

What is Turkey trying to accomplish with its Syria policy?

Written by Ayşe Zarakol

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AYŞE ZARAKOL, SEP 30 2011

As Turkey readies sanctions against Syria this week, there is some confusion as to how one best reads the recent relationship between these two neighbors. Until this year, the current government of Turkey led by the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) appeared friendly with the Assad regime, and in fact, has spent the recent months diplomatically urging Bashar Assad to curb his violent crackdowns against protesters. Some see Assad's refusal to comply as a failure of Turkish diplomacy as well as the limit of Turkey's soft power aspirations in the Middle East. The decision to apply sanctions is interpreted accordingly as Turkey reverting to the US and European line on Syria. The actual situation is somewhat more complicated, reflecting Turkey's new leadership aspirations about the Middle East more than its deferral to the West.

Turkey's improved relations with Bashar Assad during the last decade was motivated chiefly by the AKP's pragmatic considerations (such as more trade, open borders and more influence in the Middle East etc.) and not by ideological or religious affinity. As an authoritarian leader of a regime with roots in the statist, socialist Baath doctrine, Assad had ideologically little in common with the AKP, which is economically liberal but socially conservative. Bashar Assad is not particularly religious; in any case, as an Alawite, he is from a different sect from the AKP leadership. Furthermore, his father, Hafez al-Assad was responsible for the death of thousands of Sunni Muslims in the 1982 Hama massacre, an event which devout Sunni Muslims in Turkey remember well.

In the second term of the AKP government, such differences were overlooked as part of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy, which drifted Turkey away from traditional partnerships with the West and toward a betterment of relations with regions previously neglected by Turkey, such as the Middle East, North Africa, and Eurasia. This new approach to foreign policy was primarily driven by Turkey's new economic success; in particular, the arrival of many Anatolian entrepreneurs on the scene. These entrepreneurs, who are among the chief backers of the AKP government, wanted to explore markets that were previously inaccessible to them and pushed the AKP foreign policy in that direction. Of course, it also helped that unlike the secular Kemalist establishment that the AKP replaced, the AKP leaders themselves were quite comfortable with non-Western cultures, especially that of the Middle East. Bashar al-Assad also seemed to be a better diplomatic partner than his father, more pragmatic ideologically and more liberal economically. Finally, the fact that Syria had ceased to host Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish separatist group PKK, right before the AKP came to power in Turkey made it easier to establish closer neighbor relations with Syria.

Both the "Arab Spring" and the AKP's historical third term victory in the June national elections in Turkey have changed these dynamics, infusing AKP's foreign policy with a strong ideological flavor. Now the AKP (especially Erdoğan) believe that the tide has turned in the region for Muslim democracy. They believe themselves to be on the right side of history, and in fact to be at the forefront of this historic movement. Because of Turkey's historical legacy and current economic success, the leadership of the AKP believes they have a responsibility towards the people of the region; they think it is up to them deliver the Middle East from its current conditions to a better future.

We may call the AKP's view of its mission in the world as pro-democracy with a slight Sunni-Muslim twist, further circumscribed by neo-Ottomanism. In other words, the AKP believes that it can lead regions previously under

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Ottoman control (the Balkans are not exempt from the vision) to a new age of democracy, just as it did Turkey (as they see it). Given the AKP's own background, the government also finds it easier to sympathize with protesters in the Middle East if they- in addition to being pro-democracy — are also Sunni Muslims, and at the same time, they are more tolerant of authoritarian regimes which do not suppress Sunni Muslims. However, this is more of a de facto reality – if pressed, I think, they would stand for all pro-democratization efforts, at least in theory. Neo-Ottomanism also comes into play in the AKP's understanding of democracy – in the Ottoman tradition, they are much more pluralist when it comes to religious accommodation than they are of competing ethnic or ideological claims.

In the early days of the Arab “Spring” the AKP government equivocated a bit on their message while trying to decide whether the “zero problems” policy of the previous term was viable in the new Middle East. They quickly decided it was not. Since then they have been very clear in their messages to various authoritarian leaders being challenged in the region. Partly based on their own experience, the AKP leadership is betting that the Arab street will emerge victorious from this fight. With his increasingly assertive public messages, Erdoğan is making an appeal to the people of the Arab street against not only authoritarian leaders such as Assad, but also against Iran, which used to claim the populism mantle in the region, but is increasingly finding it difficult to do so given Iran's continued support for Assad and their own crackdown of protesters after the last Iranian elections.

For these reasons it is a mistake to read the AKP's policy toward Syria as a failure just because Assad did not heed the AKP's message; he was never really the primary audience for it. Nor should the sanctions be seen as a turnabout in the AKP's policy vis-a-vis the West. They are clearly still angling for regional leadership. If they can pursue that goal while appearing to be still in the West's corner, it would be a win-win situation for them.

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