

# Turkey, Syria's new best friend

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**Turkish friendship has helped bring Damascus in from the cold, but may make the nation increasingly dependent on Ankara's will.**

Just over a decade ago, Turkey's army gathered on its southern border in anticipation of a war with Syria that was narrowly avoided. Just over a fortnight ago, the two neighbours signed accords allowing for visa-free passage between the two states. Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, now describes Turkey as Syria's best friend, while Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, publicly calls Syrians his brothers.

In what marks a significant turnaround in relations, not only have the prospects for conflict evaporated but also Damascus and Ankara find themselves in an ever closer integrated relationship with economic, political and even military ties strengthening each year. Similarly, Turkey has been instrumental in Syria's recent international rehabilitation. Why, then, have relations changed so suddenly and who are the real beneficiaries of this alliance? Moreover, with Turkey's relationship with Israel tense after the Gaza conflict and Syria's alliance with Iran under increased western pressure, could this be the first step in a dramatic realignment in Middle East relations?

The roots of Syrian-Turkish animosity are deep. Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, suspicion and hostility have been fuelled by historical disagreements over territory and water rights. This was later enhanced by Ankara's closeness to Israel and Syria's support for Turkey's PKK enemies - seemingly the immediate cause behind the military standoff in 1998. Although resolving some of these grievances has aided the recent warming in relations, it would be wrong to see them as previously intractable obstacles whose removal paved the way for a closer alliance. After all, Syria stopped its support for the PKK in 1999 without immediately thawing its ties with Turkey. Similarly, Turkey remains allied to Israel, a position that Syria has made no demands to alter.

A better explanation for this developing friendship comes from new diplomatic strategies adopted by both states in recent years. In light of the slow EU accession process and disappointment at the US invasion of Iraq, Turkey has adopted the arch-realist position of its influential foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. He argues for "zero problems with neighbours", whatever their past or current misdeeds. This has allowed the regime to put aside its ideological differences and historical disagreements with Syria, as it has with Greece, Iran and, increasingly, Iraq and Armenia. At the same time Davutoglu advocates increased Turkish "strategic depth" with its neighbours - promoting its cultural, economic and political influence further than in the past. Its stable yet economically under-developed neighbour Syria proves a good test case.

Syria's shift towards Turkey has emerged out of more desperate circumstances. Frozen out by the US, the EU and the so-called moderate Arab states after the 2003 Iraq war and the 2005 Hariri assassination in Lebanon, Assad was forced to cast his net for new allies. While this drew him closer to Iran and Qatar, it was Turkey that he courted most - making the historic first trip by a Syrian president to Ankara in 2004. Assad was willing to make substantial sacrifices to forge this new friendship, such as finally accepting Turkish sovereignty over the disputed Hatay province in 2005. At the same time he proved a shrewd diplomat, rushing to support Turkey's incursion against Kurdish rebels in Iraq in 2007, despite international condemnation.

Ostensibly the hard work has paid off, as Turkish support has been instrumental in bringing Syria back in from the cold. Erdogan mediated Israeli-Syrian talks in 2008 that softened Damascus's negative international image. Not surprisingly, when the French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, eventually broke the

international boycott and visited Syria last year, Assad met him accompanied by Erdogan. Economically, the renewed ties have paid dividends, too. Trade between the two states has more than doubled in three years, there has been substantial investment from Turkish companies – particularly in Syria’s second city, Aleppo – and numerous joint infrastructural projects have been commissioned. In April 2009 there was even the first ever Syrian-Turkish joint military exercise.

Despite these obvious benefits, there are downsides for Syria. The free trade agreement signed in 2007 has already put out of business old Syrian manufacturing families that couldn’t compete with superior Turkish imports. Moreover, Syria remains very much the junior partner to Turkey in this relationship, and Erdogan has been flexing his diplomatic muscle recently by encouraging a reluctant Assad to pay a visit to Saudi Arabia. Strong links with Turkey form one of the linchpins of Assad’s economic strategy, which could make Syria increasingly dependent on Turkey’s will.

In contrast, there seem few negatives for Turkey. Supporting pro-Palestinian Syria seems to be popular domestically and increased cross-border trade can help regenerate the economically deprived Turkish south. Neutralising Syria has made resolving its Kurdish problem more likely and Syria’s support will increase security on Turkey’s long and volatile border. Diplomatically, the relationship increases Turkish influence in the Arab world, and close ties to Syria make Turkey even more valuable to its Nato allies as mediator to unsavoury regimes.

This new friendship is therefore inherently unbalanced. Syria remains only one strand (admittedly a useful one) of a wider realist Turkish foreign policy – as seen by visa-free agreements with Iran and Iraq. Turkey, in contrast, is an essential ingredient in Syria’s plans for international rehabilitation and economic recovery. It is highly unlikely that any major strategic realignment will take place as Turkey can get all it wants from a willing Syria without having to commit itself to a defensive alliance and an abrogation of its ties with Israel.

Nor is there likely to be much pressure from Erdogan on Assad to either reform internally or internationally, as this would be out of line with the “zero problems with neighbours” strategy. Turkey is trying to pursue an ambitious new foreign policy in the Middle East, and Syria is enjoying being along for the ride – at least for now.

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## Sources

Source: The Guardian (UK), 1e 01.10.09