



Insight

Syria Spills Over: Military Confrontation with Turkey

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The crisis in Syria predictably has spilled over into neighboring countries, triggering military confrontations with Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon. Of these, tension between Syria and Turkey warrants the most attention.

While Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan generally wish to avoid the Syrian conflict, Turkey has been more involved. After his intense personal efforts failed to persuade Assad to stop gunning down protesters last year, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan firmly sided with the Syrian opposition. He hoped to burnish Ankara's regional leadership role and tap into popular sympathies for the protesters. Moreover, instability in Syria threatens Turkey's impressive economic growth and brings an influx of refugees across Turkey's borders. Having gambled in his support of the Syrian rebels, Erdogan has many reasons for wanting to resolve the Syrian crisis as soon as possible.

Turkey is now among the leaders in supporting the Syrian opposition, and vocally urges the U.S. and others to do more. Turkey actively hosts and helps to arm opposition elements. In August, Turkey tried but failed to persuade the UN Security Council to establish a no-fly zone in Syria. Turkey recently recognized the opposition Syrian National Coalition (as opposed to the Assad regime) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

In retaliation, Assad began allowing Ankara's longtime nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to operate in Syria. A terrorist organization seeking Kurdish autonomy from Ankara, the PKK has been responsible for more than 40,000 deaths and may be resurging.

The two countries are also sparring militarily. In June, Syrian air defenses shot down a Turkish reconnaissance plane, killing its two pilots. Turkey later forced a passenger plane from Moscow to land in Ankara on suspicion that it was carrying weapons for Assad's forces. The border between Syria and Turkey is a critical flashpoint. With Syrian forces engaging rebels near the border, Ankara adopted a forward posture, placing military assets near the border and establishing rules of engagement to respond to Syrian attacks. On October 3, a mortar strike by Syrian forces landed on the Turkish side, killing five Turks and wounding several others. By all accounts the assault was unintentional. Nevertheless, the Turkish parliament authorized the use of force against Syria, and Turkey shelled Syria for two days.

Syria has little desire for an all-out war with Turkey, since it would divert forces Assad needs to fight the domestic opposition. While the Turkish people don't want war with Syria either, escalation is possible – and Erdogan might even see an opportunity to use the clashes to hasten Assad's fall.

Indeed, rather than down-playing the incidents, Erdogan is appealing to NATO, of which Turkey is a member. NATO is a mutual defense treaty, and members are required to help if one is attacked. Turkey requested urgent NATO meetings after both the shooting down of its plane in [June](#) and the [October](#) border shelling. The NATO Secretary General vowed, “[We have all plans in place to make sure that we can protect and defend Turkey and hopefully that way also deter so that attacks on Turkey will not take place.](#)”

Turkey is also in talks with NATO for the deployment of Patriot missiles along its border to defend against Syrian attacks.

What does this mean for the U.S.?

The Obama Administration rightly wants to avoid sending ground forces to Syria. In the unlikely event that Syria unleashed a major attack on Turkey, Erdogan would request NATO assistance and the U.S. would have a role to play. Still, the U.S. would likely refrain from committing ground troops. The U.S. would not likely support a Turkish invasion of Syria either, unless urgent coordinated action was required to secure Syria’s chemical weapons.

As a member of NATO, the U.S. should wholeheartedly support the deployment of missile defense systems to Turkey. At a minimum, they may deter Syrian forces and prevent future accidents that could escalate tensions. The Patriots could also be used for a more assertive policy. Some [experts](#) believe they could help create safe zones inside Syria, extending some 40 to 50 miles inwards from the border, potentially including Aleppo, Deraa, and Idlib province.

In one trag

ic sense, America has already contributed to the spillover of Syria’s civil war. By failing to show strong leadership in support of the rebels, the Obama Administration helped prolong the crisis. The consequence is more refugees, intensified ethnic and sectarian tensions, and more fighting in Syria’s hinterlands, including border areas.