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THE ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE
SYRIAN CRISIS: THE NEW 'GREAT
GAME' WITH IRAN

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THE ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS: THE NEW 'GREAT GAME' WITH IRAN

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Summary:

The Syrian crisis has too many actors and not so many solutions. At a time when violence has reached the highest levels, the role of Turkey as an emerging leader in the Middle East can be decisive. However, the risk of an increased Iranian involvement may lead to a regional conflict.

Keywords:

Syria, Turkey, Iran, emerging power.

Turkey is a country on which all its allies and neighbors can rely. Turkish friendship is valuable, but everyone should also be aware that Turkish anger can be violent

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish Prime Minister, in the speech of June 26, 2012 to Parliament

Leaving aside the demagoguery, several things can be deduced from the words of the current Turkish Chief Executive. Among them, while Ankara seems to prefer the friendly approach (with the exception of the Kurds), it should not be forgotten that the country relies on one of the largest armies, with more than half a million troops, and most modern in the Middle East. Armed forces which, moreover, are the second in size of NATO, only behind the United States.

But we can also see in the sentence of Erdogan that Turkey's leaders see their country as strong and powerful, a powerhouse. And they have no shortage of reasons to think this way since, perhaps, it is going through its best moment of the last 300 or 400 years.

After decades of aspiring to be a member of the European-American club, unsuccessfully in the case of the European Union, and without going beyond a secondary role in the Western bloc, in recent times, Ankara seems to prefer its Middle East neighbours, with the objective and the real possibility, in addition, of having a leading role in the region. Nowadays, it is almost unthinkable to attempt to analyze, understand, and even if only, talk about the region without taking into account the Turkish position regarding the issue to be treated.

The Turkey geo-strategic position is undoubtedly a good pillar upon which to build the expansion of its influence.



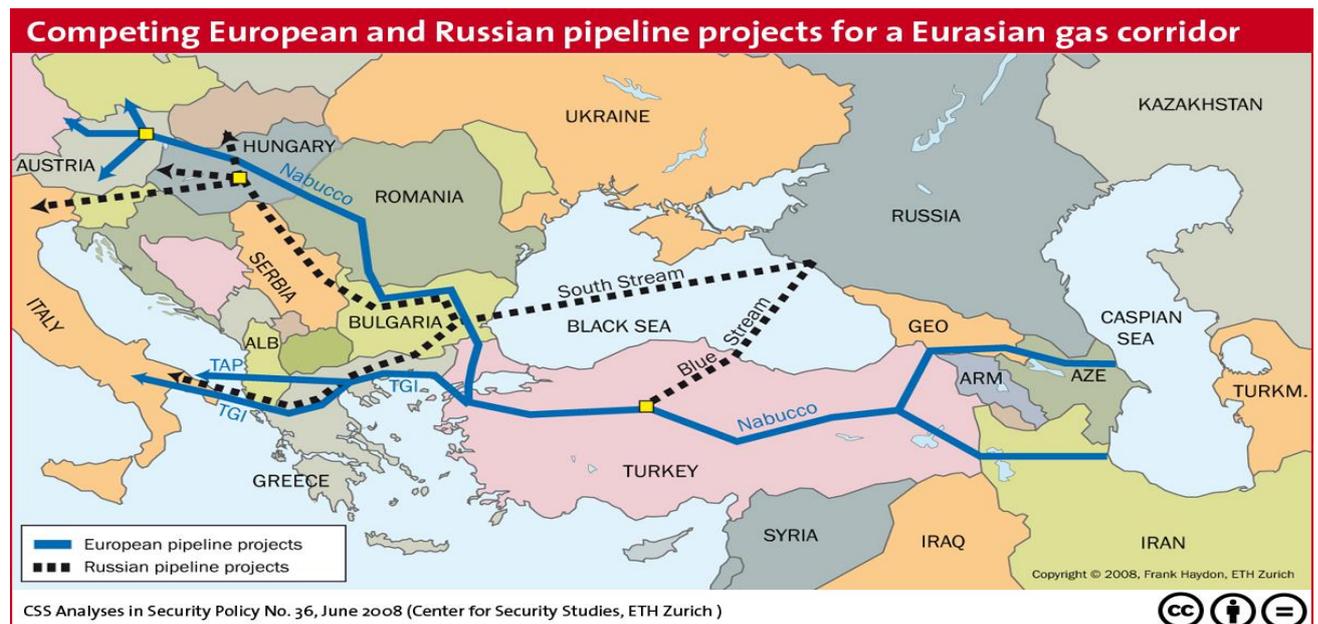
Geopolitical map of the situation of Turkey and its neighbours. Source: Microsoft Corp. 2007

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As you can see in the map, halfway between East and West, the North and the South, the Turkish Republic has a privileged position¹. First of all, as a physical bridge of something essential: oil and gas, from Central Asia and the area of the Caspian Sea to international markets. This factor is relevant since all those natural resources would come to places such as Europe without passing through Russian territory and breaking the domain that Moscow has in this market.

But also, secondly, by its proximity to the island of Cyprus; thirdly, their relationship with the Palestinian people and Israel, fourthly, its position as a Sunni leader ahead of Saudi Arabia and against the Shiite Iran, with which it shares a border, as well as, fifthly, with Iraq, specially with the area controlled by the Kurds.

Regarding the energy, we can stand out the agreement reached at the end of June 2012 between Turkish and Azeri Governments to start up the TANAP project (Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline) that will take this resource from Azerbaijan, through Turkey, to Europe. Previous ideas such as the Nabucco West and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) are related to it. All of these strengthen the position of Turkey in the energy issue and weaken Russia², which partially loses its oil and gas monopoly on its way from Russian territory and Central Asia to Europe.



Map showing some of the Russian and European projects of the Eurasian corridor pipeline. Source: Centre for Security Studies, ETH, Zurich

¹ PERAZZO, Nicolás, *Turquía, actor de relevancia en el panorama geopolítico global* (Turkey, major player in the global geopolitical landscape), Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies' website, July 2012

² <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/nabucco-pick-hikes-turkeys-energy-hub-bid.aspx?pageID=238&nID=24350&NewsCatID=348>
http://www.sta.ethz.ch/var/plain_site/storage/images/graphics/competing-european-and-russian-pipeline-projects-for-a-eurasian-gas-corridor-06-08/2288-2-eng-GB/Competing-European-and-Russian-pipeline-projects-for-a-Eurasian-gas-corridor-06-08.jpg

As far as Cyprus is concerned, Ankara continues to control the Northern strip of the island since the 1974 invasion. And, now, a big bag of gas in the waters of the island has been discovered. An opportunity that the Turkish Government cannot miss, not only for domestic consumption, but, as set out above, if it wants to position itself as a global energy centre. Although Turkey assures that it only seeks to adhere to international law regarding the rights of the bag, and that it prefers to do so in a peaceful way, it has not hesitated for a moment to show its military strength and send its fleet to do maneuvers in the area.

In fact, the discovery of natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has also led to some tensions between Israeli and Turkish military units in the airspace of this region, but no serious incidents have been caused. Even more dramatic and diplomatic has been Ankara's approach to one of the frozen conflicts in the Middle East and one of the major sources of instability for decades: the confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Turkey has shown support for the Palestinian cause and has moved away from Israel, after years of cooperation, even in the military field. A performance that has boosted its popularity in the Arab world. If it wanted to have any chance of accessing the Sunni leadership in the region, Ankara had to choose, and it has: by sacrificing its relationship with the Jewish State.

Because the Turkish Government is facing Arabs as a kind of 'Sunni champion'. With regard to the Arab Spring, Turkey is shown as a modern country, a model of progress and democracy in the entire region. It offers a system to emulate after the Arab riots, opposed to dictatorial regimes (read Egypt, Tunisia or Libya) or traditionalist and anachronistic regimes (such as that of Saudi Arabia, which still struggles with the Turks to be leader of the Sunnis).

The importance of the model of the Turkish State as a basis of its aspiration to regional leadership is such that it deserves our dedication for at least some paragraphs. To begin with, from the Western point of view, the type of Turkish regime offers a more benign face than that of other Islamic versions of Government, either real or hypothetical³.

From the point of view of those who have participated, or been moved by the Arab Spring, Turkey is a model to emulate. After popular revolts that have ended with dictatorships that seemed everlasting, all those Tunisians, Libyans and Egyptians (among others, because it is not only them) seeking a better future turned their eyes to Ankara.

The Turkish model seems to have allowed, without any disasters or tragedies, the accumulation of power by the Islamists within some secular and, essentially, democratic rules of the game. This cohabitation between Secularism and Islamism is the added value of the Turkish experience in the eyes of the Arab world⁴.

³ <http://www.economist.com/node/21525408>

⁴ http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf

In addition to an expanding economy with a business class more or less independent from the Government and a certain normalization of civil-military relations, Ankara has stable institutions and a professional bureaucracy. But perhaps these two factors are more important than all of the above: first, that the Turkish democratisation process is incomplete, there is much that needs to be done in that respect, and second, and probably the most essential one, geographical and cultural proximity and, of course, the same religious identity of Turkey regarding the Arab world⁵.

Surveys of the foreign policy programme of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation reflect what has been explained above. In 2011, Turkey gets more than 70 % of approval in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. In Egypt, Tunisia and Libya this sympathy is over 80 % and even 90 %. The only exceptions to this trend that exists at least since 2009 are, curiously, Syria and Iran⁶.

It so happens that this prone breeding ground has encountered a predisposition from Ankara, which sees that inspiration that produces an easy way to achieve its aspiration to become a regional power⁷. That, apart from the remarkable increase in exports of Turkish goods and services to all the strip of North Africa.

However, not everything is peace and harmony. We have already pointed out, first of all, the democratic deficiencies of the current Turkish regime. We are going to point out only some aspects: as far as the rights of minorities are concerned (Kurds or Alevis, for example), or the growing number of journalists imprisoned in the country for alleged crimes related to the information that they publish⁸. We must not forget another possibility, specially given the slowdown of Government democratic reforms in Ankara in recent times. We mean that, when relations with the army have been normalized, which means that the Executive has disposed of his guardianship, what prevents the Government from taking a drift towards authoritarianism and accumulating more and more power without any other institution opposing him? Because the judiciary does not seem to have enough capacity to replace the old role of checks and balances that the military had for decades in Turkey⁹. We must add to this the doubts about the issue of press freedom.

Secondly, Turkish secularism, on the basis of its system, had to be harshly imposed to the population at the time, not in a very democratic way. This is something difficult to do nowadays in the context of a certain democratic opposition. But, in addition, it seems that it is not precisely the Turkish secular side that the peoples of the Arab Spring highlight, but its Muslim identity.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.awraq.es/blob.aspx?idx=5&nId=67&hash=5eb92ecc67e9336175f008e0aa080949>

⁷ http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf

⁸ <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/06/144751851/the-turkish-model-can-it-be-replicated>

⁹ http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf

The current Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was received as a hero during his visit to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, at the end of last year. However, in Egypt, very few understood and shared their words when, in the unstoppable advance of the Muslim Brotherhood, he said on television that «nothing prevented a Muslim Prime Minister from governing a secular State»¹⁰.

Despite its weaknesses and difficulties, a vibrant economy, as well as the sympathy towards Turkey and the admiration for its model of State have favoured the placement of Ankara as a regional power, displacing somehow Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Sunnis.

And in front of all of them, Iran. With regard to the Sunni-Shiite confrontation, on one side is placed a Shiite Persian leader and on the other, a Turkish Sunni champion. In opposition to threats from Teheran, Ankara calls for dialogue, mediation and support, and it is emerging as an engine of stability and security in this turbulent region. This is the image that Turkey projects, based on its own rational calculation to achieve its goals.

An image based on a foreign policy that, beyond the Sunni-Shiite confrontation and that of Iran, seeks to put Turkey in the centre of the region and as an area of influence. And it is trying to do this presenting itself as an actor capable of changing the course of events and also claiming to be the «new defender of the Muslim world» to other world powers and to the American superpower.

An example of this policy, which seems paradigmatic at present after the current Turkish-Iranian collision on the Syrian issue and also because of the domain of influence in the area, is Ankara's opposition to a new round of sanctions against Iran at the United Nations in June 2010 and the subsequent dialogue agreement with Brazil. All this, apart from mediating on several occasions between Washington and Tehran on the issue related to its nuclear programme, and doing so with a certain degree of independence from the White House.

However, Ankara has used that image and that role as a mediator and as a stabilizing force in other conflicts. To mention some examples: between Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as in Afghan territory between the US and Taliban insurgents, between Israel and Syria, between Hamas and Fatah, in Lebanon, Iraq or in the Balkans.¹¹

In the words of the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, in a speech in Sarajevo: «We will reintegrate the region of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus... together with Turkey as the center of the world politics in the future.»¹²

¹⁰ <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/06/144751851/the-turkish-model-can-it-be-replicated>

¹¹ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote03.pdf>

¹² BBC Monitoring International reports, *Bosnian Serb Party Officials Slam Turkish FM's "Ottoman Balkans" Remarks*, 26-10-2009

With all this in mind, and returning to Iran, Turkey does not intend to provoke military confrontation with the other great emerging power in the area: Iran. But it is indeed looking for external support, in this case, of the organization to which it belongs: NATO. The Alliance will deploy the installation of its anti-missile shield in Turkish territory against a possible Iranian attack.

Membership in the Atlantic Alliance offers a series of guarantees to Ankara against a possible confirmation that Iran has the capacity to develop nuclear weapons. A presumption that could lead to the nuclearisation of the whole region. Faced with this possibility, one might ask what would the Turkish Government do: if it will launch itself to the atomic race or if it will consider that the country's security is sufficiently covered by the NATO umbrella.

One of the countries in which the attempts to expand the influence between Turkey and Iran are reflected is Iraq. A country marked nowadays by the fierce and violent confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites, which has put this nation on the brink of a civil conflict.

But in Iraq there are as well the third parties in the group: the Kurds, settled in a huge oil field with their own Self-Government in the North of the country. The PKK guerrilla (Kurdistan Workers' Party) is Turkish, but on various occasions it launches their attacks on security forces from their bases in Iraqi territory. For decades, the PKK has created a myriad of problems to Turkey, which has a substantial Kurdish minority within its borders.

Regarding the Kurds, although it could turn out to be an ace up its sleeve that Teheran hides against Ankara, at least for now, there is no confrontation between the Iranian and the Turkish interests. This may be one of the reasons why the Turkish Executive leaves behind its «soft power» and does not hesitate for a moment to use its military power against the Kurdish guerrilla inside Iraqi territory.

These attacks are commonplace. To name just one: between 22 and 24 June 2012, the Turkish air force attacked 9 targets (hideouts and caves) of the PKK in the Qandil region, in the North of Iraq¹³. But not only that: this military operation took place a few days after a violent fighting had taken place between Turkish soldiers and the PKK guerrilla in Turkish territory. The destabilizing potential of the Kurdish rebels should not be underestimated. At present, they represent one of the biggest internal threats to the Turkish Republic. This compelling reason has led Ankara to use all its military strength against them. It is also a reason why Iran, which is emerging as its main rival in the region, is thinking about using this ace at any given moment.

¹³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/24/us-turkey-iraq-airstrike-idUSBRE85N06T20120624>

But if the Kurds are a threat, today the great challenge for Turkey is the civil conflict in neighbouring Syria, which is a main issue to be discussed in this document and will be dealt with later. In addition, it also has something to do with the Kurdish problem. The possibility that Kurdish organizations, as the PKK, use the power vacuum created by the Syrian war to advance in their own pro-independence agenda in the North of the country¹⁴, next to Iraqi Kurdistan, has led Ankara to react quickly. Firstly, the Government threatens with a military intervention in Syrian territory if the Kurdish rebels show signs of going in that direction. And secondly, in an unusual situation, Ankara and the autonomous Kurdish-Iraqi authorities have pointed out in a joint statement that they will act against that possibility¹⁵.

Thus far, we have tried to give a small overview on some of the relevant issues in the region these days as well as some of its actors from the Turkish point of view. If we may use the simile of chess, we could say we have placed the pieces on the board. From now on, we will try to establish the strategies to win the game regarding the Turkish White Queen (the white color being identified as the «soft power» that the Turkish Executive demonstrates) and the Iranian Black King, in relation to the threatened Syrian black bishop (in this case, the black color being identified as the «hard power» that exercise both the Iranian regime with, for example, its nuclear program, and the Syrian one, which, apart from aligning with Iran, has shown its toughness when it comes to suppressing the rebellion in its territory, with the bombing of jet fighters, helicopters, artillery shells and troops).

TURKEY, THE WHITE QUEEN

However, before advancing on the analysis of the image that Turkey gives of itself, as well as the achievement of its objectives and the defense of its interests today, it is important to know where all of this comes from. And this means recalling some of the facts that, throughout History, have led Turkey to become what it is today.

A bit of History

To understand the Turkey of today there is no need to go back to the times of the Trojan War. However, it is certain that the control of the route that leads from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean was more than 3,000 years ago as important as it is now.

¹⁴ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/kurdish-minority-to-seek-regional-autonomy-in-post-assad-syria.premium-1.455310>

¹⁵ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Aug-02/183126-turkey-iraqi-kurds-to-act-against-kurdish-rebels.ashx#axzz23bbbvXVK>

During the last decades, Greeks and Turks have had a dispute over sovereignty, airspace and the maritime border in the Aegean Sea, where there are 2,400 islands. These disputes are related to events that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Turkey lost most of its European territories. Meanwhile, Greece managed to maintain the cultural hegemony that it had in the area in ancient times. According to the Treaties of Lausanne (1923) and Paris (1947), the territorial division left in the power of Greece all the islands of the Aegean Sea which had been inhabited by Greeks since ancient times.

Everything changes from 1958 onward, with the evolution of the international law. Greek islands like Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Rhodes and Samos are very close to the Turkish coast. Even Megisti is only 1,300 metres away. This circumstance worsens the situation when, firstly, the expansion of the limits of territorial waters and, later on, concepts like continental shelf and exclusive economic area begin to be taken into account in the Law of the Sea. Since then, Greece and Turkey have been on the verge of a war up to 3 times.

The extension of territorial waters to 12 nautical miles would leave Turkey with 8 % of sovereignty in the Aegean, compared to 71 % in Greece. And, even more, if we add to this the exclusive economic area, all of this would leave Turkey outside the area of the high seas, along with the difficulties to move its military ships, as well as the trade flow that this would entail.

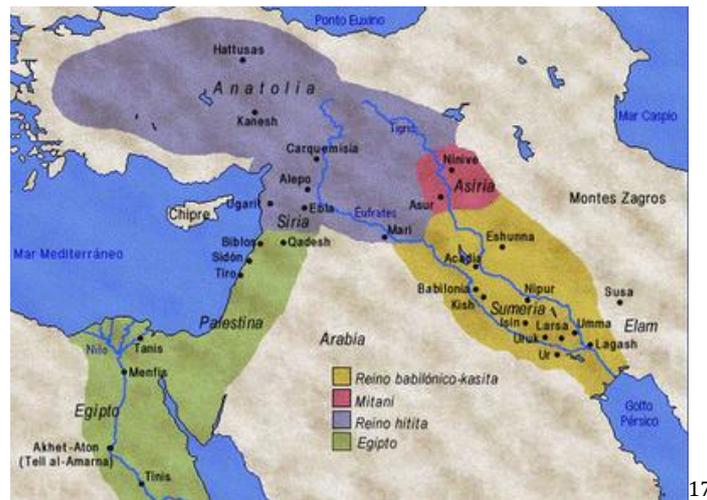
With these 12 miles, the territorial waters of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese would be connected, which would require Turkey to pass through Greek waters to reach Istanbul. However, a small area of sea would remain between the islands of Chios and Lesbos that would provide access to the Turkish port of Izmir.

The question of the Turkey's continental shelf and the islands of the Aegean does also remain. In the North, it affects several islands, such as Limnos, Agios Efstratios, Lesbos, Scyros and Psara; in the Center, the area of the Gulf of Kusadasi.; in the South, the Cyclades and the Dodecanese. Besides, there are also some specific cases due to its location: Rhodes and Megisti¹⁶.

Along with seniority, it will probably not be necessary to recall the Hittite Empire and the famous battle of Kadesh against the Egyptian troops of Ramses II, one of the great powers in those days, to understand Turkey today. However, those facts help us, indeed, to see that the geostrategic importance of what is now Turkey (and of course Syria, territory where the combat took place) is not new, and neither are its complicated relations with the East and the West.

¹⁶ <http://www.diploweb.com/The-Greco-Turkish-dispute-over-the.html> Article by Didier Ortolland which was published for the first time in *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, February 2009, pp. 74-87.

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Map of the region around 1300 BC. Source: Destylou-Historia

When the battle of Kadesh took place in 1275 BC, the hegemonic powers in the area were the Hittite, Egyptian and Assyrian Empires. Located in the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the city was a strategic location. However, not only Kadesh (before, it was Megiddo, for example), but also the whole region, which today includes Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories and part of Jordan, is a strategic location. It is a strip of land, not desert (something which is very important), that links Asia, Africa and Europe. Successive empires and powers throughout History have fought for it until today, not only because important trade routes pass through it, but also, in the same way that before the Empires fought for influence over the city-states of the area as a means of cementing, or increasing in its case its hegemony or influence¹⁸, now, for the same reasons, it is the regional powers, such as Turkey or Iran, and the international ones, such as USA and Russia, who make it.

The Eastern Roman Empire, whose capital was Constantinople (present Istanbul), became the heir to the Roman Empire, after the disintegration of the western part. From the 17th and 18th centuries onward, it was called Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines were an economic and military power in Europe, Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean until the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, moment in which a new age began: the Modern Age.

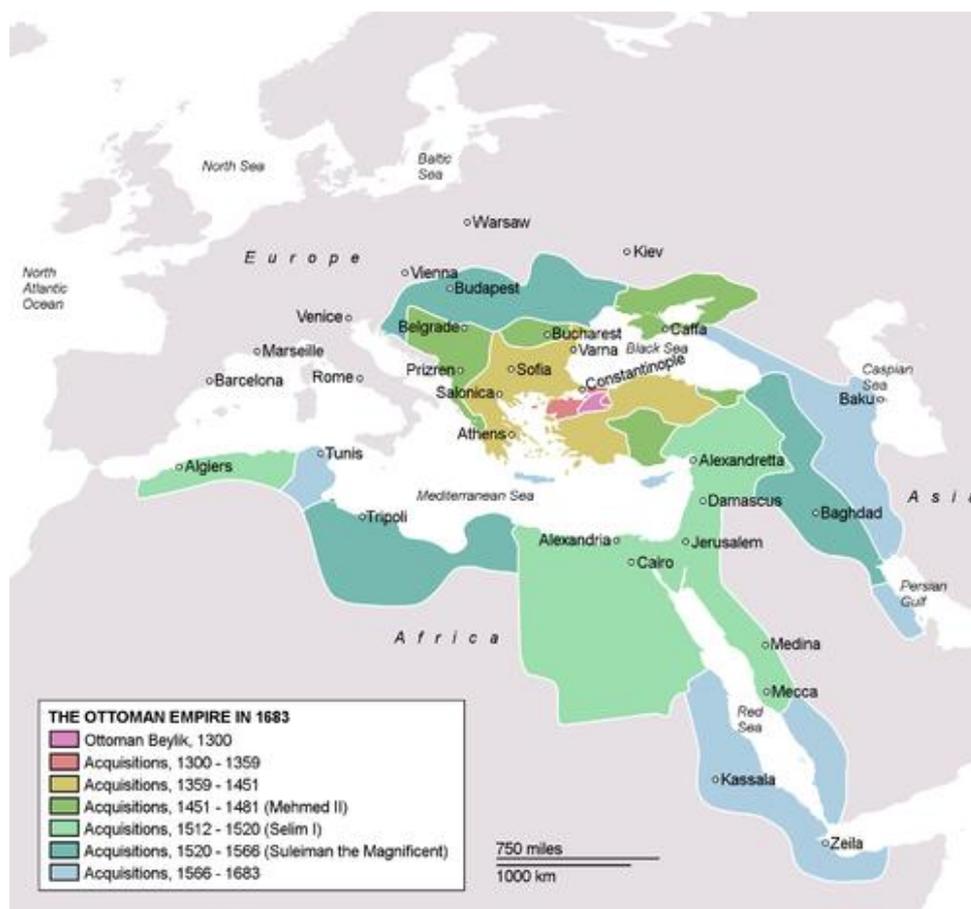
In order to understand the Turkish style of approach and expansion of its influence in the Middle East, through what has been called «soft power», we have to remember, indeed, the Ottoman Empire, if only because the Arab peoples of the region, including the Syrians, are very aware today of the centuries under the Ottoman rule.

¹⁷ <http://destylou-historia.blogspot.com.es/2010/10/los-hititas-un-imperio-olvidado.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/ancient/articles/kadesh.aspx>

The Ottoman government system is pyramidal. At the apex is the Sultan, who has the absolute power. Then there is the Divan, which is the Advisory Council formed by the closest circle to the sovereign. The most powerful member of this Council is the Grand Vizier. In order to lead a vast Empire like his own, a quite professional bureaucracy was needed to keep it united and running. The Empire was divided into provinces with a Governor and then into districts and subdistricts, governed by local authorities. All of them were responsible for carrying out the forced recruitment of young people for the Turkish cavalry and, of course, for raising taxes.

This organization was effective for a while but, over the centuries, corruption began to undermine both the bureaucracy and the Empire due to the slackness of some sultans and the extent of its territorial coverage¹⁹. It also must be recalled that this slackness would fuel some provincial governors to unleash their own way of governing their territories. An example (it was not the only one), is Ahmed Pasha Al-Jazzar, 'The butcher', who ruled the territories of Israel, Lebanon and Syria.



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Map of the Ottoman Empire at its peak. Source: *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, Robert Mantran

¹⁹ <http://www.allaboutturkey.com/ottoman2.htm>

²⁰ This map represents the rise of the Ottoman Empire to its peak in 1683. MANTRAN, Robert, *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, ed. Fayard, Paris, 1989

To defend its new regional interests, Turkey has had to overcome the feeling of betrayal which was left by the Arab revolt of 1916 and that marked the end of the Ottoman Empire with the defeat in the First World War.

On the other hand, the Arab peoples of the region have passed or maybe have to overcome the suspicion that have left the bitter legacy of centuries of Turkish control and suppression of its nationalism in the early 20th century. In principle, it seems that Turkey has managed to set in the area a positive and constructive vision against the past²¹.

The wreckage of the Ottoman Empire gives rise to several States. We are going to focus on the modern Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal 'Ataturk'. The new State breaks radically with the previous 600 years of Empire with a series of far-reaching reforms in the political, legal and social fields.

From this moment on, the powerful Turkish army becomes the guarantor of the Republic's permanence. Hardly controllable by the successive Governments, the military will enter politics and will come to give *coups d'état* like those of 1960, 1971 and 1980, whereas on no occasion will it remain in power²².

The changes carried out by the Justice and Development Party, AKP, moderate Islamist, after its victory in the elections in June 2002, will also be profound²³. Since then, and with great social support, reforms are made in different areas such as the economic and the political ones. One of them will be the strengthening of the civilian class of the Government against the military one, which translates into a loss of the power that the Turkish armed forces had come to accumulate in previous decades.

However, what today is seen as one of the great achievements of the Government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is its foreign policy, together with the Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu.

Turkish foreign policy in recent years

From the policies undertaken by Ataturk and continued by the successive Turkish Governments, it emerged that the international organization on which Turkey should have a seat 'in its own right' was the European Union.

²¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/12/15/place-in-sun-or-fifteen-minutes-of-fame-understanding-turkey-s-new-foreign-policy/1ef>

²² <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>

²³ FUENTES MONZONÍS-VILALLONGA, Jorge, *Turquía: ¿Asociado o miembro?*, Turquía a las puertas de Europa (Associate or member? Turkey at the gates of Europe), Cuaderno de Estrategia nº 132, IEEE, enero 2006

Only 2 years after the adoption of the Treaty of Rome (1957), Ankara officially applied for membership in the then European Economic Community. From that moment until today, Turkey's accession process to the EU still continues²⁴.

The coming to power of a party whose Muslim religious character is foundational, along with the growing and understandable frustration with the European authorities, represents a shift in Turkish external priorities.

Bearing in mind that half of Turkish trade is with Europe and that more than 80 % of foreign investment in the country comes from the United States and the European Union, Ankara considers 'other neighbours', those of the Middle East. There, it looks for new business opportunities, increasing commercial exchanges with countries such as Syria, Iraq or Iran, but also Russia. In fact, Turkey imports more from these two latter countries than it exports, including hydrocarbons.

Strengthening its economic role is a rational calculation for the Turkish Executive, since it is a good supporting pillar of a foreign policy geared towards the increase of its regional influence²⁵.

Apart from the economic factor, the political and diplomatic one is another of the main lines of the Turkish foreign policy designed by Ahmet Davutoglu. In this regard, the Minister has pointed out that 'the most important soft power of Turkey is its democracy'²⁶.

But, according to Davutoglu, there are a total of five foundations for the expansion of the Turkish influence in the area:

1. Security with democracy
2. 'Zero problems with neighbours' policy
3. Development of the relations with neighbouring regions and beyond (such as the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia)
4. Multidimensional foreign policy with other global players (USA, EU, Russia and Eurasia)
5. Expansion and development of Turkish diplomacy in organizations and other international forums

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/12/15/place-in-sun-or-fifteen-minutes-of-fame-understanding-turkey-s-new-foreign-policy/1ef>

²⁶ DAVUTOGLU, Ahmet, *Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, Insight Turkey, Vol. 10, nº 1, 2008

With regard to the Middle East, the Turkish Foreign Minister bases his policy in the quest for security for all (for the region), and also in the dialogue to solve the crisis, for which Turkey offers itself as a mediator.

With these measures, Ankara has sought to overcome the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and to change the vision that the world had of the country. Davutoglu believes that Turkey is now seen as a responsible State in the region that gives priority to democracy and civil liberties and that deals competently with its own internal security problems.

And he is quite right, if we add to what he has said the popularity of the Turkish Government and of its Prime Minister Erdogan, after his departure from Israel and its rapprochement with the Muslim world by presenting a successful project that combines progress, democracy and Islam. In addition, this has been made in a turbulent time of revolts against dictatorial regimes in several Muslim countries and searching for alternative options of forms of Government. What is not yet clear is the extent of the Turkish democratic agenda and its external image.

At this point, those who mark Ankara's recent foreign policy, as well as its brain, Ahmet Davutoglu, as 'neo-Ottomans' should not be forgotten. They are considered more a threat than anything else: the Iraqi Kurds²⁷ as well as the Iranians are a clear example of this way of thinking.

Back to the Turkish point of view, the jewel in the Crown of its regional design was Syria. We say 'was' because its internal conflict has made this country the greatest challenge for Turkey nowadays.

SYRIA, THE THREATENED BLACK BISHOP

In early September 2012, Syria's future is, at least, uncertain. Since the beginning of the protests against Assad, in March 2011, August has been the bloodiest month with about 5,000 deaths, of a total of around 27,000 deaths in almost 18 months, according to sources of the Syrian opposition²⁸.

What began as a new episode of the Arab Spring, with peaceful demonstrations, has degenerated into a complex civil conflict, partly sectarian in nature, which threatens to destabilize the whole of the Middle East. It is a region too volatile to withstand a war, however well localized it may be from the outside.

²⁷<http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=DA881CA1F7701D1B569DD876A47BBD40>

²⁸ BAR, Hervé, *Los rebeldes sirios concentran sus ataques contra Fuerza Aérea del régimen* (The Syrian rebels concentrate their attacks against the Air Force of the regime), Agencia AFP, 01-09-2012

On the one hand, opponents have become radicalized over time due to the hardness of the repression of the Assad regime. They form a heterogeneous group, united only by their desire to put an end to the Alaouite dictatorship and by the membership of many of them to the Sunni community, majority in Syria. Among them, the most powerful and united group is the Muslim Brotherhood. With the help of weapons and training coming from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Kingdom or US, as well as the financial support of 'sister' organizations from abroad, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, they are increasingly violent, to the extent that now no one talks about 'peaceful protests', but 'armed rebellion' and 'civil war'. Even the US intelligence is convinced that fighters from Al-Qaeda in Iraq are in Syrian territory and are behind some of the major attacks of recent months against several Government headquarters and the army²⁹. The Iraqi Government itself has also made the same claim³⁰.

On the other hand, we have a compact regime established in power for decades, with most of its members belonging to the Alaouite minority, a particular branch of Shi'ism. The senior Army Officers have remained faithful, though in recent times there have been major defections, as that of the Prime Minister, Riad Hiyab, and they have used their firepower against the opposition when possible, without any further consideration. And not only the military: the Assad family has also used its own militias to reach a point that its troops have failed to achieve³¹.

In recent months, the opposition has demonstrated its growing 'military' ability with breakthroughs on the ground, specially with guerrilla tactics. Meanwhile, the regime has lost control of part of its territory. The rebels have taken up positions at several border checkpoints and control some important routes of supplies that Iran used. In addition, last July's attack, which killed some of the highest figures on Defence matters in the Assad government, has damaged the regime.

The current Executive does not lack support either. Inside, other minorities (Christians, Kurds or Druze) are more afraid of a possible radical Sunni opposition than they are of the regime. Moreover, external assistance to Assad is not negligible: Iran and Russia do not only limit themselves to be a political and diplomatic support. They also send arms shipments³².

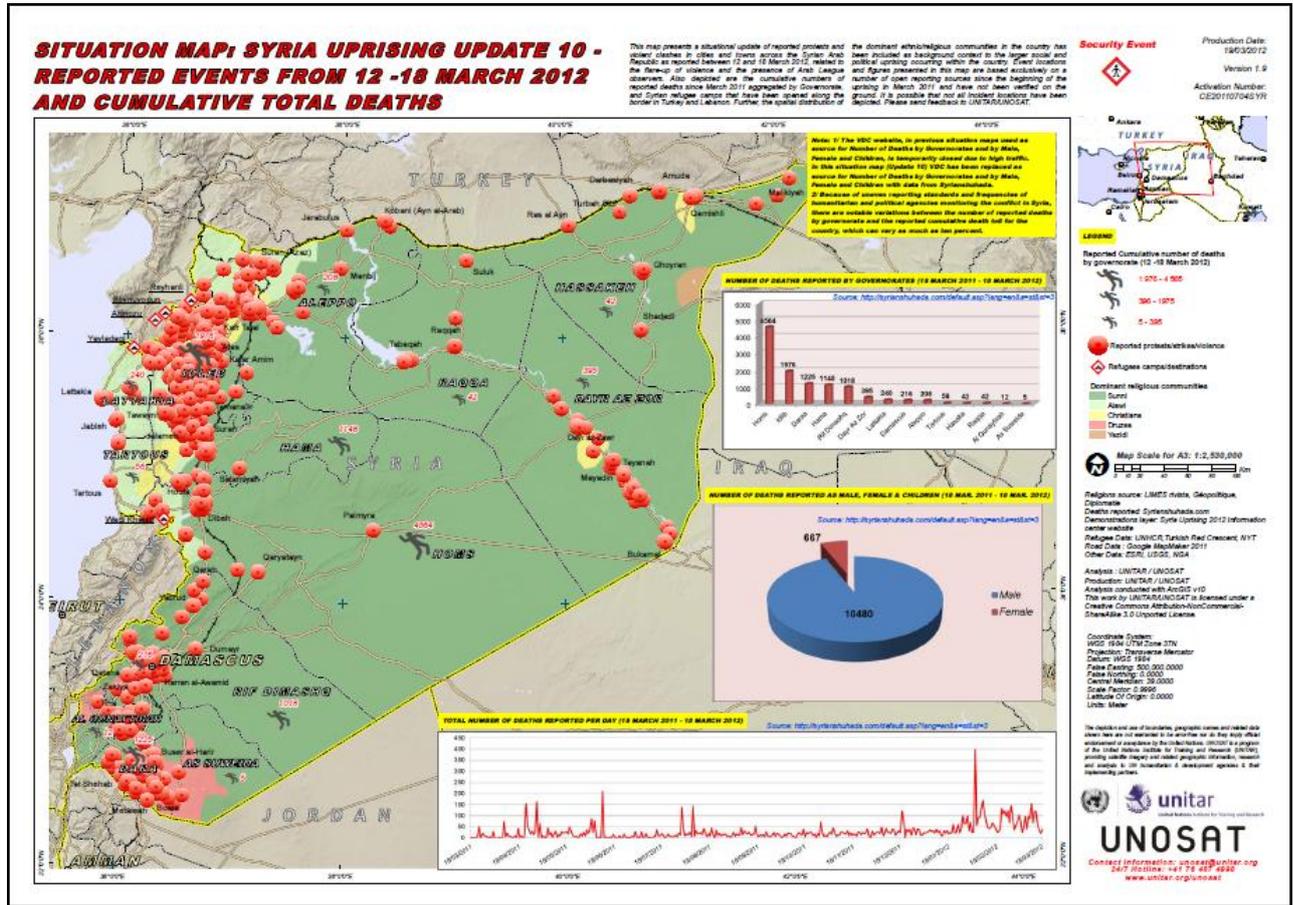
²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ REUTERS, *Iraq says al Qaeda members crossing into Syria*, 05-07-2012

³¹ DANA HAR, Paul, *Analysis: Syria's 'intractable' conflict*, BBC, 13-06-2012

³² KRAMER, Andrew E., *Russia Sending Missile Systems to Shield Syria*, The New York Times, 15-06-2012

We can see in this map an example of the level of violence that exists in Syria:



33 Map of the state of the revolt in Syria from 12 to 18 March. Source: UNITAR-UNOSAT, Reliefweb

With this background, it is not surprising that the peace plan drawn up by the United Nations' and the Arab League's envoy, Kofi Annan, has proved unreservedly to be a failure. His frustration has resulted in his resignation to the mission and he has been replaced by the veteran Algerian diplomat Lajdar Brahimi, who has to face as well a difficult situation. It is also quite clear that, in the Syrian conflict, a lot more than the current situation in the country is at stake. In the bid, there is the balance of power and the regional status quo between two emerging powers: the modern and Sunni Turkey versus the theocratic and Shiite Iran. In the next section, we will discuss Turkish-Syrian relations from the Turkish point of view.

33 <http://reliefweb.int/country/sy> If you want to see some pictures of the conflict, please click on the following link:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18595884>

Turkish-Syrian relations

We talked about the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the role of Syria in the early 20th century Arab revolt. To make the matter worse, we add to this that France, colonial power, would give the portion of the Syrian territory of Iskenderum (Alexandretta or Hatay) to the Turkish in 1939 and that during the Cold War, Ankara was on the side of the United States and NATO, while Damascus remained dependent on the Soviet Union to keep its military power. This does not seem the best starting point.

And more recently, Turkish-Syrian relations have been affected by the connivance of the Assad regime and the use by the Kurdish guerrilla of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Syrian bases to launch attacks against Turkey, even with the constant presence of its leader Abdallah Ocalan in the country. In 1998, Turkish and Syrians were close to a war confrontation for this reason³⁴.

Furthermore, the Syrian Government had for a long time been complaining about the Turkish water policy with regard to the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, controlled by Ankara according to its needs, without taking into account the needs of the Syrian side. Both rivers are essential for the growing and the supply of water in the country.

However, there is a change with the coming to power of the AKP in Ankara. Damascus expels Ocalan and turns its back on the PKK. Meanwhile, the Turkish, with their policy of rapprochement, negotiate several agreements on water with the Syrian Executive and also drive the increase of economic and commercial agreements with Syria. We should add to all this the Turkish mediation to reach an agreement with Israel, the great Syrian enemy. These steps result in the beginning of the end of Syrian international isolation and in what seems like a drift away of the Assad's regime from the orbit of influence of Tehran. For all these reasons, Syria was considered a success and it was the key to the Turkish opening to the Middle East.

But this situation, which in a show of optimism could have been qualified as 'almost idyllic', gives a turnaround with the beginning of the protests against the Syrian power. At first, the Erdogan Government protects Assad, while he asks for the implementation of democratic reforms.

The little success achieved in this regard leads Ankara to change its initial position, opting to stay away and isolate Damascus, as well as helping the opposition (something that also involves the abandonment of its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, since that support to the Syrian opponents is not only political and diplomatic, but also material, with the shipment of arms and military training).

³⁴ TATO PORTO, Francisco Javier, *Impacto en la política de seguridad y defensa de la Unión Europea, Turquía a las puertas de Europa (Impact on the security and defence policy of the European Union, Turkey at the gates of Europe)*, Cuaderno de Estrategia nº 132, IEEE, enero 2006

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This movement of aid to the Syrian opposition is carried out by the Turkish Executive, which is pressed by its image of 'democratic and friendly with civil rights State'³⁵. At the same time, it could be placed in a privileged situation in the post-Assad era, on the assumption that the opponents end falling to the Syrian regime.

However, Turkey must maneuver carefully because it is not excluded that, in an attempt to survive, Syria would use the Kurdish option and would collaborate once again with the PKK, one of the major sources of potential destabilization within the Turkish Republic itself.

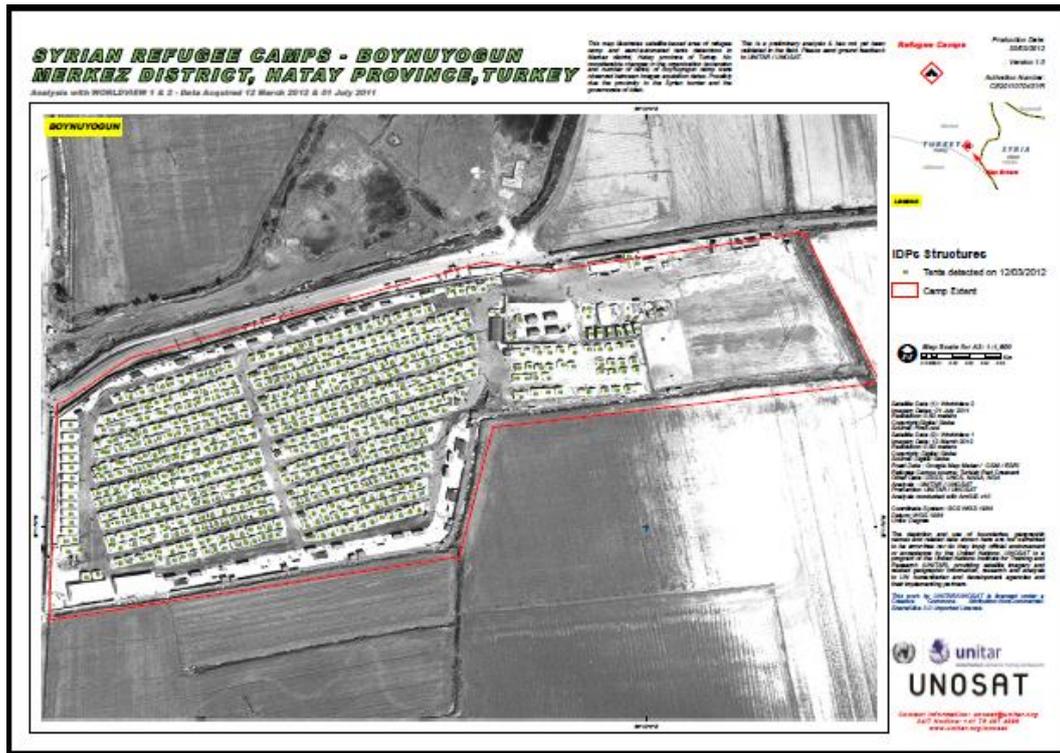
Another ace up the sleeve for Assad is the destabilizing capacity of a possible avalanche of Syrian refugees escaping from the harshness of the Syrian regime towards the Turkish territory. Today there are several refugee camps on the border between the two countries, which barely cope with the continuous influx of refugees given the increase in violence and the deterioration of the civilian population in Syrian territory:



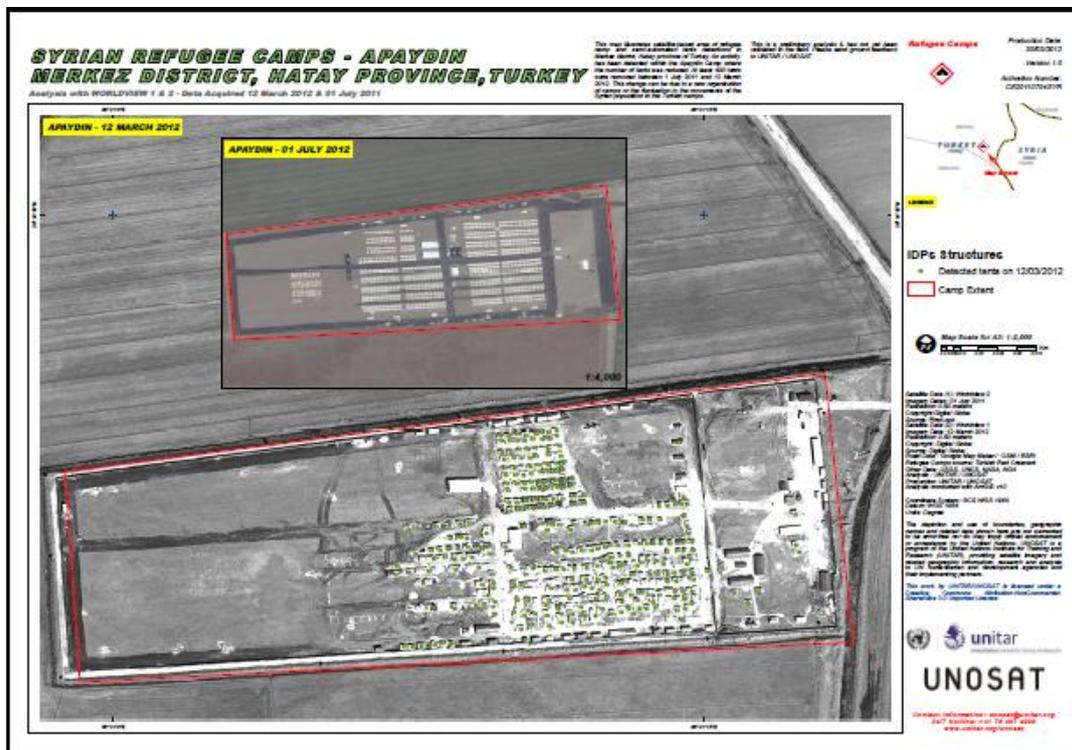
Reyhanli refugee camp. Source: UNITAR- UNOSAT, Reliefweb

³⁵ IDREES, Mohamed, *Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria*, www.alternativesjournal.net/

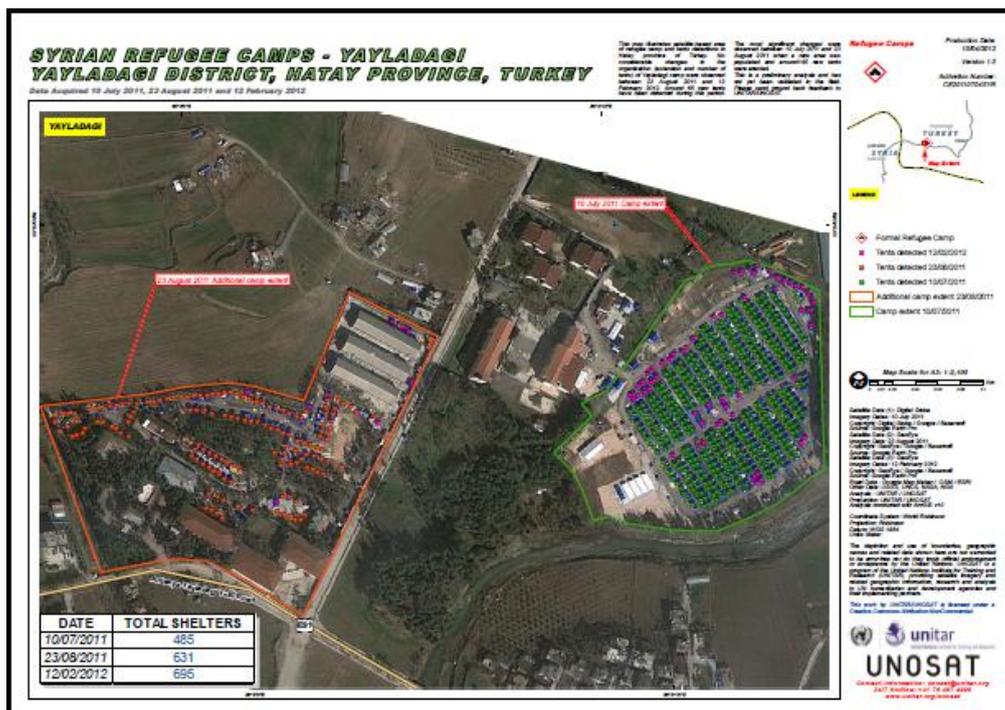
Elena María Labrado Calera



Boynuyogun refugee camp. Source: UNITAR- UNOSAT, Reliefweb



Apaydin refugee camp. Source: UNITAR- UNOSAT, Reliefweb



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Yayladagi refugee camp. Source: UNITAR- UNOSAT, Reliefweb

Apart from the situation on the southern border, we must not forget the Turkish minorities close to the Syrian Alaouites, like the Alevi, who are also Shiites.

At the economic level, Turkish goods were being exported to Syrian soil. That step is now interrupted by the uprising in the country, which has damaged the booming Turkish economy³⁷.

But, as mentioned above in this article, Syria is the epicentre of the competition between various actors, and Turkey and Iran appear as the most prominent rivals at the moment. Its relationships and interests in Syria have placed Turkey against the other emerging power in the area, Iran.

³⁶ <http://reliefweb.int/country/syr>

³⁷ <http://www.insightturkey.com/the-syrian-quagmire-whats-holding-turkey-back/articles/167>

IRAN, THE BLACK KING

From the Iranian perspective, the actions of Turkey, which Iran thinks that are supported by the West and the United States (also by the Arab League), threaten the balance of power and the regional status quo. In addition, both countries are positioned as rivals, risking previous efforts of cooperation between the two of them, which means endangering peace and security in the area and in the most global scope³⁸.

Iran reproaches Ankara its steps in recent months and considers that it has abandoned its 'zero problems' policy with its neighbours as well as its role of intermediary in regional crises.

For Iran, international pressure in favour of the regime change in Syria is actually aimed at increasing pressure on Tehran so that it will change its regional policy and even its nuclear goals. As the Iranians see it, this policy has allowed some of their major enemies, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, to intervene in the Syrian conflict, turning it into a kind of zero-sum game precisely against its geopolitical interests³⁹.

Thus, if it is about acting in Syria as a way of blocking the rise of Iranian influence in the region, Tehran had no choice but to support the Syrian regime or face a pro-Arab and pro-Western Government in Damascus. And it has not had any doubt: it has acted to safeguard its interests.

We must not forget that Iran is not alone in this, since it has counted with the invaluable help of a great power: Russia.

Syria and Iran have already a three-decade alliance. At first, they seemed like strange comrades. On the one hand, a theocratic regime and, on the other, a secular one. Both, however, are together against common enemies: the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, the Israeli breakthroughs in the Lebanon and against Palestinians, as well as the attempts of the US to penetrate into the area⁴⁰.

At present, apart from the Syrian relationship with the Lebanese Shiite guerrilla of Hezbollah and the radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad, as well as the large economic ties that bind them, Syria is important for Iran, also geographically. It is a key element of the so-called 'Shiite axis', which gives Iran access to its ally Hezbollah in the Lebanon and Israel. The downfall of Assad would be a serious blow to Tehran, which would be more isolated and less able to implement its agenda in the region⁴¹.

³⁸<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/Modules/News/Phtml/News.PrintVersion.Html.php?Lang=en&TypeId=93&NewsId=18645>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18369380>

⁴¹ IDREES, Mohamed, *Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria*, www.alternativesjournal.net/

TURKEY AND IRAN IN SYRIA: THE NEW GREAT GAME

We have already seen that the stakes are much higher in the Syrian crisis than it might seem at first sight and that there are many actors and interests to consider, although Turkey and Iran, the two current emerging powers in the Middle East, are identified as essential.

Thus, in the same way that Russia and Great Britain, the colonial powers in the 19th century, rivalled in Central Asia and the Caucasus, their 21st century heirs do likewise nowadays in Syria.

But in this new chess game, in terms of achieving their interests, what are the options of Ankara and Tehran with regard to Syria, the key element in these moments of the game?

As we have seen, the Turkish switch in Syria has put it on a collision course with Iran. This is because the common interests between Damascus and Tehran suppose that Iranians advocate the continuation of Syria's status quo, with Assad as the leader, which is totally opposed to Ankara's ideas⁴². This way, the Sunni axis takes position against the Shiite one.

We have already said that Iran uses its best weapons to maintain its alliance with Syria: from the political support to the training of the security forces and the technical support with consignments of 'material'. These are shipments that, with all the risks that this entails, Ankara tries to prevent from reaching Damascus. This has led Tehran to bring weapons directly into Syria through the port of Latakia, on the Mediterranean coast of Syria. When the new facilities will be ready, it will be extremely difficult (and probably much more risky) for Ankara to prevent it⁴³.

However, what is explained in the previous paragraph does not mean that, in case of it being necessary, Tehran will stop approaching and negotiate with the Syrian opposition. The Turks have beaten them to it, true, and the opposition is mostly Sunni, also true. But, even though a priori it might seem that they would have little success, when events are in full development, which way does the scale tip at the end?

To give an example, an Islamist organization on the rise in the world of politics in today's Middle East: the Muslim Brotherhood. Its relationship with Turkey goes back to 1982, when thousands of its members, also Sunnis, were slaughtered mercilessly by the Syrian army in Hama. At that time, Hafez Al-Assad, father of the current Syrian leader, was the President.

Added to the above is the fact that the Turkish model of reconciliation between Islam and Democracy seems to have permeated the Organization. We say 'seems' because, as we mentioned earlier with regard to Ankara and the doubts about its real agenda after the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

growing Islamisation of Turkey, it still remains to be seen if that 'friendliness' of the Muslim Brotherhood is real or just a rational calculation to win the support of the Turkish power (and of the international community) towards their cause.

However, we should not forget that the Syrian opposition is composed of other groups which, so far, nobody has been able to combine. Thus, we find that the link between the rebel side and Turkey exists, although it is far from being safe. So it is not surprising that Iranians think that this is a trump card that they can play if they need to.

And, in this clash of shafts, there is more, because the Syrians are not the only ones who threaten Ankara with the Kurdish card, Tehran also does it. But how? By getting across to the Turkish Government the message that the mutual cooperation of recent years against the PKK in Iraq can be over. If Tehran decided to help the Kurds on Iraqi territory, it could endanger Turkish internal stability. A good move, without a doubt.

For its part, Turkey considers a success the fact of having avoided 'unilateral actions', specially the military ones, as well as the fact of having united different wills and interests, like those of Turkey, the Arab League and the United States to put pressure on Syria. But the fact of creating an international consensus, the aid to refugees and the support to the Syrian opposition have been clearly insufficient for the achievement of the Turkish goals.

And to these days, early September 2012, the game is in a draw. Neither Ankara has achieved to convince Assad or to turn its opponents into a viable Government alternative to Syria, nor Tehran has managed to put an end to the rebellion and to get its interests to be taken into account. As a result, the spiral of violence continues its rise. So, what option remains? One that no one seems to want to hear nor talk about, and even less on a powder keg like the Middle East: the military option.

Turkey is not interested in this option for various reasons. Firstly, because it goes against their policy of foreign 'soft power' that has given Turkey such a good image. Ankara must measure its actions properly if it does not want to be accused of pursuing a 'Sunni agenda' on the one hand and, on the other hand, an 'imperialist agenda (neo-Ottoman)'. Something of which the Syrian regime's propaganda has already taken care of in order to inform everyone, specially other Arab Governments with internal problems because of the Arab Spring incidents⁴⁴.

In addition, Damascus has been very careful not to provoke Ankara. Without a threat of imminent action, it is difficult to build the necessary legitimacy for military action in the region, specially when this wants to be made within the framework of an international coalition, as in the Turkish case.

⁴⁴ <http://www.insightturkey.com/the-syrian-quagmire-whats-holding-turkey-back/articles/167>

Secondly, we should consider the claims of a think tank like the British Jane's with regard to the limitations of the Turkish army given the possibility, remote as it may be, of a military conflict in Syrian territory. However superior they may be, Turkish troops lack training in combat in urban areas and recent experience in a modern conventional war. The Syrians are superior to them in the attack with helicopters and in chemical and biological weapons. In addition, Syrian missiles could reach several Turkish cities, so that Ankara would need the support of the extremely expensive NATO's Patriot missiles if this possibility⁴⁵, remote as it may seem at the moment, occurred.

Nor should the Syrians be 'looking forward to' militarily provoke the Turks who, in such a situation, would invoke the article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, since this could mean a suicide for the Syrian regime.

Thus, it seems that neither the facts nor the rhetoric of Turkey are aimed at a large-scale military ground invasion, with its troops entering Damascus to end the Assad regime. On the other hand, it is not likely that Syrians will provoke Ankara in this respect. Today, this scenario seems more science fiction than anything else, though, of course, not impossible.

However, the escalation of violence in Syria could drag Ankara to 'do something'. In this sense, the possibility of a limited military operation, as passive as possible, on the Turkish-Syrian border is indeed more feasible in order to ensure certain areas of Syrian territory as a haven for civilians fleeing military repression of Assad's Government. Moreover, recent movements from Kurdish groups and militias in the North of Syria could lead Turkey to carry out a military operation in the area invoking security concerns.

This intermediate performance would require the support of the UN, the Arab League and NATO, since we have already said that Ankara avoids unilateral action in what the Syrian conflict is concerned.

Still, such an operation arouses many doubts. First, there is a risk of going to war against Syria. After all, it is about the invasion of its lands, however limited it may be. Second, we must not forget about Iran and the possibility that such a measure would end by degenerating into an escalation towards a regional conflict⁴⁶.

But, at the same time, it is not a solution to do absolutely nothing while Syria bleeds into a civil war. Among other things, because it supposes a source of instability in an already pretty volatile region itself. As an example, just look towards the Lebanon and, among other things⁴⁷, towards the sectarian clashes linked directly with the internal conflict in the

⁴⁵ Will Turkey start a new Syria conflict?, IHS Jane's: Defence & Security Intelligence & Analysis, 25-04-2012

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Varios obuses sirios impactan en el Líbano, sin víctimas*, (Several Syrian howitzers impact on Lebanon with no victims), Agencia EFE, 12-07-2012

neighbouring country. But there is also Iraq, on the verge of an internal confrontation between the Sunni and the Shiite communities.

OTHER PIECES ON THE BOARD

Before concluding, we need to review, although very briefly, the interests of other actors also involved in the Syrian conflict, because there are more pieces on the board. We have already mentioned Iraq and the Lebanon. Likewise, Jordan is concerned about the contagion of the Syrian situation to its territory, where there are already thousands of refugees from the neighbouring country. On the other hand, Israel does not lose sight of the events. The downfall of Assad benefits the Jewish State because of the blow this would mean to Iran, but the possible coming to power of an Islamist Government in Syria would not be paradise for Israelis. Saudi Arabia supports the rebellion as a way of pushing its 'Sunni agenda' into the region.

On the international stage, Iran has exhibited Russian support. This help is motivated by the fact that the only access from Russia to the Mediterranean today is its base in Syria's Tartus port:



Map and satellite photo of the Syria's Tartus port. Source: Google, BBC News

But some say that the importance of Tartus is no longer so strategic for Moscow as it was before⁴⁸. In this way, the Russian action regarding Syria has much to do with its own concept

⁴⁸ GARDNER, Frank, *How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?*, BBC, 27-06-2012

of global power, specially after its allies had intervned militarily in Libya, surpassing Moscow.

The United States is on the Turkish side, although it has not a vital interest in Syria. Washington is interested in reducing Iranian influence (and Hezbollah's influence too, with its pressure on Israel), and does not consider Tehran as 'part of the solution' but rather as 'part of the problem'. However, the Obama administration is not willing to pursue the military option. After Iraq and Afghanistan, a third military intervention in the area would be, at the very least, counterproductive, specially in the middle of the campaign for the presidential elections next November. From then on, depending on which candidate will win, the options and possibilities will be discussed once again.

AS A CONCLUSION, TOO MANY PIECES ON THE BOARD

When everyone is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before

Rudyard Kipling

If we avoid Kipling and leave the doomsday scenarios aside, in this new Great Game there are currently no good solutions for Syria. We are moving in an area that goes from the inadequate to the unthinkable. With the game in a draw and numerous pieces on the board, the options are few and dangerous.

In these moments, due to its degree of violence and bitterness, the Syrian conflict seems to be at a critical and difficult point from which to return. In the words of Churchill⁴⁹, it has surpassed the 'end of the beginning' stage and arrived at the 'beginning of the end'. With both sides unwilling, at the moment, to reach some kind of ceasefire agreement and with a complicated network of regional and international interests, which makes it impossible to achieve a consensus, it seems risky to speak of when and, in particular, how will end or evolve the situation in Syria. The regime is still kept in power, and rebels are still far from giving an image of unity and viable alternative of power. In these circumstances, we begin to delve into the shifting sands of speculation and political fiction. However, there are several plausible scenarios:

⁴⁹http://www.thecommentator.com/article/1483/syria_a_day_before_tomorrow/page/1#article_content_top

1. The most optimistic rely on the desire of the Syrian people to end, not only with more than 40 years of dictatorship, but also with a year and a half of internal conflict. According to their point of view, after the fall of Assad's regime, Local Coordination Committees (considered as the roots of the opposition and who have been acting at the local level over the past few months) could make a legitimate, organized and effective power transition starting with municipalities, which would prevent chaos from unleashing and degenerating as a result into a sectarian strife. In addition, they argue that not all Alaouites actually support the Assad family, but only some of them. With the effective implementation of fair transitional mechanisms, constitutional guarantees and equality for all citizens, a Sunni-Alaouite war could be avoided⁵⁰. It is true that the performance of Local Coordination Committees is regarded as efficient, and even as the seed of some future new authorities⁵¹. However, extrapolating its action to a power transition and, furthermore, evading the thousands of deaths and the spilled blood could be too much to ask at present. Regarding the situation as it is now, this scenario seems too heavenly to become a reality.
2. For others, not that optimistic, the chances that the country of Syria that we have known up until a year and a half ago, including its current borders, survives the current war, have been gradually reduced. Thus, a door would be opened to a solution of the 'Lebanese' type: a territory divided into areas of influence of Alaouites, Sunnis, Kurds and Druze, where they would be in the majority and would be supported by regional powers that sustain each one of them, though they would not have the agreement of distribution of political power that the Lebanon maintains today. Thus, the Alaouites would stay in the coastal strip, with the ports of Latakia and Tartus, supported by Russians and Iranians. The first ones would maintain their access to the Mediterranean and the others, to Hezbollah. In the Centre and North there are the Sunnis, with help from Turks and Saudis, which would increase its regional influence at the same time that they would contain the Shiite axis with its origin in Iran. The Druze would remain in the Southwest and the Kurds in the Northeast. But this option, whose main supporter is Vali Nasr⁵², has more than one problem. Firstly, it requires the agreement between regional and international powers that, while they have demonstrated so far their little desire to ignite the region with a war, they have not been able to reach any agreement for the time being. Secondly, it is not quite clear that this 'Lebanisation' of Syria would end by pacifying the area. The coverage that each group would get could lead to new confrontations and finish by bringing an end to the initial agreement.

⁵⁰ Here is an example of this stance:

<http://agenceglobal.com/index.php?show=article&Tid=2851>

⁵¹ https://www.cimicweb.org/cmo/ComplexCoverage/Documents/Reports/rS001_Syrian_Opposition_%2828-Aug-12%29.pdf

⁵² <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/opinion/sunday/after-syrias-assad-falls-the-us-must-work-with-iran.html>

3. The third scenario is the most pessimistic one. On the one hand, without possible understanding neither inside nor outside Syria, the bloodshed continues, with the danger that this entails. A prolonged war, with tensions about to explode in the area between Shiites and Sunnis, could blow up the whole region. On the other hand, if the conflict was decided in favour of the opposition and the Sunnis, those who consider Iran as the main threat would be happy, but those who doubt of a possible Sunni Islamist drift⁵³ would be terrified.
4. From the point of view of Turkey, it cannot be ruled out that they opt for a limited military intervention in Syria, specially after the mass exodus of refugees in recent weeks, which also affects Lebanon and Jordan, and that they decide to participate in that operation. But, to this end, they should reach a tacit agreement with Iran to avoid its reaction. The problem with this option is that, at the end, its outcome could be as limited as the operation itself and almost anything would be achieved, regarding the Syrian conflict. In addition, they will not avoid the risk that Iran would decide to intervene anyway so that the situation would degenerate into a generalized regional confrontation when the Syrian territory would be invaded.

There are also concerns about the possible use that the Syrian regime might make of its biological and chemical arsenal if it would feel cornered, either against the rebels or Turkey. Although this would be an own resource in a desperate situation for any damages that it could cause to the Syrian Government after repeated calls from United States, United Kingdom and France, among others, it cannot be entirely ruled out. At the moment, the regime has rejected the use of these weapons against its own people, although it has indeed threatened to use them in a possible 'external action'.

It is not improbable that, amid the chaos, those weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite guerrilla, or Al-Qaeda fighters operating in the country⁵⁴. This matter is of concern to other actors, such as Israel or Jordan, and has led to speculation on a possible military operation. This is something that both Jordanians and Israelis have ruled out for the moment.

However, the US could build international consensus to intervene with the 'excuse' of Syrian chemical weapons. At present, the military option has been ruled out, at least while Assad remains in power; however, that possibility remains on the table, at a later stage, in case the regime fell and the control of those weapons would be lost.

⁵³ <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=281109>

⁵⁴ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/02f97808-ce63-11e1-bc0c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz20nNsyPRN>

Another possibility, though scarce, would be a military intervention by the so-called 'international community' to stop Syrian bloodshed. We have already pointed out before that a third deployment of 'foreign' troops in the region after Iraq and Afghanistan could, rather than extinguish the current fire, add an explosion to it (specially with the total opposition from Russia and China).

Regarding the UN peace plan and its failure, we should wait to see what is Lakhdar Brahimi, the new envoy, capable of doing. There are no high hopes, neither outside nor inside Syria. A good example of this feeling is the sentence written on a banner during the Idlib demonstrations last Friday 31 August, which, quite ironically, read as follows: 'Lakhdar: Mission Impossible 2'⁵⁵. Brahimi himself described his mission as 'almost impossible'⁵⁶.

In what Turkey and its positioning as a regional power is concerned, the Syrian crisis has put them in check. Soli Ozel, columnist for the Turkish newspaper Haberturk, states: 'The risk is very high. If Turkey is ineffective in the Syrian conflict resolution, then all the regional weight that it claims to have will suffer a severe blow'⁵⁷.

The situation in Syria has awoken Turkey out of its dream of being a regional power based on its strategic position, its economic thrust, its 'soft power' and its 'zero problems' policy with its neighbours. The fact of having a powerful army also helps, nevertheless a point may come at which it becomes necessary to use it, and not only against the Kurdish guerrilla, because only threatening to use it may not be enough to achieve its own objectives.

The same Turkish policies have left the country with little room for manoeuvre with regard to Syria. With a military, although limited, operation, it could 'save face', but a sign of weakness is not a good foundation on which to build a power or, at least, has not been so far. Specially in a region with such an outstanding 'hard power' as in Iran and Israel.

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⁵⁵ BAR, Hervé, *Los rebeldes sirios concentran sus ataques contra Fuerza Aérea del régimen*, Agencia AFP, 01-09-2012 (The Syrian rebels concentrate their attacks against the Air Force of the regime)

⁵⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19460919>

⁵⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/world/europe/despite-bold-talk-on-syria-turkey-sees-limits-of-its-power.html>