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A MORE REALISTIC APPROACH TO TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Francis Ghilès, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

The Russian-US agreement hammered out in Geneva by Mr. Kerry and Mr. Labrov that witnessed Syria's hurried accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention saw Turkey's Syria nightmare go from bad to worse. After the chemical attack in Damascus on 21 August, Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was a leading supporter of military action, calling for an intervention "like (the NATO intervention) in Kosovo" to achieve regime change. But the prime minister and his minister of foreign affairs, Ahmed Davutoglu have seen their Syria calculus – a quick end to the Assad regime, rise and then simply disappear because of the refusal of the US to intervene in Syria. This is not the first time they have been wrong footed by the uprisings across the Middle East, nor are they alone in finding it nearly impossible to craft a foreign policy which responds to fast moving events while preserving Turkey's essential interests.

The Arab revolts are of course not the fault of Mr Erdogan but the hubris his foreign minister and himself have displayed since January 2011 have only exacerbated what is a very difficult situation. The prime minister's ambitions of yesterday, underpinned by a desire to straddle the Middle East scene and play a role similar to that of the former ottoman sultans have morphed into problems with no apparent solution. It has led some Arab leaders to believe that the "zero problem policy" with its neighbours promoted by Mr Ahmed Davutoglu until 2011 was just a cover for Ankara's neo-Ottoman ambitions. Two years ago, Mr Erdogan was being cheered by crowds in the streets of Tunis, Tripoli and Cairo. Today he would not meet with the same popular welcome in Tunis while the new leaders of Egypt deeply resent the strong support he afforded the ousted president, Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from which he hailed. Turkey's offer of a \$2bn aid package to Egypt has been withdrawn and replaced by a much larger one from Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

Nor have the interests of Turkey's large private sector been helped by the prime minister being the hero of the Arab street. Exports to Middle Eastern and Caucasus countries declined by 13% for the first seven months of this year compared with the previous year because of the turmoil while the UAE announced last month that it was delaying a \$12bn investment in a coal plant which was to have reduced

Turkey's \$60bn fuel import bill. Whether the delay is politically motivated or not is hard to say.

Turkey must now concentrate on the humanitarian crisis which is bleeding along its 900 kilometre border with Syria and on the threat of al-Qa'ida affiliated elements in the Syrian opposition. It is also smarting that Syrian Kurds with close links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) have taken control over some areas adjoining the Turkish border. Commentators in Ankara have started referring to the porous border as "Turkey's North West Frontier Province", a reference to the lawless region of Pakistan that is a hotbed of Islamic terrorism.

Clashes in northern Syria between the Kurds operating under the banner of the Democratic Union Party (DUP) and militants of the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra have already pushed more refugees across the border. Until a few months ago Turkey was keenly promoting Jabhat al-Nusra in Western capitals as "the most effective force against Assad", a reckless policy which is coming home to roost. Although the Turkish intelligence services were forced to reach out to the DUP and hold talks with its leader, the outcome of such discussions remains precariously dependent on how the government's stalled peace process with the PKK goes. A new bill has been put to parliament in Ankara which will authorize any action by the Turkish military, including crossing the boarder if necessary, in the event of a threat to the country's security from Syria. The risks of Turkey getting sucked into a conflict which lurches out of control are growing.

It is only fair to remember that France, the UK and the US have all found themselves in a quandary over they policy towards Syria. Their respective leaders have all had to eat their words in recent months. Calls for president Bashar el Assad to leave power have been reiterated repeatedly over the past eighteen months, to no avail. As Russia and Iran have stood by an ally whose survival they consider vital to their interests, western nations have found their bold words thwarted by the sheer brutality of president Assad, the very complex situation on the ground and the increasing weariness of Western public opinion – as demonstrated by the votes in parliament in London and Congress in Washington, to get entangled in yet another conflict after the bloody and inconclusive mess left by recent military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. MM Erdogan and Davutoglu can only console themselves with De Gaulle's famous words "*je m'envolais vers l'Orient compliqué.*"

In such a confused situation, relations with Europe appear somewhat easier to manage. Negotiations with the EU are due to resume soon after a three year hiatus. Increasing Turkey's trade with the Middle East to help reduce his country's dependence on Europe is not an argument Mr Davutoglu cares to make these days. His prime minister was further humbled by the decision to give Tokyo the 2020 Olympics, even if Turkish officials blamed European countries which did not switch their votes from third-placed Madrid to Istanbul in the final voting round. The fact of the matter is that Turkey's image abroad took a beating last June when the prime minister decided to put down demonstrations with brute force, not least in Istanbul.

A more realistic approach to handling relations with its neighbours should encourage Mr Davutoglu to return to his "zero problems" policy which he successfully promoted before that Arab revolts. That would allow Turkey to take account of the sheer complexity of the problems rumbling on its southern border and the inevitable internal repercussion partisan foreign policy decisions have on the country's internal politics and security. Three years ago, western observers were wondering whether Turkey's ambitions were drawing it closer to the Middle East than to Europe. That question no longer appears as relevant.