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Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and Syria

Report

Original citation:

Phillips, Christopher (2011) Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and Syria. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR007. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43498/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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➤ Turkey and Syria

Christopher Phillips

In October 1998 war clouds were gathering over the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey, in the middle of a gruelling campaign against the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) in its eastern territories, accused Syria of supporting the Kurdish rebels, not least by hosting PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus. This was the latest incident in a long history of uneasy relations between two neighbours who have held a catalogue of territorial, ideological, political and resource-related grievances that remained unsettled since each state's creation. Indeed, in fifty years of independence, no Syrian head of state had ever visited the Turkish capital, Ankara. Now, with the dispatch of 10,000 Turkish troops to the border and Turkish President Suleyman Demirel's declaration that Hafez al-Assad, his Syrian counterpart, must face consequences for his support of the PKK, escalation to conflict appeared inevitable. Yet rather than falling into the abyss, Assad relented. Ocalan was expelled, Syrian support for the PKK ended, and Turkey and Syria quickly signed the Adana accords on 20th October, which marked the beginning of an unexpected new chapter in the previously antagonistic relations between the two neighbours.

A decade later, any thought of conflict is far removed. In September 2009, Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Syrian counterpart Walid al-Mouallim signed an accord that ended visa-requirements between the two states. This, along with an earlier agreement to allow free trade, ensured that people and goods could pass freely over the same borders that had been peppered with barbed wire and landmines barely eleven years earlier. In what marks a significant turnaround in relations Damascus and Ankara have found themselves increasingly closely integrated over the past decade. In what has become a close personal relationship, Syria's president, Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad, now describes Turkey as Syria's best friend, while Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, publicly calls Syrians his brothers. Even though, at the time of writing, President Assad was facing international condemnation for a harsh crackdown on pro-democracy activists at home, Erdogan remained restrained in his criticism of the Syrian leader, urging restraint and reform but cautioning against too harsh a global response – quite the transformation from the warmongering of 1998.

Why did this turnaround come about? Turkey's recent reengagement with the Arab states such as Syria, after years of estrangement, has divided analysts. Some see ideology as the main driver, with the Islamic origins of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushing Turkey closer to Muslim states at the expense of historical ties with Europe, the US and Israel. Others see pragmatic realism in Turkey's approach. Davutoglu, who was a Professor of International Relations before turning to politics, advocates a doctrine of 'zero problems' and 'strategic depth' with all of Turkey's neighbours, to further Ankara's regional clout and to boost its rapidly expanding economy. On the Syrian side, most see a pragmatic dimension to Damascus' friendship with Ankara, providing Bashar al-Assad and his Ba'ath regime with a vital ally during a difficult decade of US-led international isolation. Nonetheless, ideology is not totally absent from Syria's thinking, as the Turkish alliance has allowed Damascus to boost its regional profile and aid its weak economy without abandoning its long-standing confrontation with Israel and western 'imperialism'. In considering what has driven the relationship in the past decade, this

article suggests that though realism has propelled both sides, no major ideological compromise have been required.

HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES

Recent closeness contrasts with Syria and Turkey's historical enmity. The creation of each state was in some ways defined in opposition to the other. The Republic of Turkey founded by Atatürk out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 was culturally and politically orientated towards Europe rather than its former territory, with Arabic script rejected for Latin and Arabic words removed from the Turkish language. Adamant followers of Atatürk, the Kemalists, carried this European approach into their foreign policy for years. Syria also defined itself against Turkey on gaining independence from France in 1946. As the self-declared 'heart' of Arab nationalism, Damascus projected the Ottoman Turks as its repressive historical enemy. The French exacerbated this rivalry in 1938 by giving Turkey the Syrian province of Alexandretta (Hatay) in a bid to maintain Turkish neutrality in the Second World War. The loss of Hatay first prompted Syrian calls for a 'resurrection' or 'Ba'ath' of Arab nationalism, eventually merging into the party that has ruled Syria since 1963. Ever since, the regime maintained its grievances with Ankara, laying claim to Hatay and including it on official Syrian maps. From the 1960s water also became a recurrent source of disagreement, with tensions heightening in the 1990s when Damascus complained that Turkish plans to dam large sections of the Euphrates would cripple its agricultural sector.

Turkey and Syria also found themselves on opposite sides of the Cold War. Turkey was a member of NATO while Syria received the most Soviet military aid in the Middle East. Syria, determined to regain the Golan Heights from Israel that it lost in the 1967 war, backed a motley collection of Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups to harass Tel Aviv and

derail American visions for the region. Turkey, in contrast, formed close military and economic ties with the US and, latterly, Israel. By 1979, these long-standing grievances persuaded Hafez, Syrian president from 1970-2000, to support Turkey's enemy, the PKK, providing them with training camps first in Lebanon and later in Syria itself. Though this was partially motivated by domestic concerns, as support for the PKK also helped placate Syria's own Kurdish population, support for the Kurdish rebels appeared mainly functional: a bargaining chip for water and Hatay. Hafez's willingness to jettison all support for the PKK in 1998 after the Adana accords, illustrates the pragmatic nature of Assad's alliance with Ocalan. Support for the PKK had failed to improve Damascus' hand on its historical grievances, yet had pushed Turkey closer to its greater enemy, Israel, with whom Ankara signed a military accord in 1996, and now brought a genuine threat of Turkish military intervention. In essence, Turkey upped the stakes and Syria quickly folded.

SHIFTING CIRCUMSTANCES

Yet avoiding war in 1998 did not necessarily lead to closer alignment. It was the shifting domestic and international circumstances for both regimes that developed a diplomatic rapprochement into the integrated alliance it later became. For Turkey, though relations with Syria did improve under the Kemalist foreign minister, Ismail Cem (1997-2002), the election of the AKP in 2002 catalysed the enhanced ties. This was not, however, due to any ideological familiarity between the Islamist-leaning AKP and its fellow Muslim state in Syria. The AKP was equally eager to push Turkey's application to the EU and improve relations with long-standing rivals Greece, irrespective of religion. Instead the enhanced ties with Damascus reflected the new pragmatic foreign policy of AKP ideologue Davutoğlu. Moreover, Syria did not have a blank cheque, and ties strained on occasion, notably

when Turkey joined the international chorus for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Additionally, the new approach had a strong economic component. After the financial meltdown of 2001, Turkey recovered well in the 2000s and sought new markets for its booming economy, and the relatively stable Syria proved an obvious target.

Changing international circumstances also pushed Turkey closer to Syria. The Iraq war forced Ankara to reconsider its approach to the Middle East. The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 left a vacuum in Iraq that was rapidly filled by Islamists, sectarian fighting and Kurdish nationalists, posing a threat to Turkey on its previously quiet southern border. Erdogan recognised the need to be more active in the new Iraq and the south in general. Backing certain Iraqi political parties and improved relations with Iran were a key facet of this strategy, but Syria quickly emerged as a key ally in the new strategy. The autonomy of Iraq's Kurds post-2003 was one concern, with Ankara fearing it would revive the PKK. In 2007 Erdogan launched an invasion of Iraqi territory to destroy newly built PKK bases. Almost immediately, Assad rushed to support the action. Syria, who had quashed its own Kurds emboldened by the freedom they saw in Iraq in 2004, provided Turkish intervention with international support. More broadly, the Iraq war also presented Turkey with new realities in the Middle East. Its Cold War ally, the US, had rushed into a regional conflict that Ankara opposed, denying Washington the right to use its territory to attack northern Iraq. Similarly, soon after the fall of Baghdad, George W. Bush's administration ramped up its rhetoric against Iran and Syria, alienating Turkey's neighbours, enraging their domestic populations and many within Turkey too. Turkey began to recognise that if the US vision for the Middle East was no longer in line with its own, Ankara might have to assert itself more prominently to the south, and Syria proved crucial in doing this.

Changing international and domestic factors overlap to explain Syria's new approach to Turkey as well, though issues of regime survival rather than ideology were paramount. On assuming power after his father's death in 2000, Bashar al-Assad took several years to consolidate his own power. It was not until the Lebanon crisis of 2005, brought about by alleged Syrian involvement in the Hariri assassination, that Bashar was forced to assert his own authority. Under Hafez, Syria's foreign policy became a pillar of domestic legitimacy, projecting power in Lebanon, defying Israel and, theoretically, supporting the Palestinians. The Lebanon crisis, in which Syria was humiliatingly forced to withdraw its troops from its western neighbour, made Damascus look weak and threatened Bashar's domestic legitimacy. Former vice-president Khaddam used the crisis to justify his cooperation with the opposition Muslim Brotherhood in exile and call for Bashar's government to be overthrown.

More significant than the domestic threat, which lacked both popular support and sufficient elite backing, was the danger posed by the Bush administration. Having been forced out of Lebanon, Syria appeared vulnerable. A vocal lobby in Congress called for Damascus to be the next regime changed after Baghdad, and Israel was emboldened to bomb a suspected nuclear facility deep in Syrian territory in 2007 and, allegedly, was behind two assassinations on Syrian territory in 2008. The US initiated a diplomatic boycott on Syria after Hariri's killing, which was acceded to by most of its allies, including the EU and the Arab world. Facing isolation and needing foreign support to bolster his position at home, Bashar cast his net for new allies. While this drew him closer to old ally Iran and rising regional player Qatar, it was Turkey that he courted most – making the historic first trip by a Syrian president to Ankara in 2004. Assad was willing to make substantial sacrifices to forge this new friendship, such as finally accepting Turkish sovereignty over Hatay in 2005. He also proved a shrewd diplomat, rushing to support Turkey's 2007 incursion in Iraq to show his loyalty to his

new friend. Bashar's labours were rewarded when Turkish president Sezar defied US protestations and went through with a proposed state visit to Damascus in March 2005, at the height of the Lebanese crisis. This set the tone for the coming blossoming of the relationship, and Turkey made a point of internationally rehabilitating its new ally. Not surprisingly, when the French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, eventually broke the international boycott and visited Syria in 2007, Assad met him accompanied with Erdogan stood by his side.

THE RELATIONSHIP TODAY

After evolving from a diplomatic rapprochement into a fully formed alliance, the Syria-Turkey relationship today is composed of several key strands: diplomatic, economic, military and cultural. The diplomatic side is of the greatest value to Syria, as Bashar al-Assad has made it a key pillar of his foreign policy. Turkey's role in easing Syria back into the international fold was crucial, and not just in defying the US diplomatic boycott. As important was Turkey's efforts in mediating indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel in 2007-8 that, though they came to nothing, helped soften Syria's image. This certainly helped the EU to justify ending the ineffective diplomatic boycott of Damascus in 2008, eventually even offering Syria membership of the Euro-Med partnership. It also allowed American opponents to George Bush, such as Nancy Pelosi who visited Damascus in 2007, to engage with Syria, and that engagement in turn helped the new US administration of Barack Obama end the boycott altogether, though some Bush-era sanctions remained. Moreover, as Turkey's relationship with Israel has declined in recent years, most notably over the IDF's assault on a Turkish aid flotilla to Gaza in May 2010, Erdogan has won much praise on the Arab street. Though Assad said he wanted Turkey to maintain strong ties with Israel, hoping for an eventual return to mediation, he also benefitted domestically from association with the popular Erdogan. Pictures were distributed

of Assad's many meetings with Erdogan after the Gaza flotilla in 2010. The domestic benefit of the alliance for Syria has the added bonus that Turkey, as a mainly Sunni country, is more popular with the mainly Sunni Syrian population than its longstanding alliance with Shia Iran.

Turkey also benefits diplomatically from its ties to Syria, beyond the simple pragmatism of getting on better with a neighbour. Syria has acted as a gateway to the Arab world for Turkey both economically and politically. Prior to the 2000s it was not only the Syrians who had a negative opinion of the Turks, with the foundation-myths of Jordan and Iraq all containing a considerable anti-Ottoman element. Befriending the Arab nationalist regime in Damascus thus helped soften Turkey's own regional image, even before Erdogan started taking a more populist line on Israel. Backing pro-Palestine Syria also plays well domestically with the AKP's conservative base at home. An improved image has certainly helped Turkey boost its regional clout, and strengthen its economic ties with the region, with trade from the Arab world now representing 10% of Turkey's overall trade.

The Syrian-Turkish relationship also has a vital economic component, a reminder that much of Davutoglu's 'zero problems' strategy is about finding new markets for Turkey's booming economy. A year after the Adana accords, the first economic missions were dispatched to Ankara and Damascus. A Joint Economic Committee was established that facilitated trade agreements and sponsored events such as the industrial exhibition in Damascus in January 2004 where 300 Turkish manufacturers returned home with \$250 million worth of Syrian contracts. By January 2007 a bilateral free trade agreement had come into force and in 2009 visa free movement of people was agreed. As the senior, and richer, partner, Turkey has invested a considerable amount on infrastructural projects in Syria, particularly around the northern city of Aleppo. In 2008 Ankara committed \$6.3 million to 42 cooperative projects

as part of the new Syrian-Turkish Inter-Regional Cooperation Programme and in 2011 started work on a 'friendship dam' on the Orontes river in Hatay that would irrigate Turkish and Syrian land. Syria certainly benefits from Turkish trade and investment. Syria's exports to Turkey rose from \$187m in 2006 to \$662m in 2010. Turkish companies have built much-needed infrastructure, such as cement plants and hotels, and boosted the oil and tourism industry. Yet there are downsides as superior Turkish manufactured goods threaten previously protected Syrian businesses. Within two years of the free trade agreement, one of Aleppo's oldest textile manufacturers, the Kouefati Group, had gone bankrupt after failing to compete. No such problems exist for Turkish businesses that are thriving in the new market. Turkish exports saw a 3-fold increase between 2006 and 2010, rising to a value of \$1.85bn, making Syria Turkey's seventh-largest market in the Middle East and North Africa. Though Syria may treasure the investment, its trade deficit with Ankara is growing, making the economic relationship increasingly one sided.

Military cooperation between Syria and Turkey is limited, but symbolic. After years of Turkish military cooperation with Israel, the conduct of a joint Turkish-Syrian military exercise in April 2009 served as a psychological boost to Damascus over its southern enemy. For Turkey, who sent military delegations to Syria and conducted joint training, the arrangement is mainly aimed at securing its southern border, and Turkey is unlikely to risk the United States' wrath by forging a serious military partnership. The dilapidated Syrian military still relies on Russia and Iran for hardware, while Turkey retains military contracts with Israel, despite their frosty diplomatic relationship. In terms of natural resources, the alliance has finally eased long-standing water concerns. As of 2008, Turkey, Syria and Iraq agreed to hold regular summits to discuss the allocation of water from the Euphrates and Tigris, defusing previous tension. In another symbolic gesture, Erdogan agreed to divert Euphrates water into the long dried up Quweiq

River that runs through Aleppo, providing a boost to its flagging agriculture and a showpiece for the city centre.

An overlooked but key area of cooperation is the cultural sphere. In recent years Turkey has furthered its soft power throughout the Arab world by promoting cultural products such as popular television dramas that have gripped Arab households. Syrian production companies have dubbed the dramas into the Syria Arabic dialect for export to Gulf-funded Arab satellite channels. One drama in particular, Nour, had an unprecedented impact. During Ramadan Arab streets were deserted when this Turkish drama was shown, accruing viewing figures in the tens of millions. The serials, which broadcast modern Turkish life into Arab living rooms, help to improve the regional image of a prosperous fellow Muslim country. Until recently Arab serials, often originating in Syria that has a reputation for strong Arab dramas and good actors would portray Turks as the enemy in historical stories about Ottoman oppression. Now Syria, by providing the dubbing, proves the key gateway for Turkey into the wider Arab cultural sphere. Syria has had less of a cultural impact on Turkey, which perhaps is expected given their differences in size and cultural reach. That said, Turkish tourism into Syria has boomed and, it is said, closer relations with Syria have helped Turkey reassess and even embrace the Ottoman past it had until recently shunned.

FRIENDS FOREVER?

The revolution in Turkish-Syrian relations in the past decades, from enmity to close friendship, has essentially been driven by pragmatism on both sides. For Syria, facing diplomatic isolation and a flailing economy, improving ties with Ankara was a no-brainer. For Turkey, the election of the realist AKP and new regional realities created by the US' invasion of Iraq prompted a push for increased regional influence, and Syria, with its long southern

border, was an obvious starting point. Yet crucially for both sides, détente and then alliance did not come at a great ideological cost. Syria had to give up its support of the PKK and accept the permanent loss of Hatay, but neither had been an ideological pillar of the Ba'ath regime that was not worth sacrificing to stabilise the embattled order. Moreover, the support of Turkey in the face of diplomatic isolation allowed Syria to avoid any unpopular compromise in the conflict with Israel, the regime's principle ideological focus. For Turkey, resolving its differences with Syria did require a shift in the rigid anti-Arab ideological approach of generations of Kemalists. However the change in foreign policy, from a solely Euro-centric foreign policy to Davutoglu's wider 'zero problems' strategy, was motivated by realism and economics, not any pro-Islamic stance of the AKP as some have alleged. Syria's principle value was its geographical closeness and economic underdevelopment, not a similar religion or ideology.

The relationship with Syria has given Turkey a gateway into the Arab world diplomatically, economically and culturally and Ankara's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs has now become normalised. The fact that after the wave of popular unrest in the Arab world in early 2011 many activists are looking to Turkey's AKP as a model of how Islamic pluralist democracy can work, illustrates how far Turkey's regional soft power has reached. As the Arab world begins to democratise, Turkey is well placed to benefit from new alliances as a model to emulate. Yet at the same time, that might be at the cost of its relationship with Syria, which is threatened by the wave of anti-authoritarian feeling. Having focused so much on foreign policy and breaking the diplomatic boycott with Turkey's help, domestic concerns have been neglected and Bashar Assad's regime was shocked when unrest erupted in Syria in March 2011. At the time of writing the Ba'athists were engaged in a brutal crackdown on pro-democracy activists, with over 1000 deaths reported. Though Erdogan has been cautious to criticise, despite a new wave of

European and US sanctions on regime members, if the regime survives it is unlikely that he will be able to publically be as close to Assad as before. Indeed, given the Turkish commercial interests in Syria, Erdogan may begin to wonder if regime change is more to Turkey's liking, especially if domestic Turkish public opinion turns on Assad and international pressure falls on Turkish companies to divest.

Yet even if Assad survives this newest round of isolation, there is no guarantee that Turkey, for all its previous friendship, would ride to the rescue a second time. This in many ways typifies the inherent imbalance in the relationship: that Assad needs Erdogan far more than Erdogan needs Assad. While Syria relies on Turkey economically and diplomatically, Turkey's use for Syria has diminished. Ankara now has much larger potential markets in Iraq, Egypt and the Gulf and it will continue to influence the Arab world even if Syria were to pull itself out of the alliance. Moreover, were Assad to fall, Erdogan recognises that such is the dependence of Syria on Turkey as a consequence of the past decade of cooperation, any new regime would prove just as compliant as the current Ba'athists. ■
