

The Syrian Crisis from a Neighbor's Perspective

View from Turkey

Karen Kaya

WHAT STARTED OUT as internal turmoil in Syria in March 2011 turned into a regional crisis, which then turned into an international crisis. The crisis in Syria is now affecting the surrounding region, most critically Syria's neighbors, who have all had to contend with instability at their borders. The humanitarian dimension alone directly affects Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, who, as of February 2014, were hosting nearly 2.5 million refugees.¹ However, even greater long-term repercussions could include reshaping of the entire Middle East. The crisis has deepened divisions in the region along Sunni and Shiite lines. Moreover, the Kurds are planting the seeds for an autonomous Kurdish region adjacent to the one in Iraq, causing strategic and security concerns for all neighboring countries. At the global level, the greatest risks are that Syria could become a breeding ground for Islamic militants, and those militant groups such as al-Qaida or Hezbollah could obtain and use Bashar al-Assad's biological and chemical weapons.

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(AP photo)

From Turkey's point of view, the crisis now poses four direct threats to its security. First, there is the issue of border security, particularly since clashes between anti-Assad forces and Assad regime forces have spilled over into the border region where approximately 600,000 refugees are located. Border violations have brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war, while Turkey's stationing of Patriot missiles near the Turkish-Syrian border has upset its already-tense relations with Iran and Russia. Turkey suffered one large terrorist incident related to the crisis in Syria—car bomb attacks in Reyhanli in 2013—resulting in the death of over 50 Turks. Second, the prospect that Kurds in northern Syria will gain some kind of autonomous status raises concern that Turkey's 14 million Kurds will feel emboldened to renew a push for an autonomous region. Third, there is concern that the northern part of Syria could become a base for the separatist rebels of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (known as the PKK), which Turkey is engaged with in precarious peace negotiations after fighting for almost 30 years. Fourth, there is the global threat from al-Qaida (or like-minded militant radical Islamist groups) settling in Syria, which has already

begun.² For Turkey, this means becoming neighbors with al-Qaida-linked groups and possibly becoming a transit point for Islamic militants going to join the jihad in Syria.

Going Regional: The Jet Crisis and Activation of NATO

When the Syrian crisis first erupted, Turkey used dialogue and tried to persuade the Assad regime to stop the violence. As the violence continued, Turkey changed its stance completely, harshly criticizing Assad and calling on him to step down. Turkey eventually became party to the conflict by becoming a base of support and refuge for anti-Assad forces. It sheltered members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and military defectors fighting the Syrian forces. Consequently, Turkish-Syrian relations quickly took a turn for the worse.

The crisis became regional on 22 June 2012, when Syria downed an unarmed Turkish RF-4 (an F-4 Phantom) military jet, which crashed into the Mediterranean Sea (see map in figure 1). Following the incident, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan declared this a hostile act and announced that Turkey now considered Syria a clear and present

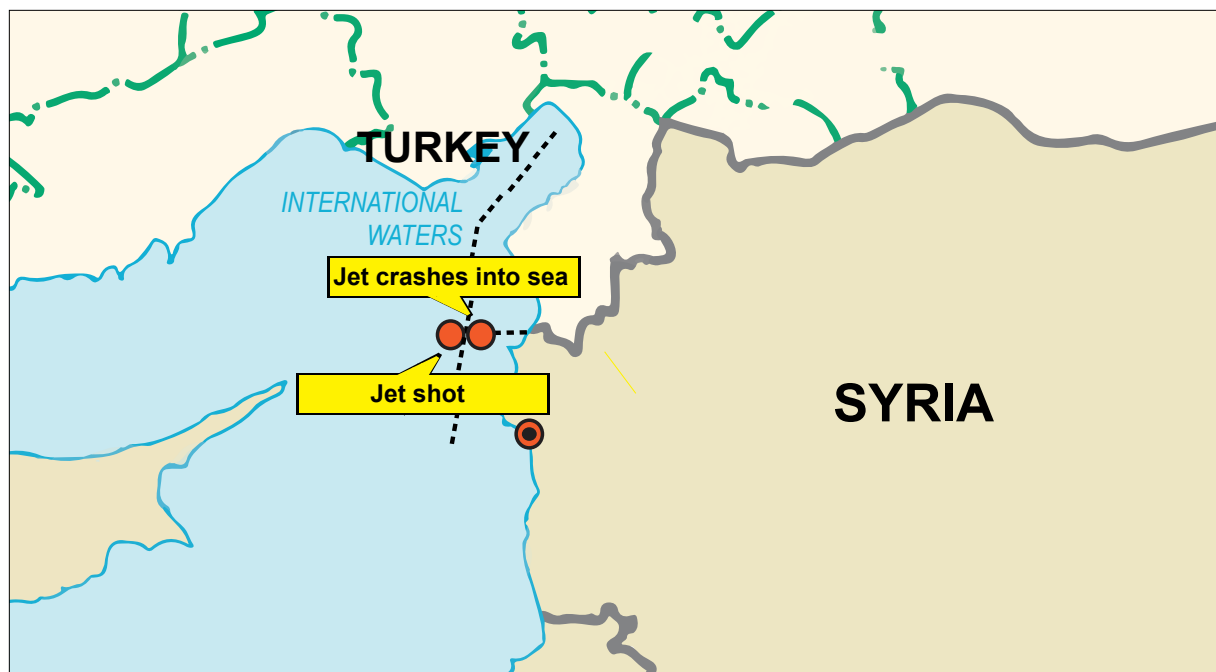


Figure 1
Map of where the Turkish jet was shot and crashed

danger. He warned that Turkey would consider any military element approaching the border from Syria a threat and treat it as a military target. On 24 June, Turkey invoked Article 4 of the NATO charter, which allows consultations with allies if a member considers its security to be under threat. The NATO meeting took place on 26 June 2012 in Brussels, where the alliance expressed solidarity with Turkey.

The situation was significant in several ways. In addition to escalating the conflict to a regional level, it also put the crisis on NATO's agenda. Turkey's activation of NATO marked a new phase in a crisis that had so far focused on U.N. diplomacy.

Border Security

The number of refugees living in camps along the Turkish side of the Syrian border has increased from 500,000 late in 2012 to over 600,000 early in 2014. Small border violations started occurring in April 2012 when Syrian forces attacked one of these refugee camps, killing two Syrian refugees and wounding two Turks. Over time, fighting between the FSA and Assad reached the Turkish-Syria border. FSA forces captured several Syrian border posts, but Assad's forces continued to fight back with bombs. The Turkish Army sent troops, armored personnel carriers, and missile batteries to the Syrian border to strengthen its defenses. In mid-July 2012, Bab al-Hawa, an important border crossing, fell into Syrian rebels' hands and rapidly became a jihadist gathering point. Tourism in the region quickly vanished, hurting many local businesses.

The border violations continued through fall 2012. On 3 October 2012, mortar fire from Syria hit the Turkish town of Akçakale, killing five Turkish citizens (two women and three children). The Turkish Armed Forces responded swiftly and sharply, shelling Syrian tanks and armored vehicles, leading to six days of exchanged artillery fire. The Turkish parliament passed a bill authorizing the government to send troops to Syria if necessary. This was followed by an incident on 12 November 2012, when Syrian warplanes hit opposition targets less than a quarter mile from the Turkish border, prompting Turkish F-16s to be dispatched to the area on a reconnaissance and patrol mission. The planes were armed and the

pilots were instructed to hit Syrian planes if there was any border violation.

On 21 November 2012, Turkey officially applied to NATO for the deployment of Patriot surface-to-air missile systems on its border with Syria; they were deployed in early February 2013. The Netherlands, Germany, and the United States provided the advanced PAC-3 model missiles that Turkey needed to intercept ballistic missiles, and they were stationed about 60 miles north of the border.³ Both Iran and Russia criticized the deployment and made statements that this was not a deterrent but a provocation or an excuse for NATO to be in the region. A high-ranking Iranian military official commented that this move would lay the groundwork for a world war.⁴

The greatest damage to Turkish life was the terrorist attack on 11 May 2013. This was the largest terrorist attack in Turkey since the 2003 al-Qaida attacks in Istanbul. Twin car bomb attacks struck Reyhanlı, a city near Turkey's Syria border where many Syrian refugees had sought refuge, killing over 50 and injuring hundreds of Turkish citizens. Turkish officials believed the perpetrators were connected to Syria's intelligence agency, linked to the Assad regime, and had conducted the attack in response to Turkey's Syria policy. The incident also had domestic implications. It created an uproar in Turkey, with many criticizing the Turkish government's Syria policy and claiming that policy had led to the attack.⁵

Northern Syria = Western Kurdistan?

An important aspect of the crisis that directly affects Turkey is the potential formation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, adjacent to the one in Iraq. Turkey has long feared that such a scenario would embolden efforts for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey or lead to similar territorial claims among its own Kurds. The Kurds in Syria are organizing themselves and trying to establish their own region. Turkey perceives this as a threat to its territorial integrity, given that almost half of the estimated Kurdish population of 30 million lives in Turkey. Therefore, the Turkish government's position regarding Syria has been that the regime should go, but Syrian unity should be preserved. Turkey does not want to see Syria fragmented along ethnic lines.⁶



Figure 2
Kurds along the Turkey-Syria border

The issue is really a regional one, encompassing all of the countries in which Kurds live: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Within each country, the Kurds live in areas they consider part of a greater “Kurdistan.” They see Kurdistan as a four-part region: eastern Kurdistan (Iran), western Kurdistan (Syria), southern Kurdistan (Iraq), and northern Kurdistan (Turkey).⁷ A semi-autonomous Kurdish region already has been established in Iraq. This region has most traits of an independent state, including its own constitution, parliament, flag, army, border and border patrol, national anthem, international airports, and an education system.⁸ Iraq’s Kurdish region stands as an inspiration to Kurds in neighboring Syria, Iran, and Turkey.

Syrian Kurds’ short-term goal is an autonomous region in Syria, similar to the one in Iraq. For the long term, there are aspirations for a Kurdish confederation or even an independent, united Kurdistan. As with any nationalist movement, the ultimate dream is independence, but this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.⁹

The Turkey-Syria border divides ethnic Kurds and traditional Kurdish lands. Drawn at the end of the World War I to follow an Ottoman railway line, it is approximately 560 miles long and is the longest border Turkey shares with any of its neighbors. People on both sides of the border are linked to each other. When Kurds in Turkey and Syria talk about their respective regions, they use the terms “above the line” and “below the line.” The two groups are

really one, and the Turkey-Syria border is really a Turkey-Kurdish Syria border (see figure 2).

Initially, the Kurds in Syria did not take sides in the conflict; they kept their distance from both the Assad regime and the rebels, focusing on the security of their own cities.¹⁰ They viewed the situation in Syria as a historic opportunity to plant the seeds of an autonomous Kurdish region there. Instead of getting involved in the fighting, they focused on Kurdish national unification, establishing an army, and securing their own towns. As the fighting spread in the rest of the country, a string of Kurdish-majority

towns in the north seized local authority from the central government and took control of most state institutions in the northern part of Syria, including police stations.¹¹

The most powerful Kurdish group in Syria is the Democratic Union Party (known as the PYD), considered the Syrian contingent of the PKK. In addition to the PYD, 15 other Kurdish groups are united under the name of the Kurdish National Council (KNC). On 12 July 2012, the KNC and the PYD came together and formed the Kurdish Supreme Committee in Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan region. This was an initiative by Massoud Barzani, the leader of Kurdish Regional Government.¹² In the Erbil agreement, the KNC and the PYD agreed to control Kurdish cities jointly and planned to take advantage of any administrative vacuum to establish their rule in the Kurdish cities in Syria.¹³ The groups even established an armed wing called the People’s Protection Committees.¹⁴

However, the PYD continued to emerge as the most powerful Kurdish faction in the region, proving it had the capacity to perform a variety of governance activities across Kurdish Syria. The PYD sustained its dominance over Kurdish governance due to its organization, networks, and control over the law enforcement and military wings of the Kurdish Supreme Committee.

In July 2013, Saleh Muslim, the head of the PYD, announced a plan to create an interim governing body to represent all of western Kurdistan. The

plan represented an important step toward Kurdish autonomy in Syria, something Syrian Kurds aspire to. Sinem Khalil, a member of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, said in their first meeting on 24 July 2012 that the Kurdish people in Syria were thirsty for unity that would help achieve their aspirations, and that was their main focus at the time.¹⁵ He also said he believed their Kurdish dream (autonomy) was coming true.

Kurds in Turkey are closely following these developments. Leyla Zana, a Kurdish member of the Turkish parliament, has called on Kurds from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria to unite and to strive together for their causes, saying that after centuries, a gate for freedom has been opened for the Kurdish people.¹⁶ Separately, PKK leader Murat Karayılan said in a 2012 interview with an English-language newspaper in Erbil that Kurds seeing other federal systems springing up around the world feel they have the right to establish a state; they consider themselves a nation.¹⁷

Turkey has a painful history with the Kurdish separatist movement PKK. In this conflict, almost 40,000 lives have been lost over the last 30 years.

Thus, a new Kurdish region is taking shape. The *Kurdistan Tribune*, a platform for Kurdish news and opinion with an optimistic view for Kurdistan, claims, “What the Kurds are doing now in the west [Syria] lays the basis for a semi-autonomous region which can link with her sister in the south of Kurdistan [Iraq] ... This is not a dream; this can become a reality.”¹⁸ These statements reflect that the Kurds view autonomy as the second piece of the greater Kurdistan project, which Turkey considers a threat to its territorial integrity. A Kurdish National Conference, the first of its kind, had been planned for November 2013 but was postponed indefinitely for political reasons. The group had aimed to gather all Kurdish political groups to set a roadmap for the Middle East’s Kurds.

Another Northern Iraq? The PKK Issue

Turkey has a painful history with the Kurdish separatist movement PKK. In this conflict, almost 40,000 lives have been lost over the last 30 years. Currently, there is an ongoing dialogue in place to end the armed violence and get the PKK to lay down its arms, a precarious process with high hopes but also high risk. In the early 1990s, the PKK had found a safe haven in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, which it used as a base to launch attacks on Turkey. Ankara is concerned that, if the peace process fails, the group could exploit the chaos in Syria to expand its base and influence. The PYD’s control over much of the Syrian side of the Turkey-Syria border allows the PKK a much larger space for its organization and operations, which strengthens the PKK’s position in Turkey.

In fact, when the Syrian crisis first emerged, clashes between the Turkish army and PKK militants intensified. During the last two weeks of July 2012, the PKK waged one of their fiercest battles in recent years against the Turkish army. Army forces fought the PKK using helicopters and fighter jets in the mountainous terrain close to the town of Şemdinli in southeastern Turkey. The ongoing peace negotiations have stopped the fighting and attacks, but from the Turkish military’s point of view, northern Syria is another northern Iraq, another potential PKK stronghold. Turkey views the current developments in Syria as very similar to those that took place in Iraq from 1980 to 2012. With the start of the Iran-Iraq War, northern Iraq started splitting from the central government in Baghdad. The 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq brought northern Iraq (southern Kurdistan) closer to autonomy. This area eventually became the PKK’s base of operations.¹⁹

In 2012, Dr. Nihat Ali Özcan, a terrorism expert from the Turkish Economic and Political Research Association, said that just as the PKK had established an area where it could obtain logistical support and have a base for its operations in northern Iraq after the Kurdish region separated from the government in Baghdad, the PKK would try to do the same in northern Syria.²⁰ He said that for Turkey, this would mean its problem in northern Iraq would expand to include northern Syria. He stated this would mean that while Turkey was trying to control its 190-mile border with Iraq, it would also have to control its 560-

mile border with Syria. He predicted this would become a new security concern for Turkey.

Despite the ongoing peace process, in Turkey, concerns remain about the PYD retaining control along parts of the Turkish-Syria border. PYD control of the border would create a greater safe haven for the PKK.

Jihadi Groups in Syria: New and Unwelcome Neighbors for Turkey

Several al-Qaida-affiliated jihadi organizations have established a foothold in Syria. These groups have experience with improvised explosive devices, suicide bombings, and bomb making. Their expertise and organization have allured some FSA fighters, many of whom have pledged allegiance to various groups. One such fighter explained to *The Guardian* in 2012, “The Free Syrian Army has no rules and no military or religious order. Everything happens chaotically. Al-Qaida has a law that no one, not even the emir, can break. The FSA lacks the ability to plan and lacks military experience. That is what [al-Qaida] can bring. They have an organization that all countries have acknowledged.”²¹ An FSA commander told *The Guardian*, “They [al-Qaida] are stealing the revolution from us and they are working for the day that comes after.”²² It appears that al-Qaida is turning the local conflict into a global one.

Then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared on 10 May 2012 that al-Qaida had become an actor in the Syrian crisis.²³ More and more jihadi videos are popping up on the Internet, showing different rebel groups calling for jihad, including the Islamic Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (an al-Qaida-linked group in northern Syria), and Jabhat al-Nusrah. What will become of these groups after the fall of the Assad regime is unknown. In 2012, an al-Qaida operative told *The New York Times*, “We have experience now fighting the Americans, and



A Syrian army soldier walks on a street during a government-organized media tour in the Jobar neighborhood of Damascus, Syria, 24 August 2013. (AP Photo)

more experience now with the Syrian revolution Our big hope is to form a Syrian-Iraqi Islamic state for all Muslims, and then announce our war against Iran and Israel, and free Palestine.”²⁴ In a recent audio statement, al-Qaida linked its insurgency in Iraq with the revolution in Syria, depicting both as sectarian (Sunni versus Shiite) conflicts.²⁵ As a fundamentalist Sunni movement, al-Qaida is hostile to the Shiite-dominated state of Iran. It is also opposed to the Shiite-led government of Iraq and the Alawite-led government of Syria (Alawite is an offshoot of Shiite Islam).

The greatest threat this poses concerns biological and chemical weapons. The chaos in Syria carries the risk of Assad losing control of his weapons stockpiles. In 2012, a jihadi site featured a video showing FSA rebels with chemical and biological weapons they claimed were left behind by Assad’s army when they left Aleppo in a rush after heavy fighting.²⁶ Deterring groups influenced by al-Qaida from using such weapons is a challenge; they have shown that their members are not afraid to die.

In mid-July 2013, the al-Qaida-linked Al-Nusrah Front started attacking Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria. These attacks came at a time when the Kurds had started working on establishing their own administration in the region, which includes

Syria's oil and gas resources. The fighting took place along large parts of Turkey's Syrian border. With the start of fighting between Al-Nusra Front elements and the PYD (which Turkey considers an extension of the PKK), Turkey finds itself in a dilemma: the government in Ankara does not want its border to become like Afghanistan, but it is also opposed to what it considers an extension of the PKK's control in the region.

On 15 October 2013, the Turkish Army announced that it had fired on fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in retaliation for a stray mortar shell that hit Turkish soil. This was the first time the Turkish Army responded to al-Qaida-linked targets in Syria.

The presence of jihadi groups on its longest border leaves Turkey with concern about what security analysts are calling the *Afghanisation* risk in Syria.²⁷ The diverse dissenting groups in Syria are not united in their goals and ideologies.²⁸ Initially, they appeared to be united against a common

enemy and obtained military and political assistance from outside actors and Muslim networks offering support. More recently however, these groups have started turning against each other or becoming instruments of their respective supporters. The mujahid groups in Afghanistan also displayed a strong resistance during 10 years of occupation by the Soviet Union. However, once the occupation was over, various nations tried to control their favorite groups through aid and financial backing while Afghanistan disintegrated into internecine chaos.

Turkey fears the spillover effects of this activity on its border, including becoming a transit point for jihadists. Foreign fighters from Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and Afghanistan are reportedly moving into Syria through Turkey.²⁹ Other risks include the potentially devastating effects on the tourism industry, which represents around 10 percent of the economy, and decreased prospects for attracting foreign investment.



Turkish soldiers patrol the Turkish-Syrian border after a blast occurred in Hacıpasa, Turkey, 3 September 2013. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

The Chemical Weapons Attack, Diplomatic Developments, and Turkey's Position

Events of 21 August 2013 in the suburbs of Damascus, according to a U.S. intelligence assessment, included a sarin gas attack by the Syrian regime.³⁰ This attack caused the death of over 1,400 people and sparked the prospect of a military intervention. When intervention was being discussed in the United States, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu expressed their support and called for a comprehensive intervention directed at the regime, rather than a limited one. In fact, Turkey had been raising the need for a military intervention, or at least an internationally imposed humanitarian or no-fly zone, since the summer of 2012, following the downing of its fighter plane and an influx of refugees into Turkey.

Subsequent diplomatic developments, including Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, have left the Turkish government disappointed and facing the prospect of Assad remaining in power. Comments by Turkish government officials suggest they believe the outcome does not punish Assad, nor does it address the humanitarian crisis.³¹ Ankara's position, because

of its difference with that of the international community, has left Turkey in an isolated position in the Middle East.³²

The Turkish government's position does not reflect the views of the majority of Turks, however, who oppose a military intervention in Syria.³³ The public is wary of the costs to Turkey of such an intervention, including more refugees, worsening border security, terrorist attacks, a depressed economy, and declining relations with Russia and Iran.

The outcome of the Syrian crisis, however it eventually turns out, will have varying repercussions at the regional and international levels depending on the actors. The conclusion of the crisis will directly affect Syria's neighbors because they will have to coexist with the resulting structure. For Turkey, the most direct effect of the crisis is the likely establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern and northeastern Syria. A PKK safe haven there would be a direct threat to Turkey's security. In addition, Turkey may be left with al-Qaida-affiliated or similar militant groups on its longest border. Finally, there are greater global dangers, involving such groups' potential acquisition of dangerous weapons, which will have consequences far beyond the Middle East. **MR**

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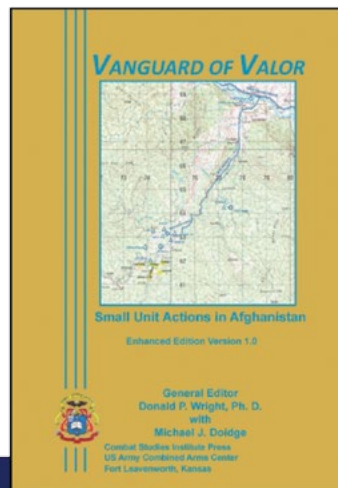
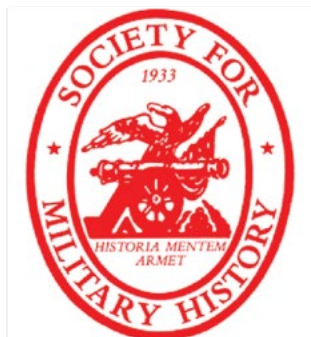
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