

# Turkey, Syria and the Western Strategic Imperative

Ian O. Lesser\*



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ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER  
SABANCI UNIVERSITY  
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

The escalation of the turmoil and violence in Syria, coupled with the tense military confrontation along the Turkish-Syrian border, underscore the marked deterioration of the strategic environment in Turkey's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean neighbourhoods. Of all Syria's neighbours, Turkey may have the biggest stake in the outcome of an increasingly desperate internal struggle. The evolution of the Syrian conflict, and its broader regional consequences, will have important implications for Ankara's regional role, and the future of Turkish-Western relations. The repair of the Turkish-Western strategic relationship is no longer optional, but essential for both sides.

## *A Dangerous Border*

The precise circumstances behind the downing of a Turkish RF-4E reconnaissance aircraft remain uncertain. That the plane was brought down by Syrian anti-aircraft fire, most likely by gunfire rather than a surface-to-air missile, is clear. The plane may well have strayed over Syrian territory. It may or may not have been struck outside of Syrian airspace. An apologetic statement from Damascus asserts that Syrian forces mistakenly identified the plane as Israeli. Whether or not this is true, it is probably less revealing than the apology itself, which seems aimed at forestalling a Turkish military response. The build-up of ground and air forces operating in close proximity on both sides of the border has heightened the risk of a more serious clash. This includes the potential for escalation after a new incident, even an accidental one. The risks long associated with brinkmanship between Turkish and Greek forces in the Aegean – risks that have receded substantially in recent years – are now back in full force on the Turkish-Syrian front.

Ankara's response to the loss of the aircraft and its crew has been viewed as measured and sensible by most observers. But

\* Executive Director of the Transatlantic Center, the Brussels office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The opinions expressed here are the author's, and do not necessarily reflect the views of GMF.

the Turkish leadership and Turkish public opinion are clearly in no mood to tolerate further military threats from Syria. The strong reinforcements sent to the Syrian border underline Ankara's commitment to deter any further incidents, and to respond as required. In any conventional military clash, Turkey's air and land forces are virtually certain to prevail. But the balance of conventional forces does not tell the whole story. Turkish planners must also be concerned with Syria's significant arsenal of Scud missiles capable of reaching Turkish population centres, including Iskenderun and Adana. In a serious Turkish-Syrian conflict, NATO's nascent missile defence architecture could face a dramatic test.

## *High Stakes in Syria*

But the risk of a large-scale military clash is perhaps the least likely contingency facing Turkey across the Syrian border. Turkey is already dealing with a large influx of refugees from the fighting in Syria. Looking ahead, the most troubling scenario for Turkey may also be the most likely one: protracted chaos and sectarian conflict, leaving a security vacuum across the border, with an ongoing risk of spillovers affecting Turkish security. Under these conditions, Ankara will be most concerned about the potential for the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) to re-establish itself and to conduct operations inside Turkey from Syrian bases. This would mirror the circumstances prevailing in the 1990s, when the Assad regime hosted the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus, and allowed the PKK to operate from Syrian safe havens. Turkey came close to war with Syria in 1998 over precisely this issue, and it remains the most serious flashpoint in Turkish-Syrian relations. To the extent that Ankara deepens its support for armed opposition groups in Syria, Damascus may once again be tempted to play the PKK card. Ankara could well respond by establishing a security zone on Syrian territory along the border. The potential for escalation is all too real.

Turkish stakes in the Syrian crisis go well beyond the risk of

conventional and proxy war, and the exposure of Turkish territory to Syrian missile attacks. Even in the absence of direct spillovers, Ankara must be concerned about the consequences of the Syrian conflict for regional balances and the broader geopolitical competition. Over the last decade, Ankara has developed a stable and at times cooperative relationship with Tehran. This era may be coming to an end. Even before the steep escalation in tension with Syria, Turkish strategists and policymakers had begun to take a more wary attitude toward Iran. Ankara may appear relatively relaxed about Iran in comparison to its NATO allies, but on the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions, there are clear signs of a new, tougher stance. Certainly, Turkey is seeking to hedge against the possible emergence of a new nuclear armed state on its borders, including through participation in NATO's new missile defence architecture (also useful vis-à-vis Syria, of course). An embattled Syrian regime, even more dependent on its alliance with Iran, together with the prospect of growing Iranian influence in Iraq, reinforces the potential for a strategic competition along sectarian lines. For all of the AKP government's affinity for Sunni regimes and political movements, Ankara's essentially conservative, status quo approach to international policy will not benefit from this kind of regional future.

#### *European and Transatlantic Implications*

Over the last decade, Turkey's regional policy has been driven substantially by commercial interests, and supported by multiple *détentes* with traditionally difficult neighbours. Turkey and the region have benefited from this shift in Ankara's relations with neighbouring states, and the emergence of Turkey as a prominent soft power from the Balkans to the Black Sea, and beyond. Today, the unfinished revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa confront Turkey with a tougher set of challenges, and some potentially uncomfortable strategic choices. This is not an environment that lends itself to unilateral policies. In important respects, it harks back to the Cold War era, in which Ankara relied heavily on its NATO allies for reassurance and deterrence vis-à-vis hard security risks. These risks now emanate from a different quarter. Turkey faces the prospect of a prolonged period of chaos in Syria, a looming geopolitical competition with Iran, and the conundrum of an Egyptian state dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood that may pursue a destabilizing foreign policy and may, ultimately, come to resent Turkish influence in the region. To this one can add an unstable relationship with Israel, and mounting competition over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The economic crisis in southern Europe is also part of the equation. At first glance, weakness in Cyprus and Greece might not pose a threat to Turkish interests. But the possibility of expanded Russian influence through concessionary loans and investment, not to mention Moscow's role in supporting the Syrian regime, is likely to complicate Turkish-Russian relations, which remain important to Ankara's energy security. A European Union increasingly inclined to worry about its southern members is all the more likely to hold Turkey at arm's length.

This deterioration of the strategic environment is likely to change the character of Turkish-Western relation in significant ways. Beyond a rhetorical commitment to strategic cooperation, both Turkey and the West have had at least a decade in which close cooperation has been optional. The superstructure of



relations – NATO membership and Turkey's EU candidacy – has remained in place, of course. But the last decade has been characterized by a sense of drift and uncertainty regarding the longer-term trajectory of relations between Ankara and the West. Turkey's economic dynamism and European diffidence have encouraged many Turks to focus on other options. The US and Europe have often been frustrated or annoyed at Turkish policy, or simply distracted by other concerns. Turkey's staunch opposition to NATO-EU cooperation, at a time when closer links between these organizations are badly needed, has not endeared Ankara to Alliance partners. So too, Turkish-Israeli frictions have further complicated NATO's already troubled Mediterranean Dialogue.

Today, the highly unstable environment in the Middle East, above all the crisis in Syria, makes Turkish-Western partnership essential for all sides. The US and Europe cannot pursue an effective strategy towards Syria – humanitarian, political or military – in the absence of Turkish cooperation. Turkey, for its part, will require active support from its NATO allies in addressing threats emanating from Syria and, potentially, Iran. Renewed progress in Turkish-EU relations will be essential to continued stability in the Balkans, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. A truly strategic relationship between Turkey and the West is no longer optional.