

AICGS Transatlantic Perspectives

June 2011

Politics of Dilemma: Turkish and EU Approaches toward Syria

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How will the ongoing conflict in Syria affect its bilateral relations with both the EU and Turkey?

Will the ongoing conflict in Syria bring Turkey closer to the EU or eventually push them further apart?

In the run-up to that fall's parliamentary elections, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and his contender Angela Merkel (CDU) held a TV debate on 5 September 2005, in which the moderator asked the two politicians how they intended to deal with Turkey's EU membership—one of the most debated issues in German political discourse. Merkel responded by selling her concept of a "privileged partnership." In contrast, Schröder publicly supported Turkey's European vocation, considering it a bridge to the Muslim world. According to Schröder, Turkey's accession to the EU could turn the Union into a more vigorous player in the Middle East and help mitigate extremist tendencies in the region. Since talks with Turkey began, the bridge notion has regularly emerged in German politics and is often referred to when decision-makers publicly want to push for Ankara's integration into the European Union.

Besides the obvious characteristics that suggest Turkey could be a bridge, one needs to raise another question first: Are Turkey's Middle East politics in line with the EU's approach toward the region? The "bridge" terminology makes sense only if both actors display similar interests and policy goals vis-à-vis this conflict-ridden neighborhood. In response to this crucial question, this essay analyzes Syria as a case study for EU and Turkish policy. Syria plays a major role in the strategic outreach of both Turkey and the EU. Geostrategically speaking, Damascus is crucial for a better, holistic understanding of multiple challenges in the Middle East, be it the future of Lebanon, the handling of Iran, managing border security with Iraq, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, Syria has not been exempt from the Arab Spring uprisings that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. Protests are underway in Syrian cities like Daraa and Homs, where protesters demand substantial political reform and that the Assad regime relinquish power—causing the regime to react with such severity and relentlessness that it has caused the death of 1,500 Syrian citizens and the imprisonment of more than 10,000 demonstrators so far. Against the backdrop of these events, Syria can be a litmus test for Ankara's and Brussels' ability to perform immediate crisis management.

Looking through European Glasses: Consistent Inconsistency

Despite Syrian involvement in financing international terrorism and its efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, the country has always been a rational and zero-sum oriented player in the international arena, never showing signs of an ideologically or religiously driven foreign policy, as is the case with Iran or Saudi Arabia. In order to win new partners in the international arena, the country began to pursue a strategy of rapprochement toward Europe, after Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000. The EU responded positively and seemed to be inclined to integrate the Arab republic into its Mediterranean framework, a policy pattern inaugurated in 1995 in order to multilaterally manage challenges emanating from North Africa and

the Middle East. After six years of negotiations, Syria and the EU decided on an association agreement, a basic document that was supposed to serve as the legal basis for the bilateral relationship. The contract was never ratified by either side. However, the agreement still reflects the core interests the EU tries to foster in its handling of the Arab neighbor. Four aspects should be highlighted:

1. Both parties agree that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction pose a serious threat for the maintenance of international peace and stability.
2. Promoting any kind of international terrorism is in opposition to the very nature of the agreement. The respective paragraph is formulated as an essential element clause and justifies the termination of the complete agreement at any point in time.
3. The EU offers the Syrian authorities best practice, training, and equipment in order to enable them to deal more efficiently with migration flows.
4. The EU underlines its willingness to speak up for a normative agenda: "Respect for democratic principles and fundamental human rights established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights shall inspire the domestic and external policies of the Parties (...)."

The ratification process was slowed down by two incidents. First, Operation Iraqi Freedom not only divided European nation states over how to deal with Saddam Hussein's regime, but also on the treatment of Middle Eastern politics in general. The U.S., in alliance with multiple EU member states, deliberately followed a policy of confrontation and isolation, which included the possibility of regime change. This is especially true for Syria, which was frequently labeled a "rogue state" by American and European officials. As such, it was a bad time to implement an agreement aiming at mutual cooperation. Second, Syrian security forces were accused of involvement in the 2005 assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who was a close friend of former French President Jacques Chirac. France, who had promoted cooperation with Syria until that time, changed sides and became one of the harshest critics of the Assad regime. Combined circumstances allowed no room for maneuver and, given these international events, Syria was shown the cold shoulder.

EU-Syria relations took another turn in 2008. Germany's then-foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, together with Germany's political foundations, actively lobbied in favor of inviting Syria to the 2008 Middle East Peace Conference in Annapolis. Political foundations are a unique feature of Germany's set of foreign policy instruments that, even in times of diplomatic isolation, keep up the dialogue with state and non-state actors. Steinmeier laid the groundwork for French President Nicolas Sarkozy to translate this new approach into a European framework. Under his leadership, the EU inaugurated a revised Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008, of which Syria is the central piece of a remodeled Mediterranean outreach by the EU. The rationale was simple: Syria was the game changer for various challenges in the region due to its key position in its conflict-prone neighborhood. In developing a close working relationship with the Arab republic, the Union wanted to turn itself into a more powerful actor in the Middle East. In order to facilitate such an assertive approach, Sarkozy cut most of the normative references out of the UfM founding document, such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This was meant to facilitate dialogue with Syria to a considerable degree, given the country's poor human rights record.

Against the backdrop of a growing opposition movement and the regime's attempts to repress it violently, the European Union switched gears again. Beginning in May 2011, the European Council passed a set of sanctions against Assad and his entourage. These include an arms embargo and on other materials that could be used for measures of repres-

sion, as well as travel restrictions and asset freezes. The EU, furthermore, published a new strategy for a revised European Neighborhood Policy, which is supposed to better address the needs of civil society in the whole Mediterranean region. The paper foresees the establishment of a civil society facility, meaning more funding and support for grassroots organizations. In addition, a European endowment for democracy shall also make financial grants available to NGOs that are not officially registered in the country in which they are operating. The strategy implicitly shows the EU's willingness to become more intertwined with the people's movement. In the case of Syria, this means that the Europeans plan a post-conflict scenario without Assad.

Friendship Forever? A Turkish Perspective

Turkish-Syrian relations had been a prime example of bilateral conflict resolution after decades of strife. Three points of divergence are particularly striking: First, the disputed territorial status of Turkey's Hatay province (Syria claimed the region due to alleged historic and cultural bonds); Second, a profound disagreement over the water shares of the Euphrates and Tigris basin; Third, Turkey accused its neighbor of supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) financially and logistically. In 1998, when Turkish intelligence discovered that Syria gave safe haven to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the two states stood at the brink of war. A violent conflict was prevented only due to the diplomatic efforts of the United States, Egypt, and Iran. Since then, however, relations between the two neighboring countries have consistently improved. Under Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its two leading figures, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Secretary of State Ahmet Davutoğlu, the two countries have begun to cooperate in an unprecedented manner. Turkey's foreign outreach is guided by the following principles: first, according to the slogan of "zero-problem policy," Turkey is determined to ease tensions with all of its neighboring states; second, conflicts must not be resolved with lethal means, but with diplomacy; and third, Turkey wants to maintain channels of dialogue to all parties in the Middle East in order to raise its own profile of being an honest broker. Consequently, Ankara follows a strict policy of political cooperation and rejects any form of coercion, such as sanctions or diplomatic pressure. Within these over-arching policy goals, Turkey's particular interests toward the Syrian Republic are threefold.

With growing agitation for statehood by the Kurdish population in Northern Iraq, Syria and Turkey feared that their Kurdish minorities might be inspired in their own struggles for autonomy—or even independence. Therefore, Turkey set up the Iraq Neighbor Initiative giving a forum for several Middle Eastern states to cooperate on the maintenance of Iraqi integrity. Syria and Turkey act as a driving force within this body, which is becoming increasingly involved with matters of regional stability that do not necessarily relate to Iraqi politics. Hence, some analysts saw the two countries planting the seed for regional integration.

Turkey sees Syria as a gate opener for the entire region, used as a vehicle for the enlargement of Turkey's own Middle Eastern impact. Such was the case when Ankara, however unsuccessfully, mediated between Syria and Israel in 2008 over a peace accord between the two. Furthermore, Turkey cooperated with Syria in curbing the Lebanese government crisis at the beginning of 2011. Last but not least, the Turkish government also dealt with a looming crisis when Baghdad accused Damascus of sponsoring terrorist groups operating on Iraqi soil. Experts regularly express their astonishment over Davutoğlu's talent to be physically present at so many hot spots in the region.

Besides working on its own reputation as a power of dialogue and mediation, Turkey also uses its partnership with the Syrians as an opportunity to move the country away from Iran.

By doing so, Ankara hopes to minimize the regional leverage the theocratic regime in Tehran has developed over the past couple of years.

In pursuing those interests, the AKP government can resort to a variety of diplomatic and economic means. Syria and Turkey agreed on the establishment of a free trade zone that came into force in 2007. Furthermore, both countries introduced visa-free mobility for their people. Consequently, bilateral trade has grown significantly since then. Meanwhile, Syrians are the eighth largest group of tourists traveling to Turkey, which in turn helps the latter to promote itself as a hybrid of a Western-styled system incorporating a distinguished Muslim heritage. Apart from that, the two heads of state and government created a Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, which regularly gathers on a ministerial level, in order to exchange views and explore ways of cooperation on various issues like security, defense, education, and health care. This intensity of mutual politics gave birth to the notion of “one state, two people,” which is surely exaggerated. However, it gives a sense of the bonds both actors are tied by. One should not forget that the two are not only geostrategically, but also emotionally attached to each other. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regularly declares Syria a state of brothers. This also explains why the Turkish prime minister has not visited any capital more often than Damascus.

The Turkish government faced serious difficulties when trying to appropriately react to the ongoing turmoil in Syria. For many weeks, Ankara remained completely silent. After atrocities committed by Syrian security forces could not be obscured any longer, Turkey hesitantly and softly began to condemn the course of action in the neighboring state. Several delegations and the head of Turkish intelligence were sent to Damascus in order to—unsuccessfully—compel the regime to abandon its relentless crackdown of the opposition forces. However, the crisis reached a new dimension when it turned into a domestic issue for Turkey. A growing exodus of Syrian refugees fled to Turkey, causing massive humanitarian and social consequences for Turkish authorities in handling this situation. As a matter of fact, Ankara issued a complete gag order to prevent the spread of eye-witness accounts about the brutal suppression by Syrian forces. Otherwise, the government fears growing domestic pressure to act more vigorously vis-à-vis Syria. Just a couple of days prior to the last elections Erdoğan gave a remarkable interview to the Turkish news agency, accusing Bashar al-Assad’s brother Maher, who heads a paramilitia group, of committing atrocities against the civil population. Erdoğan even called the UN Security Council to take appropriate measures. When concluding, Erdoğan ended by saying: “Turkey cannot defend Syria any longer.”

Comparing the Approaches: Dilemmas and Opportunities

When comparing the EU’s and Turkey’s approaches toward Syria, it is apparent that both actors display a significant consistency in their respective agendas. Turkey’s desire to be economically entangled with the Arab republic mirrors the economically-driven neighborhood policy of the European Union. Looking at the EU-Syria association agreement, it is striking how much is devoted to technical and administrative regulations intended to bring the Syrian economy gradually in line with the EU’s market. Such an approach shall, in the end, lead not only to the spread of a liberal market economy, but also to the implementation of political reforms. Such a soft power idea of “Wandel durch Handel” (change through trade) is also seen on the Turkish side, which consistently reiterates that trade and politics are two sides of the same coin.

Additionally, Ankara and Brussels show conformity when it comes to the security dimension. Neither wants to allow Iran to become more powerful: Tehran’s efforts to expand its influence in the neighborhood contradict Turkey’s own interest in striving for regional lead-

ership, while Europe, too, would rather see Iran marginalized in order to strengthen its own position in the context of the ongoing nuclear talks. Disrupting the partnership of convenience between Syria and Iran was, therefore, another reason behind the deepening of Turkish-Syrian and European-Syrian ties.

Furthermore, terrorism concerns need to be taken into consideration as a unifying factor, although terrorism has a slightly different connotation in Brussels than in Ankara. The EU still considers Syria a facilitator, if not even a financier, of Islamist terrorist groups. Turkey, however, seeks cooperation with Damascus in order to contain the cross-border activities of Kurdish separatism. Despite their different foci, for many years both Turkish and EU decision-makers sought Syria as an important asset to cope with the diverse phenomena of terrorism. Syria's Hamas-Hezbollah-Lebanon interconnection is also related. Both Turkey and the European Union want to be more vigorous players in the Middle East and have, therefore, recognized that all roads lead to Damascus. Thus, Sarkozy, as a representative of the Union for the Mediterranean, rolled out the red carpet for Bashar al-Assad in 2008, while Erdoğan and Davutoğlu developed their "zero-problem" policy. Syria was perceived by both actors as a means to enhance their roles in the region.

Finally, the Syria-Turkey partnership increasingly showed signs of being the axis for regional integration mechanisms. The free trade area, visa-free movement, and high profile talks on the level of heads of state and government were first institutionalized between the two countries, but subsequently extended to include other Middle Eastern states. Considering the EU's emphasis on south-south cooperation and self-sustaining integration patterns separate from the EU, the regional interplay in the Middle East with its Syrian-Turkish nucleus fits well into the EU's own interest of exporting its success story of cross-border integration to other parts of the world.

These strategic considerations appear in a different light after the Syrian uprisings, which are changing the country's political landscape in an unforeseeable manner. It is apparent that the crisis uncovered serious dilemmas for decision-makers in Turkey and the European Union, with the discrepancy between security and democracy being a chief concern. Turkey's overwhelming interest vis-à-vis Syria is the maintenance of stability along their common 900 kilometer border. This policy objective was formulated in the zero-problem approach. However, this thinking has always been pursued on a government-to-government basis. The possibility of bottom-up change in the course of the Arab Spring was beyond all imagination and Turkey became increasingly status quo-oriented. Consequently, Ankara is not appropriately adapted to handle the growing grass-roots movement currently sweeping through Syria. Indeed, Turkey had serious difficulties in condemning the atrocities committed by Syrian security forces. The paradox is that despite this hesitant and cautious reaction of AKP leaders, many Syrians still consider the country a source of inspiration for their own political destiny. In a survey conducted in 2010, a vast majority of Syrian citizens expressed a positive attitude toward Turkey. Some experts even conclude that if the Syrian opposition had the choice, they would prefer solidarity with the Turkish government over the backing by Western capitals. Against this backdrop, Ankara does not know which horse to bet on. The interest in stability will prevail—but will it be better served under Bashar al-Assad keeping power and implementing substantial reforms, or under a brand new Syrian state structure that will have gone through a long period of conflict, turmoil, and unrest?

The European Union must cope with a similar situation. The EU is, geographically, less exposed to the security threats emanating from Syria, but it still debates the merits of se-

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curity versus democracy. The EU has an interest in both pushing a normative agenda and securing basic interests of stability, but it must do so by including twenty-seven different national foreign policies. For example, France has a different outlook on Syria than the UK, Germany, or Poland. Consequently, the European Union changed its stance on Syria several times over a short period of time. Furthermore, European states do not have any serious economic stakes in Syria, making it much easier for them to agree on sanctions for Syria—a situation completely different from Libya, where economic contracts complicated a common position on how to handle the crisis.

However, there are opportunities for Turkey and the European Union to play a role in the future development of Syria. No matter how the situation in Syria progresses, both partners will benefit from combining their efforts. At the time of writing (27 June 2011) it is unclear whether the Assad regime will be able to stay in power; The situation changes daily. Still, the domestic situation in Syria will not affect the persistent regional challenges: Iran’s nuclear program, the stability of Lebanon, managing the integrity of Iraq, and the conflict over the Golan Heights will stay on the Middle Eastern agenda. Syria will likely remain a key factor in resolving those issues.

Furthermore, Turkey offers the EU a unique feature in two regards: because Turkey is considered a source of inspiration for democracy in the Middle East, reform measures channeled through Ankara have a better chance for success than those that would be imposed by Europeans. Helpfully, Ankara usually has access to political decision-makers in Damascus, no matter who it is. On the one hand, the Assad family is closely interlocked with Turkey’s political elite, but on the other hand, it was interesting to see that the recent meeting of Syrian opposition leaders was held in the Turkish province Antalya. Giving a platform to the Syrian opposition movement shows that Turkey is beginning to reach out to alternative political figures that might be able to gain power in the future.

An essential tool that the European Union can offer, in contrast to Turkey, is its sophisticated set of instruments to deal with people’s needs. Europe’s neighborhood policy, and even more so its reformulation in May 2011, focuses on the integration of civil society organizations and NGOs. This kind of normative foreign policy could help to shape developments in Syria for the sake of democratic and human rights-related standards. The EU is a serious player when it comes to promoting change from the bottom up; together, the EU and Turkey share a compatibility that will allow them to find new forms of cooperation in order to deal with current challenges. This does not mean that accession talks should be suspended or substituted through a privileged partnership. However, Ankara and Brussels cannot afford to ignore one another when it comes to managing the groundbreaking events in the Middle East, as these cannot be faced by a single actor on its own. Instead, common and immediate action is necessary in the form of an institutionalized Turkey-EU strategic dialogue, for example. Such a body could convene on the level of foreign ministers and heads of state and government. It is time to get Turkish and European decision-makers at the table and help to shape Middle Eastern politics for the better.

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AICGS is grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its generous support of this essay.