

No Help is Coming: The Syrian-Turkish Strategic Quagmire

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, OCT 18 2012

Recent events in Syria have drawn a great deal of speculation from pundits and scholars.[1] Now the increasing violence in the Syrian civil war has spilled over into neighboring Turkey with cross-border violence that began when shots were fired into Turkey from an unknown source in Syria. The violence recently escalated to a shelling exchange between Syrian and Turkish forces, which has left at least five Turkish civilians dead.

It is currently unclear why this cross-border violence, emanating from Syria, is occurring. Surely, the Assad regime would have little to gain by opening up a new front even against a Turkish force that is considered to be of middling strength at best. Assad cannot desire that a NATO force intervene in his state on behalf of Turkey, for such an intervention would certainly result in the end of his regime.

Before anyone, even Turkey, considers launching an all-out ground attack against the Syrian government, one must consider the likely possibility that the rebels are responsible for the attacks emanating from Syria. There is even historical precedence for this. In Kosovo in the late 90s, when U. S. troops were occupying the region sniper fire regularly peppered the U. S. Marines patrolling the streets there. It was discovered after one incident in which the Marines returned fire that the snipers were Albanian, exactly the friendly population the Marines were sent there to protect. At first, everyone was baffled and then someone noted that since it was logical to assume the local Serbs would be the ones behind the attacks, the Albanians had cleverly attempted to use this cognitive propensity to trick the United States into a more harsh reaction against the local Serbs.

Perhaps the rebels are baiting Turkey in a similar fashion today, hoping that Turkey will invoke Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, triggering a massive NATO intervention. It is certainly easy to see why the rebels have much to gain from a NATO intervention in Syria. Even if NATO were only to impose a ceasefire, the rebels would gain the operational pause they need to regroup, rearm, and perhaps coalesce into a much more cohesive and operationally astute fighting force.

But, alas, if the rebels are holding onto this hope, there seems little chance of it being realized. The main reason is that the United States has no strategic dog in the fight. This might seem antithetical, perhaps even heretical, to what others have written. The cries for intervention are particularly loud from the democratic peace proponents and the Mass Atrocity Response Operations (MARO) crowd who have argued that the United States has a moral obligation to intervene *anywhere* a human rights abuse is occurring. But even these two groups are finding that the international liberalism they so ardently crave is being thwarted by realist strategic considerations in the Syrian case.

The harsh reality of NATO is that it is a U. S. construct, so no intervention will occur without the United States' blessing. While the United States is certainly not fond of the pro-Iranian, pro-Hezbollah Assad regime, the rebels offer little comfort to Washington officials. The Al Tawhid Brigade, for example, is a conservative, religious, jihadist group that has joined forces with other conservative Muslim fighters under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. It is unlikely that the Free Syrian Army will institute anything near the liberal democracy that democratic peace proponents so ardently hope for with the toppling of the Assad regime. Instead, it is far more likely that if the rebels win power and depose Assad, the result will mirror the Libyan experience: sharia law in part or in whole is likely to be

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imposed. The recent harsh lessons in Libya that resulted in the deaths of four U. S. citizens, including the U. S. ambassador in Benghazi, amplify the point that the end of a dictator's reign does not necessarily result in stable democratic governance.

Al Qaeda too is now fighting alongside Free Syrian Army forces but officials for Al Qaeda have publically stated that once the Assad regime is gone, they will turn their guns on the Allawite and Christian minorities. The United States cannot risk supporting forces that might turn their military capabilities on yet another set of minorities. Further, another massive western intervention in the Middle East will be used by jihadist and other fundamentalist groups as proof that westerners are unduly meddling in Arab affairs.

If that were not enough reason to steer clear of military intervention in Syria or on behalf of Turkey against Syria, there is also the Iranian wild card to consider. Iran would certainly interpret American intervention in Syria, in spite of any cogent logic for such intervention, as aggression against Iran. Syria is one of Iran's chief allies in the region. As the lone Shia dominated state in the region, Iran has historically felt isolated from the Arab world. American intervention in Syria is likely to make President Ahmadinejad and the Guardian Council feel even more isolated. This could result in a number of unpleasant outcomes. Iran could enter the war in Syria on Assad's behalf, ramp up its nuclear program, or attempt to scuttle the whole intervention and punish the western sanctioning states and other Arab states by flooding the straits of Hormuz with oil. Such an operation is apparently already being considered by Iranian officials according to a classified document the German paper *Der Spiegel* claims to have obtained.

With almost no strategic upside and numerous strategic pitfalls to intervention in Syria, even on behalf of Turkey, there is little chance that Article V will be successfully invoked by Turkey to bring in a NATO intervention force. And, as Robert Murray, my colleague at e-IR, suggests, intervention under the terms of Article V would represent a massive overreaction to the crossborder violence affecting Turkey on NATO's part anyway. Just the same, I suspect that U. S. diplomatic officials have already hinted to their Turkish counterparts that an invocation of Article V would be unwise. Unfortunately, for the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire in Syria, the civil war is likely to continue unabated until one side or the other prevails or war fatigue sets in.

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