How Ankara Is Trending on the Syrian Crisis

Turkey’s active involvement in overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria since virtually the beginning of the protest movements (March 15, 2011) that evolved into a civil war has not resulted in Ankara achieving its goal.

Syrian President Assad is still in a position of strength from a military standpoint, which enables him to ignore demands that he resign despite persistent predictions by his detractors that his fall is inevitable.

The Syrian army, the bureaucracy and the intelligence services remain united and loyal to the regime. The military has prevented the armed opposition from taking control of the provinces. Armed groups are active in several areas bordering on Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Several pockets of resistance remain in the Damascus Province, but they are currently being “mopped up.” The capital is stable, and its key points are still being defended by military units.

Despite substantial assistance from the leading Western European countries and the United States, plus Turkey and the Persian Gulf principalities, the opposition groups have proved incapable (two years after the beginning of the unrest in Syria) of winning any clear-cut victories capable of shifting the balance of forces to the rebels’ favor. Moreover, the opposition remains divided despite efforts to unite it. The opposition outside the country still lacks effective political and military leadership, which increases the risk of infighting as well as armed clashes between Free Syrian Army units and groups with different politico-religious orientations in Syria.

It recently has become increasingly obvious that extremists, jihadists and criminals are playing a central role in the insurgency, damaging the opposition’s credibility and weakening the popular support it enjoyed early on.

Ankara has been actively working with the Syrian military-political opposition and following developments in Syria closely. It understands the futility of counting on a victorious blitzkrieg in the foreseeable future. Many in Turkey’s government believe that the obvious reluctance of the leading Western countries and the United States to supply arms to the Syrian rebels proves that conclusion to be correct. This perspective was seen in the April 20 meeting of the Friends of Syria in Istanbul.

With Turkey’s 2014 presidential elections coming up (which Erdoğan hopes to win), its current leaders believe they need to adjust the country’s stance on the Syrian crisis and distance Ankara from direct involvement in it. A wide range of factors point to the need for such a step. The main one is the markedly greater dissatisfaction that Turkey’s sociopolitical circles and locals are feeling about the growing socioeconomic problems caused by the presence of
more than 100,000 Syrian refugees in the country.

Another irritant is the fact that since early October 2012 (after the “Syrian shelling” of the village Akçakale) the Turkish army has essentially been at war in that it has been systematically responding to each shell fired from Turkish territory. Tensions are high all along the Turkish-Syrian border, and they threaten to escalate into a conflict.

The Turkish opposition believes a failure of national diplomacy is the reason the situation is heating up, and it openly accuses the conservative Islamic government of intending to plunge the country into a war that 51% of the Turkish people strongly oppose.

The events in Syria have prompted the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to greater activity of late, and that has exacerbated the situation. Turkey, which has been destabilized by the war and by events inside the country and on its borders, fears the declaration of a Kurdish state encompassing parts of Syria and Turkey predominantly inhabited by Kurds more than anything.

Turkey is already adjusting its position, but it is not advertising the fact. For example, it has renewed contacts with two of Syria’s chief allies, Iran and Russia. Ankara has not rejected regional initiatives for resolving the Syrian crisis, as witnessed by its support for the “quartet” of negotiators consisting of Cairo, Ankara, Tehran and Riyadh.

Turkey appears to be eager to return to its political formula of “no problems with my neighbors.” Ankara has not yet officially raised the issue of turning a political corner, but there are indications that it is preparing to do so.

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