

# Turkey's Syrian Misadventure

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*Turkey's intervention in Syria has been an act of unprecedented folly. Not since the republic was established in 1923 – not even when the military was in charge – has a Turkish government sought 'regime change' in another country.*

*In sponsoring armed groups seeking to destroy the Syrian government, the collective calling itself 'The Friends of the Syrian People' appears to be committing serious violations of international law. While the focus has to remain on the prime victims of their intervention, the Syrian people, it is also the case that more than a year later the policy has not worked for Turkey and is blowing up in the face of its architects, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.*

## **International Law**

Article 2 (1) of the UN Charter (1945) states that the organization is based on the 'sovereign equality of all its Members'. Article 2 (3) states that all members 'shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered'. Article 2 (4) required all members to refrain in their international relations 'from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state or in any manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations'. Article 2 (7) states that 'nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state'. Chapter 7 of the charter grants the Security Council the right to take action but only in cases of a threat to peace, a breach of the peace or an act of aggression. 'Peace' here is clearly intended to mean international peace and not the disruption of domestic peace by domestic disorder.

In 1965 the sovereign rights of the state were further affirmed in General Assembly Resolution 2131 (XX), entitled Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty, passed on December 21 by a vote of 109-0. Three of the core principles are adumbrated below:

1. No State has the right to intervene directly or indirectly for any reason whatever in the internal and external affairs of any State. Consequently armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements are condemned.

2. No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from its advantages of any kind. Also no State shall

organize, assist, foment, finance, incite or tolerate subversive, terrorist or armed activities directed towards the violent overthrow of the regime of another State or interfere in civil strife in another State.

The fact that powerful states bully the weak and frequently violate their sovereign rights is no excuse for Turkey to do the same. The question of whether the Justice and Development Party government is violating Turkey's own laws is another issue, already raised in the Turkish media and by opposition politicians.

## **Disarray**

None of this would matter so much if Turkey's policy had worked out. Bashar would have gone in a few months and the Turkish Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister would be hailed for their foresight and courage but now it is they who are on the hot plate. Bashar is still in power and the army - the foot soldiers mostly Sunni Muslims - has not broken up on sectarian lines. The armed protégés of the outside governments are steadily being contained and driven out of the towns and the cities they have infiltrated. Fighting continues but external support for the armed groups seems to be waning. The US was already losing its appetite for direct intervention under the aegis of NATO and in the wake of the murder of the US ambassador to Tripoli by the very people whom the US used as auxiliaries to destroy the Libyan Jamahiriya and its founder, it can be ruled out altogether and not only because of fear of the Russian and Chinese reaction. Finally the US is taking a clear look at the people likely to inherit in Syria if Assad goes and it does not like what it sees.

The recent statement of a 'rebel commander' in Aleppo that 70 per cent of the population remains loyal to the government probably means that 90 to 95 per cent support the government and not just in Aleppo, where local Christians have been forming armed groups to defend themselves. It is only another strand of western involvement in Syria that politicians who wear their Christianity on their sleeve in Washington and London have completely ignored the evidence of the killing and intimidation of Syrian Christians. Only the Vatican has spoken out. Only recently have the sponsors of the armed groups - with the notable exceptions of Saudi Arabia and Qatar - begun looking askance at the savagery of the crimes they are committing, including the massacre of civilians and soldiers, rape, kidnapping and the murder of anyone identified as a 'regime loyalist', including police, postal workers, university professors and journalists. In Aleppo they stood their captives against a wall and riddled them with machine gun fire. Later they 'executed' 20 bound and gagged Syrian soldiers. In Al Bab - near Aleppo - they murdered postal workers before pitching their bodies from the roof of their building on to the steps below. In Homs the FSA's Faruq Brigade maintained a special squad whose job it was to cut the throats of the group's captives. Others have their heads cut off. All of this is justified by the crimes committed or alleged to have been committed by the 'regime'. Any lines of demarcation between these groups have all but disappeared. There is tacit cooperation between all of them. There is no reason why any sane Syrian would want these people in their midst, especially as many are not even their countrymen but salafis/jihadis/takfiris - Pakistanis, Iraqis, Turks, Saudis, Chechens and Libyans - paid by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Their role in the armed opposition has become increasingly dominant.

## **US Target**

Syria has been in the gun sights of the US administration for decades. The country's modern history bulges with attempts to disable it through assassination, attempts to overthrow the

government, armed attack and occupation and most recently sanctions: no wonder Syria has become a byword for the mukharabat state. In the past two decades the calibration of the anti-Syrian policy has been in the hands of the neoconservatives. The Middle East was their prime target and Israel their prime beneficiary. The national security strategy announced by the George W. Bush administration was effectively a neoconservative writ for attacking other states if and when the US wanted, with Muslim countries top of the list. The rule book – beginning with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia – was tossed out the window. After the invasion of Afghanistan the governments of seven states were set up for destruction: Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Iran, not necessarily in that order. Out of the ruins a new Middle East was to be born.

The strategy has been extended to include a wide range of activities befitting a ‘hyper’ state powerful enough to operate outside the law, including ‘extra judicial’ executions and drone attacks that have killed countless numbers of civilians as well as a handful of Islamic militants in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. Osama bin Laden could have been arrested and put on trial but was shot dead in front of his wives and children. This was not an ‘extra judicial’ execution because there is no such thing. For an execution to be legal it must have been preceded by prosecution, trial and conviction but now prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner have all been rolled into one. Osama might have been responsible for murders but he also was murdered. The use of ‘extra judicial’ execution is no more than media apologetics for crime.

Heads of state are no more exempted from the law of the gun than anyone else but there was a time when they were removed covertly. Now it is done right out in the open. The Reagan administration’s failed attempt to murder Muammar al Qadhafi in the 1980s was finally followed by success last year. The oracular statement of Hillary Clinton in Tripoli a few days before his murder that ‘we’ are looking forward to the Libyan leader’s capture or killing was thus fulfilled. It will be remembered that she celebrated the occasion with a joke. The assassination of the US ambassador to Libya was a different matter altogether: she said it left her heartbroken – a technical impossibility, some would say, reminiscent of the old jazz line – ‘something beats in his chest/but it’s just a pump at best’. Certainly she has never been known to utter a word of regret, remorse or apology for the women and children who have been killed by US drone attacks in various countries. Her heart seems quite intact as far as they are concerned.

Clinton’s purpose-driven morality blows around like a weathervane in a high wind but she is no more than the symptom of an ugly moment in history which has produced Guantanamo, extraordinary rendition and torture, the massacre of civilians on the ground and from the air in Baghdad, the urinating on the bodies of their victims by US soldiers in Afghanistan, and even the trophy mutilation of their bodies. One cannot be separated from the other. Reinforcing the systemic place of these crimes, very rarely has anyone even been rapped on the wrist for them.

Overshadowing them all, of course, is the genocidal assault on Iraq, beginning in 1991, and continuing through more than a decade of sanctions and the second war of 2003, but not even for these most terrible crimes has anyone who committed them or was ultimately responsible for them been punished. Clinton and Obama arrived late but added Libya to the pile of corpses and in any case have adhered to the policies set by their neoconservative predecessors.

In this new overtly lawless world, Bashar al Assad is a prime target for assassination. Very possibly he was expected to be at the meeting targeted for bombing by the so-called Free Syrian Army in Damascus a few weeks ago. Usually governments feel obliged to abhor terrorism, especially when directed against the members of other governments, but this time the spokesman for the US State Department more or less said that the victims – the Defence Minister and two other senior figures in Assad’s inner circle – had it coming. Responsibility for this attack was claimed by Riad al Assad, the commander of the FSA who remarked: ‘God willing this will be the end of the regime. Hopefully Bashar will be next’. Mr Assad lives in southeastern Turkey under the protection of the Turkish state. The question is rhetorical but still has to be asked: has Turkey really reached the stage where its government gives sanctuary to a man who openly admits to organizing terrorist outrages in the capital city of another country and is looking forward to the murder of its head of state? The FSA leader’s fervent hope was later echoed in the assertion by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius’ remark that Bashar does not deserve to be on this earth. In the world we used to have this would have been called incitement to murder.

### **Prolonging Violence**

Under the UN Charter it is incumbent on all members to seek the peaceful resolution of conflicts that threaten international order. In Syria the US government and its allies have done the reverse. Through their intervention they have created a situation that threatens international order. In pursuit of their own agenda they have supported armed groups, imposed sanctions and agitated against the Syrian government through the UN Security Council and the Arab League.

Far from trying to bring the violence to an end they have prolonged it in the hope that it will eventually bring down the government in Damascus. They have blocked every attempt at a settlement that does not involve the precondition of ‘regime change’. Kofi Annan’s ceasefire could not work because the ‘friends’ were not prepared to compel the armed groups to lay down their arms at the same time as the Syrian army did. Having learned its lesson in Homs, where the tanks were pulled off the streets, only for the ‘rebels’ to take advantage of their withdrawal to reclaim lost positions, the Syrian government is not going to play this game again.

Further back, Saudi Arabia and Qatar torpedoed the Arab League monitors’ mission the moment it became clear it would come up with findings not to their liking. Its report was suppressed as was, more recently, the report resulting from the on-the-ground inquiry into the Houla massacre by the UN Supervisory Mission in Syria (UNSMS). It reached the UN Secretary-General’s office but not the Security Council and the mission’s mandate was terminated soon afterwards. The mission’s commander, Lieut-General Robert Mood, spoke at a press conference of conflicting evidence and it has to be assumed this was the reason for the report being buried. No solution has been allowed by the US that includes the participation of Iran. China and Russia have their own motives for supporting the government in Damascus but their position of opposition to outside intervention and support for negotiations without preconditions at least stands on firm moral and legal grounds. The main Syrian domestic opposition groups have now put forward an initiative for a negotiated settlement starting with the army and all armed factions laying down their weapons simultaneously. Having so far blocked every attempt at a settlement that does not meet their terms, will the ‘Friends of the Syrian People’ allow it to work?

### **Zero Problems?**

In the campaign against Syria – or the Syrian ‘regime’ as the ‘friends’ would insist – Turkey’s role has been central. Until the beginning of last year the Turkish government had pursued policies of ‘soft power’ and ‘zero problems’ around all of Turkey’s borders. It now suits supporters of the government’s position to argue that the ‘zero problems’ policy had failed, when all the evidence suggests that it had been a resounding success. Outstanding issues were resolved, new trade agreements signed and borders opened up. Relations with the two countries with which Turkey has had the most difficult relationship – Syria and Iran – had never been better. The ‘zero problems’ policy will stand as Foreign Minister Davutoglu’s greatest achievement: its destruction will stand as his greatest failure.

Libya marked the beginning of Turkey’s policy turnaround. Erdogan initially responded by saying that military intervention anywhere in the Middle East would be a disaster but with a western triumph inevitable Turkey climbed on board. The spectacle thus arose of a government selling itself on its Muslim credentials coming in behind yet another western attack on yet another Muslim country. With Libya finished – another functional state turned into a dysfunctional state – the western-gulf state alliance then turned its attention to Syria. Erdogan and Davutoglu abruptly dropped their attempts to persuade Bashar al Assad to accept their advice (apparently to negotiate with the Muslim Brotherhood and even to bring it into government) and turned on him. The ‘brother’ of a few months before was now the worst man in the world.

The crisis broke when the two men were already fashioning an enlarged regional and global role for Turkey drawing strength from the connections of the Ottoman past and building on Erdogan’s popular standing across the Arab world following his blistering criticism of Israel. In what critics described as ‘neo Ottomanism’, the two men saw Turkey as a regional leader, role model and servant, as Davutoglu put it a few months ago. A new Middle East was being formed and they positioned themselves on the crest of the wave of reform, albeit in a very selective way because they had little or nothing to say about the need for change in the Gulf states.

### **Out of Touch**

Had Erdogan and Davutoglu been properly advised, had they been more alert, more tuned in to the realities of the Middle East, they would have known that Bashar would not soon be gone. They would have known that he is popular with many Syrians and is seen by them as the best hope for reform. They would have known that confrontation with Syria would undermine relations with Iraq and Iran, as well as putting Turkey at odds with Russia and China. They would have known that these two powers would never allow a repeat of Libya and they might have guessed that the Kurds would take the opportunity of turmoil in Syria to strengthen their own position. They presumed to speak for the Syrian people when not even now is there any evidence that the ‘Syrian people’ in the mass support whom they support. The clearest evidence of what they want remains the referendum of February, when more than half the people on the electoral roll voted to remove the Baath party as the central pillar of society and state and bring in a multiparty system. Of course the changes did not go far enough: after half a century of authoritarian rule, the mukhabarat state was never going to be transformed overnight but what was on offer was certainly better than the mayhem sweeping across Syria with the encouragement of governments that have done nothing but harm to Arab interests over the last two centuries.

### **Cost of Conflict**

The costs of Turkey's confrontation with Syria have been great. An effective regional policy has been wrecked in favor of policy incoherence. The Kurds have taken advantage of the turmoil, with the PKK escalating its attacks and the Syrian Kurds tightening their grip on the region just south of the border, raising alarm in Ankara at the possibility of a Syrian Kurdish enclave being added to the nucleus of a future 'Greater Kurdistan'. Bashar is being blamed when it is clear that the Syrian army is stretched to the limit and no longer capable of policing the border as before.

The Iraqi Kurds have been sucked into the vortex of this conflict, with Massoud Barzani convening a meeting of the Syrian Kurds – including a faction closely linked to the PKK – and advising them to settle their differences in the common interest and take what they can. Because of the close political and trade links established with the northern Iraqi Kurdish governorate – at the expense of relations with the actual government of the country – Erdogan was infuriated at Barzani's endorsement of actions seen as inimical to Turkey's security interests. Rubbing salt into Iraq's wounded pride, Davutoglu chose the middle of this crisis to visit the contested city of Kirkuk.

In the southeast sanctions have killed off the cross-border trade with Syria that was the livelihood of merchants and traders in Hatay and Gaziantep provinces. The population of Hatay is more than 50 per cent Alevi and still connected to Alawis across the border by family ties. The Turkish Alevis are strongly opposed to their government's policies and do not want the 'refugees' (formally the 'guests' of the Turkish government), the bearded jihadis or the agents of foreign governments in their midst. They see Bashar as the head of a secular regime which is the best guarantor of minority rights and they regard the prospect of a Muslim Brotherhood-type government of the kind apparently favored by Erdogan with absolute anathema. Their reaction to the situation has not been helped by Erdogan's intermittent political point scoring at Alawi expense. The focus on Hatay revives the question of how the province came to be a Turkish possession in the first place: breaking the terms of its mandate over Syria, the French government handed the region to Turkey in 1938 as a placatory measure before the onset of the Second World War. As for the Turkish people in the mass, the most recent poll indicates that the majority do not support military intervention in Syria. Whether they are aware of how deeply their country already is involved is another matter.

Tens of thousands of Syrians are now pouring out of their country to seek refuge in Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. They are another consequence of the decision to prolong the fighting in Syria rather than help end it. Here it should be remembered that Syria took in half a million Palestinian refugees in 1948 and more than a million Iraqis after the US-led invasion of 2003 created the greatest refugee tragedy in the Middle East since 1948. Now it is Iraq that is taking in Syrian refugees. Refugees of a different category in Syria include the families of the 100,000 Syrians who were driven off the Golan Heights by Israeli forces in 1967.

Although everyone in the collective calling itself 'The Friends of the Syrian People' is playing their part, the role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar – the paymasters – is especially pernicious because it is based on a sectarian reordering of the Middle East, with Shi'ism dammed behind a wall of Sunni governments. Saudi Arabia is one of the most reactionary states in the world, not just the Middle East. Qatar is a liberal version of Saudi Arabia but still has no political parties, no parliament, no unions and a system of indentured foreign labor that has been likened to slavery and even bears the same name as that given to the columns of slaves trudging across Africa in the 19th century (the kafil, the name of the wooden collar yoking the slaves together.)

The unprecedented domestic success of Turkey's Justice and Development Party government has now been followed by unprecedented folly in foreign affairs. It needs to get out of this mess without delay, a conclusion that has undoubtedly already been reached within the party. Turkey needs to get back to where it was and begin the process of repairing the damage done to relations with near neighbors, beginning with Iraq and Iran because it will be a long time before relations with Syria can be returned to an even keel. The whole Syrian venture will have to be wound down. The SNC will have to be abandoned (but it has been a waste of time and money from the beginning anyway) and the commander of the FSA asked to seek lodgings elsewhere. Whatever the support being given to the armed men it will have to be dried up. This is going to create further complications but they will have to be faced. There will be loss of face but that is a problem for the individual politicians and advisers concerned: the interests of the country are the central issue and in any case, loss of face does not even begin to compare with the loss of more lives that will be the only result of persevering with a policy that has failed.

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