

Turkey, Europe and the Syrian Crisis: What Went Wrong?

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How did we end up like this? Syria should have united, not torn, Turkey and Europe apart. It should have led both sides to work together, and through closer foreign policy coordination, possibly rebuild part of that long-lost trust that is badly needed to re-launch the broader EU-Turkey agenda.

We were all on the same side. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the EU and its member states and Turkey first attempted to nudge Bashar al-Assad to reform. Turkey exerted significant effort to this end, attempting to leverage the political capital built up with the Syrian regime, the poster-child of its now beleaguered “zero problems with neighbours” policy. By the summer of 2011, Turkey, Europe and the United States concluded this was a lost cause. The regime was bent on a strategy of survival and would have used all means at its disposal to fight back against the opposition. The more the spiral of violence spun out of control, the more Turkey and Europe, alongside the United States and the Arab Gulf countries, converged, in the framework of the Friends of Syria, on their support for the Syrian opposition.

Views were not always identical. While all applauded Turkey’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis – approximately 500,000 Syrian refugees have found shelter in Turkey –, many criticized its reluctance to embrace greater international involvement in the management of the humanitarian crisis. More acutely, and increasingly so as the months dragged on, Europeans questioned Turkey’s deepening alliance with Qatar in the Syrian war, its under-appreciation of the risks posed by the radical Syrian opposition, and its unwilling but nonetheless real fuelling of the sectarian underpinnings of the Syrian and regional context. Both within and outside Turkey, some suspect that the AKP’s Syria policy is often dictated by a domestic agenda rather than by a pursuit of Turkey’s foreign policy interests and values.

Differences aside, the leitmotif in Europe, Turkey and across the Atlantic was that goals were shared – the ousting of Assad and a democratic transition in Syria – and their pursuit was so arduous that working together was of the essence.

Then came Gouta. When on August 21 a chemical bombardment killed hundreds on the outskirts of Damascus, the debate polarized. Turkey had long called for a more muscular international involvement in support of the Syrian opposition. It appealed for a humanitarian corridor, it supported the arming of the rebels, and repeatedly called for a no-fly-zone. Yet it never considered acting alone and would have only endorsed a more forceful involvement in Syria in the framework of a broader regional and international effort. This meant winning over the United States, a goal that Prime Minister Erdoğan pursued, notably during his May visit to the White House, but notoriously failed to achieve. Turkey backed down and toed the line: the goal shared by Europe, the United States and Turkey was a political solution to be sought at Geneva II. Although after the fall of Qusayr in June, the prospects for Geneva II waned, diplomacy was still, predominantly, the name of the game. The attack in Gouta turned the tables once again. The proverbial red line had been crossed and a sequencing of events brought a reluctant American president to the brink of a military attack.

Turkey was quick to jump on the interventionist bandwagon. It immediately backed President Obama’s call for a military strike. It officially stated that a chemical weapons attack could not go unanswered. Even after the international community converged on the need to give diplomacy a last chance by endorsing the Russian plan for the Syrian regime to hand over its chemical weapons arsenal and put it under international supervision, Turkey continued to argue that Gouta could not go unpunished. The credibility and values of the international community were at stake.

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The European Union took a different line. With the sole exception of France, no member state openly backed the idea of a military attack without a UN Security Council resolution. Even the United Kingdom moved to the sidelines, after the Cameron government was embarrassingly defeated with a 285-272 vote in the Commons, due to resistance not only from the Labour opposition but also from the Liberals and his own Conservative Party. Most other member states either refrained from taking a clear line – Spain –, or more commonly declared they would support an intervention only after international inspections verified the culpability of the Syrian regime and it received UNSC backing – Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden. Some member states went beyond. Italy, for instance, beyond insisting on the imperative of waiting for the result of inspections and respecting international law, expressed clear doubts about the political desirability of an intervention, claiming that a diplomatic solution remained first best. Germany went a step further (or more accurately too far) delaying its endorsement of the G20 statement calling for an international, but not necessarily military, response in Syria until the EU Gymnich meeting in Vilnius a day later. France, as said, was left alone in its support for an attack. But President Hollande was dumbfounded when Cameron lost in the House of Commons and President Obama made one step forward by calling for an attack and two steps backwards by abdicating his leadership to Congress. On its own and confronting a palpably hostile domestic public opinion, the French government converged on the EU consensus in Vilnius. When Russia pulled the rabbit out of the hat – which President Assad readily caught –, proposing its plan to place Syria's chemical weapons under international supervision, the European Union and its member states sighed in relief. A military attack, while not off the cards altogether, had at least been postponed.

But why is Turkey so keen on an attack? Why is a traditionally staunch supporter of national sovereignty so gung-ho on Syria? Ever since the Syrian regime, with the support of its allies, has regained the upper hand in the Syrian conflict, Turkey considers it imperative to alter the balance of forces on the ground. A limited attack in response to the chemical weapons attack would thus not be ideal in this respect. But it would be better than nothing. In many respects, what many in Europe (and the US) view as a serious risk and reason to refrain from action – that a limited attack could trigger a broader military conflagration – was viewed in Ankara as an opportunity in disguise. Turkish policymakers, well aware that the planned surgical strike would do little to alter the course of the Syrian civil war, behind closed doors hoped that a limited attack could end up in a more substantial military involvement. A broader military engagement by the West, alongside Turkey and the Arab Gulf countries, could have reversed the course of the Syrian war in favour of the opposition.

Why does Turkey not seriously embrace the alternative to an attack: a political solution? The reasoning is straightforward. According to Ankara, were the diplomatic track to be pursued today, even in the best of possible worlds in which an agreement could be reached, such an agreement would be woefully deficient. It would essentially foresee Bashar al-Assad remaining in power behind the scenes; allowing (and assisting?) the regime in eradicating *jihadi* and *takfiri* groups; and closing a blind eye to the fact that, barring a few cosmetic changes, the regime would wipe out – *à la* Egypt? – the Brotherhood and



the democratic opposition over time. According to Turkey, it is only after the Syrian National Coalition and the Free Syria Army gain the upper hand both in the confrontation with the regime and within the Syrian opposition *vis-à-vis* al-Nusra and other radical groups that a political solution should be energetically pursued. And to gain the upper hand, military backing by the West is necessary to counterbalance the military involvement of the Syrian regime's allies.

Turkish concerns are not far-fetched. There is indeed a tangible risk that a diplomatic solution would end up in *de facto* acceptance of the *status quo ante*, coupled with the continuation of low level violence in the months and years ahead. This said, it is also clear that Turkey seriously underplays the costs of a military strike. A strike would, at the very best, entail a violation of international law, tarnish further America's battered reputation in the region and have no visible impact on the Syrian war – were an attack to remain limited. At worse, an attack would provoke a broad military conflagration in which Iran, Lebanon and possibly also Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Israel and the Arab Gulf would not be spared. Added to this, a clear-cut victory of the opposition may threaten Syria's survival as a multi-religious state. Just like Turkey is rightly concerned that the regime's victory would lead to a political wipeout of the Brotherhood, the reverse may also be true. In view of the preponderance of radical elements within the opposition, one could legitimately fear that their military victory would end up undermining the rights and role of Alawites and Christians in the country.

The key question, particularly now that the Russian initiative on chemical weapons has given diplomacy a temporary lease of life, is what to do in order to set in motion a political track that offers some hope for a solution that moves beyond a mere endorsement of the status quo. To the extent that the Syrian crisis is as local as it is regional and international, what is evident is that a diplomatic solution requires the regional and international actors to exert meaningful pressure on their respective allies in order to reach a genuine compromise. The Arab Gulf ought thus to rein in the Islamist – radical and non – opposition. Turkey should do likewise with the Free Syria Army. In doing so they should be backed and prompted by the United States and EU member states.

The trickier part of the equation regards the Syrian regime and its allies. Insofar as the military balance on the ground is heavily tilted in their favour, what would it take for al-Assad's regime and its allies to accept a meaningful compromise? In order

for Moscow and Tehran to exert the necessary pressure on the Syrian regime for it to yield, it is clear that their underlying desiderata would need to be satisfied. And such satisfaction calls upon the United States and Europe to do some serious soul-searching.

Russia's basic needs appear to boil down to concrete action to stem radical Islamism in Syria and the region and recognition of its great power status. In the Russian narrative, the secular Assad regime is engaged in a worthy struggle against jihadist forces, a struggle Moscow knows well in view of its unruly Northern Caucasian periphery. Alongside its allergy to Islamism in all shapes and forms, Russia wants to be acknowledged as a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East and the world. Hence, to the extent that a political solution would entail Russian stalling, and reassurances regarding radical Islamism, one could foreseeably imagine Moscow playing ball.

Iran is a tougher nut to crack. While Russian interests in Syria are strategic, Iran's are vital. Like all authoritarian regimes, Iran's basic interest is survival. And in view of its regional and international isolation, maintaining Syria as an ally and a lifeline to Hizbollah is vital for Iran. The bottom line is thus whether Europe and the United States are willing to provide Iran with the inclusion it seeks as an alternative strategy to its political survival. Are EU member states and, most critically, the United States willing to fully accept Iran in the regional order in exchange for its cooperation on Syria and beyond? Unless and until this question is genuinely addressed, Turkish concerns about a political solution should not be dismissed out of hand.

But where does Turkey stand on all this? Only a few years ago, Ankara had stuck its neck out for Tehran, despite Iran being a traditional Turkish rival. The 2010 nuclear fuel swap deal mediated together with Brazil had put Ankara at loggerheads with its traditional allies in the West. Yet Turkey, intent on pursuing its zero problems with neighbours strategy and actively resisting coercive responses to international crises, steadfastly attempted mediation. Since then much has changed. The growing sectarianization of Iraq and above all the Syrian civil war have starkly brought to the fore Turkish-Iranian divisions. This said, as much as Europe and the United States should do their share of soul-searching on the Iranian question, Turkey should do likewise, and revive the promise it held out for the Middle East only a few years ago: that of a soft power that defied rather than fed on the conflictual dichotomies of the region. To do so there is no better place to start than Tehran.

Concretely, what would this mean? A promising thread to follow regards precisely the Russian initiative on chemical weapons. The goal is now that of broadening consensus on that initiative at the regional and international – UNSC – level and using it as a first step towards a broader dialogue on Syria's future. Not least in view of its own history as a victim of chemical attacks in the Iran-Iraq war, Iran is keen on bolstering the international chemical weapons regime. Engaging Tehran on this front is thus a promising place to start. On this and eventually on the nuclear file, the ultimate objective is a direct US-Iranian engagement. But Europe and Turkey are the possible path-breakers towards that end and could create a contact group, eventually inviting the US to join. Working together in this regard would serve the double goal of pursuing an end of violence in Syria and restoring trust and cooperation between Turkey and Europe.