

## Helpless and lonely: Turkey's attitude towards the war in Syria

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The conflict in Syria, which has lasted since 2011, has become the most significant test of the efficiency of Turkey's foreign policy and the biggest challenge to Turkey's security in recent decades. The lack of a clear prospect of an end to the war does not allow us to come to a final conclusion regarding the Syrian civil war's importance for Turkey. However, it can be said today that with the exception of the initial phase of the conflict, Ankara's influence over the course of events in Syria has been limited, and the war itself is evolving in a direction that is unfavourable for Turkey: the hostile regime of Bashar al-Assad is still in power, the opposition has proved to be an unreliable or even a dangerous ally, and in northern Syria militant jihadist groups and Kurds are gaining importance. It is also quite unlikely that the West will take any greater responsibility for stabilising the situation in the region.

In response to such an unfortunate situation, and out of fear of risking deeper involvement in the conflict, during the past year Turkey's policy towards Syria has been restrained, reactive and focused mainly on defending Turkey's territory. However, this policy offers no security guarantees and does not prevent the country's regional position from weakening, especially in the context of the reinforcement of the jihadist militants and the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. The arguments for Turkey continuing its defensive policy are strong: the country fears the possible results of an open confrontation with Assad's forces; most probably it could not count on support for such actions from within its own society or its Western allies. It also does not have enough acceptance within the anti-Assad opposition circles. On the other hand, though, the risk of uncontrolled development of events is still present; the risk of confrontations with armed jihadist militants is growing; and the potential operation of Turkish forces, either against the jihadists or against Assad's army, could be considered as a method of diverting attention from the political problems with which the AKP government has been struggling at home.

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### On the threshold of year 4 of the Syrian war

The war between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the rebels has seriously destabilised the Middle East. The conflict has spilt over onto the territories of Syria's neighbours: there is regular fighting in Lebanon, increased activity by Islamic terrorist organisations in Iraq and (to a lesser extent) in Turkey, increasing tendencies among Kurds to fight for their autonomy

in Turkey, and the influx of refugees to all of the states neighbouring Syria. The war has also fuelled the rivalry among the region's major actors, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, as well as between actors from other regions, namely the West and Russia.

Currently there seems to be little chance of a quick resolution of the war. None of the sides involved is able to win. Assad's forces control the state's strategic territories and resources,

and in recent months have been more successful on the battlefields thanks to their military advantage. However, they are not strong enough to regain control over the entire country, despite the opposition being scattered and split by internal conflicts. It is equally unlikely that peace can be reached through negotiations, as confirmed by the failure of the talks held in Geneva in January and February 2014 between the representatives of the government in Damascus and the opposition.

The deadlock has been further reinforced by external actors. The potential of the warring sides is magnified by their foreign supporters: mainly by Iran (together with Hezbollah) and Russia, which support Assad; by Saudi Arabia and Qatar (and to a smaller extent by the West and Turkey) which support the opposition; and by Islamic terrorist organisations, their members and proponents, who provide recruits and weapons to the jihadist militants. Moreover, Russia has blocked peace-oriented initiatives launched by the West, for example by using its right to veto the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council. We may expect that over the next few years the war in Syria will affect the security, politics and economy of the states of the Middle East, and the regional distribution of power, including the position of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the West and the situation of Kurds. The future course of events will be significant for Turkey's position as well.

## The evolution of Turkey's policy towards Syria

Turkey's policy towards the crisis in Syria can be divided into three stages. Initially, Ankara saw the crisis as an occasion to act like a modern and influential state, a regional promoter of democracy able to appease the socio-political tensions which destabilise the Middle East. When protests broke out in Syria in the spring of 2011, Turkey attempted to use its influence over Damascus to convince Bashar al-Assad to

carry out democratic reforms<sup>1</sup>. On one hand it offered support, while on the other it kept reinforcing its negotiating position and expanded its room for manoeuvre by giving shelter to the opposition. When in autumn 2011 it turned out that its attempts at persuasion had failed, and Assad started to use force to curb the demonstrations, Ankara moved to the second stage, focused on confrontation. It based its approach on the assumption that, similarly to other states covered by the 'Arab Spring', Syria's despotic regime would soon be toppled.

### Turkey's policy towards the crisis in Syria can be divided into three stages: diplomacy, confrontation and defence

This policy called for actions in various fields, including logistical and material support for the Syrian National Council, then the strongest opposition organisation, and the anti-regime Free Syrian Army; reception of refugees in specially built camps<sup>2</sup>; and launching a diplomatic offensive aimed at mobilising the international community to topple Assad<sup>3</sup>. Ankara remained positively neutral towards the armed jihadist

<sup>1</sup> Since the breakthrough in bilateral relations in the late 1990s – when in response to the threat of war voiced by Turkey in connection with Damascus' support for the anti-Turkish Kurdish terrorist organisation the Kurdistan Workers' Party PKK, and especially since the AKP came to power – the two countries have made attempts to improve their mutual relations, e.g. by launching cooperation in the fight against terrorism (mainly Kurdish separatism), intensifying trade relations, cooperating in the management of the Euphrates waters, developing political relations and abolishing the visa regime. See Szymon Ananicz, 'Turcja wobec konfliktu syryjskiego', *Komentarz OSW*, 10 October 2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2012-10-10/turcja-wobec-kryzysu-syryjskiego>

<sup>2</sup> According to the UNHCR, there are nearly 700,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey; the Turkish authorities claim that the actual number of refugees is around 900,000.

<sup>3</sup> Turkey has called on its Western allies and Arab states to establish a no-fly zone in Syria, create a buffer zone in the northern part of the country, and provide weapons to the opposition. It has launched initiatives at various forums including the United Nations, NATO, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Friends of Syria group and the League of Arab States.

groups which had joined the rebellion, hoping that they would contribute to the elimination of the regime. Officially, the Turkish government offered them no support, but at the same time it tolerated their presence in Turkey, which has become their transit territory and stronghold<sup>4</sup>. Simultaneously Ankara made attempts to prevent a situation in which destabilisation in Syria would enable the Democratic Union Party (PYD), associated with the PKK, to win autonomy for the two-million strong Kurdish minority in the northern part of the country, fearing this might be a *casus belli*. In this period Syria occupied a central place in the actions carried out by Turkish diplomacy; it was one of the main topics of speeches given by politicians at home and abroad. The clear declaration of support offered to the pro-democratic forces oppressed by the criminal regime was aimed to reinforce the AKP's image as a party which was determined to defend these values in the eyes of Turkey's foreign partners and the party's domestic electorate.

In mid-2012 Ankara's policy entered its third stage. Turkey gradually moved from active confrontation towards a more reactive policy restricted to defending the country's own territory, including potential support for actions carried out by the opposition and other states, albeit without taking any risks associated with its own initiatives aimed directly at Assad's regime. A series of events showed Turkey's vulnerability to retaliatory actions by Damascus and its allies, Iran in particular, which gave impetus to make changes. In 2012 the conflict between the Turkish forces and the Kurdish terrorist organisation PKK escalated, reaching its highest level since the 1990s (in 2011–2013

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to verify the media reports suggesting that Turkey provides weapons to these groups. However, it can be assumed that some of the militants who had previously been members of more moderate groups supported by Ankara later joined ISIS or al-Nusra (along with weapons which could have been provided by Turkey).

nearly 1000 people died in this conflict)<sup>5</sup>. This was possible, among other factors, due to the support granted to the PKK by Damascus and Tehran. In June 2012 the Syrian army shot down a Turkish reconnaissance plane, and in May 2013 in the border town of Reyhanlı a bomb attack was staged, killing over 50 Turkish citizens. Turkey has suspected Syria of staging the attack. These events have demonstrated that the price of confrontation with Assad is high.

Other manifestations of this new policy have included the softening of the rhetoric towards Damascus, and the non-escalation of tensions associated with clashes on cross-border territories. Ankara decided to refrain from military action even after the attack in Reyhanlı<sup>6</sup>; instead, it has used force for defensive purposes alone<sup>7</sup>. The threats of possible retaliations should the Tomb of Suleyman Shah (located in a Turkish exclave in northern Syria) be desecrated, can be interpreted in a similar way. In the international arena, Ankara has moved away from promoting offensive initiatives and has focused on obtaining security guarantees from NATO, which has resulted in the deployment of NATO's missile defence system to Turkey<sup>8</sup>. It also counted on the United States to negotiate with Russia over the conditions for bringing an end to the war<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Data quoted from the International Crisis Group, 'Crying "Wolf": Why Turkish Fears Need Not Block Kurdish Reform', Europe Report N° 227, October 2013, p. 6, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/227-crying-wolf-why-turkish-fears-need-not-block-kurdish-reform.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/227-crying-wolf-why-turkish-fears-need-not-block-kurdish-reform.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Marek Matusiak, 'Turkey: Attack on the border with Syria', *OSW Analyses*, 15 May 2013, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-05-15/turkey-attack-border-syria>

<sup>7</sup> The Turkish army shot down a Syrian helicopter in September 2013, and a fighter plane in March 2014. According to the Turkish authorities, in both cases the Syrian aircraft had intruded into Turkey's air space.

<sup>8</sup> Krzysztof Strachota, 'The US and NATO are defending Turkey', *OSW Analyses*, 19 December 2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-12-19/us-and-nato-are-defending-turkey>

<sup>9</sup> Until the failed peace conference held in Geneva in January and February 2014, Turkey had hoped that Washington would be able to bring an end to the conflict.

Moreover, it attempted to revive its relations with Iran and Russia (previously it had not considered these two states as actors in the peace process), and since mid-2013 it has consistently rejected the accusations formulated by Turkey's foreign partners concerning the country's possible support for ISIS and al-Nusra<sup>10</sup>. Turkey's support for moderate opposition groups has become less visible and less frequent. Also, Ankara has softened its rhetoric towards the actions of the Kurdish PYD in northern Syria: Turkey has abandoned its threats of a military intervention, even though in the meantime (with tacit support from Assad and a certain degree of assistance from the PKK) the PYD has managed to gain control over north-eastern Syria, after which it proclaimed autonomy (in January 2014) of the Kurdish regions on these territories. Ankara's response was limited to closing border crossings with the territories controlled by the Kurds.

It is difficult to judge whether Turkey is likely to continue this cautious, defensive policy with a similar consistency to that which it has demonstrated in the last two years. Certain doubts can be supposed, in associate with some difficult-to-verify media reports, secretly recorded declarations by Turkish politicians and representatives of uniformed services, as well as leaked reports suggesting the deep, offensive involvement of Turkish services in the fight against Assad and the jihadist militants<sup>11</sup>. Should these revelations prove true, it is likely that Turkey's involvement in the conflict would increase.

<sup>10</sup> According to media reports, at the end of 2013 Turkey sent the EU states a report saying that in that year it had detained and deported 1100 European citizens who had come to Turkey to join the jihadist organisations operating in Syria. <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-332877-turkey-deports-1100-european-fighters-to-countries-of-origin.html>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Seymour M. Hersh, 'The Red Line and the Rat Line', London Review of Books, Vol. 36, No 8, 17 April 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line>

## Little room for manoeuvre

Ankara has treated the Syrian war as a serious threat, in the face of which it is practically helpless. The vulnerability to hostile actions by Assad and his supporters, the situation in Syria, in the international arena and within Turkey itself make it increasingly difficult for Ankara to conduct an active policy towards the conflict.

A significant barrier to this is the internal divisions within the opposition, the increased significance of radical factions in the rebel groups (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and the al-Nusra Front associated with al-Qaeda) and the resulting inability of the opposition to act in concert, which would be exacerbated if such actions were to be supervised by Ankara<sup>12</sup>. In particular, it was the strengthening of the armed jihadist groups, at the expense of those circles which Ankara initially saw as Assad's possible successors, that generated serious doubts in Turkish thinking as to whether the fall of the Syrian regime would be beneficial for Turkey. In this scenario, extreme Islamic groups would have a great chance of becoming the main actor in the new Syria, which would pose a serious threat to Turkey<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, even the more moderate part of the Syrian opposition (the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, the Syr-

<sup>12</sup> Until 2014 the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) claimed that it belonged to al-Qaeda. However in February 2014, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a statement in which he denied any ties with ISIS.

<sup>13</sup> Islamic radicals are particularly active in the northern and eastern part of the country, which is close to the border with Turkey. They have proved very determined in their fight with the anti-Assad forces, and additionally ISIS has carried out military actions against the remaining rebel groups (including the Free Syrian Army, al-Nusra and the Kurdish PYD). US intelligence sources estimate that of the 75,000–110,000 strong group of rebels, some 26,000 are Islamic extremists. Around 7000 of them have come to Syria from abroad. It can be assumed that most of them reached Syria via Turkey, benefiting from the latter's geographical location, the ease of crossing the border with Syria, the favourable attitude towards the rebels, the liberal visa regime and the convenient air connections. See the testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper on 29 January to the US senate: <http://www.senate.gov/isvp/?type=live&comm=intel&filename=intel012914&stt=38:15>

ian National Coalition) have proved to be more susceptible to the influence of Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent Qatar) than that of Ankara. Contrary to initial calculations, it has also become clear that the West is not interested in becoming more involved in the conflict, as a result of which Turkey has become isolated and more prone to the risk of confrontation with Assad's forces and their supporters – Russia and Iran.

**The vulnerability to hostile actions carried out by Assad and his supporters, the situation in Syria, in the international arena and in Turkey itself are making it increasingly difficult for Ankara to conduct an active policy towards the conflict.**

This has been clearly confirmed by the restrained reactions of the United States and the EU to the use of chemical weapons and the reports of mass killing in jails controlled by Assad's regime<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, in recent months the West has devoted much of its attention to the crisis in Ukraine. Furthermore, the worsening relations with some of the Arab states which are hostile towards Damascus has limited Turkey's potential for action. For instance, diplomatic tensions in its relations with Saudi Arabia make it difficult for Ankara to cooperate with the Syrian opposition, even though the two states' interests in the context of the conflict are similar<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> An attack with the use of chemical weapons was carried out on the Syrian town of Guta in August 2013. The suspected perpetrators are Assad's forces. Although Barack Obama had previously referred to the use of chemical weapons as a "red line", the crossing of which the US would consider a *casus belli*, Washington refrained from a military intervention. In January 2014 evidence came to light confirming that around 11 individuals had been killed, most of them starved, in regime-controlled jails. This report was also met with a muted response by the West.

<sup>15</sup> Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia want Bashar al-Assad's regime to fall; they fear armed jihadist groups and have called for the international community to intervene and end the conflict. The main differences between the two states include their relations towards the Muslim Brother-

hood; Turkey considers this organisation a partner, while Saudi Arabia refers to it as an enemy. The two countries had a dispute over this issue when the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt was toppled.

The domestic situation in Turkey has not been particularly favourable for the state's active policy. The previous confrontation-oriented approach had little public support and was generally considered wrong and pointless<sup>16</sup>. The renewal of the peace process with the Kurdish minority in Turkey in early 2013 makes it difficult for Ankara to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria<sup>17</sup>. The socio-political crisis, which started with mass protests in May and June 2013 and was further aggravated by the corruption scandal which broke out in December, has diverted the government's attention from foreign policy, and discouraged the country's leaders from continuing unpopular actions, especially in the pre-election period<sup>18</sup>. The confrontation between the ruling AKP and Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement has translated into rivalry between the state's services, in particular between the intelligence service (on the government side) and the police and gendarmerie (on the side of Gülen), which has limited Turkey's freedom to act in Syria. This can be illustrated by the attempts made by the police and gendarmerie to stop supplies being sent to Syrian rebels by Turkish intelligence services<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> A Turkish opinion poll conducted in September 2012 showed that 56% of the respondents assessed Turkey's policy towards Syria as negative, and 28% supported it. See '*Türkiye Siyasal Durum Araştırması*', Metropoll, September 2012, <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiye-siyasal-durum-arastirmasi-eylul-2012>.

<sup>17</sup> As part of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process, which has been ongoing since 2013, the PKK has indirectly held talks with the Turkish government on the regulation of the situation of the Kurdish minority. Although the fighting has ended, the authorities still consider the PKK as a dangerous rival.

<sup>18</sup> In March 2014 local elections were held, presidential elections have been scheduled for this summer, and parliamentary elections for 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Semih Idiz, 'Syria-bound trucks put spotlight on Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 21 January 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/turkey-trucks-attention-syria.html>

It can be expected that the disclosure of the recordings from a meeting held at the Turkish foreign ministry, during which the possibility of staging a provocation in order to create a pretext for an intervention in Syria was discussed, has made the public additionally sensitive to the issues of the army and special services becoming involved in the government's actions<sup>20</sup>.

## Main challenges to security

It seems that for the time being, the main challenge to Ankara will be the strengthening of armed jihadist groups in northern Syria and in Turkey itself. Turkey has become increasingly hostile towards these groups. However, launching decisive actions against the jihadists would probably expose Turkey to the risk of retaliation on their part. This would be all the more dangerous as they can move freely to Turkey and organise their actions, for instance by recruiting militants from the several hundred thousand-strong group of Syrian refugees on Turkish territory. The growing threat can be confirmed by the cases of exchange of fire in March this year between the militants and the police in central Turkey and Istanbul which killed a number of police officers and Turkish civilians. Combating Islamic militants is difficult, due for example to the problems with controlling the 900-kilometre-long border with Syria and verifying whether individual militants belong to any of the groups. On the other hand, continuing the policy of latent tolerance for the presence of such groups in Syria and Turkey could strengthen their position in the region and compromise Ankara's relations with the West, which is pushing for a more active fight against terrorist groups.

<sup>20</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/27/us-syria-crisis-turkey-idUSBREA2Q17420140327>, a record of a part of the meeting between the minister of foreign affairs, a secretary of state at the MFA, the head of the intelligence service and deputy chief of staff in English: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/turkey-youtube-ban-full-transcript-leaked-syria-war-conversation-between-erdogan-officials-1442161>, a record of the entire meeting in Turkish: part 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfm3XTNVcFw>, part 2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTDtxvJ6kXU>

Another challenge to Turkey's security and regional position will be the gradual reinforcement of the Kurdish autonomy supervised by the PYD in northern Syria. Turkey's room for manoeuvre is limited in this case also: a confrontation with the PYD would mean re-starting the war with the PKK on Turkey's own territory, while a policy of non-involvement would strengthen the PKK's regional position at the expense of Ankara and its ally Masoud Barzani.

## The action of jihadist militants and the gradual reinforcement of the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria pose significant challenges to Turkey's security.

The PKK/PYD's successes have fuelled new aspirations among Turkish Kurds and reinforced their negotiating position in their attempts at establishing political and cultural autonomy in Turkey, while in the same way limiting the government's ability to manage the Kurdish issue on its own. Moreover, if the current peace process does not develop as they would expect, the PKK might consider this area their shelter and a stronghold for carrying out actions against Turkey. The creation of a Kurdish autonomy in Syria would also considerably weaken Turkey's regional position.

## Conclusions

From Ankara's perspective, any further development of the Syrian conflict is highly unfavourable. It has been over three years since the war began, and none of the elements of Ankara's initial plan (the rapid fall of Assad's regime, the victory of the moderate opposition, Turkey's major role in building a new Syria) has been realised; moreover it seems that none of them will ever be realised.

The war has weakened Ankara's regional position and demonstrated that Turkey's aspirations to play the role of a regional power were excessive. Turkey has failed to win the status of leader in its immediate neighbourhood. So far it has lost the contest for influence in Syria not only with Iran and Russia, but also with Saudi Arabia. Ankara's unsuccessful Syrian policy has considerably deepened its isolation in the Middle East. It is particularly important to note that these failures have been combined with the freezing of relations with Egypt, Israel and the deterioration of relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (excluding Kurdistan).

As a result, over the last three years Turkey's room for manoeuvre in the Middle East has been greatly reduced.

Another heavy burden for Turkey will be its domestic situation. Lack of public support for more active involvement in the conflict – especially in the pre-election period – along with the destabilisation of the state structures, will limit Ankara's ability to take the initiative in the Syrian conflict. It is likely that, at least in the short term, Turkey will continue its policy based on the defence of its own territory and non-confrontation.

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