No magic Syrian solution

The background to Turkey's current dilemmas with Damascus can be traced back to the ruins of the Ottoman Empire

GIVEN THE horrific violence in Syria and overall heightened instability throughout the region, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's grand design for a neo-Ottoman Middle East order, to be based on "zero problems" with its neighbors, sounds like a pipe dream, at best, and a bad joke, at worst. This was driven home anew by the deadly twin car bombings in the Turkish town of Reyhanli near the Syrian border on May 11, which claimed at least 46 lives, in what was apparently an act of retaliation by the Syrian regime for Turkey's support for the opposition.

The background to Turkey's current dilemmas regarding Syria can be traced back to the establishment of the modern Turkish state on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Kemal Atatürk demonstratively turned his back on the ex-empire's Arabic-speaking lands, in favor of a secular, modern, West-centered orientation. But Istanbul also asserted itself at opportune times. In 1939, Turkey and France successfully engineered the transfer of the Hatay/Alexandretta region from French-mandated Syria to Turkey, to the everlasting rage of Syrian nationalists.

In the post-World War II era, Turkey joined the NATO alliance to counter the power of its Soviet neighbor. Relations with the Soviet Union's Arab client states, and particularly Syria, were fraught with tension, and a quiet, but significant strategic relationship with Israel was established. Turkey would never entirely ignore the region, but would always look upon its Arab neighbors with a distinct air of disdain.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1991 Gulf War and the growing salience of the Kurdish issue provided new challenges and opportunities for an increasingly confident and assertive Turkey. Its now very public strategic alliance with Israel in the mid-1990s was directed in no small part against Damascus. Not coincidentally, Turkey successfully threatened Syria with war in 1998, forcing it to cease its support for the Kurdish rebellion in southeast Turkey, and to expel its leader, Abdullah Oçalan, from Damascus.

UMIT BEKTAS / REUTERS

Protesters in Hatay, Turkey, demonstrate against their government's policy on Syria, May 1

In 2002, the electoral triumph of the Islamist AKP inaugurated a tectonic shift in Turkish political life, reducing the power of Turkey's secular-military governing elite. It also triggered an about-face in Turkish-Syrian relations. High-level visits, economic agreements and even a joint military exercise seemed to confirm the renewal of Istanbul's historic pre-eminence in the Syrian lands. Conversely, the Turkish-Israeli relationship steadily deteriorated: from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's unsuccessful mediation between Israel and Syria, to his embrace of Hamas, public confrontation with President Shimon Peres, harsh condemnation of Israel's 2009 Gaza operation, and the Mavi Marmara Gaza flotilla episode.

However, the steadily escalating Syrian rebellion, beginning in March 2011, compelled the Turkish authorities to recalibrate again. Ignoring Erdoğan's advice, Syrian President Bashar Assad sought to crush the opposition instead of placating it. In response, Erdoğan, along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, bet on regime change. Turkey provided the opposition groups with vital political and economic backing, acting as a conduit for weapons, as well as hosting more than 325,000 refugees. To Erdoğan's continuing dismay, however, Assad and his regime, bolstered by Russia, Iran and Hizballah, and benefiting from the opposition's disarray, have remained defiant.

Throughout the crisis, Washington and Istanbul have had a common objective – maintaining Syria's unity and stability by replacing the Assad regime with a legitimate broad-based government – but have differed on how to achieve it. Istanbul has looked to Washington to take the lead in mobilizing international support to topple Assad. Conversely, the Obama Administration has been extremely wary of the possible consequences of even limited military action and has hoped that Turkey could play the leading role in tipping the scales against Assad. In the meantime, with American prodding, Israel and Turkey agreed to turn a page in their relations, in recognition of their common wider strategic interests vis-à-vis Syria and Iran.

The Syrian crisis has shown again that, contrary to Davutoğlu's notion of renewing Istanbul's historic hegemony, the age of empire is gone. There can be no regional hegemon in today's Middle East. And with regard to ending the bloodshed in Syria and removing Assad's murderous regime, as US President Barack Obama declared at the end of his May 16 meeting with Erdoğan, "there is no magic formula."

Meanwhile, the specter of Syria's collapse as a state is causing Israeli decision-makers sleepless nights. ■

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