



PERSPECTIVES

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[Might the Turkish Military Intervene in Syria?](#)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With Russia and China vetoing a UN Security Council resolution seeking an end to the violent repression in Syria, there are almost no options left for a negotiated end to the crisis. This may bring Turkey to consider military intervention in Syria in coordination with the US and Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

The recently vetoed draft resolution of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) obligated the Syrian Army to return to their barracks, allow peaceful demonstrations, and swiftly hold democratic elections. The rejected offer also recognized the “sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Syria,” and would not “compel states to use force or threat of force.” This may have been the final opportunity for peaceful transition.

A December 2011 Turkish Supreme Military Council declaration indicates that one of the discussed agendas was “preparation of war capacity of the Turkish Armed Forces.” Considering Ankara’s hardening rhetoric towards Damascus’ violent crackdown, which has continued to intensify since the UNSC double veto, there looms the possibility of Turkish military intervention to end the turmoil in Syria.

In an *Al-Arabiya* interview, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said that he hoped an intervention wouldn’t be required but “if there is a humanitarian tragedy, a disaster, of course the international community and the UN cannot be silent.” He added that if the Arab League (AL) initiative fails and killings continue, Turkey would not tolerate it.

Turkey has reportedly sought two major parameters for the legitimacy of a possible military operation: the full failure of the AL initiative and a UNSC decision. At this point, two critical questions should be raised: first, whether Moscow and China can be “convinced” at least to abstain in another UNSC vote, and second, if the bloody crackdown continues to intensify in Syria, whether Turkey can play a role in a non-UNSC approved military mission?

Encouraging Factors for Turkish Intervention

Ankara has already openly recognized the legitimacy of the Syrian National Council (SNC), indicating that it is a peaceful opposition platform. However, while the UNSC resolution draft was being vetoed by Russia and China, Damascus’ atrocity has cost additional lives. Given the current circumstances, Turkey’s shift to a rhetoric emphasizing the right of self-defense of the peaceful Syrian opposition would not be a surprise. There are four main factors that might pave the way for Turkish military intervention, even without a UNSC resolution.

The first parameter is Turkey’s position in the larger sectarian power struggle between the new-born Sunni bloc and the Shiite – Iran-Syria-Hizballah – alliance in the region. Anti- and pro-regime rallies in Syria have become a show of force by Sunni groups and pro-government Alawites. Other groups, such as the Christians and Druze, worry about possible religious oppression and much uncertainty after Assad’s potential demise. Electoral results in Egypt and domestic violence in Iraq consolidate these worries.

Second, Syria's Kurdish presence in the PKK terrorist organization can be an exacerbating factor. One of four or five PKK militants is of Syrian-Kurdish origin and holds a significant place in the HPG, the armed wing of the PKK. HPG members include notorious figures like Fehman Hussein, who is in great part responsible for the recent violent activities against Turkey. Additional turmoil in Syria will allow greater freedom of action for the Syrian Kurds. The terrorist organization is ready to wage a proxy war against Turkey, and the Baathist regime is preparing to back this action. It should be emphasized that PKK violence has always provoked Turkey into cross-border military operations.

Third, the rising mistrust between Ankara and Damascus has greatly harmed the relations, so much so that an official Syrian news agency labeled the recent Turkey-GCC meeting a “conspiracy” against Syria. Under current circumstances, Turkey cannot allow the Baathist rule to continue running the country.

Finally, Turkey's new foreign policy paradigm promotes "geocultural integrity" with the societies in Turkey's historical hinterland and emphasizes a soft power concept, which aims to win hearts and minds on the Muslim street. Thus, Ankara cannot allow Damascus to create a more deadly version of the 1982 Hama massacre right on its borders, as it will be tantamount to the collapse of the perception of Turkish guardianship over the "oppressed" Muslim communities and to the fall of Turkey's political-military leadership in the Sunni bloc.

Abstention from Military Intervention

There are also several considerations that would lead Turkey to abstain from military intervention in Syria.

First, preserving national and territorial unity has always been Ankara's most critical security agenda. The 2003 establishment of the regional government in Northern Iraq has caused significant worries among the Turkish strategic community, as this could produce a viable autonomy model for Kurdish separatism. A possible Turkish military intervention in Syria might actually create the second Kurdish autonomy in Qamishli, which would encourage Kurdish separatist movements and augment Turkish concerns.

Second, Turkey would not commission its armed forces to overthrow the Baathist regime and then simply stand aside. After the Libya operations, Ankara was displeased with the surprise joint visit of French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron, just one day before Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's scheduled visit. Moreover, Turkey would have preferred greater economic and political shares of post-Gaddafi Libya. According to some analysts, the Arab Gulf states are now encouraging Turkey to launch a military intervention in Syria by promising economic rewards. However, Ankara would expect more than economic guarantees from the Gulf States or the West – it would demand political influence over the next regime in Syria.

Finally, Turkey is concerned over whether such an intervention will exacerbate a regional war, especially when Turkish-Israeli relations are poor and the Gulf states are "military dwarfs" and cannot provide effective security cooperation. Clearly, Turkey is becoming hawkish in its indirect rivalry with Tehran – Syria and Iraq – but is still hesitant and indecisive in the direct confrontation. Ankara would not like to see its military efforts overlap a possible Israeli strike against Iran and certainly does not want to be perceived as aiding Israel by destroying a key ally of Iran.

Conclusion

Without Turkey's cooperation, any military intervention in Syria would be impossible, as such an operation cannot exclude the second largest land force in NATO and its 877 km-long border with Syria. Furthermore, the Gulf states would still need a regional guarantor to counterbalance Iran, Syria's close ally, in military and geostrategic aspects.

Will Turkey await a UNSC resolution for military intervention? This would be preferable, though any non-UNSC approved action would likely force such a resolution. However, if Russia or China insist on vetoing UNSC decisions, and if the Assad dictatorship continues to physically destroy the opposition, then Turkey can deploy its armed forces to stop the humanitarian tragedy. Again, Turkey's preference is not for unilateral action, thus it would probably seek cooperation from the US and the Gulf states.

At this juncture, the activities of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Ankara's relations with it are expected to become more important. The first meeting between the SNC and FSA took place in late 2011 near Turkey's Hatay province, where Syrian refugees have settled and Colonel Riyad Al-Asaad of the FSA resides. Integrating the SNC and FSA was a critical move, as peaceful demonstrations had no viable chance against Assad's security apparatus, which was familiar with leveling guns to its own citizens.

Now Turkey will probably foster its support of the FSA in order to prevent the destruction of the opposition groups. However, such a move could provoke Damascus to engage in heavier crackdowns on the Syrian people. In turn, the humanitarian tragedy may trigger a Turkish military intervention. Actually, it is argued, this scenario is not far from becoming a reality.

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