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Turkey shows double duplicity on Syria

Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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With the blessing of the US and its other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners, as well as its own national legislature if not the entire Turkish population, some of whom have been holding mass rallies in opposition to Ankara's war policy vis-a-vis Syria, the Turkish government has resorted to a double hypocrisy.

On the one hand, it has exploited the mortar attack on a Turkish border town, which may have well originated from the well-armed opposition groups trying to weaken Damascus by instigating Turkish-Syrian skirmishes, without even a pause to inquire whether the Syrian army had anything to do with that attack. Even The Wall Street Journal admitted: "While Turkey blamed Wednesday's attack on the Syrian regime, it remained unclear whether it was a deliberate attack or an errant bombing. Most analysts in Turkey concluded that President [Bashar al-] Assad had little to gain from targeting Turkish civilians."

Instead of a measured, level-headed response, the government of Recip Erdogan has rushed lawmakers into giving him carte blanche for Turkish incursions inside Syria, most likely as part and parcel of a concerted effort to secure a "safe haven" for Syrian rebels along the border, where the (French-led) efforts to set up a Syrian provisional government would gain a foothold on Syrian territory.

On the other hand, this "hard power" strategy has been combined, and partly camouflaged, by the "soft power" tactic of stepping back from the year-long calls for a wholesale regime change in Damascus, by pretending that Ankara is now lowering its expectations and would be happy to see the embattled Assad relinquish power and be replaced by his vice-president, Farouq al-Shara,

described by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as "a man of reason and conscience" who "has not taken part in the massacres in Syria ... the Syrian opposition is inclined to accept Shara" as the future leader of the Syrian administration.

But this shows that Davutoglu himself is not a man of either reason or conscience, as he and his government are clearly sold on the "neo-Ottoman" dream of acting as kingmakers in neighboring countries, by giving lip service to the United Nations' current efforts to stop the deadly violence in Syria, as well as the efforts of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, to establish dialogue between the warring parties in Syria through a "quartet" consisting of Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

But the Saudis, who failed to show up at the quartet's last meeting in Cairo, have apparently decided to pull out because of their misgivings regarding the role of Iran, which they see as part of the problem rather than the solution, per reports in the Persian Gulf media. This is as if the Saudis are the blessed peacemakers and incapable of an earnest self-critique, given their prominent role in providing arms and finance to the Syrian opposition - which by all indications will not rest until the entire Ba'athist regime is overthrown.

Still, irrespective of the self-evident goals and objectives of the Syrian opposition that belie Davutoglu's claim that they would be content with a mere change of musical chairs in Damascus, Ankara continues with its dual-track approach that, as stated above, reeks of hypocrisy. In fact, despite appearances to the contrary, this shows no real change of Turkish policy toward Syria, only a temporary adjustment that underscores Ankara's determination to support the armed opposition by opening a new front against Damascus, sowing division in the Syrian political hierarchy by giving the impression that it has given up on the goal of regime change in Syria, while in reality even that pretension at this juncture is yet another cloaking maneuver to bring about regime change in Damascus.

The trouble with the present Turkish approach toward Syria is, however, twofold. First, the Turkish military salvos, entering a second week, run the risk of military escalation and may well serve as a unifying factor for Damascus, thus strengthening Assad instead of weakening him as patriotic Syrians rally behind the anti-Turkish cause.

Second, there is a saying "sever the head and the body falls". Given the nature of Syria's political hierarchy and tradition of strong autocratic rulers, it is a safe bet that a "Yemen-style" scenario has little chance of success in Syria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious, sect-driven system and, consequently, the Turkish proposal for Assad's deputy is an invitation to a transition to system collapse, not system preservation.

Davutoglu wants us to believe that this is not the case and that a post-Assad transition without much tampering with the present Ba'ath-led order is indeed feasible. But Davutoglu and other Turkish leaders are probably hiding their anticipation of a rather quick unraveling of the post-Assad scenario presented by them, by the combined pressures to (a) dismantle the dreaded security infrastructure, (b) put on trial the perpetrators of crimes against Syrian population, (c) write a new constitution by a new democratically elected parliament, one that would do away with the Ba'ath Party's monopoly of power and dominance of Syrian political space, and (d)

merge the armed groups with a new, and much sanitized, Syrian national army.

This is, of course, assuming that the post-Assad scene will not be dominated by revenge killings, chaos, confessional retributions, sectarian divisions, the de facto breakup of national unity, uncontrolled irredentism, and so on.

Indeed, the list of challenges inherent in the new Turkish proposal is a formidable one and raises serious question about its applicability and chance of success, unless of course the Turkish narrative is a mere put-on, that is, to mollify the image of Turkish aggressors violating Syrian sovereignty in the name of legitimate response to unprovoked attacks on their territory.

Still, in light of the Syrian quagmire and the rising toll of civilian casualties and mass refugees - the latest reports indicate tens of thousands have fled to Egypt as well - Ankara must have realized that its old regime-change strategy is in trouble and new nuances must be introduced, on both the military and political fronts. Thus, via the suspicious mortar attack cited above, it has inserted itself more forcefully in the Syrian military equation while simultaneously appearing more dovish by making it look as if it can live with a Syrian Alawite-led Ba'athist regime without Assad.

It has thus widened the gulf between its rhetoric and its intentions, at the same time triggering the unintended consequence of having to come to grips with the fact that the rebels are simply incapable of dislodging the regime in Damascus in the foreseeable future, at least not without foreign assistance.

Bottom line: the chips have fallen on the military side, not the political side, of the equation, with Turkey the NATO member intent on extending NATO's foothold inside Syria slowly but surely, irrespective of certain misgivings by some Western politicians, including in Washington, who are wary of jihadis in the Syrian civil war.

The sad part of the unfolding tragedy in Syria consists of the fact that ambitious and self-aggrandizing politicians in Turkey are allowed to play a disproportionate role as architects of the Western approach toward Syria, even though Europe has neither the finances nor the desire to be the Libyan-style stakeholder of a future Syria.

A wake-up call to the European Union to put a rein on Turkey's war chariot in Syria is therefore urgently called for, simply because Turkey's new offensive against Syria is a recipe for disaster, for Syria, Turkey, and indeed the whole region.

What needs to be done instead of such militaristic tactics covered with the language of compromise is a new peace offensive, real and genuine support for UN efforts and other related peace initiatives. The path chosen by Ankara will only lead to more and not less conflict, at least for the foreseeable future.