

## Toothless Wolf: Turkey's incapacity to act against Syria

By BIROL BASKAN

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Unexpectedly, I met with two members of the Syrian opposition over dinner a few days ago. Their insightful analysis of the Bashar al-Assad regime was truly impressive, but even more so was their unwavering optimism regarding the future of Syria. I was moved.

I am a Turk. Not surprisingly, our discussion inescapably led to the question of what Turkey could have done, or will do in the future, to solve the Syrian crisis. However heartbreaking as it is, I have claimed from the very beginning of the crisis and still do: not much. I have many compelling reasons for this.

The two members of the Syrian opposition expressed what the common wisdom would say about Turkey's incapacity. Turkey has both Kurdish and Alawite populations of non-negligible size and, therefore, cannot take any risk regarding Syria. This factor certainly limits Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's capacity to act against Syria. But, it must be tailored significantly.

First, there are two Alawite groups in Turkey: the first group is of Arab origin who live in Hatay, the southernmost province of Turkey, and are intimately connected to the Assad regime in Syria. There is no question that the Arab Alawites are strongly committed to the Assad regime and by all means against any Turkish intervention in the Syrian crisis. But, the question is, does Erdogan care less about them? I do not think so. The Arab Alawites do not constitute a sizable majority in Turkey and do not occupy critical positions in the Turkish state.

The other group is of Turkish origin. The Turkish Alawites mostly live in the Eastern part of Turkey and in big cities, like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. No one really knows their size, but everybody agrees that they are not a non-negligible size. Furthermore, a small but influential segment occupies critical positions in the Turkish military and judiciary. Can Erdogan have this Alawite in mind?

From the very beginning Erdogan has made repeated gestures to the Turkish Alawite community in Turkey, even attended one Ashura celebration. But, to his disappointment, Erdogan has failed to get their support. The Turkish Alawites have generally voted for the main opposition party, Republican People's Party, the party founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and do not seem to be wavering in their stubborn opposition to Erdogan.

Still, the Turkish Alawites cannot factor in Erdogan's decision regarding Syria. There is no good reason why the Turkish Alawites should have any interest in the survival of the Assad regime in Syria. Therefore, they would be against the Turkish intervention not because of some Alawite sympathy, but for some other reasons. It should be kept in mind, that Erdogan and his team had better relations with Iran and Syria all along, the relations with the former raising the ire of the Turkish Alawites.

The Kurdish question is more serious. First, a full-scale sectarian civil war in Syria has the potential to spill over into Turkey, engulfing not only the Arab Alawites in Turkey, but also the Kurds in the fragile southeast part of Turkey. Second, and more critically, the PKK is going to find another safe haven in Syria. It is not difficult to make an analogy. When no-fly zone was set up following the first Gulf War, the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization, the PKK, found plenty of space and opportunity to operate in

Northern Iraq. It was not coincidental that the mid-1990s witnessed the peak of PKK terrorist activities, inflicting heavy damages on the Turkish military and civilian populations. There is no doubt that it will be a nightmare for Turkey to have another Iraq on its southern border.

Going beyond the parameters of this state-centric perspective, I argue that there are domestic political reasons, which severely tie Erdogan's hands.

Any intervention against Syria without a U.N. resolution is going to be Erdogan's bet only. The main opposition party, CHP, has not raised a categorical objection against military intervention in Syria, in fact repeatedly declared its support for it. But, that support is conditional. That is, a U.N. resolution must legitimate the intervention. Given that such a resolution is almost impossible without Russia and China on board, the CHP's condition pretty much amounts to saying, 'you should go alone.'

For Erdogan, a unilateral intervention in Syria is going to be a hard sell. First, except for the Palestinian issue, the Turkish public has generally been apathetic about the developments in the Arab world, an apathy having roots in the post-world war one disappointment the Turks still deeply feel. For the most part, the Arabs have not been held accountable. The Ottoman Empire disintegrated, most Turks still hold, because of a British-French conspiracy, not genuinely desired by the Arabs naively deceived.

The same simplistic conspiracy theory guides most Turks' view of the Arab affairs. If there is any disturbance in any Arab country, it must be a Western conspiracy. More than anyone else in Turkey, the Turkish Islamists have strongly believed in this conspiracy. When Erdogan objected to the military intervention in Libya, he in fact alluded to it: the Western Powers were really after the Libyan oil. By implication, the trouble could be avoided without involving them.

That is in fact the most consistent policy, at least until recently, the Turkish leaders have pursued. All along the Arab Spring, they have tried to help the Arabs solve their own internal problems without involving any Western power. Once they realized, however, that the Arab world has its own serious problems, not in need of a Western power to mess them up, it was a wake-up call for the Turkish leaders. The challenge they now face is how to confess how wrong their reading of the Middle East history has been. That confession will also lead to a more painful process, a whole re-reading of the very much-romanticized Ottoman period.

This is not an insurmountable problem. More pressing is that Erdogan will face a more serious opposition from an influential segment of his own constituency. It might be hard to understand this. But, there is a hard-core pro-Iran lobby among Erdogan's close circle of advisers and bureaucrats. The media pillar of this lobby is openly and loudly against any intervention in Syria, portraying it as another Western conspiracy in the region not to be fallen into.

A more daunting problem is that Erdogan is not going to find an enthusiastic military at home. It should be remembered that from the very beginning the higher echelons of the military have never liked to work with Erdogan, expressing their discontent in every occasion possible. It was not easy for them to see someone, who landed in jail thanks to a repressive environment they helped create in Turkey, rose like a phoenix from the ashes and became the prime minister of Turkey. We later learned that some top generals in fact prepared plans to stage a military coup to topple his government.

As Turkish economy recovered, inflation dropped, and living conditions visibly got better, Erdogan had become more and more popular. Soon thereafter, Erdogan-supported police and judiciary went after those who planned to topple his government, thus initiating the most ambitious and unprecedented court case in Turkey. The brave prosecutor of the case, Zekeriya Oz, became the most popular prosecutor Turkey has ever seen. Similar court cases soon followed. As of now there are court cases involving not only military coup planners of 2003 and 2004, but also former military coup makers, the most notable ones being Kenan Evren and Cevik Bir.

For the future of democracy, this re-balancing of civil-military relations in Turkey is a welcome development. But, it is hard to say that Turkey has arrived at a healthy equilibrium yet. The Turkish military is totally demoralized. As tens of generals, retired and on-duty, and many other lower-ranking military officers are now in jail, the Turkish military do not give confidence at a time, to be added, the PKK recovered its former strength and began to inflict heavy damages again.

Erdogan and the military thus have gone through such a long, troubled and painful period. It seems absurdly unlikely that the couples will go on an adventure at this moment in the Turkish history.

<http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2012/04/29/211023.html>