

QUESTION ON TALKS WITH THE SYRIAN LEADER

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Question on talks with Assad

Should, or will, Turkey talk with Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad? These are questions that come to Turkey's agenda from time to time. They have recently become popular again. We are used to reading and listening to these kinds of comments, but one should understand that it has never been about policy change. In fact the question of talking to Assad is not a foreign policy one in Turkey. It is rather served for domestic political consumption. Let me explain this.

The benefit of talking with a leader who does not control at least one-third of his country, who is able to stand only with the help of outside powers and whose legitimacy is in question is open to discussion from a rationalist perspective.

The goal of the circles who lobby for dialogue with Assad is clear: If the Turkish president starts a dialogue with Assad he would be in position of accepting failure in the government's Syria policy over the last years. This will provide an argument for the opposition parties against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This is the expectation and this is at the core of the discussion.

The real question is this: Is it realistic to suggest starting talks with Assad? Should Turkey start communicating directly with the Syrian leader? Will this dialogue contribute to Turkey's security and well-being?

When we look at the record of the Ba'ath regime from Ankara's point of view, it is hard to tell that Syria was a friend of Turkey. Hafez al-Assad, today's president's father and predecessor, never recognized Turkey's sovereignty over Turkey's border province of Hatay. He was not fond of Turkey.

The members of the PKK terrorist organization, which claims territory in Turkey, received their first military training in camps in Bekaa Valley in Lebanon under the control of Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s. All kinds of support, from weapons and logistics to training, had been provided by the Syrian intelligence to the PKK. The head of the organization, Abdullah Öcalan, lived in Damascus for years and operated under the wings of the Ba'ath regime.

Under the Ba'ath Party, Syria implemented a policy of searching and exploiting the weaknesses of its neighbors, especially after the 1967 war. They supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Hamas against Israel and let them open bureaus in Damascus. The Assad regime supported the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Hafez al-Assad even massacred his opponents within the country. American author Thomas Friedman gives the details of the Hama massacre in 1982 in his famous book "From Beirut to Jerusalem." Syria financed and supported terrorist organizations like the PKK and DHKP-C against Turkey.

During the Cold War years,

Syria acted with the Soviet bloc against the U.S. and its allies like Turkey. The foundations of today's Syrian-Russian partnership are Hafez Al-Assad's agreements with the Soviets in the 1970s.

When we look at near history we also see that one of the reasons leading the Turkish-Israeli partnership in the 1990s was the common threat from Syria.

Despite all these, Turkey and Syria had a rapprochement after the 1998 Adana accord following the deportation of Öcalan from Syria. Turkey's secular President Ahmet Necdet Sezer attended the funeral of Hafez al-Assad and Turkey tried to normalize its relations with its southern neighbor.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) supported Bashar al-Assad in his first years in power in the early 2000s, trying to contribute to democratization in Syria, when the regime was regarded illegitimate by the western powers. The U.N.-sponsored Mehlis and FitzGerald reports (2005) investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri concluded that the Syrian regime was involved in his killing. The American administration at the time accused the Ba'ath regime of supporting insurgencies in Iraq. Turkey tried to pull the Assad regime to the legitimate ground and mediated between Damascus and Tel Aviv in 2008.

Besides that, Turkey continued its support to the Assad regime in the first days of the Syrian uprising until the summer of 2011. Ties between the two sides were severed as the level of violence against civilians increased.

The Ba'ath regime was in ruins when the Russian military came to the rescue in 2015, as Russian President Vladimir Putin started his air campaign against opposition pockets. Assad survived with the support of Russia and owes his current position solely to Putin. He is guided by Moscow and has nothing to deliver without the consent of the Russian Federation.

Only for this reason, changing Turkey's no-contact policy with Assad and expecting Erdoğan to start dialogue with Assad, as the Turkish opposition suggests, is neither necessary nor realistic.

No doubt, when Syria completes its constitutional process and is able to form a legitimate administration, which is composed of all legitimate political factions and fractions, either pro-opposition or pro-government Turkey will probably start dialogue with Damascus.

Today we understand that there is already contact between Turkish and Syrian officials at the technical level. Keeping dialogue at these lower levels is important. But the focus must be building a legitimate government for Syria in the coming years, not prolonging the days of the already exhausted administration's lifetime.

It seems that, until that day, the biggest concession that Turkey can give is to condone an exit plan for Syrian leader when, or if, there is a constitutional agreement among Syrian political groups.