Turkey's Challenge and the Syrian Negotiation

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Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zubi harshly criticized the Turkish government early last week over Ankara's proposal that an interim government succeed the al Assad regime, saying that "Turkey isn't the Ottoman Sultanate; the Turkish Foreign Ministry doesn't name custodians in Damascus, Mecca, Cairo and Jerusalem." Being the spokesman for a pariah regime requires a mastery of propaganda. Al-Zubi has not disappointed in this regard, mounting a strong rhetorical offensive against Syria's powerful northern neighbor.

While his latest rebuke of Turkey will not save the al Assad regime (much less his own career), he is tapping into a powerful narrative in the region, one that will have stronger and stronger resonance in the Arab world as Turkey is forced to play a more assertive role in the region.

Great Expectations in Ankara

As Ankara is discovering, the resurgence of a nation can be an awkward and rocky process. Things were simpler for Turkey in the early part of the past decade when the regional
climate allowed Turkey to re-emerge cautiously, with a white flag in hand and phrases like "zero problems with neighbors" on its lips. The region has since become far more unforgiving, with violent political transformations nipping at Anatolia's borders, Iran putting up stiff competition for regional influence, Russia's resurgence proceeding apace and the United States increasingly losing interest in the role of global policeman. The region is pushing Turkey into action regardless of whether Ankara is ready to take on the responsibility.

The past week offered several glimpses into Turkey's growing pains. Turkish and Syrian border troops shelled each other after Syrian mortar fire killed five Turkish civilians. Turkish fighter jets scrambled after the Syrian air force attacked a town along the Syrian side of the border. Turkish-Russian tensions also flared when Turkey intercepted a Syria-bound plane from Moscow allegedly carrying radar equipment. And a nervous Ankara watched as a coalition of Kurdish groups from Syria, northern Iraq, Iran and Turkey gathered in Paris to brainstorm ways to exploit the shifting regional landscape and propel a campaign for Kurdish statehood.

**The Basis for a Negotiation**

The conflict in Syria offers both a threat and an opportunity for Ankara. Turkey took a risk when it became the most ardent and visible backer of the Syrian rebellion. Now, tens of thousands of refugees are flowing across the border into Turkey. The threat of sectarian warfare spreading past Syria's borders looms. And the exposure of Turkey's regional competition with Iran has elevated the Kurdish militant threat from a domestic sore point to a weakness that regional competitors like Iran can exploit.

Turkey is also closely monitoring a critical force that has begun to shape the region: the rise of Islamist movements and the discrediting of Arab secularist police states. The transition from secular autocracy will be tumultuous, but the more leverage Turkey has with this Pan-Arab Islamist movement, the better prepared it will be to manage its neighborhood. An opportunity is thus developing for Turkey in which it can assert its Islamist credentials alongside its ability to compete effectively with Iran and to deal with the West. Turkey is uniquely positioned to steer the Islamist movement while the Arab street still requires a regional backer in its challenge to the old regimes and to keep Iran at bay. But Arab attitudes toward Turkey will shift with time as Turkey's expectations of a growing sphere of influence in the Arab world inevitably clash with the Muslim Brotherhood's vision of a Pan-Arab Islamist movement following its own course, as opposed to one set by Ankara.

Turkey has several immediate challenges. First, it is attempting to prevent a power vacuum from expanding in Syria that would fuel Kurdish separatism. Second, it is trying to push back the Iranian sphere of influence while expanding its own into the Arab world. Third, it wants to be taken seriously as a regional leader. Heavily constrained as it is, Ankara appears to have chosen to tackle this array of issues primarily through dialogue.
Turkey wants to avoid regime change in Syria, and it is not alone. Neither the states trying to retain influence in Syria, like Iran and Russia, nor the states trying to force a political transformation in the Levant, like Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia, France and Qatar, are prepared to weather the consequences of debaathification, which would dismantle the state machinery, sideline the Alawite minority and plunge the country more deeply into civil war. A growing consensus centered on removing the al Assads while largely maintaining the regime has created an opportunity for dialogue between the United States and Turkey on one side and Russia and Iran on the other. Tehran and Moscow have used the monthslong stalemate in the Syrian conflict to edge their way into discussions over a post-al Assad government. The Russians and Iranians have positioned themselves for a possible agreement that facilitates an exit for the al Assads while requiring a prominent space for the Alawites in a new government, something that would preserve Russian and Iranian influence in Syria.

The urgency to negotiate the Syrian transition is escalating just as one of the key pillars Stratfor identified from the start of the conflict, the cohesion of the Alawites, appears to be breaking down. Recently, clashes have erupted between Alawite clans in the coastal Alawite strongholds of Latakia and Qardaha, the birthplace of former President Hafiz al Assad. Evidence also has emerged supporting claims that a handful of Alawite military officers have recently defected from the regime. Critical Alawite defections could accelerate in the coming weeks as fewer Alawites see the survival of the al Assads as necessary to their own survival.

As the al Assad clan continues to weaken, Turkey has sought to stitch together negotiations already fraught with complications. One look at the participants in the discussion over a post-al Assad Syria explains the difficulty.

The U.S.-Iranian Dynamic

The first major dialogue for Turkey to mediate is between the United States and Iran. The United States has no interest in initiating a military intervention in Syria, though it is preparing for the possibility that U.S. intelligence assets and special operations forces will have to secure Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles in the event of a regime meltdown. The United States also does not want to engage in a military confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program. Washington thus has elected a strategy whereby Turkey does the bulk of the work on Syria while Washington focuses on weakening Iran through sanctions pressure, covert operations and building up a credible military threat in the Persian Gulf. Washington hopes to coerce Iran into negotiations where it can extract hefty concessions from Tehran on issues ranging from Syria to the Iranian nuclear program.

Timing is everything in such a challenging negotiating environment. The U.S.-led economic siege of Iran is starting to bite, as evidenced by the rapid depreciation of the Iranian rial in the past weeks. Iranian officials claim that Iran can weather hardship far better than most think, but the specter of social unrest exploited by foreign powers clearly weighs heavily on Tehran. Iran also cannot shake the threat of a potential U.S.-Israeli strike. Though the
chances of such a strike remain low, occasional Israeli saber-rattling plus a far higher level of U.S. military preparedness in the Persian Gulf make it much harder for Iran to call the U.S. bluff. At the same time, Iran is watching the situation in Syria deteriorate and is trying to prevent a scenario in which the sectarian spillover in Syria threatens Iran's hard-fought gains in Iraq. All of this does not necessarily mean Iran is ready to offer serious concessions, but Iran is giving indications that it wants dialogue with Washington.

Turkey is the facilitator for that dialogue. Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi met last week, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Iranian Supreme National Security Council chief Saeed Jalili in mid-September. While the Turkish government has been keeping Washington abreast of these talks, Iran has been softening the atmosphere to create favorable conditions for a resumption of talks on its nuclear program. U.N. monitors have reported that Iran is converting more than one-third of its 20 percent enriched uranium stockpile into uranium oxide in powder form to alleviate concerns over potential attempts to produce weapons-grade nuclear fuel. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has revealed that Iran is attempting to arrange a visit by International Atomic Energy Agency chief Yukiya Amano to Iran to discuss the possible military dimensions of the Iranian nuclear program (though the United Nations has not yet confirmed the visit).

While putting out feelers via the Turks for negotiations with Washington, Iran is also preparing a contingency plan for Syria. Transitioning from a conventional army to an insurgent military force is logical for Syria's Alawite minority given the crisis' trajectory. Hints have emerged that Iran is preparing an Alawite militia for use when the al Assads fall with the help of Hezbollah. By creating a strong militant proxy, Iran can try to ensure its interests won't be ignored should its latest attempts at negotiations with the United States fall through.

**The U.S.-Russian Dynamic**

Turkey must also navigate fitful U.S.-Russia negotiations. Russia has deep relationships with the Syrian and Iranian regimes and will likely play a role in securing the exit of the al Assad clan in return for guarantees of influence in the refashioned government. Russian President Vladimir Putin was supposed to arrive in Istanbul on Oct. 14 for talks with the Turkish leadership, but that visit was postponed to Dec. 3. The extent to which the detention of the Russian plane and Turkish accusations that Russia is arming the Syrian regime caused this change in schedule remains unclear, but Moscow was quick to reschedule the visit for a date after the U.S. presidential election. At the same time, Russia is trying to revive dialogue with the United States over ballistic missile defense in Europe and Russia's contentious relationship with NATO. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov aims to have a Russia-NATO summit (which was canceled in May amid heightened U.S.-Russia tensions) again rescheduled for the end of the year, after the U.S. election.
It appears that Russia may be delaying negotiations over Syria until it gets a better sense of whom it will be negotiating with in Washington. Similarly, Iran is unlikely to make any bold concessions until it, too, can be sure that the next U.S. administration will follow through on its end of any potential bargain. With these broader interests in play, there is not much Turkey can do to influence the time and place of negotiations.

The Other Stakeholders

Israel and Saudi Arabia are two key players on the sidelines of this negotiation to watch closely. Israel is not a direct participant in the transition talks, but it has a vested interest in preventing the further destabilization of its northern frontier and in sapping Iran's regional strength. Israel will continue to rely on covert means to try to reinforce the pain caused by the U.S.-led economic siege against Iran but will also search for a deal with Russia that would increase Iranian isolation.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been heavily involved in efforts to fortify the Syrian rebellion with the aim of undercutting its regional adversary, Iran. Though Saudi Arabia can see the risk to the region of having Syria remain in a prolonged state of civil war, it also does not want to see a broader understanding between Washington and Tehran develop out of the Syrian crisis, an understanding that could strain the U.S.-Saudi relationship. If negotiations gain traction in the coming months, Saudi Arabia may end up being more of a spoiler than a facilitator.

Turkey's Challenge

These negotiations evidently are about much more than Syria. Syria is merely the conversation-starter for much broader strategic disputes. Turkey's challenge in managing the number of players and competing interests in this negotiation may be immense, but there is arguably no country more suited by geography and its own strategic needs to seize the task. Turkey lies at the crossroads of the many conflicts these negotiations will touch on. And unlike the United States, Turkey's physical proximity to the issues deprives it of the option of selective engagement.

All of this will generate great consternation within Turkey. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, sought to relieve his country from the burdens of the Ottoman legacy in the Islamic world. His vision entailed creating a state based on a national -- as opposed to an Islamic -- identity and reorienting Turkey toward Europe, where the idea of a nation-state had already taken root. Today, Europe is turning inward, grappling with the revival of the nation-state while clinging to the idea of a supranational union. To Turkey's south, Pan-Islamism promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood is pricking Turkish historical sensibilities as violent political evolutions compel a reluctant Ankara into action.

The Syrian information minister strategically exposed this uncomfortable reality in his recent rebuke of Ankara. Turkey is not trying to advertise the re-creation of the Ottoman sphere of
influence, but it simply cannot avoid having its actions rekindle memories of Ottoman troops on Arab soil. This memory is seared into the Syrian and Egyptian consciousness, something Turkey's regional adversaries will exploit in a bid to delay Turkey's inevitable rise.

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