

No Turkish Syrian War

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, OCT 13 2012

Although Turkey is greatly distressed by the conditions in Syria and has suffered attacks by the Syrian government at the border where it is helping both Syrian refugees and insurgents, it will not be the instrument by which the Assad regime is deposed. Turkey will neither directly attack the Assad government nor be the leader of an intervening coalition. If there is an intervention, it will have to be an American initiative.

Turkey is constrained in several ways. Syria is but one of its neighbors and none of the big ones—Iraq, Iran, Russia and the European Union want Turkey to assert itself. Iran and Russia are Syrian allies and arms suppliers. Iraq's government doesn't want a Sunni lead Syria. Several EU members oppose intervention uncertain about what will follow. And of course, Kurdish separatist groups are primed to take advantage of any Turkish misstep.

The Turkish government would want international support for its intervention but will not find it. UN action is effectively blocked by Russia and China via their Security Council veto. NATO will not act on Syrian border shelling and is burdened by those same EU members who oppose intervention. Internally, although the Syrian acts against Turkey stirs strong nationalistic feelings, there is likely to be some reluctance to push the military to the forefront as would result in any major Turkish military action against Syria.

Turkish intervention will only come, I believe, with direct US support, and that is not likely for many months, if at all. The US election puts things off until November. In December and January, the US Congress and the Obama administration must deal with a huge budget/deficit crisis which they have created for themselves and which involves major defense cuts. A new war would be most unwelcomed. Moreover, although Mitt Romney, the republican candidate for president, seems much disposed toward intervention, he is unlikely to make a war, even one against hated dictator, his first action on taking office. If he is elected, a President Romney would not be sworn in until January 20, 2013. His major appointments, including the secretaries of state and defense, require Senate confirmation, a process that can drag on until mid spring. By then, Afghanistan will likely be center stage with the fighting season approaching and US combat involvement in question. An American lead war in Syria to change its government is possible but unlikely. I wouldn't expect Turkey to be far in front of the US on this issue.

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Read more from Harvey M. Sapolsky in his e-IR blog: The High Ground: Observing International Security

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War*

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edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.