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Research Paper

**The Determinants of the Turkish Position towards the Syrian crisis:
The immediate dimensions and future
repercussions**

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Introduction

Turkey believes that its relationship with Syria, and the credit it has accumulated with President Assad, may permit it to convince him to respond to the legitimate demands of his people, either through advice or through pressure, in a manner capable of ending the domestic crisis and sparing the Syrian state, as well as Turkey, a great debacle with events deteriorating further, especially considering Turkey is willing to provide the needed support for the enactment of radical reforms in Syria.

The Turkish position towards the Syrian crisis is advancing slowly, but with an escalating rate of pressure over Assad. Ankara has legitimate concerns and is relying – at the same time – on a number of objective variables to draw its position regarding the crisis in Syria. The Turkish calculations are extremely complex, with Turkey attempting to balance sensitive considerations while creating and solidifying its stance.

Turkey is aware that “change” will sweep the region as a whole, but is concerned of a scenario of disastrous chaos due to the Syrian regime’s links to explosive files Turkey hopes to manage this issue in a manner that preserves the popular rights and demands that it supports, while, at the same time, sparing it disastrous consequences if things slide into chaos.

Time will be the main factor in this equation; if Assad succeeds in crushing the protests by emulating the Iranian option in dealing with dissent, he would impose a fait accompli on everyone, which would place Turkey in a very embarrassing position vis-à-vis Syria, which would also apply to the international community. However, if Assad turns a deaf ear to the Turkish advice, while failing to suppress the protests, he would be placed under even greater pressures, and the Turkish position would likely fall in line with those pressures.

The special relationship between Turkey and Syria is one of the main foreign achievements of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since its assumption of power in 2002. After the two countries were on the brink of war in 1998, relations between them evolved following the Adana Accord, which was signed on October 20, 1998, effectively ending Syria’s hosting of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. The AKP’s assumption of power in Turkey in 2002 permitted further rapprochement with Syria; President Assad visited Turkey in 2004, and the Turkish President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, responded with a visit to Syria in 2005¹ despite the strong protests from the Bush administration, which was tightening the political and diplomatic isolation and siege over Syria.

¹ See: Turkey’s Political Relations with Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey: www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-political-relations-with-syria.en.mfa.

The Turkish foreign policy saw a major and quick transformation when Abdullah Gul² and Recep Tayyip Erdogan³ prepared for the adoption of the vision of Ahmet Davutoglu,⁴ who was an advisor to Erdogan at the time, aiming at redefining Turkey's role in the region within the concept of "strategic depth," a phrase coined by Davutoglu.⁵

Since the adoption of the "zero conflict" policy emanating from Davutoglu's vision, a reversal took place in a number of traditional policies of the Turkish Republic, especially in relation to foreign policy;⁶ thus, relations between Turkey and Syria developed into a strategic relationship, effectively resolving many of the standing issues between the two countries; this relationship took an even more significant turn with Davutoglu's assuming the helm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009.

² Abdullah Gul was the prime minister between 2002 and 2003, foreign minister between 2003 and 2007, and President of the Republic since 2007.

³ Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been Turkey's prime minister since 2003.

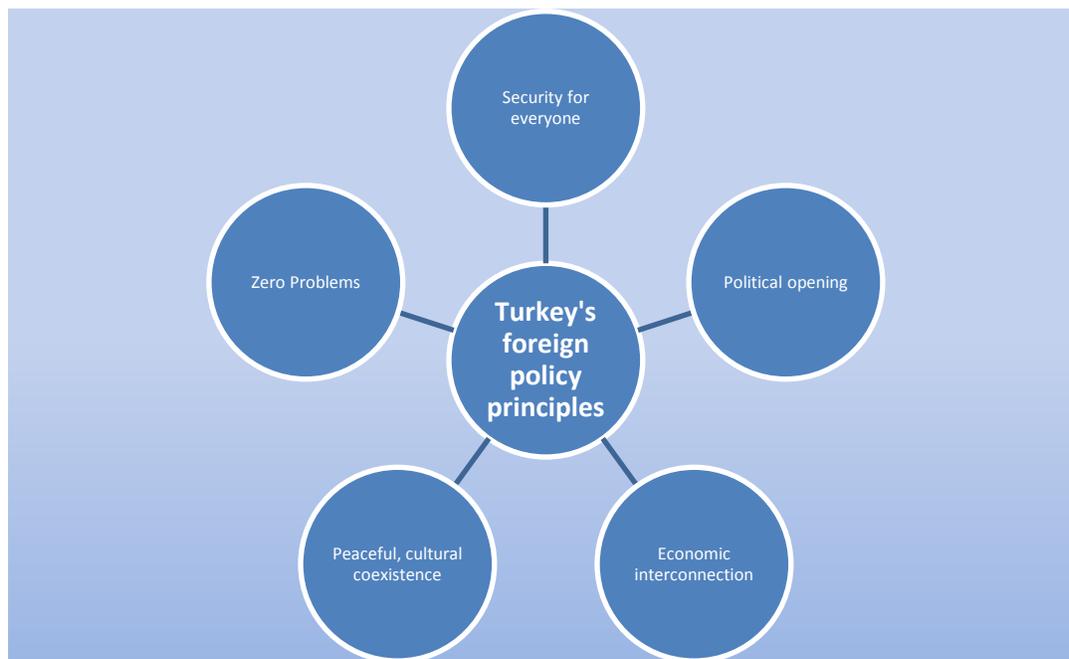
⁴ Ahmet Davutoglu has been the minister of foreign affairs since 2009.

⁵ For more details on this transformation and Turkey's project for the region, see Ali Husain Bakeer's article, published by the General Directorate for Media and Information in the Office of the Turkish Prime Minister on April 7th, 2010, available in Turkish and Arabic from <http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599534>.

⁶ Ali Husain Bakeer, "The New Turkey – regional ascendance and the conflict of agendas", *Madarat Istratijiya* (magazine), Sabaa Center for Strategic Studies in Yemen, Year 1, Issue 1, November-December 2009, pp. 110-114 (in Arabic), available at, <http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599445>.

Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East⁷

Graph 1: Turkey's foreign policy principles (designed by the author)



In 2009, a strategic cooperation council was founded, which is headed by the head of the governments of Syria or Turkey, depending on the place of the council's meeting. The council includes 16 ministers from both countries (foreign affairs, interior, defense, energy, transport, agriculture, and public works; other ministries – such as tourism – could also be included when needed). Two sessions are held annually (one in each country), with the aim of accomplishing the goals of the strategic relations between the two countries.⁸

Furthermore, in 2009, the first common military exercises between the two countries were held,⁹ and entry visas were abolished in an initiative exhibiting the depth of relations between the two countries.¹⁰ The total number of agreements signed between the Syrian regime and Turkey in the

⁷ For details more information on the diagram, see Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, May 2010, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy.

⁸ For further information on the strategic cooperation council, see Veysel Ayhan, "Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Period", ORSAM, December 8, 2009: www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=107

⁹ See Bilal Y. Saab, "Syria and Turkey Deepen Bilateral Relations", Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings, May 6, 2011: www.brookings.edu/articles/2009/0506_syria_turkey_saab.aspx.

¹⁰ See Emine Kart, "Ongoing crisis justifies Turkey's policy of engagement with Syria", *Today's Zaman*, May 1, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/news-242446-ongoing-crisis-justifies-turkeys-policy-of-engagement-with-syria.html.

first session of the cooperation council reached 56 accords in a multitude of fields: politics, economics, society, culture, investment, water, banking, and others.¹¹ All of these agreements were also enacted precisely according to schedule, which is noteworthy from the viewpoint of the commitment of the two parties and the seriousness of the relationship between them. Moreover, commercial trade between the two countries increased from \$730 Million in 2000 to over \$2.3 Billion in 2010 (with both sides anticipating – before the Syrian crisis – that annual trade would reach \$5 Billion within a short span of time).¹²

In 2010, an agreement was signed based on a Turkish proposal to create a common trade zone that would include Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, with the possibility remaining open for other countries to join; visas would be abolished between the member states and harmonized regulations will be put in place in order to spur economic, commercial, and investment cooperation – a structure that resembles an embryonic Middle Eastern Union.¹³

During this period, Syria acquired a critical level of importance for the new Turkish foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party, which helped in fomenting the Turkish strategic vision for the Middle East and the nature of its role within it.¹⁴ As a result, Turkey was present in many of the heated and explosive files involving Damascus, ranging from Lebanon to Palestine to Israel to Iraq. Furthermore, the spread of the Turkish “soft power”¹⁵ had a major effect on the ascension of Turkey’s stature and role in the region and the development of its relations not only with Arab regimes, but – foremost – with their peoples, especially with the support of public diplomacy and numerous statements critiquing the Israeli position (see figure below).¹⁶

¹¹ For further details on the first meeting of the strategic council, see: Veysel Ayhan, “Turkish-Syrian Strategic Cooperation Council’s First Prime Ministers Meeting”, ORSAM, December 30, 2009, www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=125.

¹² For more details on commercial and economic relations between the two countries, see: Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-syria.en.mfa.

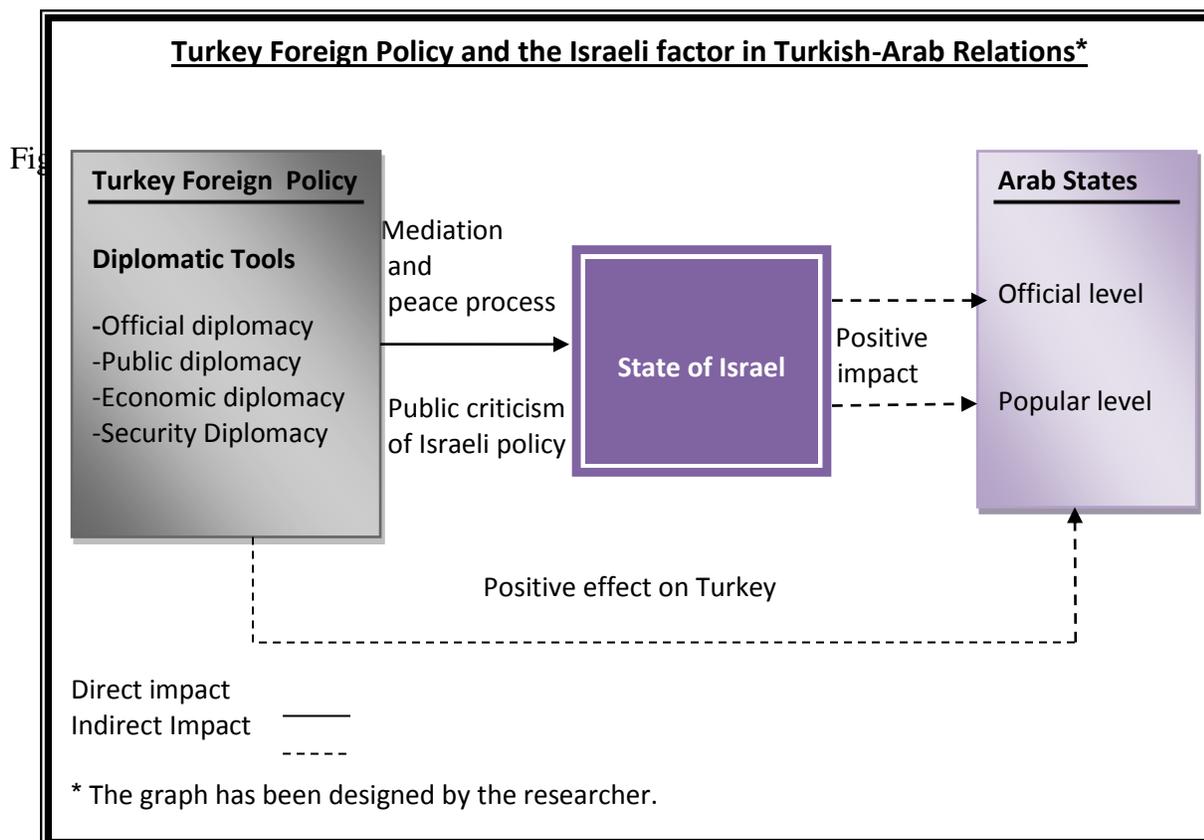
¹³ Piotr Zalewski, “Why Syria and Turkey Are Suddenly Far Apart on Arab Spring Protests”, *Time*, May 26, 2011, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2074165,00.html.

¹⁴ For a more expansive discussion of Turkey’s foreign policy vision and the nature of its role in the region, see Ali Husain Bakeer, “The determinants of the new Turkish foreign policy – the introduction to understanding the Turkish role in the region,” *Ara’ Hawl al-Khaleej Journal*, al-Khaleej lil Abhath, UAE, Issue 71, August 2010, pp. 69-72(in Arabic).

¹⁵ For a further discussion of Turkish “soft power,” see: Ali Husain Bakeer, “Turkish soft power in the balance of Arab transformations”, *Islam Online*, March 18, 2011 (in Arabic), <http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599989>.

¹⁶ The figure was prepared by the author and is quoted from his unpublished research paper, which was presented at the Turkish-Arab Relations Conference, which was held in Kuwait on January 11, 2011. The paper is entitled, “The role of the media in the building of strategic Arab-Turkish relations” (in Arabic). A published summary of it can be read in: Ali Husain Bakeer, “The missing element in Arab-Turkish relations,” *Ara’ Hawl al-Khaleej Journal*, al-Khaleej Research Center, UAE, March 2011, <http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599951>.

Figure 2: The Israeli Factor in Turkish-Arab Relations



On the Syrian side, rapprochement with Turkey came at a very opportune moment: the regime saw its relations with ascending Turkey as an outlet to escape the international siege that it had been lying under (a policy led by the United States and the Bush administration, especially after the 2003 Iraq invasion, the assassination of Hariri in 2005, the July aggression against Lebanon in 2006, and the aggression against Gaza in 2009). Relations with Turkey also constituted a bridge for Syria to reconnect with the European countries and the international community.¹⁷ Even more importantly, close ties with Turkey offered Syria an alternative course that dissipates the imagery of the minoritarian “Alawi” sectarian rule that is allied with “Shia Iran” in the heart of the Arab world. This permits Syria to escape the policy of Iranian monopoly as Tehran was being pressured over its nuclear program and its negative role in the Arab region.¹⁸

¹⁷ İhsan Bal, “Can Assad’s Regime Get off the Hook Again?,” USAK, May 18, 2011, www.usak.org.tr/EN/haber.asp?id=754.

In the midst of these events, relations evolved even on the interpersonal level, with a personal – and even familial – friendship forming between Bashar al-Assad and the First Lady, and several Turkish figures, especially Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who used to visit Damascus frequently, while Assad and his wife have spent a number of vacations in Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, on the other hand, admits that “in eight years, I have visited Syria over sixty times, while I visited my own hometown in Turkey only twenty times!”¹⁹

With the flaring of Arab revolts throughout the beginning of 2011, the Syrian regime stressed the “exceptionality” of its situation and condition based on the premise that the “rejectionist card” would grant immunity to the regime and that it would be sufficient to provide it with the necessary popular cover in the Syrian domestic arena. In fact, the regime seemed confident that no protests would take place in the Syrian interior; in a *Wall Street Journal* interview on January 31, 2011, President Bashar Al-Assad said: “the situation cannot be compared to Egypt. If you wish to do so, then you need to look from a different angle ... Syria is stable, why? ... because we are close to the people and are intimately tied to the citizens’ beliefs ... Despite the fact that our situation is difficult because of the sanctions, and despite the fact that people are lacking a lot of basic necessities, you do not see them coming out in protest.”²⁰

The middle of March saw the eruption of the popular uprising against the regime, and the situation of the Syrian leadership remained critical because of the escalation of internal protests in the face of the authorities’ refusal to respond to popular demands, even though Turkey advised them to execute reforms over a year ago.²¹

The Syrian popular upheaval placed the Turkish government in an equally difficult position due to the specificity of the relationship with Syria on the one hand, and its anticipated position towards the events in Syria from the Syrian regime *and* the Syrian people. This took place in a context where viewpoints were divided between those expressing suspicions vis-à-vis the Turkish role, accusing it of supporting the regime, while others were accusing it of duplicity – compared to their positions on the revolutions in Egypt and Libya – as well as those despairing

¹⁸ Ali Husain Bakeer, “Those who stand to lose from the ascending Turkish role” (In Arabic), *Al-Nahar* (Lebanese newspaper), June, 13, 2010 (in Arabic), <http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599579>.

¹⁹ “Turkey Calls for Syrian Reforms on Order of ‘Shock Therapy’,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/europe/26turkey.html.

²⁰ Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>.

²¹ In a May 12, 2011 interview with Charlie Rose on the Bloomberg Channel, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that “Bashar is a good friend of mine”; he also revealed that “we discussed last year the lifting of the state of emergency and the release of political prisoners and issues such as the electoral system and the permitting of party pluralism ... I even agreed that he studies our experience in the Justice and Development Party and I told him frankly: if you find it necessary, send us your men, we could train them and show them the mode of operation in our Party so that they learn how to organize a political party and build links with the people and communicate with them.”

since they believe that Turkey is not in possession of the necessary tools to garner significant effect.²²

This research paper aims at studying the elements determining the Turkish position towards the Syrian crisis, especially in the period ranging from the start of the protests in mid-March 2011 to the beginning of June; the study will examine the interconnected circumstances and factors that led to the cementing of that position. We shall conduct this research from the “Turkish lens,” looking into the dimensions of the Turkish positions and the repercussions that they will have over the relationship between the two countries during this crisis and the phase that will follow.

The methodology employed in this study relies on a combination between the tools of the descriptive and deductive methodology, as well as those of the analytic and interpretive method. Additionally, it relies on close, daily monitoring of Turkish sources and the positions of Turkish officials during the period covered in this study.

The import of this paper lies in its attempt to determine the premises of the Turkish position during the crisis with the aim of employing them to assess the prospective position towards the Syrian crisis in the event that the circumstances change, and the position that Turkey would occupy in such scenarios, either with Assad responding to popular demands and enacting deep reforms that would satisfy the public, or with the Syrian president ignoring these demands and persisting with his reliance on the repressive security/military policy in order to crush the protests.

The Turkish Position towards the Syrian Crisis

Contrary to the widespread opinion claiming that the Turkish position has adopted, since the start of the Syrian crisis, a consistent tempo that tilts towards the regime more than the people, a close examination disproves this notion. The Turkish position has been slowly, but gradually, evolving towards increasing pressure on the Syrian president, as is shown through a number of postures, the most important being Turkey’s previously-asserted position vis-à-vis the developments in the Arab world that consists of its declared support for all popular movements demanding democracy, expanded freedoms, and respect for human rights, while affirming the necessity of the peacefulness of this power transition. This posture has been expressed in the different cases, the last being Libya,²³ as well as in Syria, as we shall see.

²² See, for an illustration, Zain al-Shami, “Turkey’s advice to the Syrian regime,” Kuwaiti *al-Rai* newspaper (In Arabic), www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=271220..

²³ See the interview with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Qatari *al-Sharq* newspaper, March 16, 2011 (in Arabic), www.al-sharq.com/articles/more.php?id=233494.

Unlike its dealing with the Tunisian and Egyptian situations, Ankara believes that it can – due to its objective and geo-political resources, in addition to its weight and relations in Syria – convince Assad to lead a peaceful transition through advice or pressure. This attitude slightly resembled Turkey’s stance on Libya, but Turkey did not possess the resources that would enable it to play a similar role in Tunisia or Egypt; furthermore, with the latter cases, Ankara did not harbor the same concerns as it does with the Syrian and Libyan crises (the fear that Syria and the region would enter a state of chaos, incurring great losses upon Turkey because of the negative repercussions of such a scenario.)

As a result, Turkey’s stance on Syria has so far evolved along three phases:

First: Advice and Guidance

This phase extends from the flaring of the popular uprising in Syria in mid-March 2011 until the middle of April. This stage saw the speech of Buthaina Shaban, political and media advisor to the president, in addition to the speech of President Bashar al-Assad addressed to the Parliament.

During this stage, the Turkish government attempted to prompt the Syrian regime and its leaders to adopt openness and enact the reforms necessary to surpass this national predicament. Turkish leaders repeatedly advised the Syrian president, and the Turkish government expressed its full support and readiness to furnish all the necessary means to achieve the desired reform as soon as possible.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry was the first official Turkish organ to make a formal comment on the developments of the Syrian situation, with a statement issued on March 25, 2011 stressing “the unshakable relations tying Turkey and Syria,” which prompted Ankara “to place a great deal of importance on the welfare and stability of Syria, our brother and friend, and the happiness and security of the Syrian people.” The most notable elements of this comment were as follows.²⁴

- Turkey is closely following events and developments in Syria
- Turkey expresses sorrow for those dead or injured during these events, extends condolences to the victims, and wishes quick healing for the injured.
- Turkey supports the decisions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad regarding the necessity of identifying the culprits who were involved in these events, and presenting them to justice, and releasing those who were detained.

²⁴ See Turkish Foreign Ministry statement on the events in Syria, Statement no. 82, March 25, 2011 (in Arabic) www.mfa.gov.tr/2011-مارس-25-التاريخ-82-الرقم-ar.mfa.

- Turkey desires the application of the decisions announced by Syrian officials, especially in response to the legitimate demands of the people, and the enactment, without delay, of reformist steps in social, economic, and political fields.
- Turkey supports the reformist steps announced by the Syrian brothers, and is prepared to contribute in any way Syria requests in order to reinforce these reforms.

The content of the statement reflected, more or less, all official Turkish communications that took place with the Syrian side during this phase, whether through Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, or through his personal envoys to Damascus. Erdogan was careful to maintain direct contact with the Syrian president due to the special relationship linking the two men; he called him twice in three days at the beginning of the crisis (March 25-28), expressing – in the first phone call – “his country’s support for Syria in the reform process that was announced to be launched soon, in an effort that fulfills the demands of the Syrian street.”²⁵

In the second phone call, Erdogan advised Assad to enact a quick and real application of the reforms, on the ground and without delay, and to address his people directly regarding that matter,²⁶ expressing his hope that there would not be a replay of the Libyan experience, and that the Syrians will be spared these worrisome events.²⁷

Through these official positions, Turkey seemed to be sending two messages:

- The first message to Assad, telling him that he is capable of surpassing the internal crisis by adopting real and felt reforms on the terrain of reality that need to be applied and enacted as quickly as possible, with Turkey prepared to furnish the needed support during this process.
- The second message, directed to the international community and, specifically, the United States, said that it is possible to avoid the impasse of the Libyan scenario through the reformist option that responds to the wishes of the people. Turkey would have the ability to influence the Syrian president and push him to enact the necessary reforms, especially since the Turkish prime minister did not hear any opposition from Assad to the

²⁵ Sevil Kucukkosum, “Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan talks with Syria’s Assad,” *Hurriyet* newspaper, March 27, 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=beyond-demand-for-reforms-some-circles-try-to-stir-up-trouble-assad-told-erdogan-2011-03-27.

²⁶ “Erdogan urges Assad to announce reforms soon,” *Sabah* newspaper, March 29, 2011, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/03/29/erdogan-urges-assad-to-announce-reforms-soon>.

²⁷ “Assad will announce important decisions that will ‘please the people’ and Erdogan urges him to enact reforms soon,” *al-Hayat newspaper* (in Arabic), March 29, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/249464>.

application of reforms during their last communication, according to Erdogan; the argument was that more time should be allowed.²⁸

However, the Turkish concern over the possibility of Assad not committing to the execution of real reforms, and the repercussions of such a scenario over the entire situation in and outside of Syria, has prompted Turkey to maintain constant contact with the Syrian leadership. In an attempt to not squander this chance to resolve the domestic crisis, Erdogan sent his Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, on April 6, 2011 to Damascus as the head of a delegation to meet with the Syrian president and other officials. The delegation carried a message containing three articles of advice to Assad,²⁹ including:

- The necessity of opening up to the public and explaining the positive side of the relationship with the Sunnis, and Assad's view of the Sunni community given that his wife is Sunni as well.
- Turkey's readiness to provide the needed support for the requirements of the reform process.
- The necessity to take into account that what is taking place in the region is not restricted to the Egyptian and Tunisian model, and that conditions in Syria could affect the entire Middle East (a hint at the risk of delaying treatment and the adoption of the Libyan scenario).

Second: Reassessment

This stage extends from the middle of April until its end. This phase witnessed several important junctures, including the speech of Assad in front of his new cabinet and the decision to suspend the emergency law, which coincided with the widening of the scope of the protests in different parts of the country, the large increase in the number of civilian protestor victims, and the condemnation of the Syrian regime by the United Nations' Human Rights Council.

In this phase, the Turkish government reassessed the situation following the frenetic efforts it led in the previous phase to extract Assad from his quagmire by pushing him in the direction of veritable reforms on the terrain of reality, and by providing him the necessary support to achieve these steps.

What became clear to the Turkish government, however, was that a discrepancy was taking place, and that Assad was going in the opposite direction of the Turkish advice, and that the

²⁸ "Erdogan urges Assad to announce reforms soon," *op. cit.*

²⁹ "Four messages for Assad", *Sabah newspaper*, April 7, 2011, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/World/2011/04/07/four-messages-for-assad>.

current policy of suppression and killing threatens an internal explosion whose fragments will reach Turkey. The reassessment policy led to a harder Turkish rhetoric towards Assad, while maintaining the content of the previous message to the effect that Syria is capable of surpassing the crisis through fully supported radical reforms.

On April 24, 2011, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a comment on the events of “Great Friday” (April 22, 2011) and the acts that followed, which led to the death and injury of hundreds, demanding that the Syrian government – clearly and publicly – follow a number of steps; the statement’s message was:³⁰

- Turkey is extremely concerned due to the events that have taken place in a number of Syrian cities.
- Turkey places extreme importance on the stability of its neighbor and friend, Syria, and on the welfare of the Syrian people and their prosperity.
- We have welcomed statements from the Syrian president regarding the fulfillment of the legitimate demands of the people, and many of the reforms are on their way to being applied.

In the statement, Turkey called on Syria, in this difficult phase, to:³¹

- Exercise the utmost degree of self-restraint, abstain from disproportional and excessive use of force, and employ the proper means to deal with the wide protests.
- Continue the reform effort with vigor in order to reach the results of the effort in the soonest possible time, and enact the reforms without delay.
- Adopt an appropriate course of action that befits the text and the spirit of the declared reforms.
- Regain social peace and avoid practices that could lead to the escalation of tensions.
- Maintain patience, good sense, and self-restraint in order to prevent the increase of (mortal) incidents in a manner that could lead to a spiral of violence.

This statement was followed by a phone call from Erdogan to the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on April 26, 2011 in which he expressed, in a frank and very clear manner, Turkey’s fears and its disconcert due to the recent events. Erdogan asked Assad to move forward with the

³⁰ Press Release Regarding the Events that took place in Syria on Friday (April 22, 2011), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, No. 111, April 24, 2011, www.mfa.gov.tr/no_111_-24-april-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-events-that-took-place-in-syria-on-friday_-22-april-2011.en.mfa.

³¹ *Ibid.*

reforms, considering that the lifting of the state of emergency in the country was an insufficient move.³²

The matter did not stop at that as it appeared that Turkey was preparing for a plan “B” after its attempts with the Syrian regime have failed during the first phase. Turkey’s Ambassador to Damascus, Omer Onhon, was called to Ankara as part of the preparations for the Turkish national security council meeting, with Turkish President Abdullah Gul chairing, with the aim of readying to deal with the worst expected scenarios regarding the evolution of events in Syria.

Despite leaked information at the beginning of the crisis implying that the council would not include the regime-change scenario among the possibilities it would discuss,³³ other – more recent – information spoke of a Turkish plan to provide protection to Assad and his family if a change of regime takes place in Syria.³⁴

The council meeting convened on April 28, 2011, with Gul as chairman,³⁵ and with the participation of the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu, Chief of General Staff Isik Kosaner, Chief of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT) Hakan Fidan, the General Chief of the Internal Security Forces Necdet Uzul, and Turkey’s Ambassador to Damascus. The meeting ended with the following conclusions:³⁶

- The council expressed its deep regret and concern due to the rise in the number of deaths during the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria.
- The council asked the Syrian authorities to hasten the enactment of the promised reform in fulfillment of the people’s legitimate demands in the political, economic, and social fields, stressing the necessity of their application in the quickest possible time.
- The council stressed the necessity of taking quick and specific measures to guarantee basic rights, freedoms, and personal security, as well as an end to the violence and the achievement social peace and stability in Syria.

The council also came up with the following recommendations:³⁷

³² “Turkey concerned over the Syria events and fears a rebellion on its borders,” (in Arabic) *Swiss Info*, April 26, 2011, www.swissinfo.ch/ara/detail/content.html?cid=30094666.

³³ “Turkey’s scenarios for regional uprisings,” *Sabah newspaper*, April 7, 2011, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/04/07/turkeys-scenarios-for-regional-uprisings>.

³⁴ “CIA Director pays ‘very secret’ visit,” *Sabah newspaper*, April 26, 2011, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/04/26/cia-director-pays-very-secret-visit>.

³⁵ “Turkey’s scenarios for regional uprisings,” *Op. cit.*

³⁶ “Turkey’s top security council calls for swift progress on Syria reforms,” *Today’s Zaman newspaper*, April 29, 2011, http://todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=242329.

³⁷ “Ankara mulls post-Assad scenarios, eyes all options for Syria,” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, April 29, 2011, www.turkishweekly.net/news/114781/ankara-mulls-post-assad-scenarios-eyes-all-options-for-syria.html.

- The immediate dispatch of a high level Turkish governmental delegation to Damascus, to be headed by Turkey's Chief of Intelligence Agency (MIT) Hakan Fidan, along with the Director of National Planning (DPT) Kemal Madanoglu, and a number of other experts and specialists.
- The delegation, headed by Fidan, is to transmit the Turkish message to the Syrian leadership, expressing Ankara's preparedness to support the Syrian reforms. The delegation is also to meet with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to be informed of the latest events and developments taking place in his country, and to assess his position regarding the continuing troubles.
- The national planning delegation, headed by Kemal Madanoglu and a number of experts and specialists, is to explain the Turkish experience to the Syrian administration. In addition to transmitting its reformist experience in the field of economic development and public administration, the delegation is to help formulate a road map for the anticipated democratic changes in a manner consistent with the Syrian popular aspirations.

Turkey's reassessment of the situation led to a new narrative on the happenings in Syria:³⁸

- The situation is dangerous, and becoming more so with the passage of time given the use of force and the rise in the number of the demonstrators killed; the matter is no longer about Syria alone.
- The reformist steps that were announced remain insufficient; therefore, Turkey will practically help in formulating solutions, assuming this is the problem that is impeding the Syrian decision maker.
- Time is a decisive factor in this matter; however, time has not yet run out for the launching of real reforms and regaining of initiatives to be effective though this must be done immediately. Turkish President Abdullah Gul openly expressed this view when he said: "some [people] are adamantly opposed to change, [yet] these have no hope whatsoever of remaining where they are, others are maneuvering to gain time, but time will outpace and defeat them."
- Pursuing the present course unchanged will lead to disastrous results, "and Assad may fall in the same way that other totalitarian leaders in other parts of the Middle East were removed by popular uprisings."

Third: Transformation and Pressure

³⁸ "Turkey to Help Guide Syrian Democratization Process," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, April 28, 2011, www.turkishweekly.net/news/114742/turkey-to-help-guide-syrian-democratization-process.html.

This phase saw a transformation in the Turkish stance; not in terms of the formula adopted since the beginning, when Turkey encouraged Assad to respond to the legitimate popular demands by launching radical reforms in the political, social, and economic fields as soon as possible in order to overcome the current crisis, but in terms of the means adopted to spur Assad into achieving these changes.

The shift in the Turkish position during this phase was expressed in a number of areas, including further emphasizing the fears born out of the neglect of the Turkish advice, in a context of increasing regional and international pressures; additionally, the imposition of further US and European sanctions, and the discussion of the Syrian file in the Human Rights Council and, perhaps later, in the Security Council, affected Turkey's position. Equally, Turkey began to publicly warn of the catastrophic repercussions of continuing with the same policy, in addition to Turkey's hosting of a conference for Syrian civil society organizations and a number of Syrian activists.

Open and direct criticism was also voiced against the policy of killing that has adopted by the Syrian regime, as well as the narrative they have offered for the ongoing events, claiming that armed gunmen and gangs were attacking the protestors and the army. In a televised interview on May 2, 2011, Erdogan warned President Assad of the repercussions of persisting with killing civilians and committing of massacres similar to the 1982 Hama massacre, warning that Syria will not rise again if such atrocities were committed, and the country will not be able to resolve its problems, because such crises – if the continued and escalated – would prompt the international community to increase its pressures on Syria and take a sharp position towards its government.³⁹ In such a scenario, Erdogan added, Turkey would be obliged to do what should be done and to undertake its responsibilities towards such situations.

On May 10, 2011, the head of the Turkish government spoke to the pro-AKP news channel, Channel 7, belying for the first time the official Syrian narrative, claiming: “there are no intruders or armed gangs as Damascus is claiming; our information in that regard is completely different. It is the right of security forces to defend themselves, but they are being faced by an unarmed population ... the number of deaths has surpassed a thousand, and we do not want to live through the massacres of Hama and Halabja one again; it is wrong for a regime to kill its people.”⁴⁰

³⁹ A section of the interview from the Arabic-language Turkish channel, TRT-Arabic, www.trtarabic.tv/ar/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2653:2011-05-02-14-00-32&catid=44:news-reports&Itemid=184.

⁴⁰ “Turkey gains little sway over Syria,” *Today's Zaman Newspaper*, May 12, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=243746.

The message Erdogan wanted to transmit through this new, direct, and escalating Turkish position revolved around four main ideas:

1. The Syrian crisis is no longer a strictly Syrian matter, but has become a domestic Turkish issue for a variety of reasons, which I will explain the second part of this paper; if the Syrian leadership does not take that into consideration, the evolution of events in Syria, and the increase in killings, will lead to the explosion of the entire region.
2. Nobody believes the official line on conspiracies regarding the internal events in Syria; more killing should be opposed because it will escalate the protest movement and things will spin out of control with protests broadening to the point of no return.
3. If the international community intervenes, and the question is transferred to the UN Security Council, becoming a matter of discussion in international forums, Turkey – as a state respectful of the law and its institutions, in addition to its ethical position – could not stand in the face of the international community, especially if the policy of killing persists or intensifies.
4. Despite all that has happened, ending the crisis peacefully through the introduction of deep and comprehensive reforms remains a possibility though the change will not present itself again, and the window of opportunity is quickly closing in the face of the Syrian regime; a peaceful and stable transformation of authority, however, is the real demand.⁴¹

Erdogan's statements do not merely reflect his personal opinions, but are representative of all the decision-making institutions and the personalities affiliated to them, from the President Abdullah Gul to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu. These statements are reiterated by the entire AKP team, beginning with Ibrahim Kalin, Erdogan's advisor, Ersat Hurmuzlu, President Gul's chief adviser on Middle East and Arab World affairs, and ending with Murat Merjan and Omar Tishlik, the most prominent minds in the planning of foreign policy for the ruling party. Their collective message was:⁴²

1. It is imperative that the opportunities still present to the Syrian regime not be squandered; rather, they must be exploited as quickly as possible on the way to reform and the provision of stability.
2. The actions of the Syrian leadership today represent the last chance to prevent any foreign intervention in Syria; the Libyan experience has taught us that the wager on China and Russia cannot continue for long.

⁴¹ A section of an interview with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu from the private NTV Turkish channel held during the news cast "Turkey 'has urged' Hamas to recognize Israel, Gül says," *Hurriyet newspaper*, May 22, 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-urges-hamas-to-recognize-israel-2011-05-22.

⁴² Samir Salha, "The Turkish position on the Syrian crisis: repercussions and predictions," (in Arabic) Al-Jazeera Studies Center, Qatar, May 8, 2011, www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/41D59130-19AE-48CD-A96C-78AAF5873C2C.htm.

3. Turkey will not be able to distance itself significantly from the stances adopted by the UN Security Council, which will discuss – sooner or later – the Syrian crisis.

In the midst of this shift, it was announced that the Syrian opposition was planning to hold a large conference for all its factions, which was to be prepared and held in Turkey in June,⁴³ after Egypt refused to host the conference.⁴⁴ The conference was to represent over 300 national figures of all stripes and affiliations, which could eventually lead to the formation of a transitional council.⁴⁵ It should be mentioned that in late April Turkey hosted a conference entitled “the Istanbul Gathering for Syria,” which was attended by over 40 Syrian personalities ranging from journalists, to businessmen, to human rights activists from all persuasions in collaboration with Syrian civil society organizations from both inside Syria as well as abroad through an invitation from a group of Turkish civil society groups and institutions gathered under “the Istanbul Forum for Political Dialogue”.⁴⁶

The final statement of the Istanbul Gathering included a number of demands, most notably:⁴⁷

- The enactment of radical reforms in Syria as quickly as possible.
- The abandonment of the one-party system and establishing multi-partism with the aim of guaranteeing political equality and competition.
- The release of political prisoners and guaranteeing the freedom to demonstrate and the freedom of the press in Syria.
- The opposition to any foreign intervention in Syria and to any initiative that might divide the country.

Motives Behind the Gradual Change in the Turkish Position

It was predictable that the Turkish stance would shift towards the exertion of more pressures upon President Assad because the Syrian crisis had become a domestic Turkish affair,⁴⁸ especially at a time when Turkish leaders began to feel that Assad was not heeding their advice,

⁴³ www.youkal.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28034:2011-05-23-15-36-02&catid=54:2011-04-29-12-25-44.

⁴⁴ According to ex-Syrian MP and prisoner (during the “Damascus Spring” arrests) Mamun al-Humsi, Cairo refused to host the conference, prompting the request to Turkey in order to benefit from its democratic environment and the people’s support for the just cause against “the war of annihilation that is being waged by the Syrian regime against the people.” This statement was denying that the Syrian opposition had received any prior approval from the Turkish authorities for the holding of the convention. For further information, see www.elaph.com/Web/news/2011/5/656433.html?entry=newsarab.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Turkey’s position regarding developments in Syria,” (in Arabic) France 24 website, by Radio Monte Carlo, April 28, 2011, www.france24.com/ar/20110428-meeting-turkey-syria-solution-political-situation.

⁴⁷ “Istanbul gathering for Syria calls on the Syrian regime to respond to the people’s demands ... and rejects foreign intervention,” (in Arabic) *Akhbar al-Sharq Website*, April 27, 2011, www.levantnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7497:-q-q&catid=66:syria-politics&Itemid=118.

⁴⁸ Interview with Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Bloomberg TV by Charlie Rose, May 12, 2011, www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11666.

which aimed at containing the internal Syrian crisis, and that he did not appreciate the efforts they were exerting towards that aim. In other words, he is unwilling or incapable of action because something is preventing him from within the regime. The shift in the Turkish stance regarding the Syrian crisis is related not only to this aspect, but also to a number of other factors, some relating to the effects within Syria, while others relate to the repercussions on the Syrian domestic affairs of Assad's negligence of Turkish advice.

First: President Assad's Unresponsiveness

The official Turkish assessment of Assad's stance shifted from his depiction as "a reformist attempting to implement reforms"⁴⁹ into their "doubts as to the degree of his fulfillment of the reformist promises that were made, and regarding his implementation of other critical reforms,"⁵⁰ to being described as "not listening to the Turkish side,"⁵¹ and "a friend, [who] has failed to quickly take specific steps to fulfill the demands of his people."⁵² Thereafter, the assessment turned into "uncertainty on whether Assad has lost interest in enacting reforms, or whether there are other sides within the regime that do not permit him and to whom he is subdued."⁵³ And, finally, the brief summation "we hear a lot of promises but we see few actions."⁵⁴

Concurrently, the Syrian regime seemed to have adopted the Iranian option in dealing with protests, pursuing security and military action until the end,⁵⁵ instead of heeding Turkish advice to contain the popular movement by embarking on a true process of reform. This appeared in a practical manner on the ground with the escalation of events in late April, and was reflected in the statements of Syrian officials, especially:

Buthaina Shaban:⁵⁶ The political and media advisor of President Assad who stated to the *New York Times* that "the upper hand is now that of the regime in the face of the protestors ... the

⁴⁹ "Erdogan: Assad is working on reforms in Syria," March 28, 2011, www.wanginnovations.com/2011/03/28/erdogan-assad-is-working-on-reforms-in-syria/.

⁵⁰ "Syria Strains Turkey's 'No Problems' Foreign Policy," NPR, May 6, 2011, www.npr.org/2011/05/06/136035297/syria-strains-turkeys-no-problems-foreign-policy.

⁵¹ "Turkey scrambles to cajole Syria into reform," *Khaleej Times*, AFP, April 27, 2011, www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle09.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2011/April/middleeast_April600.xml§ion=middleeast.

⁵² "Erdogan: Assad is a good friend, but he delayed reform efforts," *Today's Zaman Newspaper*, May 12, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/news-243660-erdogan-assad-is-a-good-friend-but-he-delayed-reform-efforts.html.

⁵³ "Syria a test case for democratic Turkey," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 2011, www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2011/0509/Syria-a-test-case-for-democratic-Turkey.

⁵⁴ Erdogan reiterates his warning message: we fear Syria's division on a sectarian basis", (in Arabic) *Al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, May 17, 2011, www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=622067&issueno=11858.

⁵⁵ For an expansive discussion of the Iranian option, which was previously used to crush the Green Movement, see Ali Husain Bakeer et. al., (2001), *Iran: the Conservatives, the Green Movement, and Arab Revolts (1st Ed.)* (in Arabic), UAE: al-Misbar Center for Studies and Research.

⁵⁶ Anthony Shadid, "Syria Proclaims It Now Has Upper Hand Over Uprising," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/world/middleeast/10syria.html?_r=1.

threat is behind us and we are witnessing the final stage of this matter ... for we cannot be tolerant with people who are leading an armed insurgency.”

Rami Makhoul:⁵⁷ Cousin to President Assad and a powerful tycoon, also spoke with the *New York Times*, frankly and clearly stating that the ruling elite in Syria will fight this battle until the end, even if it leads to war or chaos in the Middle East. He also attempted to use the “Israeli card” by saying that Syria’s stability guarantees Israel’s stability,⁵⁸ and clarified by saying: “do not make us suffer, do not pressure the president too much, do not push Syria into doing something that it would not be happy to do.”⁵⁹

President Assad:⁶⁰ Assad also claimed that his regime has surpassed the crisis and that the events are in their favor, clearly referencing the crushing of the protests; not surprisingly, these statements came in tandem with the intensification of the security campaign against various Syrian cities and regions.

This line of analysis was adopted by a number of Turkish political and intellectual elites who saw that Assad listened, at the beginning, to the Turkish side, but ignored it afterwards, lending its ear to the Iranian side and using its own strategy that is based on repression, which was attempted by the Iranian regime in the past.⁶¹

Second: Fears of a Collapsing Regime and Chaos

Unlike what many believe, Turkey has no problem or sensitivity with the Syrian regime falling, nor any worries regarding an alternate regime, as long as the alternative commits to placing the country on the road to freedom and democracy.⁶² However, Turkey is worried most about the collapse of the Syrian regime in a manner leading to chaos in the absence of an alternative, a

⁵⁷ “Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to ‘the End’,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhoul.html.

⁵⁸ For the first time in 40 years, the Syrian regime allows for demonstrations on “Nakba Day” (May 15) to enter the Golan and penetrate the barbed wire separating Syria from Israel. The same took place in the Lebanese village of Marun al-Ras, after years of absence, in what appeared as a coordinated position between the Syrian regime and its allies in Lebanon in order to deliver the message of Rami Makhoul to those concerned. This led to the death of several Palestinian martyrs by the bullets of the Israeli occupation.

⁵⁹ Even though Syrian authorities later distanced themselves from his statements, saying that “Rami Makhoul is a Syrian citizen expressing his personal opinions,” those statements were intended and the message was indeed delivered; for an example of this point of view, see the article by Hazim Saghiya, “Thank you Rami,” (in Arabic) *Now Lebanon*, May 16, 2011, www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=271338.

⁶⁰ “Assad: we have overcome the crisis and the events are at their end...,” (in Arabic) *Al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, May 19, 2011.

⁶¹ Interview with academic and Middle East expert Meliha Altonisik in Barcin Yinanc, “No one predicted the Arab Spring,” says Turkish expert, *Hurriyet Newspaper*, May 20, 2011, www.hurriyetcailynews.com/n.php?n=noone-predicted-the-coming-of-arab-spring-says-expert-2011-05-20.

⁶² “The Turkish position on Syria: from ‘advice’ to ‘alternatives’?” (in Arabic) *Al-Safir Newspaper*, April 28, 2011, www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionID=1833&ChannelID=43131&ArticleID=3026.

chaos that would spread to the countries surrounding Syria; Turkey believes that political change should not lead to the collapse of stability in Syria. During the third phase, Turkey expressed – on more than one occasion – its hope that the stage of transition takes place peacefully and gradually.⁶³

It appears that the fears of the Turkish government towards the possibility of chaos in Syria are related to their knowledge that such instability will not remain limited to Syria, but will spillover to a number of Arab countries and affect the entire region, leaving Turkey to shoulder unbearable costs on more than one level:⁶⁴

- **Foreign Policy:** Such a scenario (chaos) would undermine the Turkish project in the Middle East region, which is based on the achievement of stability in Turkey's neighborhood and opening eastward. The "Zero Problems" policy would be lost in the midst of a host of conflicts emerging in each country. Therefore, Turkey – whose regional influence was partly based on its creative foreign policy – would lose this area where it has an advantage and a role to play.⁶⁵
- **Economics:** This scenario would weaken Ankara's economic capacity by limiting growth, reducing exports, and increasing the cost of imports, especially hydrocarbon in light of the oil price rise that will no doubt be engendered by the crisis. This could cause Turkey an economic crisis at a time where it needs to maintain its pace of economic growth. In the last four years, Turkey has invested heavily in building economic partnerships with Arab countries and opening markets and free-trade zones with a number of them; between 2002 and 2008, the amount of trade between Turkey and these countries has risen fourfold from \$7 Billion to over \$48 Billion, with plans to raise the level of trade to \$100 Billion, and enhance the attraction of large Arab investments to Turkey. Any chaos scenario is capable of dashing all these economic hopes and achievements.⁶⁶
- **Internal Effects:** Economic recession and setbacks in foreign policy would have repercussions on internally in Turkey, which could present a new opportunity for the adversaries of the Justice and Development Party to undermine its popularity and

⁶³ Turkey has Urged Hamas to recognize Israel, *op. cit.* and "It should be a smooth transition," *Sabah Newspaper*, May 18, 2011, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/05/18/it-should-be-a-smooth-transition>.

⁶⁴ Muhammad Saif al-Deen Arul, General Director of the Eurasia Center for Strategic Studies, tells the Turkish *Zaman Newspaper* on 25/5/2011: Syria has a strategic location and a strategic importance in the region; these repercussions could affect the situation in Palestinian, as well as Lebanon and Iraq, and perhaps even Iran, which – by losing Syria – would see its influence in these countries, and on Shia groups, wane; things could evolve in a manner spurring chaos in the entire region. In that case, events would have an effect on Turkish policy that has been formulated over the last few years in the region. As an example, the process of economic cooperation and integration launched between Turkey and Syria (also grouping Jordan and Lebanon) would be placed in doubt.

⁶⁵ Ali Husain Bakeer, "Turkish soft power..." *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

increase their own chances, if they use such an opportunity skillfully. Therefore, negative Arab conditions would reflect on Turkey, which would be forced to revert to isolationism in order to protect itself, which could lead to a reversal in regional power balances and the re-emergence of the Israeli and Iranian influences.⁶⁷

Third: Fears of an Increase in Fatalities and International Intervention

The first of the Turkish advices to President Assad, throughout the different phases that we have detailed above (advice and guidance, reassessment, and transformation and pressure), was “do not kill!”⁶⁸ Because the more civilians are killed and the numbers of the victims rise, the quicker the matter will spiral out of control, and the Syrian situation would become an international file that is being examined in the institutions of the international community, which could reflect negatively on Syria as well as Turkey itself.

Ankara found itself in the midst of a critical dilemma, and did not want to take harsh measures against Syria as it was advising the regime with the necessity of quick and real reforms as a solution to the crisis it had been undergoing; at the same time, however, in light of the international environment and the facts on the ground, Turkey could only approve any measures emanating from the institutions of the international community. On the one hand, Turkey cannot face the will of the international community, and on the other hand Ankara could use these resolutions to pressure the Syrian regime following the deaf ear it gave to Turkey’s advice.

In this regard, Turkey’s concerns center on creating a balance between convincing the Syrian regime to enact immediate reforms and reminding them of their international commitments as a responsible state, especially if the Syrian file were to be discussed in international forums and if difficult decisions were to be made. International pressures would probably include diplomatic and economic sanctions against the Syrian regime, which would further escalate the problem, especially since the regime would not be able to bear the pressure resulting from such sanctions as it lacks the necessary tools and resources to endure such pressure as the Iranian regime did in similar circumstances.⁶⁹

However, what Turkey really fears and rejects is the potentiality of a direct international intervention in a manner similar to the Libyan case, especially that international intervention in Syria is likely to arrive in force due to the presence of Christian minorities in Syria and Syria’s borders with Israel, a situation that could degenerate into chaos, which would bring us back to

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Yusif al-Sharif, “The Turkish Ten Commandments to the Syrian regime begin with ‘thou shall not kill!’,” (in Arabic), *al-Hayat Newspaper*, April 27, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/259956>.

⁶⁹ “Turkey’s public concerns grow as tension in Syria prolonged,” *Today’s Zaman Newspaper*, May 25, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/news-245106-turkeys-public-concerns-grow-as-tension-in-syria-prolonged.html.

the previous scenario and its repercussions and effects upon Turkey⁷⁰. A recent opinion survey in Turkey has shown a consistency between popular and official positions on the fear and rejection of international intervention, with 63% of those polled rejecting any such form of international intervention in Syria.⁷¹

Fourth: The Kurdish Situation

Aside from all the repercussions of the chaos scenario, Turkey is intensely concerned that a serious deterioration in the Syrian situation could lead to the division of the country. As a result, warnings of the dangers regarding the ongoing events, and the possibility of the fragmentation of Syria, abound in the statements of various Turkish officials.⁷² As for the Turks, Syria's fragmentation carries several threats, but the most important repercussions would relate to the Kurdish file, which is extremely sensitive for Ankara on two levels:

- The question of secession: There is a widespread belief claiming that Syria's fragmentation, or its entry into chaos, could prompt Syria's Kurds to demand secession, which would also reflect on Turkey's Kurds, perhaps pushing them in the same direction.⁷³ Such a scenario would signal a major shift in the demands of Syria's Kurds who were not previously known for demanding secession; Syrian Kurdish demands had a different character than those of other Kurds in other countries, such as Iraq. As a general rule, Syria's Kurds merely demand their cultural rights and freedoms, as with other Syrian citizens, but not secession or an independent state.⁷⁴ Furthermore, some of Syria's Kurds value Erdogan's government for taking several positive steps towards the Kurdish cause, through its overtures towards Kurds in Turkey, as well as in Iraq.⁷⁵
- The question of combating the PKK: The main source of fear is that the escalation of events in Syria to the point of fragmentation and chaos would reinforce the presence of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its attacks from Syrian soil against the Turkish interior. These concerns were confirmed when Turkish forces recently clashed with a group from the banned party that had infiltrated from the Kurdish-majority part in

⁷⁰ Ismail Duman, "Future of Syria and Turkey's difficult test with it", **World Bulletin**, 21/4/2011: www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=72781

⁷¹ "Most Turks against international intervention in Syria," *Today's Zaman Newspaper*, May 11, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=243624&link=243624.

⁷² *Al-Qabas Newspaper*, May 3, 2011, www.alqabas.com.kw/Article.aspx?id=700159&date=03052011.

⁷³ Ismail Duman, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ This statement is made by Ahmad Barakat, a member of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party. See *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Despite the praise of Turkish overtures by Abd al-Baqi Yusif, a member of the Kurdish Committee in Syria, he maintained – in the same interview – his demand to establish federalism in Syria, which is not an acceptable logic in Syria or in Turkey. See the text of the interview: "Syrian leader warns against the Antalya Conference bypassing the Kurdish question," (in Arabic) *al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, May 26, 2011, <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11867&article=623530&feature=>.

Syria, and killed seven of its members.⁷⁶ That was despite the PKK announcing a one-sided truce in August 2010, claiming that the truce was previously negotiated with the Turkish government and would last until June 15, 2011 (i.e., after the Turkish elections), but the PKK eventually rescinded the truce.⁷⁷

Fifth: Pressure from the Turkish Public

With the increase in the number of fatalities among the demonstrators, the spread of the protests, and the regime's increasing reliance on security, as well as the constant reiteration of the narrative that the army is resisting armed, terrorist, and radical gangs, Turkish public opinion opposing Assad began to grow incrementally. After it was spurred by demonstrations organized by the Syrian community in Turkey, it eventually spread to include elites, the public, and civil society organizations – which, as we noted above, participated in the organization of a massive conference in support of the Syrian people to stop the killing in late April. The Turkish media also fell in the same line,⁷⁸ whether those closer to the AKP, the left, or the Ataturkists, keeping in mind that a section of the Turkish media, including the pro-AKP outlets, used to allow – until very recently – the official Syrian narrative to appear heavily on television⁷⁹ and in the newspapers⁸⁰.

However, with the escalation of events and the difficulty of trusting the official Syrian version in the face of a large number of documented videos spreading through online social networks, and with the rise in the number of civilian fatalities, a major shift occurred in Turkish public opinion. As an illustration, an opinion survey conducted by The Metropol Center for Strategic and Social Research provided the following results:⁸¹

- Over 45% of respondents said that Turkey should offer support for the demonstrators in Syria instead of Bashar al-Assad.
- 41.3% said that they supported the Turkish government policy towards the Assad regime as opposed to 35.8% who disagreed.

⁷⁶ “Turkey kills seven Kurdish PKK rebels crossing from Syria,” *E Kurd*, April 1, 2011, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/4/turkey3172.htm.

⁷⁷ Yusuf Kanli, “Syria as Turkey’s domestic issue,” *Hurriyet Newspaper*, May 15, 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=syria-as-turkey8217s-domestic-issue-2011-05-15.

⁷⁸ Mahmud Nureddine, “Turkey and Syria: the end of ‘strategic depth’!,” (in Arabic) *Al-Safir Newspaper*, May 17, 2011, www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1847&ChannelId=43481&ArticleId=1608.

⁷⁹ Ismail Yasha, “Will Erdogan stain his reputation with the blood of Syrians?,” (in Arabic) *Al-Asr Electronic Magazine*, May 2, 2011, www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.con&contentID=11850.

⁸⁰ Ismail Yasha, “Who makes Turkish public opinion?,” (in Arabic) *Al-Asr Electronic Magazine*, April 12, 2011, www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.con&contentID=11823.

⁸¹ “Most Turks against international intervention in Syria,” *Today’s Zaman*, May 11, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/mobile_detailn.action?newsId=243624.

- 65% said that the protests in Syria will probably have repercussions on the Turkish domestic level, against 30%,
- According to 47.1% of those polled, the protests will expand and remove the regime of Assad, while 26% believed that Assad will overcome the protestors and impose his rule and authority.
- Around 60% said that Turkey should aid civil movements in the Arab countries and the Middle East.

Since the nature of the Turkish system forces the government to bend to public opinion, Erdogan's cabinet began feeling the weight of the public stance, which was – doubtless – one of the reasons prompting the gradual shift in the official Turkish position on Syria.

Six: The Displaced and the Refugees

Turkey has over 900 kilometers of land borders with Syria, with people on both sides being interlinked through family relations, culture, customs, traditions, and economic and security interests. Furthermore, since 2000, families on both sides of the borders could visit each other easily, a situation that improved further with the ascension of the AKP to power, as well as the Turkish-Syrian agreement to abolish visitor visas between the two countries in September 2009; this permitted Syrians to enter Turkey, and Turks Syria, for a period of 90 days without any conditions or documents except their passport⁸².

These factors led the Turkish government to fear that an escalation in the policy of killing would flood Turkey with refugees, especially if events spread to the areas bordering Turkey. Refugees could enter Turkey openly as refugees, or by entering the country legally. This would lead to the problem spreading into Turkey, with repercussions on the Turkish street, especially with the current situation of solidarity with the Syrian people. Therefore, and in preparation for the worst scenarios, the Turkish government decided to establish a refugee camp – through the Red Crescent organization – a few kilometers inside Turkey and containing a number of tents; this camp received the first wave of displaced people on April 29, estimated at 500 individuals in deplorable condition, many of whom had fled before being able to bring their families along.⁸³

The Turkish Human Rights Association (IHD) and Human Rights Institution (TIHV) both published a common statement strongly condemning the human rights abuses committed by the

⁸² "Turkey ready for 'worst case scenario' on possible Syrian refugee crisis", **Today's Zaman** newspaper, 2/5/2011: www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=78BAAFCE5DAF3DDD3A32C00303AC3937?newsId=242576

⁸³ Gokce Aytulu, "Fleeing unrest, Syrians find shelter in southernmost district," *Hurriyet Newspaper*, May 19, 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mob_nx.php?n=syrian-refugees-at-turkish-border-2011-05-19.

Syrian regime;⁸⁴ meanwhile, the toll of the military/security option adopted by the Syrian regime had reached at least 1,100 dead, 4,500 wounded, and 10,000 detainees⁸⁵ in nine weeks of the popular uprising.

The Relationship between Turkey and Syria During the Crisis

Turkish-Syrian relations experienced a gap because of the situation, which placed each party in an embarrassing position with the other. Despite the fact that the Turkish position was not as strong and decisive as many had hoped due to the above-discussed fears and concerns, it was clear that the Syrian regime wished the Turkish side would merely remain silent, desiring their unconditional support in an explicit, public, and clear manner until the end. The Syrian regime seemed extremely enraged and distressed by the Turkish position, especially over three of Turkey's actions:

- Contradicting the official Syrian narrative
- Speaking of new Halabjas and Hamas
- Hosting a conference for the Syrian opposition

On their end, the Turks have attempted to maintain a bridge with the Syrian regime, believing that their previously close relationship allows them to enact a policy of pressuring the regime to end the killings and exit the debacle by fulfilling popular demands. Such measures would be a means to avoiding greater harm, with Assad understanding that Turkey is his only hope, and that its vision is the only way out of the quagmire. This time, however, Turkish officials stressed their points of principle in the face of the Syrian regime criticism, indicating that they do not fear an alternative ruler if that took place because they were the first to affirm that the region's fate is democracy and that they consistently stand with the peoples; finally, Turkish officials made clear that they are embarking on a double course, allowing a new chance for Assad while also opening up to alternative options that consist of the Syrian opposition.

Syria's Response to Turkey's Shift in Position

The Syrian media waged an organized campaign against Turkey, decrying the change that is occurring in its stance. Talks began of Turkey joining the American axis, and of neo-Ottomanism, and the contradiction between Turkey being a secular state and its support for Islamic movements (the Brotherhood). The "Ikhwan" background of Erdogan, and a number of AKP members, was also recalled in explaining the Turkish posture; even Ottoman history was summoned with a "colonialist interpretation" when discussing the theories of Foreign Minister

⁸⁴ "Turkey's public concerns grow as tension in Syria prolonged," *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ "At least 1100 people killed, 4500 injured, and ten thousands arrested in Syria," (in Arabic) *Now Lebanon*, based on a France Press report, May 26, 2011, www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=275016.

Ahmet Davutoglu. It was stressed in these campaigns that Turkey was not immune and that it should be preoccupied with its domestic problems and the Kurdish file instead of meting out advice.

The most notable expression of this position came from a privately-owned newspaper that is close to the authorities, *al-Watan* newspaper, when they embarked on a violent campaign against the Turkish stance, focusing on the following:⁸⁶

- The official Turkish conduct is hasty and rife with improvisation, noting that the current events present a decisive test to the “Turkish model”.
- The prime minister was described as a conceited reformist preaching (a local Syrian term was used indicating pretension and exhibitionism) that is being performed in European forums.
- The Turkish foreign minister was described as the architect of neo-Ottomanism, as well as a person who is incapable of formulating solutions due to his alleged difficulty in dealing in a clear and straightforward manner with these events.
- The contradiction between the secular, Turkish regime, which has allowed the current economic and political prosperity in the country, and their cooperation with wings of the Syrian opposition, especially the Muslim Brothers, which places the Turkish model in a test that will decide its fate.

The Syrian newspaper opined that “there is no commonality between the Turkish model and the Ikhwan model, historically and conceptually, but this rule is now being broken through the Turkish dealings with the events in Syria”; they added that “it is the first instance where the Turkish model appears to be implicated in, and perhaps on its way to adopting, a political phenomenon that is most different from its ideals and history”. Additionally, the paper noted that “it is not clear whether this is related to a pre-Attaturkist Ottoman awakening, or whether this is one of the fields of cooperation with the US strategy that is currently laboring to produce non-Jihadi Islamist authorities, with a clean behavior towards Israel, to head the helm of the Arab state system for the coming decades.”⁸⁷

Some Syrian and pro-Syrian authors tried to remind the Turks that change in the Arab world – in reference to Syria – contradicts Turkey’s interests in the Middle East, and that Ankara, which

⁸⁶ “Syrian Press describes Erdogan as ‘conceited preacher’ ... and Ankara prefers ‘advising brother’,” (in Arabic) *al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, May 13, 2011, www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11854&article=621397.

⁸⁷ “Syrian media critiques ‘neo-Ottomanism’ in response to Erdogan’s ‘improvisation’,” (in Arabic) *al-Balad Newspaper* (Kuwait), May 12, 2011, <http://kw.albaladonline.com/ar/newsdetails.aspx?pageid=3022>.

used to occupy a void in the Arab political and diplomatic scene, will see its influence recede once the Arab revolutions reach their fruition.⁸⁸

Politics and Diplomacy

The new Turkish position led to a rift in relations, even if in an overt and public manner; the available indicators, however, point to a state of political estrangement while diplomatic communication continues. During some stages of the crisis, especially in the first month, Prime Minister Erdogan would call President Assad daily, but a stage of non-communication then lasted for about six weeks⁸⁹ when the Turkish side expressed its displeasure at the number of unfulfilled promises by the Syrian leadership.⁹⁰ This dovetailed with the Syrian foreign minister summoning the Turkish ambassador in Damascus and communicating a harsh message of complaint regarding the Turkish position.⁹¹ Moreover, the Syrian ambassador in Ankara expressed his country's displeasure with the Turkish stance, arguing a number of points that can be summarized as follows:⁹²

- Syria feels slighted by the statements of Turkish leaders, whose provenance is in internal political games that are related to the coming elections.
- If the point of comparing the Syrian leadership's handling of the current situation with the Halabja massacre was meant to communicate a specific message to the Syrian side, then the message received was extremely negative.
- The Syrian leadership feels disappointed by some of the criticisms that were directed at Syria, remaining aware that the shift in the Turkish position is related to domestic Turkish calculations, mainly centered on the electoral wagers.
- The Syrian people were not happy about a lot of things that have taken place in Turkey recently, and were expecting a radically different posture. Namely that Syria is experiencing a confrontation between small military units and a number of gangs that are murdering policemen.
- Syria wishes for the existence of a very clear Turkish commitment regarding the security and stability of Syria, and the regime, in order to protect the historic strides that were made between the two countries in recent years.

⁸⁸ Samir Salha, *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "Turkish PM speaks by phone with Syrian president," *World Bulletin*, May 27, 2011, www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=74333.

⁹⁰ "Erdogan reiterates messages of warning," *Ibid.*

⁹¹ "Syrian Foreign Ministry communicates letter of protest to Turkish Ambassador," (in Arabic) *Damascus Press*, May 12, 2011, www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=83579.

⁹² **Sevil Küçükkoşum**, "Syria 'offended' by Turkish PM's statement, envoy says," *Hurriyet Newspaper*, May 17, 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=syria-offended-turkish-leaders-comparison-with-halepche--envoy-says-2011-05-17.

- Syria feels anger about the April convention in Istanbul, where of a number of Syrian opposition figures gathered, and is aware that – despite the convention of the conference under the MUSIAD banner – the financing came from Ghazi Masirli (né Ghazwan Masri),⁹³ a Syrian who carries Turkish citizenship and is a member of the Muslim Brothers; the real organizer of the event.
- As far as Syria is concerned, the Muslim Brothers are equivalent to the PKK for Turkey; therefore, the Istanbul gathering, which was broadcast live on al-Jazeera, was an unwelcome move that Syria did not appreciate. Turkey was not supposed to offer a forum to people whose hands are bloodstained.

Security

On this level, the focus of the Syrian regime has often been on comparing the threat of the Muslim Brothers (the Ikhwan) to Syria to the threat of the PKK, which Turkey sees as a terrorist organization, to Turkey. The messages sent to the Turkish side to this effect abound; through media and diplomatic outlets, the matter was often phrased as “what if Syria had hosted a conference for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party on its territory under the banner of the freedom of speech?”⁹⁴

It was also clear that the Syrian regime was attempting, through the Kurdish card, to remind Turkey of the importance of security cooperation and the effort – in which Damascus is participating – to limit the danger of the PKK against Turkey, as per the Adana Accord signed on October 20, 1998 prohibiting the presence of PKK members on Syrian territory. On May 26, 2011, the Syrian security authorities handed their Turkish counterparts three members of the PKK, with a timing that appeared to indicate that the matter was related to the messages passed by Damascus to Ankara. It should be mentioned that Syria has delivered 125 PKK members to Turkey since the signing of the agreement.⁹⁵

Consistencies and Variables in Turkey’s Position towards the Syrian Crisis

Turkey’s Constants in the Syrian Crisis

The writings and opinions of journalists and politicians close to the AKP responded by reminding Syria that the government of their country was always a pioneer in carrying the banner of change and reform in the Middle East, and that Turkey has reiterated such calls in

⁹³ Gazi Misirli, “The Origins of a Turkish MB Leader,” www.scribd.com/doc/50265053/25/Gazi-Misirli-%E2%80%93-The-Origins-of-a-Turkish-MB-Leader.

⁹⁴ See, for an example, Usama Yaqub, “What if Syria responded to Turkey in kind?,” (in Arabic), Syria All, May 3, 2011, www.syriaall.com/news.php?id=11015.

⁹⁵ “Syria hands over three PKK militants to Turkish authorities,” *World Bulletin*, May 26, 2011, www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=74280.

numerous high-level Arab and Islamic forums. Turkey's view has been that the existence of Arab and Islamic countries that are open, and where relations between the political class and the popular base are strong, would be the prelude for real regional change and an opportunity for strategic cooperation that leads to the creation of alliances capable of providing security, stability, and cooperation between the countries of the region.

Nevertheless, the official Turkish response to the strained relations between the two countries and to the official Syrian criticisms regarding the Turkish stance vis-à-vis the protests in Syria (especially following the Turkish shift towards the use of the policy of pressure) reaffirmed a number of constants in Turkish policy and its dealing with developments, which were expressed through multiple channels (advisors to the president, the prime minister, and others). These constants include:

- The winds of change are inevitable in the Arab region, and they must reflect the demands of Arab populations and their legitimate demands in justice, freedom, and prosperity.⁹⁶
- Change in the Arab World must take place without violence.⁹⁷
- Unlike what many of the critics claim, changes in the region will reinforce Turkey's position in the Middle East, and Turkey will come out a winner in the context of a democratic, pluralist, prosperous Arab World.⁹⁸
- Turkey does not fear change, even when it takes place in friendly countries, such as Syria, simply because Ankara is aware that Arab peoples are ahead of their rulers in their positive outlook of Turkey and its role.⁹⁹
- It was natural for Turkey to support the demands of the Syrian people, as it did in all Arab countries where popular uprisings took place.¹⁰⁰
- It was natural for Turkey to address the Syrian leadership and stress the importance of listening to the legitimate and rightful demands of the Syrian people.¹⁰¹
- Ankara enters countries only through their "legitimate door" (i.e., formal relations with the governments), and it does not "host" anyone; the long and short of the matter is that democracy obliges Turkey to permit anyone to convene freely, as long as they are not inciting violence, terrorism, or extremism.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibrahim Kalin, "Turkey and a democratic and prosperous Arab world," *Today's Zaman Newspaper*, May 18, 2011, www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=244346.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

- No comparison can be made between the Syrian Muslim Brothers and the PKK; the Muslim Brothers participated in a peaceful conference grouping dozens of individuals in a hotel, while the PKK is an armed terrorist organization.¹⁰³
- Turkey has previously seen conferences taking place on its territory for the Iraqi opposition and the Palestinian organizations, where they expressed their opinions freely without calling for violence.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, Ersad Hürmuzlu, President Gül's top adviser said: "despite all that, Turkey is not against any regime or in support of any regime; we are always with the peoples, and see a need for change in this region. Instead of this change being imposed from abroad, let it happen domestically, for the solution cannot be in the use of force and violence, but by the leaders stepping ahead of their peoples by hastening the application of reforms."¹⁰⁵

The Double Trajectory

Based on the aforementioned constants, and because Turkey wishes for a peaceful transition of power that prevents the sliding of events into another Libyan scenario or into generalized chaos, Turkey prefers for this process to take place by Assad enacting reforms as quickly as possible.¹⁰⁶ Through this trajectory, Ankara hopes to furnish more time for the Syrian president to achieve these goals while increasing pressure on him.

Ankara advised Washington to grant Assad more time to enact the reforms; hence, President Obama's call on Assad to "lead the transitional phase towards change or leave" goes along with the Turkish proposition, which asked that Assad be given another chance; however, this proposal is apparently conditioned to a number of elements, mainly:

- Enactment of reforms should take place immediately, which was expressed by Erdogan in a phone call with Assad in which he urged the Syrian president to apply the reformist steps right away because the time for action has arrived.¹⁰⁷ Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu recommended the adoption of what he termed "shock therapy"¹⁰⁸ (i.e., the application of reforms in one package, along with the halting of the killings, which might put a stop to the ballooning crisis).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ "Turkish foreign minister pushes for Syrian reform," *Now Lebanon*, May 28, 2011,

www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=275766.

¹⁰⁷ "Turkish FM says Syria's Assad would stay in free elections," *Today's Zaman Newspaper*, May 28, 2011,

www.todayszaman.com/news-245397-turkish-fm-says-syrias-assad-would-stay-in-free-elections.html.

¹⁰⁸ "Turkey 'has urged' Hamas to recognize Israel," *op. cit.*

- This call for reform comes as an expression of the friendship and candor that Turkey carries towards Syria and its people, and as the only doorway towards the ending of the crisis in a peaceful manner. Turkey has presented Syria with numerous ideas and proposals in this regard, the latest of which being a proposal to call for a national dialogue that also includes the Muslim Brothers; additionally, one way of moving forward would be to perhaps include the Muslim Brothers in the government by granting it two ministerial seats, and launch an anti-corruption campaign that will naturally reach the intimate circle of Assad, in addition to holding the security forces accountable.¹⁰⁹
- The timeframe offered to President Assad is not open; the Turkish prime minister indicated that the available time is beginning to run out for Assad.¹¹⁰ Turkey is currently attempting to provide more time, but it will not be able to prevent the international community from discussing the Syrian file, or to engage it if it were proven that Assad is not serious about using his available time-window for the application of reforms.

In this regard, it appears that the US and European steps were taken in coordination with Turkey when it came to the Syrian case, since Turkey is the closest country to Syria and has an intimate knowledge of the domestic Syrian situation.¹¹¹ At the same time as Turkey is urging Assad to reform, expressing its willingness to provide support in that regard, and to buy the regime additional time, the US, Europe, and a number of other powers are stepping up their sanctions' campaign against Assad and his regime in order to pressure him to heed the Turkish advice.¹¹²

In parallel to this trajectory, there is another course of action that is taken by Ankara, in which they allow the Syrian opposition to hold conferences on its territory, so long they do not contravene the law or call for terrorism. The conference held by the Syrian opposition factions on June 1 and 2 was the largest, and was attended by 300 delegates from all sects and minorities; the closing statement of the conference called on President Bashar al-Assad to resign immediately and affirmed that those gathered “are committed to the departure of Bashar al-Assad and to the bringing down of the regime and to supporting freedom. They call on him to

¹⁰⁹ “Turkey Calls for Syrian Reforms on Order of ‘Shock Therapy’,” *op. cit.*

¹¹⁰ “Turkey PM calls Assad to press for reform,” *Hurriyet Newspaper*, May 27, 2011,

www.hurriyetcailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-pm-calls-assad-to-press-for-reform-2011-05-27.

¹¹¹ See “Turkish-US roadmap to manage the Syrian situation ... and Erdogan calls Assad, urging him to ‘take the path of reform’,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, May 28, 2011,

<http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11869&article=623855&feature=>.

¹¹² The messages of Europe, the US, and the G8 to Assad openly told the president to “reform or leave”; since it is unlikely that he would depart willingly, the intention here is to push Assad towards reform in this stage, which goes along with the Turkish proposal.

resign immediately from all his posts and to hand over power to his vice-President as per the law in place.”¹¹³

There is no doubt that Ankara’s overture to the Syrian opposition in one way or another, immediately or later, could:

- Allow Ankara to pressure the Syrian regime more effectively in the first phase.
- Allow it to play the role of the mediator between the two sides in a second phase.
- In a third phase, it could also prepare, if the option of pressure to spur reforms failed, for embracing another option, which involves the fall of the Syrian regime. This could be seen in the Turkish position towards Libya, in which the Turkish posture shifted from having good relations with the Libyan regime to concern over Turkish nationals and interests in the country, moving then to proposing solutions to Gaddafi, which was followed by a request for his departure, and finally, acknowledging the Transitional Council.

Conclusion: The Turkish position and Future Scenarios

Due to the quick and escalating development of events in Syria, the Syrian file today occupies the priority for Turkish policy in the region. In addition to the vital relations between the two countries, Ankara realizes that Syria is the most critical part of the Middle East because it is linked to a number of explosive files extending from Palestine and Israel to Lebanon and Iraq; developments in Syria will not only reflect on these countries, but may extend to affect the neighboring countries, such as Turkey and Jordan, in addition to Syria’s main ally – Iran.

From this perspective, and aside from Ankara’s specific concerns comes the Turkish proposal based on allowing Assad time and another chance, Ankara wishes for a smooth and organized transition of power that prevents the situation from sliding into a new Libyan model or generalized chaos. Turkey prefers that this be done through Assad enacting reforms quickly; it realizes that change will affect the entire region, but is afraid of the scenario of disastrous chaos, and hopes to manage the situation in Syria in a way that would shield it from disastrous damages if things slid into chaos.

What will happen, however, if Assad fails to introduce quick radical reforms or if he refuses to do so and gives no attention to the limited amount of time left for him to act? This question was posed to Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoglu in an attempt to predict the coming

¹¹³ “Syrian opposition in exile plans to meet in Turkey,” *Sabah Newspaper*, May 27, 2011, www.sabahenglish.com/World/2011/05/27/syrian-opposition-in-exile-plans-to-meet-in-turkey.

Turkish move in such a scenario; the minister simply answered: “we do not know! That is why we are asking him now to affect shock therapy on the Syrian domestic scene.”

Based on the analysis of the Turkish position above, we realize that this is an extremely critical matter for Turkey, and that the Turkish position is moving slowly, though in an escalating fashion, and while it is motivated by a number of legitimate concerns, Turkey relies on a number of objective indicators in charting its course during the Syrian crisis.

Turkish calculations regarding the Syrian crisis are very precise and complex. By analyzing the data supplied in this paper, we can conclude that Ankara is trying to balance a number of sensitive considerations at once while formulating its position. The most notable of these are:

1. Ankara does not wish to appear as if it were seeking to overthrow the Syrian regime and replace it with another in the customary colonial fashion, though it does not want this to be understood as an abandonment of the Syrian people either. Therefore, Turkey’s steps usually come in tandem with the escalation of public pressure inside Syria and in a manner that reflects sensitivity towards the occurrence of civilian fatalities and the threats of the explosion of the Syrian situation over the Turkish interior.
2. Attempting to convince Assad that he can overcome the internal crisis by responding to the legitimate demands of the people, and that Turkey is prepared to help him in that endeavor, without having this interpreted as support for the Bath Party, the Syrian regime, or those close to Assad.
3. Providing Assad with more time and granting him a second chance to enact real and radical reforms, without this seeming as a way of helping Assad gain time while he pursues his security and military policy in crushing protests.

From this perspective, in guise of predicting the coming Turkish course of action, and whether it will escalate in the coming phase or not, we could say that the context implies that pressure will escalate later in order to maintain balance between the aforementioned considerations. This will rely on a number of variables, mainly:

- The Syrian popular position: The position of the Syrian people and the continuation of their uprising and revolution is the edifice for all internal and international equations; if the popular position were to remain resilient in the face of the official repressive system and the regime’s security/military policy. If events spread and grow, that would undoubtedly pressure Turkey and affect its calculations.
- The international situation: The international position has its weight in the Turkish equation, Turkey is a responsible country that does not like to appear as a rogue state; if an international consensus forms during the next phase regarding Syria, Ankara’s

decisions will be affected – especially since Turkey is expected to play a leading role in any coming change.

- The Turkish popular stance: The popular stance is the basis for the decision-making process in Turkey, and has a major effect on politicians and politics. As a democratic country, Turkey cannot neglect public opinion, in addition to the influence that civil society organizations garner as strong and effective lobbying tools will definitely intensify their efforts if the situation in Syria continues, or turn to the worse. It should be noted that the Turkish public and government are expected to have a harsher stance after the closure of the parliamentary elections, which gave the Justice and Development Party a comfortable majority making its government freer from the electoral constraints that accompanied the previous phase.
- The Arab position: The Arab position also has a place in Turkish calculations because Turkey cannot make a major step before polling the Arab position, especially in case of a fateful decision with regional and international dimensions; the Libyan case is probably the closest example of such a situation.

In any case, time will be of the essence in the equation, with one of the following two scenarios expected to prevail in the Syrian crisis, with varying repercussions of Turkish-Syrian relations:

The First Scenario

Assad will use the time at his disposal, but not to effect radical reforms (shock therapy), but to pursue the policy of repressing protests and killing demonstrators along the “Iranian model” as used against the Green Movement. An intensification of security and military policies causes a rise in fatalities among civilians, with the hope that this would dissuade them and end the protests while imposing a “fait accompli” on the international community by forcing the other countries (whether they agree or not) to deal with the standing regime, which would be in a position of strength on the international level (from its perspective), as well as domestically – despite damaging its relationship with society, it would remain in power nonetheless. In this case, all parties would be in a bind, including Turkey, who would have to depend on a Syrian decision to improve relations with it once more.

Some appear to be thinking from this angle and wagering on this scenario, which is present in the mind of the authority in Damascus, especially with the insinuations of Syrian Foreign Minister Waleed al-Muallim on May 23, 2011: “President Assad is our leader. We shall persist, and I am certain that we will emerge from this crisis stronger than we were.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ “Syria will emerge from crisis stronger – Moualem,” *Reuters*, May 23, 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/23/syria-eu-assad-idUSLDE74M22820110523. Also,

The Second Scenario

Assad refuses to use the time at his disposal to enact radical reforms and fails at the same time to suppress the protests and turn back the clock to the phase preceding the popular uprising, which would increase the size of the protests that will expand geographically and radicalize its demands, placing the regime in the face of overriding pressures and international sanctions that it would not be able to prevent or survive at this stage. The Syrian regime is not like Iran in terms of resources, and using its cards to inflame the region from Lebanon to Iraq may not be necessarily useful, but could backfire against the regime and hasten its fall. However, the questions posed in such a scenario include: “to what extent will the international community and Turkey be able to go in pressuring the regime? What would be the ceiling of such pressure? Could it escalate to military intervention to enforce the regime’s departure?” Such questions would be difficult to answer, but the international community in general, and Turkey in specific, read reality from the perspective of past experiences, including Afghanistan and Iraq, and lately Libya. It is clear that Turkey has deep concerns regarding the option of military intervention, and that is the main and principal reason behind the adoption of the policy of “allowing more time for Assad”.

However, it may be a mistake for the Syrian regime to rely on these concerns in order to remain in power, and to wager on the impossibility of international intervention because of such fears, which is a belief held by a number of officials in Damascus,¹¹⁵ because such a behavior may in fact produce the opposite results. Ultimately, and in the long run, Turkey may not lose from the replacement of the current Syrian regime with a new one, as Turkish officials have insinuated on more than one occasion, “Turkey does not fear change, even when it takes place in very friendly countries, such as Syria, simply because Ankara is aware that Arab peoples are ahead of their rulers in their positive outlook of Turkey and its role,” as spoken by Ersad Hurmuzlu, Senior Advisor to Turkish President Abdullah Gul.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵See the statement by Syrian Foreign Minister Waleed al-Muallim, stating that he expects further political and economic sanctions against his country but without the adoption of the military option.

“EU imposes sanctions on Syria’s Assad,” *Reuters*, May 23, 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/23/us-syria-idUSLDE73N02P20110523.

¹¹⁶Interview with Ersad Hurmuzli, Senior Advisor to Turkish President Abdullah Gul, *Ibid*.