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Making Sense Of Turkey's Post-Uprising Syria Policy

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MAKING SENSE OF TURKEY'S POST-UPRISING SYRIA POLICY

İmran Demir

ABSTRACT

This article identifies and discusses four strategic miscalculations committed by Turkish foreign policy makers in their engagement with the uprising in Syria. These miscalculations involve investing too much confidence in various actors to bring some sort of change in Syria envisioned by Turkey. These actors are the leader of Syria, Bashar Assad, the opposition, the international community and Turkey itself. Along with a discussion of each of these miscalculations, the study elaborates on potential causes for their commitment. The argument of the study is advanced by blending descriptive analysis of developments with theoretical insights brought together from different foreign policy literatures.

Keywords: Syria Crisis, Turkey's Syria Policy, Miscalculation.

ÖZET

Bu makale Türk Dış Politika yapımcılarının Suriye'deki ayaklanma karşısında geliştirdikleri tutumdan kaynaklanan dört temel stratejik hesaplama hatalarını

tespit ederek tartışmaktadır. Bu hesaplama hatalarının Suriye'de Türkiye'nin arzuladığı doğrultuda bir dönüşüm gerçekleştireceğine inanılan çeşitli aktörlere aşırı güvenden kaynaklandığı ileri sürülmektedir. Bu aktörlerin Suriye lideri Başar Esad, muhalif güçler, uluslararası toplum ve de Türkiye'nin kendisi olduğu düşünülmektedir. Bu hataların ne olduğunun yanı sıra nelerden kaynaklandığı ayrıntılı bir şekilde tartışılmaktadır. Makalenin ileri sürdüğü tez betimleyici anlatımın dış politika literatürünün çeşitli alanlarından alınan teorik yaklaşımlarla desteklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Krizi, Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası, Yanlış Hesaplama.

INTRODUCTION

When the wave of uprisings in the Middle East eventually found its way into Syria, it was not at all surprising to observe Turkey playing an active role to influence the course of events. From the time of the inception of the crisis, Turkey assumed a leading role to influence various international actors, including Bashar Assad, the President of Syria, the opposition and various actors in the international community, more specifically the US and Turkey's NATO allies, to adopt a position and act in ways that were preferable to Turkish vision of handling the issue. Put in perspective, the reaction of Turkey was in perfect congruence with the foreign policy pattern of Turkey in the last one decade, which prescribed an active role in foreign policy to make Turkey relevant in its region and in the world of the post-Cold War-post-9/11 unstable and unpredictable strategic environment.

What probably Turkish policy makers did not account was the limitations on the capacity of Turkey to achieve the kind of goals they aspired. An analysis of Turkish engagement with Syria's uprising demonstrates that Turkey may have made some serious strategic miscalculations in its handling of the crisis. The primary purpose of this article is to identify these miscalculations and explore their potential causes. I identify four primary miscalculations all of which were essentially the result of overconfidence in Turkey's ability to influence its environment.

An analysis of the early reaction of Turkey to the protest movement in Syria demonstrates that Turkey appears to have invested too much confidence in Assad's ability and willingness to initiate political reforms. The perceptual gap between Turkey and Assad over the implications of uprising prevented Turkey to see the limits of Turkey's influence to convince Assad to put Syria on a democratic path. What Assad perceived as a threat to his survival was potentially considered by Turkey as an opportunity to exercise its newfound influence.

When the differences in perception led Turkey and Assad to drift apart, Turkey choose to closely associate itself with the aspirations and the cause of the opposition. Nevertheless, Turkey seems like to have expected more than the opposition could deliver. It appears that the opposition lacked the political and military support of the most important segments of the society needed to cause erosion in Assad's ruling coalition. The failure to mobilize support deprived the opposition from having access to resources to credibly challenge the regime. To the contrary, the composition of the opposition and their aspirations created a strong motivation for the ruling coalition, who perceived the uprising to their survival as intensely as Assad, to further solidify their support for the regime. The concern for political survival in turn allowed Assad to frame the uprising as a sectarian assault on the welfare of his coalition of minorities and rely on his warfare superiority to uproot the opposition. Unless, the military switched sides, which was quite unlikely given its highly dense Alawite composition strongly loyal to Assad, it is not clear what calculation was involved in assuming that grenades and small guns will topple an organized military of almost half a million man.

Of course, the target and the goal behind the facilitation of the formation of an opposition might have been different. The objective could have been creating a foundation for a military intervention similar to the one conducted against Libya. However, this reasoning, which has been the third strategic miscalculation committed by Turkish decision makers has proven to be grossly misleading. Surface similarities between Syria and Libya seem like to be blown out of proportion. A moderately probable outcome, a NATO intervention, was treated as almost certain. Yet, the efforts to convince the NATO for an operation has remained unsuccessful and is not likely to materialize because of the risks and costs associated with an intervention against a country whose military and political capabilities are more formidable than that of Libya.

The fourth strategic miscalculation committed by Turkey in its engagement of the Syrian uprising has been an ineffective use of coercive diplomacy. The exercise

of coercive diplomacy demonstrated that the asymmetry of interests over what Turkey wants and expects are not as fundamental and as existential as what Syria is willing to resist giving and ready to incur the costs for what it values to protect. Turkey's articulated moral and ethical motivations, which Turkey is hesitant to impose, are no match for the Assad's struggle for survival.

After exploration of each of these miscalculations, I conclude my analysis addressing two questions. In the first place, I assess the prospects of an active military intervention, with or without a coalition, on the part of Turkey. I identify three reasons why Turkey should not be enthusiastic over a unilateral intervention. These are the lack of adequate capabilities to undertake such an operation, the alarm and the counter balancing that such an operation will cause among powers anxious over the growing Turkish power, and finally, the implications of such an operation for Turkey's own Kurdish problem. In addition, I argue that due to problems associated with collective interventions, it may not be wise to intervene even as part of a regional coalition, whose members' primary concern would be promoting their geo-sectarian interests. Finally, I speculate what Turkey should expect in the long run from the internal conflict in Syria, which is now turning into a Lebanon style civil war.

1. INVESTING TOO MUCH CONFIDENCE IN ASSAD

When the Arab Spring eventually reached Syria in the Spring of 2011, Turkey's initial reaction was to cooperate with the regime. Turkey relied heavily on Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria and one time close ally of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, and his readiness and willingness, and perhaps capacity to implement political reforms that would put the regime on a democratic path. Quite reasonably, Ankara used diplomatic channels to convince Assad before the crisis spiraled out of control. Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan strongly believed that his personal relations with Assad, whom he called "brother Bashar," and the family diplomacy that was going on for some time between two countries will allow him to steer Assad in a positive direction. Erdogan dispatched his National Intelligence Chief to Damascus to persuade Assad accepting a road map toward the democratization of Syria (Cebeci and Ustun, 2012). According to some accounts, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu after a number of visits to Syria between April and late summer gained some concessions for reform and even handed over public statements drafted by the Turkish Foreign Ministry to Assad for his delivery to Syrian public (Phillips, 2012a).

However, instead of heeding to Turkish prescriptions, Assad chose to suppress peaceful protests with ferocious violence. At the time, why Assad acted disproportionately, turning a peaceful protest into a self-made tragedy did not appear rational. However, Assad's behavior cannot be understood independent of the context or the domain under which he perceived himself. This requires seeing how Assad framed or perceived the uprising as a threat to his survival.

Prospect theory, an approach that explains how people react and make decisions under conditions of risk may help us understand not only why Assad acted the way he acted, but at the same time why Turkey might have taken Assad's rebuff to implement reforms as an offense (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981; Levy, 2003; Taliaferro, 2004; McDermott, 1998; Mercer, 2005).¹

Prospect Theory

Prospect theory begins with the assumption that people are loss averse, which simply means that losses are so painful that people hate losses more than the satisfaction they draw from equal gains. In addition, prospect theory asserts that decisions are not made in isolation of context. This suggests that the decision-making environment has considerable impact on perception of the situation and the choices made. When faced with risky choices, individuals assess the situation in relation to a reference point or a background condition, according to which they code the impact of an outcome on their welfare as loss, gain or neutral. Since loss

¹Prospect theory is an individual decision making approach developed as an alternative to rational choice models, which assume that individuals are goal oriented and thus seek to maximize benefit and minimize costs by choosing the option with the highest probability of occurrence. Systematic violations of utility maximization have convinced the framers of the prospect theory to assert that individuals do not act according to the premises of rational choice models. Instead, decisions are highly influenced from the context in which the decision makers operate. More precisely, individuals' propensity towards risk will be conditioned according to whether the individuals perceive their situation as a loss or gain. In addition, prospect theory contends that severe limitations on individual faculties make it highly unrealistic to expect individuals to assign probabilities to varying outcomes in a calculator fashion. For detailed accounts of prospect theory see Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, 47: 2, March 1979, pp. 263-292; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decision and the Psychology of Choice," *Science, New Series*, 211, no. 4481 (January 1981) 453-458; Jack S. Levy, "An Introduction to Prospect Theory," *Political Psychology*, 13, no.2 (Jun 1992): 171-186; Jack S. Levy, "Applications of Prospect Theory to Political Science," *Synthese*, 2003, 135: 2; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Power Politics and the Balance of Risk: Hypotheses on Great Power Intervention in the Periphery," *Political Psychology*, 25: 2, 2004, pp. 177-211; Rose McDermott, *Risk Taking in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998); Jonathan Mercer, "Prospect Theory and Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8:1, 2005, pp. 1-21.

aversion assumes that individuals do not like losses, prospect theory predicts that a decision maker will be more risk acceptant to avert losses. Loss aversive behavior is highly influenced from endowment effect, which means that people value goods in their possession more than goods yet to be acquired.

Three additional cognitive procedures require attention to fully understand why Assad refused to act along the Turkish plan to resolve crisis through implementation of democratic reforms. These are anchoring, escalation/commitment over sunk costs and analogical reasoning. Anchoring and escalation over sunk costs are natural consequences of aversion to losses. Anchoring simply is initial fixation on a past decision or one aspect of a decision, which heavily influences subsequent choices. The outcome is inability to make adjustments to a misjudgment. Escalation or commitment over sunk costs, a natural result of anchoring, suggests obsession with recouping or salvaging costs incurred in the past as a result of a particular course of action that can no longer be reversed by any current or future course of action.

Analogical reasoning is another cognitive procedure, which involves surface comparison of incoming information with past experience or knowledge (Tversky, 1974, Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Once the decision makers find a match, they use the similar case to simplify the complexity of the situation and come up with a solution. This judgmental heuristic usually involves exaggeration of similarities and underestimation of differences between different events and categories.

The Implications of Loss Aversion for Assad's Choices

What are the implications of these assumptions for the failure of Turkish policy makers to accurately anticipate why Assad behaved the way he behaved? When the early protest movement emerged in Syria, there were two potential alternative courses of action in front of the Assad regime: implementing desired reforms to satisfy the demands of the protesters or suppress the protests as the regime had always done. As noted earlier, retrospectively, the first option should have been the most optimal strategy at least from the perspective of a rational mind. However, that is not probably how Assad or anyone else operating under the perception of loss aversion would have behaved.

To understand why Assad made the choices he made demands in the first place to identify circumstances and background conditions that oriented Assad to

frame a peaceful protest more threatening than it probably was.² Two background conditions are relevant in this case. The first is the overall position of Syria in international community. The second is the wave of uprisings all over the Arab world.

Without going too far in history, a glimpse at the relation of the Assad regime with the rest of in the of the period of 2000s demonstrate that the Syrian regime remained on the gray area of the axis of evils, a concept coined by the administration of George W. Bush to classify Iran, North Korea and Iraq as the US enemies in the post 9/11 international world. It had to struggle with mounting pressures from the West because of its support for terrorism and its Lebanese policy. Syria consistently occupied a high-ranking on US list of countries supporting terrorism for its close relations with Hizzbollah and Hamas. In addition, its close ties with Iran were sufficient to make Syria an outlier by association. It barely averted an invasion similar to Iraqi invasion by the US, which accused Syria for harboring insurgents and terrorists destabilizing Iraq (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2009). The US along with its European partners had already imposed several sanctions on the regime.

In addition, Syria was under heavy pressure from the international community for destabilizing Lebanon. The country was even implicated by the UN for the involvement of the Syrian intelligence service in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon in 2005. Thus, for much of the period, the regime was isolated and occupied a marginalized position, with Turkey being as the only country it could rely on and use as an outlet to the world (Bishku, 2012; Worth 2009; Phillips, 2012b).

Only in this context is it meaningful to understand why and how Assad coded peaceful protests as loss and a threat to his survival. The uprisings in the Arab world put Syria in a precarious situation. Assad regime could follow the example of Green Revolution, which earlier confronted Iran after 2009 general elections, and avert a revolution or get caught in a course that eventually led to the tragic downfall of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and later Muammar Qaddafi in Libya.

The forty years of Baath Party control first under his father, Hafiz Assad, and another eleven years under his rule should have created a strong endowment effect

² Nothing in this analysis should imply a bias in favor of autocratic governance of Assad and his brutal policies that eventually led to the transformation of a peaceful protest into full scale civil war.

in which Assad and his ruling coalition truly internalized the idea that they were the true owners of Syria. In such a mindset, any implication of loosening Assad's control was likely to have been registered as a loss and thus perceived as a threat to a personal possession, which warranted a harsh retaliation.

However, the inability of Assad to contain protests through coercive measures only served to induce more risk acceptant strategies. Anchoring his decision on averting a loss and ensure survival, only entrapped Assad to preserve a failing course of action. Despite mounting evidence that his approach was only deteriorating his prospects of remaining in power, commitment to sunk costs put the regime into an irreversible path. Each action to salvage past losses further compelled Assad and the regime to adopt extreme measures to recoup those losses. The threshold of the sanity was crossed once the regime rolled its tanks into urban areas and bombed entire neighborhoods without regards to civilian life (ICG, 2012).

The readiness of Assad to engage in air operation that brought down Aleppo to rubbles clearly demonstrates how he perceived the protests a life and death situation. It is also likely that Assad's reaction was under heavy influence of analogical reasoning, only inducing more risk acceptant behavior and convincing Assad to cling on power harder than ever before to avoid the fate of Saddam Hussein, ex-leader of Iraq, Mubarak, and Qaddafi at best Slobodan Milosevic, ex-leader of Serbia, facing a trial for committing crimes against humanity.

Turkey's Projected Gains and Commitment to Recouping Unrealized Expectations

Viewed in this context, the most critical reason for miscalculation of Turkey was failing to discern or anticipate the construal of the situation from the perspective of the Assad regime. Turkish policy makers and Assad regime were looking at the same picture but seeing two different images. And the failure of Turkish policy makers to predict that Assad had a much more serious problem than having to worry about fulfilling the expectations of Turkey, led to erroneous conclusions and overly confident predictions and projections.

For Turkey, the wave of democratization presented one in a lifetime opportunity to establish ties with the people of the Middle East at societal level. The opening up of the regimes would be the removal of one of the most formidable barriers in front of achieving the vision set for Turkey in its strategic doctrine, which instructed strengthening of ties with regional countries at all levels. With a little bit of conservatism and emphasis on social equality and justice, Turkey could have multiplied its influence and established stronger presence in the region.

Geopolitically, assuming an influential role would be the realization of Turkish Lebensraum, an idea that had kindled Turkish imagination for some time. Syria after Iraq would allow Turkey to expand its economic, political and diplomatic boundary further into the South, creating a vast area and population waiting to be reshaped along Turkish nostalgia of a past recreated in the future. Therefore, Turkey might have treated Assad's resistance as an obstacle to the realization of these aspirations.

This suggests that if Assad had coded the protests a loss, Turkey might have equally perceived itself facing a loss situation for the refusal of Assad to deliver the expectations of Turkey. Perhaps, this is the reason why the resistance of Assad to influences from Turkey was considered to be outrageous. When Turkey realized that it did not really have much leverage over Assad, it became the most vocal critique of the regime openly calling Assad to step down, declaring him outlaw and illegitimate (Tharoor, 2011; Phillips; 2012a).

This is when Turkey switched gears and followed a course that relied on different actors in its campaign to promote and facilitate the removal of Assad. These actors were the opposition, the relevant international actors, more specifically Turkey's NATO allies and finally Turkey itself. An examination of the performance of Turkey to influence each of these actors to bring the regime down demonstrates that Turkey might have pitched its expectations higher than each of these groups were capable or willing to deliver.

2. INVESTING TOO MUCH CONFIDENCE IN OPPOSITION

Turkey did not invent the protest neither the opposition in Syria. Both are the result of the incompetent and oppressive policies of a 40 year regime. However, after withdrawing its support from Assad, Turkey hedged its bets on the opposition by taking an active role in its unification and hosting conferences attended by what is called the Friends of Syria. The record and composition of the opposition in comparison to Assad's ruling coalition demonstrate that Turkey might have actually expected more than the opposition could have delivered. In addition, Turkey might have underestimated the control of Assad on key institutions and his ability to successfully manipulate the institutionalized sectarian divide to solidify his support among his core supporters. To see this miscalculation one has to see how the logic of political survival operates.

The Logic of Political Survival

Survival instinct is the essence of politics. And this instinct works two-ways; both for the leader and the groups who support the leader. The logic of political survival states that all leaders remain in office as long as they retain the support of their winning coalition - the group of people who have the power to break and make leaders (Mesquita et. al. 2002; 2003). In all regimes, leaders have resources at their disposal, which they use in order to maintain their coalition. The coalition continues to support the leader as long the leader produces outcomes that serve their interests.

The ability of a challenger to successfully challenge a leader will depend on how successful the challenger persuades enough members of a leader's winning coalition over the structure/composition of an alternative allocation. In other words, the success of a challenger depends on the ability to credibly convince enough supporters from a leader's winning coalition that they will be better off departing the winning coalition and joining the challenger. If the challenger can form an alternative winning coalition the leader loses his/her winning coalition and the challenger replaces the incumbent. A leader thwarts a challenge if s/he either retains a winning coalition or prevents the challenger from assembling a winning coalition.

Assad and Syria are no exception to the logic of political survival. Plainly stated, these assumptions suggest two things. In the first place, Turkey seems to have underestimated the control of Assad over his winning/ruling coalition. By extension this means that Turkey had also underestimated the weakness of the opposition to construct an alternative winning coalition or attract enough defections from Assad's winning coalition to credibly challenge the regime.

The Logic of Political Survival for Assad's Ruling Coalition:

Viewed in this context, much of the reason for the failure of the opposition to develop into a credible challenge to Assad's regime was its inability to establish a broad base or a new winning coalition. However, the ability of the opposition to build such a coalition was realistically limited. Opposition was and has remained inorganic, fragmented and shared little in common. The main opposition was the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella group dominated by the country's Sunni majority, including Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (BBC, July 2, 2012). The SNC was created in Istanbul and has recently been replaced by Syrian

National Council for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces to placate concerns of the US (Dehghanpishch, 2012).

Regardless of the brutality of the regime and the legitimacy of the aspirations of the opposition, lack of an identifiable and agreeable leadership, a unifying goal and motivation, a platform and a discourse to expand their power base, and an institutional structure to coordinate their actions deprived the opposition from both political and military support that they desperately needed. Yet, the most important obstacle of all was that not everybody shared the objective or embraced the idea of seeing Assad removed from power. If anything, until summer of 2012 the opposition remained as a peripheral and rural movement having little or no connection with Damascus and Aleppo, two major political, economic and cultural centers of Syria, where much of the population is concentrated (Koran, 2012a).

Some ethnic and religious minorities specifically Alawites, Durzis and Christians, including prosperous urban Sunni Arabs, who were among the countries most privileged groups and who were by implication among Assad's winning coalition, did not see any reason to abandon Assad and join the opposition. If anything, these groups felt a threat to their survival from any potential regime change as intensely as Assad. These concerns, in turn, made them especially minorities (Alawites, Durzis and Christians) more susceptible to manipulations and agitations by the regime that any potential regime transformation would lead to circumstances analogous to the fate of Sunni Arabs in Iraq, which lost their privileged position after the removal of Saddam Hussein (Phillips, 2012c; Badran, 2011). These fears created additional incentives to solidify behind Assad, who was able to frame the uprising as an act of terrorism with a sectarian agenda conspiring to disrupt the harmony of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Syrian society with support of external powers whose goal was to turn Syria into another Iraq through occupation and colonization.

The ability of Assad to use ethnic manipulation was most visible when Assad withdrew Syrian troops from areas with high Kurdish concentration and left the control of the region to pro-Kurdish parties, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), allied to Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), Turkey's arch enemy. Ironically, just in 2004, Assad had applied the same brutal force against Kurdish protesters (Economist, August 18, 2012).

The concern of the most influential groups with survival and their refusal to join opposition had some serious (detrimental) consequences for the ability of the opposition to successfully challenge the authority and legitimacy of Assad. First and

foremost, the lack of support from these groups prevented an erosion of Assad's rule from inside. Support from these groups was essential to not only undermine the legitimacy and moral foundation of the regime, but at the same time break regime's resistance to uprising. In addition, it deprived the opposition from having access to necessary military and non-military supplies and resources that would allow the opposition to credibly challenge the power and control of Assad on key institutions, most notably, the military and the intelligence. Also, it prevented the opposition from developing a universal platform, leaving the opposition with a marginal outlook. The domination of the opposition by the pro-Islamic factions closely associated with Muslim Brotherhood not only repelled more neutral and liberal groups such as Kurds but at the same time made the US and the West ambivalent and cautious in their support for the fear that the uprising might be taken up by extremist groups such as Al-Quida.

Therefore, the attempt to reorganize the opposition under a new banner called the National Coalition for Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition (NCRFSO) as a result of pressures from the US and Arab countries should be understood within the context of the logic of political survival (Erlanger and Gladstone, 2012). Although the goal for the replacement of SNC with the National Coalition was explained to create a cohesive, reliable and accountable actor, the concern with forging a more-broadly based platform is influenced primarily from the motivation to create incentives for the members of Assad's coalition to abandon the regime and join the opposition.

However, apart from lacking a broad base moral and political support, the opposition for the most part lacked necessary and credible means to pose a serious threat to Syrian military forces over which Assad had total control. Unlike Libya, for instance, where there were large splits in the military or for the same reason unlike Egypt, where the military preferred to remain neutral, much of the Assad's close to a half a million-troops and especially top ranking officials, who are mostly from Assad's Alawite sect are still in place and remain loyal to him. Despite expectations that there would be mass defections, these expectations were barely met and remained limited to only low-ranking officers. The estimated number of defections from the military has remained at most 50,000 without arsenals and a command and control structure to be a credible counterweight to Assad's power (Phillips, 2012c; Koran 2012b).

Again, the weakness of the opposition in this respect was mostly due to ambivalence on the part of international community, which was not sure whether to

provide arms that the opposition desperately needed (Perthes, 2012). As early as March 2011, French Foreign Minister Allain Juppe made France's position against arming opposition clear insisting that that the action would trigger a civil war in Syria, which is highly fragmented along ethnic and religious lines (RFI, March, 15, 2012). Even the US against its initial enthusiasm and support for the opposition, by the end of October 2012 became a vocal critique of the opposition. The US concerns were explicitly articulate by Hillary Clinton, who rejected the Syrian National council as the legitimate voice of the people of the Syria and insisted on the formation of a more representative and inclusive coalition (Quinn, 2012).

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who had been playing an active role in the crisis, provided some small weapons through Turkey yet conditional upon the approval of the US (Worth, 2012). As a result the opposition was armed just enough to prevent them from being crushed altogether. Even Turkey, which was so vocal over its support for the opposition, has refused to provide military supplies to the opposition, at least officially.

Thus in as much as failing to see the logical of political survival operating for Assad, Turkey might have discounted the weakness of the opposition in mobilizing into full scale popular revolution. As a result, the opposition could not develop into the formidable political and military force that Turkey would have expected.

The question here is why Turkey failed to see the weakness of an opposition that was organized by Turkey. Probably, Turkish policy makers were susceptible to a cognitive bias resulting from the kind of analogical reasoning at work for Assad. The surface similarities between successful uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa were blown out of proportion misleading Turkey to be overly confident that Syria would be no exception to the pattern that the entire Middle East was going through. Viewed in this context, the primary expectation on the part of Turkish foreign policy makers might have been the transformation of the protest movement into a mass movement of the kind observed in Egypt and Tunisia, where the mass mobilization for reform would grow into a formidable force causing the regime to retreat and transfer the power to some sort of an entity taking responsibility for democratic transition.

In addition, Turkey might have calculated that once there was a structural movement on ground, it would be impossible for the West to ignore the plight of the Syrians. Possibly misled by Libyan analogy, Turkey might have calculated that once a viable and effective alternative to Assad regime is formed the international community would follow suit in funneling aid and military support including an

imposition of a no fly zone which would help the opposition to resist assaults from Assad's regime and launch their operations.

3. INVESTING TOO MUCH CONFIDENCE IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

And this is where Turkish policy makers seem like to have made their third bad bet. Turkey's NATO allies were nowhere close to the vision of an outside intervention held by Turkey. Indeed, quite contrary to the expectations of Turkey, the international community (read primarily the US, because an international intervention of any kind without the US approval and contribution is unrealistic) refrained from displaying any commitment that would put them under any direct obligation. And the composition of the opposition, which has been discussed above, was not necessarily the greatest of all concerns for the reluctance of the US and other NATO members primarily France and the Great Britain. If anything the composition of the opposition served as a good excuse to keep the West out of Syria (Associated Press, November 14, 2012).

Yet, Turkey kept its hopes alive over the materialization of some sort of military intervention, at least entertained the idea of creating a no-fly-zone or a humanitarian corridor despite the mounting evidence that none of these may ever happen. Two primary reasons seem to account for the optimism of Turkey over the prospects of an intervention.

Libyan Analogy Sets a Bad Precedent

In the first place, Turkish policy makers seem like to have committed a similar kind of analogical fallacy committed by Assad. If Libya served as a confirmation of Assad's fears, it served as a bolstering case for Turkey to develop high expectations from its NATO partners to deliver an intervention similar to the one conducted against Qaddafi. Turkish expectations are more likely to have been biased by the arbitrary similarities drawn between Libya and Syria without consideration to factors that distinguished them from each other. What Turkey could not see was that Syria was not Libya. And even if a comparison between Libya and Syria had been warranted, this comparison would discourage rather than encourage the materialization of an intervention (Vivienne, 2012).

Libya analogy was wildly misleading in two ways. In the first place, the reason why NATO intervened in Libya and would not in Syria is similar to why the US

intervened in Iraq but not in North Korea over the weapons of mass destruction. Weakness invites aggression and if Libya in military terms had any capability to put NATO at any risk, it probably would not have happened. On the other hand, Syria had much more formidable military capabilities than Libya. Recent arm transfers from Russia have allowed Assad to improve its ability to inflict considerable damage in the case of an attack. The regime also commands the support of a military concentrated by Alawites, who so far have demonstrated the determination to defend the regime at any cost. A substantial amount of chemical weapons capabilities retained by the regime, which should not come as a surprise if Assad utilize should regime find itself on the ropes is another discouraging factor for the realization of a foreign intervention (Nerguizian, 2011). Finally, in addition to Syria's own arsenal, Russia's willingness to support Syria has acted as another major deterrent against a potential NATO operation. Russia has stepped up to deter any future intervention and this time it would not resemble to the kind of fiasco and setback Russia suffered against NATO in Kosovo (Koran, 2012b).

This does not mean that NATO lacks the capacity and capabilities to undertake a military operation against Syria. Syria is not a match for the military preponderance of NATO. However, the more appropriate question would be at what cost and whether NATO countries have the willingness and domestic tolerance of undertaking the costs of such an operation. The costs of an operation against Syria will be much greater than the costs of an operation undertaken against Libya (Koran, 2012b). Even then it was not so easy to neutralize Qaddafi's relatively weak and archaic military capabilities. Indeed, Libya might have even had an adverse impact on the likelihood of an operation by inducing risk aversion to a subsequent operation whose costs may not be worth the benefits.

Misreading the US Diplomatic Support

The second major reason for failure of Turkey to see that a military intervention of the kind conducted against Libya was not going to materialize was the misinterpretation of the US diplomatic support. Each display of public sympathy for the suffering of the Syrian people and statements by the US administration, such as the ones issued by Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama from time to time that Assad must go, created bursts of optimism without being considered in relation with the US administration's so called Obama Doctrine, which essentially asserted that the US would not be involved in any conflict unless the issue posed a direct threat to the US interests (Sharp, 2012 ; Shanker and Cooper, 2011 Wilson and Warrick, 2011)

Yet diplomatic support was nothing more than the occupation of a position without necessarily implying commitment to an obligation. As long as it did not involve any action, it was a cost effective way of occupying a morally high ground at a time when the US administration has seriously prioritized domestic problems resulting from the economic recession, enormous debt burden and the strain of two major wars on the US military. Thus, President Obama's next administration will seriously scale back from some of its international commitments. This shift will be more visible once automatic deficit reduction measure under the Budget Reduction Act of 2011 takes effect. The measures require roughly \$54.7 billion cut a year from U.S. defense spending (Palette, 2012).

This does not mean that the US will completely ignore the crisis or withdraw to an isolationist course. Instead, the US is more likely to prefer a strategy of offshore balancing or what is now diplomatically called leading from behind, which essentially means protecting and advancing the US interests by contracting its desire to check potential threats from hostile states to favorable regional powers. This strategy is a cost effective way of casting weight from distance and maintaining great power superiority without having to worry about or take the risk of being drawn into unpredictable regional blunders such as Iraq and Afghanistan that pose the risk of jeopardizing overall American dominance (Walt, 2011).

In addition, an intervention that has the slightest possibility, which in the case of Syria is quite large, to turn Syria into a Sunni-Iran or a second post for Muslim Brotherhood is simply not going to happen. Indeed, as discussed above, this was one of the reasons for the ambivalence of the US administration towards the opposition.³ The administration is unlikely to act in a way to jeopardize the security of Israel. Realistically, an unstable Syria is always preferable to a stable Syria with a government that has the opportunity and willingness to pose a serious threat to the security of Israel and especially when the opposition openly articulates its enmity of Israel. The first act such a regime first and foremost would do is to make an attempt to regain the control of Golan Heights to create a rally effect and establish its legitimacy in the public perception (Hage, 2012).

³ Indeed, along Assad's domestic supporters, the US and the European publics were among the primary audiences of regime's manipulation of sectarian fears and the risk of an Islamic takeover. Such fears with enough concessions, potentially over the status of Golan Heights, a strategic Syrian territory under Israeli occupation, can be expected to neutralize the US and the West through the cultivation of Israeli support based on the premises that my enemy's enemy is my friend. If Assad could credibly convince Israel that the latter would be toasted between an Egypt under the control of Muslim Brotherhood and its cloned government in Syria after the collapse of his regime, he could extend its expiration date well into the future.

Thus, the US and NATO have resisted so far to be chain ganged (being drawn into an unwanted war by an ally) into Syria by Turkey and have instead insisted on a policy of leading from behind, which is really another way of passing the buck to Turkey and to some extent Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Given the degree of activism and enthusiasm displayed by Turkey in ousting Assad, one would reasonably expect Turkey to be the most relevant and appropriate power with the opportunity and willingness to deliver what others could not. The question is whether Turkey has the appetite to put together an intervention with or without the support of the countries in the region?

So far, Turkey has resisted this temptation. Indeed, Turkish policy makers have strictly ruled out any direct involvement that is not backed by a UN Security Council mandate, which in essence, given the large looming Russian and Chinese veto means that Turkish policy makers are more realists and pragmatic in practice than in speech (al-Arabia News, September 10, 2012). A discussion of whether Turkey is going to intervene or not is going to be held below, but it is important to note that regardless of how liberal Turkish policy makers may sound on their insistence of the moral and ethical imperative of intervening in Syria, their realist calculations have persuaded them to refrain from the kind of direct intervention that Turkey has been lobbying.

4. INVESTING TOO MUCH CONFIDENCE IN TURKEY'S ABILITY TO PLAY A DECISIVE ROLE

However, the realism and restraint displayed by Turkey is a symptom of a serious problem. It highlights the fourth strategic miscalculation that Turkey has committed so far in its Syrian policy. It points to limitations on the capacity of Turkey to influence and mobilize international actors, including Turkey's NATO allies and other international organizations to adopt Turkish position. In addition, it reveals the limitations on the ability of Turkey to exercise coercive diplomacy.

Leadership Gap

In the first place, the kind of collective international intervention that Turkey has been struggling to mobilize requires a type of international leadership that integrates structural, entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership (Young, 1991). Structural leadership involves translation of material possessions into bargaining leverage over the issues at stake. The entrepreneurial leadership entails the use of ideas and negotiation skills to influence the manner in which issues are presented in

the context of institutional bargaining. It requires formulation of mutually acceptable deals that yields beneficial outcomes for all. Intellectual leadership, on the other hand, relies on the power of ideas to shape the way in which participants in institutional bargaining understand the issues at stake. The leader attempts to reorient thinking of the participants over available alternatives to induce them to come to terms with demands of the issues in question.

However, as the discussion of the preceding section has demonstrated, there were serious limitations on Turkish ability to play any of these roles to mobilize international actors. Turkish efforts to mobilize international organizations including the UN and primarily NATO have failed badly.

It should have been clear to Turkey at several occasions that it had limited capacity to set the agenda, and enlist support for the reaction envisioned by Turkey. The first one was right after the shot down of a Turkish surveillance plane by Syrian forces over or near the Syrian airspace. After the incident, Turkey acted quickly in calling NATO for an emergency meeting to discuss the situation under the Article 4 of the North Atlantic Charter on the justification that its security was threatened. Despite the fact that Turkey's allies characterized the incident as "a brazen and unacceptable act", no concrete action or decision for collective action was taken (Sly, 2012; Schmit, 2012). The second time, Turkey requested such a meeting from the NATO was when a stray shell fired from Syria dropped to the Turkish side of the border killing five Turkish citizens. NATO's response to this incident was not quite encouraging from an alliance claiming to be sharing Turkish concerns. The alliance was expressing the desire for Turkey and Syria to find a way to stop escalation of tensions (Reuters, October 9, 2012).

The situation in the UN Security Council was even less hopeful. Strong Russian and Chinese opposition, aside from blocking the materialization of a Security Council mandate of any kind including a humanitarian assistance for the growing human tragedy of 120,000 refugees, made it even hard to obtain a resolution condemning Syria's shelling of Turkey (Nour and Lauria 21011; Lynch, 2012). Finally, the recent replacement of SNC, which was facilitated and organized in Istanbul, with the National Coalition for Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition under the tutelage of the Arab League in Doha, Qatar was symbolic of the gap between what Turkey aspires to be and what it can realistically deliver.

None of these analyses should be understood to imply that Turkey is weak or not an important regional player. What they precisely mean is that the scope and the size of the intervention advocated by Turkey was one that even the US or any

other major power would have difficulty in mobilizing. Being a dynamic power with the ability to forge beneficial trade relations and occupying a moral position that inspires masses is one thing and projecting power and exercising influence in different forms at global scale is another.

Exercising Coercive Diplomacy in a Situation of Asymmetric Motivations

Along the same lines, Turkey might have also overestimated its capacity to convert its capabilities into kinetic force; make its wishes realized and produce the effects it wanted to produce. As noted earlier, once Turkey realized the limitations on its ability to persuade Assad diplomatically, it replaced its policy of reliance on soft power (getting others want you want using attraction rather than coercion) with compellence and coercive diplomacy. This strategy involved heavy reliance on the use of threat of punishment and/or limited force short of full-scale military operations to persuade Assad to stop its violent crackdown on the opposition and transfer the power to a transition government preferably to one led by the Sunni Vice President Farouk Al-Sharaa (Milliyet, October 7, 2012).

Yet despite the centrality of threats and military preponderance to coercive diplomacy, Turkey might have underestimated the impact of several contextual factors essential to successful exercise of coercion, including the coercer's magnitude of demand(s) made on the opponent, the magnitude of the opponent's motivation not to comply, and whether the opponent treats the threatened punishment to be sufficiently credible (George 1991; 1994). All of these contextual variables, however, favored Assad and strained the ability of Turkey to induce Assad along Turkish demands.

The first two variables simply underscore the relative value of the issue and the degree of commitment on the part of each side including the willingness and readiness to attain or retain what is at stake. For the kind of coercive diplomacy adopted by Turkey against Syria to work first and foremost, the asymmetry of interest should have been favoring Turkey. A closer inspection of motivations of Turkey demonstrates that for the most part the articulated interests for Turkey were too abstract involving the promotion of some normative values. Publicly, Prime Minister Erdogan and other high rank officials made a moral case insisting that it was unacceptable to standby and idly watch Assad massacring innocent people. Other commentators have emphasized a loss aversive reaction on the part of Turkey in which the goal was to prevent Syria turning into another Iraq, where Turkey would have to watch the rise of second Kurdish entity on its southern flank (Phillips, 2012a).

Regardless of how compelling these justifications were, they are by no means as compelling as the existential threat felt by the Assad regime. Insisting on a leader to step down does not leave any room for negotiation and compromise. When Turkey declared Assad illegitimate and demanded his departure, Prime Minister Erdogan, gave Assad every reason to cling on to power. Turkey might not have realized that asymmetry of interests created a much stronger motivation for Assad to resist threats from Turkey and thereby undermine the successful application of coercive diplomacy.

Furthermore, the sheer military preponderance is not sufficient to give credibility to a threat. It is the relative balance between the value/utility of the demand and the degree of sacrifice a coercer is ready to make to ensure compliance. In other words, it does not matter how many tanks, planes and troops you can deploy on the border. What matters is the circumstances under which they are most likely to be put into use. The commitment of Turkey to carry out the threats that it had been promising was tested when the Turkish surveillance plane was shut down in the summer of 2012. Under inherently credible threats, the situation should have created an opportunity that Turkey could not miss (Reuters, July 9, 2012; Economist, July 7, 2012). A stronger opportunity presented itself in early October when Syrian fire hit Turkish property killing five Turkish citizens (Hurriyet Daily News, October 5, 2012).

Why did Turkey not recognize that the interests at stake were much greater for Assad than for Turkish policy makers? There is the possibility that Turkey might have been misled by the memory of the successful outcome of coercive diplomacy exercised against Hafiz Assad, the former president and father of Bashar Assad, to compel Syria to expel Abdullah Ocalan from Damascus in late 1998 (Bishku, 2012). This event might have encouraged Ankara to become overly confident that the threat of the use of force will work again forcing Assad into capitulation. However, Turkey has failed to see that it was pursuing an ambitious objective that this time went beyond Turkey's own vital interests. Giving up Ocalan and giving up power are not even comparable. In the Ocalan case the motivation of Turkey was far greater than that of Syria. This time, son Assad had much more existential reasons to resist Turkish pressures.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Explicitly, these analyses demonstrate that Turkey has made some serious miscalculations in its handling of the crisis in Syria. Each instance points to the gap

between Turkey's desire and sense of high self-esteem to play an active role and what Turkey can practically and realistically deliver. In addition, each instance demonstrates the absence of an elaborate or systematic and sophisticated approach and decision-making structures. These weaknesses discouraged rigorous assessment of incoming information, accurate identification of intentions and measurement of capabilities and interests of various actors. Predictably, these errors inhibited development of effective strategies in congruent with tangible and intangible capabilities. As a result, the foreign policy output demonstrated an impulsive instantaneous reaction to events as they progressed.

For the most part Turkey expected someone to deliver something for Turkey. In the case of Assad, not enough attention was paid to the concern of the regime with political survival. If this had been taken into account, it would have been easier to see why Assad would not leave without a fight. The same error was made while investing too much trust in the opposition, which misled Turkey not to recognize that the logic of political survival will further solidify support for Assad from his ruling coalition. The same degree of high expectation was invested in international community, specifically NATO, which neither shared the desire nor the vision to undertake an operation of the kind entertained by Turkey. A foreign policy of the kind advocated by Turkey cannot be conducted first by relying on NATO and the US if it suggests autonomy. Nevertheless, despite the enthusiasm found in Turkish rhetoric, when the opportunity presented itself first when the Turkish plane was shot down by Syrian forces and later when stray shells by the Syrian military hit Turkish territory, Turkey only made a lot of noise instead of capitalizing the opportunity.

Two interesting questions arise from the analyses of these strategic miscalculations. The first is what to expect from Turkey's Syrian policy, more specifically whether Turkey will intervene or not. The second is what Turkey should expect from the crisis in Syria. Certainly, these miscalculations leave Turkey with serious reputational costs for failing to deliver the promises advanced in strong Turkish rhetoric. And the crisis is most likely to have negative consequences for the prospect of exercising the regional influence of the kind that Turkey enjoyed with Syria in the pre-crisis period. The policy reversals displayed by Turkey are bound to remind other countries in the region to be mindful of relative gains concerns advanced by realist thinking and be wary of growing Turkish power.⁴

⁴ Concern with relative gains arise when actors who would both benefit from cooperation in absolute terms start calculation how much the other side would accrue relative to how much they achieve from cooperation and how they will use the extra gain at their expense in the future.

However, it is highly unlikely for a number of reasons that reputational concerns will induce Turkey to act unilaterally or with a coalition of regional countries. Essentially, Turkish foreign policy makers despite the overwhelming tone of humanitarianism present in their rhetoric are essentially realists. A military intervention without the support of the US military, intelligence and logistic capacity is fraught with peril. Therefore, it should be clear to Turkish policy makers that if NATO, whose members' combined defense spending comprises over 70% of world defense spending, is not confident in its capacity to stage a successful intervention, Turkey should not either.

Capability gap should not be the only issue of concern. A unilateral intervention will certainly alarm many internal and external actors wary of relative growth in Turkey's power (Cebeci and Ustun, 2012; Economist, April 14; 2012). Therefore, such a move by Turkey is very likely to be perceived as aggressive, expansionist and hostile instead of purely humanitarian.

An intervention will at the same time complicate things for Turkey over Kurdish issue both inside and outside Turkey. Indeed, Syria has already manipulated the issue. Turkey now faces another Kurdish entity on its southern flank, after Syria pulled its military from areas highly concentrated by Syrian Kurds.⁵ Consideration of this development as a threat to its perception may induce Turkey to act alone to eliminate this entity from developing into a potential autonomous government or persuade the Syrian insurgency to do this for Turkey. Either way, Turkey will find it difficult to reconcile its Kurdish policy with the moral justification advanced for the removal of Assad. The Kurdish issue is also a candidate to strain relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, which is disgruntled with the Turkey's Kurdish policy in Syria. Finally, the degree of activism over an issue internal to Syria, at least legally, will leave Turkey entirely vulnerable in the future to interventions from outside that Turkey can no longer insist to be an internal issue.

Can the potential complications associated with a unilateral intervention be averted through a collective intervention undertaken by a coalition of regional states led by Turkey? The problem with this alternative is that it is simply not going to happen, because of common problems associated with collective action, specifically, prisoners' dilemma, free-riding and tragedy of commons. To begin with, the lack of trust among the participants over the intentions of other participating members will

⁵ Despite the commitment of Turkey to removal of Assad from power, it would not be surprising to see the Kurdish issue be a solvent between Assad and Turkish policy makers.

discourage the formation of a coalition. Indeed, the collapse of the meetings between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, a group formed by Egypt, to find a regional solution is the evidence of how much can be accomplished by a coalition of states from the region with diverse interests with geo-sectarian agendas (Hurriyet Daily News, October 3, 2012).

The lack of trust will also undermine the ability of potential members to coordinate their actions, which will prevent the coalition from acting as a unified and cohesive entity. Each potential participant is likely to be concerned with relative gains others might score at their expense. This concern will cause members of the coalition to act counterproductively to block each others' moves.

Another problem associated with collective interventions is the temptation to free riding, which often occurs when participating members are unenthusiastic about making optimal contributions necessary to undertake the burdens of a critical operation. The free riding problem is already visible from the reluctance of the supporters of the Syrian opposition to supply the opposition with necessary arms, equipment and resources. Finally, concern with national interest will motivate each actor to put its interests ahead of the interests of Syrian people. This situation, which is commonly called tragedy of commons in the political discourse, is another obstacle in front of the materialization of a collective intervention in Syria.

If Turkish policy makers are realist enough not to intervene unilaterally and if an international or regional intervention is less likely to materialize because collective action problems, what is awaiting Turkey in the years ahead? Since analogical reasoning has been suggested to be an influential decision making tool, it is appropriate to answer the question and conclude the argument using analogical reasoning. However, if one has to look for an analogy to understand the situation in Syria, none of the countries already undergone regime changes (Egypt, Tunis and Libya) are valid cases for comparison. The situation is turning more and more into a Lebanon style civil war in which the parties will engage in a protracted conflict along geo-sectarian lines. If Assad stays and is unable to restore status quo, the possibility of which has been lost a long time ago, his coalition of Alawites, Christians, Durzis and middle and upper class Sunni Muslims will fall apart. The insecurity and lack of trust especially on the part of Alawites, who perceive the situation as a matter of life and death, will eventually push Sunni factions out of the coalition with Christians and Durzis more likely to ally with the former. If this happens each side will move to their ethnically demarcated geographical zones from where they will launch attacks against each other.

Yet, while Syria is already on the way to turn into the next Lebanon, Syria is not Lebanon, either. It is a much larger bite than anybody could chew alone. In addition, Syria has a considerable degree of experience in urban warfare from its involvement in Lebanon's civil war. Turkey has great a deal of experience in fighting an insurgency as well, however, Turkey's guerrilla warfare experience is not a match for Assad's urban warfare experience.

Even if one optimistically assumes that Assad would leave soon, it will take some time for the stability to come to the country and to the region. Thus, Turkey will have to develop a strategy to deal with the instability on its southern border. One of the most serious questions that Turkey will have to consider is the implications of such a civil war on the internal stability of Turkey resulting from its restive Kurdish population. In addition, Turkey will have to consider a new framework to put its relations back on track with the countries of the region, who are likely to feel a certain degree of intimidation from the growing activism and power of Turkey. Along the same lines, Turkey's Syrian policy may put a break on the growing economic power of Turkey if Turkey's regional trade partners put a heavy emphasis on relative gains.

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