan before Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus not only stimulated a response by Shaaban, but also was probably the reason behind the rapid escalation of the Saudi position, and the ensuing decision by King Abdullah to summon the Saudi ambassador from Damascus for consultations which was followed immediately by two similar decisions by both Bahrain and Kuwait. The escalation of the Saudi position did not only come against the backdrop of rising anger in Saudi streets about what is going on in Syria, but it also emphasized the Arab role in determining the future of Syria - which is not less important than Turkey's role. Simultaneously, however, Erdogan's statement and Davutoğlu's visit were met with protesting statements from Iranian officials.

Nonetheless, the Syrian masses and the Turkish popular base of the Justice and Development Party have pinned hope on the Turkish position from the very beginning. The leadership of the government of the Justice and Development Party is aware that Turkey will be affected first and foremost by the worsening situation in Syria which is heading towards civil-geographical division, a civil war, or external military intervention in favour of the regime, from Iran or Hezbollah, or against it, by Western countries. This is certainly what led to Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus and the explicit and threatening confrontation with President

al-Assad.

It is clear that Turkey has not yet decided that al-Assad and his regime must go; Turkey's position is still capitalizing on the fact that al-Assad's position has become so critical that he may respond to the pressures aimed at forcing him to adopt radical reforms sufficient to provide an opportunity for a gradual and peaceful transition of power within months or a year at most. It is also likely that Ankara's position plays an important role in determining the U.S. position rather than vice-versa.

There are many reasons behind Ankara's hesitation to say anything about the end of al-Assad's regime including the fear that this position will contribute to the escalation of the situation to a sectarian civil war in Syria and the fear of igniting a wider sectarian war in the East that will not affect Turkey alone but may also put Iraq's Sunnis at stake too. There is also the fear of a lack of a credible national alternative to al-Assad's regime and a lack of adequate indicators of retreat of the army and security forces loyalty to the Syrian regime, the risky variance risk in regional positions, and the fear of getting involved in Syria's deepening crisis at a time when too many weaker regimes, such as those of Gaddafi and Abdullah Saleh, survived for months in the face of comprehensive popular revolts.

What should be noted is that any political change in Syria would be in favour of Turkey which Erdogan's government is certain about. Still, the Turks are afraid of making the wrong decision or making the right one at the wrong time. Perhaps it is necessary to point out that the Turkish diplomacy machine, despite the widespread admiration it has gained recently, is not yet qualified to deal with complex crises the size and complexity of Syria's.

The problem with the Turkish position is that it does not take into account President al-Assad's profile of credibility since the launch of the popular movement against his regime, on the one hand, and the remarkable change in the orientation of the Syrian grassroots and political opposition forces on the other. His approval rating is now at its lowest level since mid-March, as it is difficult for Syrians to take his promises seriously. Even if he delivers a new speech on the promises of reform, it is not expected to persuade many Syrians.

Following the major escalation of the bloody crackdown on protesters during the past two weeks and the spread of bloodshed in all parts of Syria, it is clear that Syrian streets and opposition forces will accept no less than the fall of the regime.

Nevertheless, the Turkish position is still evolving. Despite all the complexities that surround the Syrian crisis, Erdogan's government is extremely sensitive to regional and Turkish public opinion. The continued policy of repression in Syria and the mounting public pressure on it will lead to the earnest development of the Turkish position. Perhaps the order issued on August 11th to summon back all Turkish officers who have retired from service in the last five years and their deployment to military centres on the Syrian border is an indication of Turkey's continued preparations for any emergency.

If Turkey reaches a stage of calling for immediate political change in Syria, it will not necessarily mean the start of Turkish military operations against the forces of President al-Assad. External military intervention in Syria is a very serious and complex evolution which requires an international and legal cover and Arab political support in particular. These conditions are too difficult to be provided at the time being. However, it is expected that the development of the Turkish position may lead to a similar ones in the positions of the Americans and Europeans, resulting in strong pressure on both Russia and China so as to change the direction of their policies towards the events in Syria, and that Turkey undertakes a positive role to consolidate the position of the Syrian opposition and provides more support for the popular movement in Syria, leading to the escalation of the popular movement and

the beginning of the disintegration of the regime and the social forces supporting it.

If the Turkish position fails to develop in time, it is likely that Turkey will suffer a great loss in the Arab region, as the early vision of the Turkish officials – that Syria would be the point of ascension or decline in the Turkish influence on the Arab –Islamic region – is now truer than ever before.