

UN/ Arab League Special Envoy

General Description

Syria is a country of 21 million people with a Sunni Muslim majority (74%) and significant minorities of Alawites - the Shia heterodox sect to which Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad belongs - and Christians. Mr Assad promotes a secular identity for the country, but he has concentrated power in the hands of family and other Alawites. Protests have generally been biggest in Sunni-dominated areas. Under the sanctions imposed by the Arab League, US and EU, Syria's two most vital sectors, tourism and oil, have ground to a halt in recent months. The IMF says Syria's economy contracted by 2% in 2011, while the value of the Syrian pound has crashed. Unemployment is high, electricity cuts trouble Damascus, and critical products like heating oil and staples like milk powder are becoming scarce. Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 after the arrest and torture of a group of teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on walls at their school in the southern city of Deraa. Security forces opened fire during a march against the arrests, killing four. The next day, the authorities shot at mourners at the victims' funerals, killing another person. People began demanding the overthrow of Mr Assad.

The government has tried to deal with the situation with a combination of minor concessions and force. President Assad ended the 48-year-long state of emergency and introduced a new constitution offering multi-party elections. But at the same time, the authorities have continued to use violence against unarmed protesters, and some cities, like Homs, have suffered weeks of intense bombardment. The opposition is deeply divided. Several groups formed a coalition, the Syrian National Council (SNC), but it is dominated by the Sunni community and exiled dissidents. The SNC disagrees with the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC) on the questions of talks with the government and foreign intervention, and has found it difficult to work with the Free Syrian Army - army defectors seeking to topple Mr Assad by force. International pressure on the Syrian government has been intensifying. It has been suspended from the Arab League, while the EU and the US have imposed sanctions. However, there has been no agreement on a UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to violence. Although military intervention has been ruled out by Western nations, there are increasing calls to arm the opposition. Correspondents say a peaceful solution seems unlikely. Syria's leadership seems intent on crushing resistance and most of the opposition will only accept an end to the regime. Some believe the expected collapse of Syria's currency and an inability to pay salaries may be the leadership's downfall. There are fears, though, that the resulting chaos would be long-lasting and create a wider conflict.

Eighteen into the Syrian uprising, the level of death and destruction is reaching new heights. Yet, outside actors - whether regime allies or opponents - remain wedded to behavior that risks making an appalling situation worse. Growing international polarization simultaneously gives the regime political space to maintain an approach - a mix of limited reforms and escalating repression - that in the longer run is doomed to fail; guarantees the opposition's full militarization, which could trigger all-out civil war; and heightens odds of a regional proxy war that might well precipitate a dangerous conflagration. The appointment of a joint UN/Arab League Special Envoy arguably offers a chance to rescue fading prospects for a negotiated transition. It must not be squandered.

Your objectives

As the representative of the UN/Arab League Special Envoy delegation you are tasked with developing a mutually agreeable plan that would:

1. put an end to the violence
2. convince all the parties to sit around the negotiation table
3. impose a workable transition plan

Syrian National Council (SNC)

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Your position

You represent the Syrian National Council, an umbrella organization of the opposition groups in and outside Syria. Although you have tried to reconcile the differences between the opposition groups over the past eight months, you were not successful at doing that. Opposition unites in one goal: the removal of the Assad Regime. Nearly a year after the uprising began in Syria, the opposition remains fractious and deeply divided. The wide variety of political groups, exiled dissidents, grassroots activists and armed militants have been unable to agree on how to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Several groups, however, have tried to form coalitions to unite opposition supporters in Syria and gain international help and recognition.

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is a coalition of seven opposition groups aimed at offering a credible alternative to President Assad's government and serving as a single point of contact for the international community. Its formation in October 2011 recalled that of Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), which earned international recognition through its opposition to the rule of Col Muammar Gaddafi and has formed an interim government.

The SNC includes:

- The Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change grouping - a movement born during the so-called "Damascus Spring" of 2000/2001 which called for broad democratic reform, and was soon suppressed
- The Muslim Brotherhood
- Local Co-ordination Committees - grassroots movements that have led and documented demonstrations
- Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) - a coalition of 40 opposition grassroots groups
- Kurdish factions, tribal leaders and independent figures

The SNC has a Secretariat General composed of representatives of the various member groups, which elect a 10-member Executive Committee and a chairman whose term is renewable every three months. The current chairman is Abdulbaset Sieda, a Kurdish activist living in exile in Sweden who became chairman following the resignation of Burhan Ghalioun, a Paris-based academic who has regularly called for democratic reform across the Arab world. He has said the SNC is "an independent group personifying the sovereignty of the Syrian people in their struggle for liberty" and is "open to all Syrians".

The SNC's website says it is committed to the following principles:

- Working to overthrow the regime using all legal means

- Affirming national unity among all components of Syrian society and rejecting all calls for ethnic strife
- Safeguarding the non-violent character of the Syrian revolution
- Protecting national independence and sovereignty, and rejecting foreign military intervention

However, at a press conference in Paris on 1 March 2012, the SNC announced that it had created a military bureau to co-ordinate the various armed anti-government groups in Syria. The bureau would function like a defense ministry and would be staffed by soldiers from the Free Syrian Army (see below) as well as civilians.

But the FSA, the main armed opposition group in Syria, responded by saying it will not co-operate with the new bureau. The head of the FSA, Col Riyad al-Assad, said the group does not want any political interference and has its own military strategy. Military issues aside, the SNC says it has a clear vision to create a civil, modern and democratic Syria, and issued a political programme in November for a post-Assad future.

It has laid out plans for a transitional period, similar to those of Libya's NTC, which would see it:

- Form an interim administration
- Hold an all-inclusive national convention on democratic change
- Organize the election of a constitutional assembly within a year to draft a new constitution and hold free parliamentary elections within six months of the new constitution being approved
- Form a judicial commission to investigate crimes against humanity and form a national reconciliation commission

The new Syria, the SNC states, will be a "democratic, pluralistic, and civil state; a parliamentary republic with sovereignty of the people based on the principles of equal citizenship with separation of powers, smooth transfer of power, the rule of law, and the protection and guarantee of the rights of minorities". The SNC, which is dominated by Syria's majority Sunni Muslim community, has struggled to win over Christians and members of President Assad's Alawite sect, who each make up about 10% of the population and have so far stayed loyal to the government.

The council's primacy has also been challenged by the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC), an opposition bloc that still functions within Syria and is led by Hussein Abdul Azim and other longstanding dissidents, some of whom are wary of the Islamists within the SNC. The SNC, which is trying to keep the uprising peaceful, has also found it difficult to work with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of army defectors which is seeking to topple Mr Assad by force. However, the two groups have agreed to co-ordinate their operations more closely.

Western diplomats say the SNC is far from achieving the recognition given to Libya's NTC at an early stage of the revolt against Gaddafi, and many are encouraging the group to merge with the rival NCC.

National Co-ordination Committee (NCC)

The National Co-ordination Committee (NCC), formed in September 2011, is made up of 13 left-leaning political parties, three Kurdish political parties, and independent political and youth activists. It is led by the veteran opposition figure Hussein Abdul Azim. The NCC differs from the Syrian National Council (SNC) on the questions of dialogue with the government and foreign intervention. The NCC calls for dialogue conditional on the withdrawal of the military from the streets, the end of attacks on peaceful protesters by security forces, and the release of all political prisoners. The group is strongly opposed to any form of foreign intervention that would involve military measures, such as a no-fly zone, and would prefer economic sanctions and other diplomatic measures to increase pressure on President Assad.

It is the only group still calling for conditional dialogue with the government, arguing that it remains the least costly route to political transition. Despite this, the NCC has refused to engage in the government's national dialogue initiative, saying that the authorities are merely trying to buy time while they "liquidate the forces of the uprising". The NCC has also been reluctant to affiliate itself with the SNC and challenged its primacy, with some members said to be wary of the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the umbrella group.

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The Free Syrian Army was formed in August 2011 by army deserters based in Turkey and led by Riyad al-Asaad, a former colonel in the air force. At its founding, the group said it would seek to "work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity, topple the regime, protect the revolution and the country's resources and stand up to the irresponsible military machine which is protecting the regime". Col Asaad claims to have 15,000 men under his command and that soldiers are defecting every day and being assigned tasks by the FSA. However, analysts believe there may be no more than 7,000.

They are also still poorly armed, and many have only basic military training. The FSA has admitted that it is unable to confront directly the Syrian army, which is estimated to have 200,000 soldiers. FSA fighters have nevertheless launched increasingly deadly and audacious attacks on security forces in the north-western province of Idlib, around the central cities of Homs and Hama, and even on the outskirts of Damascus. They began by using only light weapons, but now have more sophisticated and heavier weaponry that has either been captured or smuggled in from abroad. Improvised explosive devices have been used, while anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons have reportedly been seen.

Since November 2011, the FSA appears to have been much more active. Analysts say this is because the FSA has changed from being primarily a group of army defectors carrying out attacks near the borders with Turkey and Lebanon. It is now an umbrella group for civilians who have taken up arms and militant groups. The local insurgents - particularly those in Homs and Hama - are working towards a similar goal, but are believed to have only limited or no contact with each other or the FSA's leaders in Turkey. Some are said to merely adopt the name "FSA" to underscore their revolutionary aspirations, their army background or that they are not pro-government militiamen. The FSA leadership told the UN Human Rights Council in February that commanders in the field did not receive orders from it and currently made their own rules of engagement. The leadership saw its role as facilitating co-ordination between FSA groups and ensuring media outreach.

The council said it had documented instances of gross human rights abuses committed by members of various FSA groups. In Homs, FSA members were found to have tortured and executed suspected members of the pro-government militia, the Shabiha, in retaliation for abuses committed by them or security personnel. Some armed civilians in Homs, including those belonging to the FSA, have also allegedly sought to kill the family members of Shabiha and security forces personnel to exact blood revenge, or take them hostage. The FSA's leadership has also found it difficult to work with the SNC, which has publicly stated that it wants to safeguard the uprising's "non-violent character". However, in January the two groups agreed to co-ordinate their operations more closely through a liaison office that would be set up to "maintain direct communications around the clock".

The groups also agreed to devise a plan which would include "the reorganization of FSA units and brigades, and the creation of a format to accommodate within FSA ranks additional officers and soldiers, especially senior military officials, who side with the revolution". The SNC even appealed to the international community to support the opposition "by means of military advisers, training

and provision of arms to defend themselves" at the "Friends of Syria" meeting at the end of February. The FSA meanwhile agreed to form a joint leadership with the Higher Revolutionary Council, which was set up by Gen Mustafa Ahmed al-Sheikh, the highest ranking deserter from the Syrian army. The 15-member joint council would be chaired by Gen Sheikh and would "delineate the overall policy of military action in Syria", a spokesman said. Col Asaad would be a member of the council and the FSA would "implement the council's decisions".

Assad Government

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Your position

You represent the Assad Government. The family of President Bashar al-Assad has been in power since his father, Hafez, took over in a coup in 1970. The Ba'athists seized power in a military coup in March 1963. In the initial period of Ba'athist rule, politics still existed. The party had military and civilian wings; there were leftists and rightists. In November 1970, Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez, Syria's defence minister, staged a coup. The military and security establishments were massively expanded, with an influx of officers from the new president's Alawi sect. Syria became a police state ruled with an iron fist. Political activity degenerated into a personality cult centred on the president.

When Hafez al-Assad died in mid-2000, his son, Bashar, a British-educated ophthalmologist, succeeded him. There followed a short-lived Damascus Spring. Criticism of the regime became possible, even in the state-run media. After six months, the spring turned into a winter. Like his father, Bashar has stayed in power largely thanks to his security agencies terrorising the population. This is a regime that has no purpose other than to stay in power. There's no real ideology: just an empty rhetoric of vacuous slogans. That the broadly based protest movement should be denounced as nothing more than "armed gangs" acting as "agents" for outside powers is entirely par for the course.

It's very much a family affair, however. Bashar al-Assad rules largely as a figurehead, with the consent of a tight coterie of relatives. His younger brother Maher, who heads the Republican Guard and commands the army's 4th Mechanized Division, has been especially active in the attempts to suppress the uprising. Bashar's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, was formerly head of military intelligence and is now deputy chief of staff of the armed forces. A cousin, Hafez Makhlof, heads the Damascus branch of the feared General Intelligence Directorate. While the President and his English-born wife Asma show no particular appetite for ostentatious consumption, other members of this mafia-like ruling family have wholeheartedly embraced the material benefits of power.

Central to the regime's narrative is that it alone can preserve stability. Yet if there were free and fair elections in Syria tomorrow, it would be out on its ears. It knows that any meaningful concessions to a real democratic process would be political suicide. It also knows that the opposition stands alone, and will probably continue to stand alone, even if the Russians change their tune at the UN.

The country underwent some liberalization after Bashar became president in 2000, but the pace of change soon slowed, if not reversed. Critics are imprisoned, domestic media are tightly controlled, and economic policies often benefit the elite. The country's human rights record is among the worst in the world. It is more isolated than ever: the Arab League has forged a remarkable consensus against it; support from Arab public opinion has reached an all-time low; the Syrian National Council rapidly is gaining recognition internationally; and a UN General Assembly resolution registering disapproval garnered 122 votes on 22 November. At home, the so-called Free Syrian

Army, which purportedly is drawing more and more military defectors to its side, has been claiming increasingly effective attacks against the security services. From the outset, the regime strove to deny the existence of a deep-seated popular protest movement, choosing instead to reduce the crisis to actions of foreign-backed armed gangs.

RUSSIA

General Description

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Your position

You are a member of the Russian Delegation. You have been selected to represent Russia in a possible multi-party talks on Syria Peace Deal. You are committed to the official line of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Below is the latest developments:

After months of resistance, Russia recently voiced its support a United Nations resolution endorsing Kofi Annan's plan for settling the Syrian crisis, signaling it is prepared to raise the pressure on its old ally. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that the resolution shouldn't turn into an ultimatum to the Syrian government, setting the stage for tough bargaining over the wording of the document at the U.N. Security Council.

But Lavrov appeared to indicate Russia's growing impatience with Syrian President Bashar Assad, whose government he said made "many mistakes" that led to a worsening of the conflict. Russia and China have twice shielded Assad's regime from U.N. sanctions over its yearlong crackdown on protesters, in which more than 8,000 people have died. But the Kremlin has also offered strong support to Annan, the former United Nations secretary general who is the joint U.N. and Arab League special envoy. Annan met twice with Assad earlier this month and made proposals to end the bloodshed, which haven't yet been made public.

Lavrov said that Annan's proposals should now be unveiled, adding that Moscow stands ready to back a U.N. Security Council resolution supporting them. "The Security Council should support them, not as an ultimatum but as a basis for the continuing efforts by Kofi Annan aimed at reaching accord among all Syrians, the government and all opposition groups on all key issues, such as humanitarian corridors, halting hostilities by all parties, the beginning of a political dialogue and offering access to the media," Lavrov said at a news conference following talks in Moscow with his Lebanese counterpart.

In a radio interview aired Tuesday night, Lavrov stepped up his criticism of Assad's government "We think the Syrian leadership reacted wrongly to the first peaceful protests and makes very many mistakes, despite the numerous promises made in response to our appeals. And the positive steps are taken too late," Lavrov said on Kommersant FM radio. "Unfortunately, this is why the conflict has become so acute."

Lavrov said over the weekend that Annan's plan doesn't contain a demand for Assad to step down. On Tuesday, he reaffirmed Russia's call for a simultaneous cease-fire by the government and the opposition forces. Lavrov also said that a Russian navy oil tanker anchored at the Syrian port of Tartus is on a mission to assist Russian navy ships on anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. He scoffed at media reports alleging a Russian military buildup in Syria, saying that the servicemen aboard the tanker are needed to protect it from pirates in the waters off Africa's coast.

The foreign minister's statement followed Moscow's strong call on the Syrian government to open humanitarian corridors to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to treat the

victims of the fighting. Moscow also urged Damascus to grant the Red Cross access to jailed protesters.

While Russia had previously backed the ICRC's call for a cease-fire, Monday's statement from the Foreign Ministry that followed Lavrov's talks with the ICRC chief was worded stronger than previous ones. Speaking before Russian parliament last week, Lavrov criticized Assad for being too slow to implement long-needed reforms and warned that the conflict in the Arab state could spiral out of control.

He also complained in a weekend interview with state television about the "unproportionate" use of force by government troops and said Moscow disagrees with many of the decisions made by the Syrian leadership. "We support the need to start a political process, and to do that it's necessary to have a cease-fire first," Lavrov said. "Russia will do everything for that, irrespective of the decisions made by the Syrian government. We disagree with many of those, by the way."

TURKEY

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dangerous conflagration. Kofi Annan's appointment as joint UN/Arab League Special Envoy arguably offers a chance to rescue fading prospects for a negotiated transition. It must not be squandered.

Your Position

You represent the Turkish government in a possible multi-party talks. As the lethal crackdown by the Syrian government intensifies, Turkey has been struggling in the face of a spiraling crisis on its doorstep that is exposing the limits of its leadership in the region. In the year since the conflict in Syria began, the Turkish government has sought to play a leading role in stemming the crisis, engaging in aggressive diplomacy at the Arab League and, more recently, calling for the establishment of humanitarian corridors in Syria to help protect civilians. Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has likened President Bashar al-Assad of Syria to Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian strongman who plunged his country into an ethnically driven civil war.

But for all of its bluster and stated resolve, Turkey has been stymied in its ability to follow through with anything concrete. Officials and analysts say Turkey is extremely wary of engaging in any unilateral military action, mindful of the perils of igniting a sectarian conflict on its own border, alienating public opinion in the Arab world or, worse, inadvertently instigating regional war. The conflict in Syria has presented Turkey with an opportunity, both perilous and promising. The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria. If Turkey proves to be ineffectual in resolving the Syrian conflict, then all of the claims of its regional prowess will take a big hit. Turkish officials say they have not ruled out having their military participate in an international plan to create a buffer zone in the event that Mr. Assad continues to kill his own people and an even larger influx of refugees ensues. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan raised the possibility again on Friday, telling reporters in the capital, Ankara, that "a buffer zone, a security zone, are things being studied." But that idea has been discussed since the early days of the conflict with no concrete steps taken by Turkey or other nations toward carrying it out.

What has accelerated, though, has been the exodus of refugees despite the presence of Syrian forces along the border with Turkey. On Thursday, Turkish officials said more than 1,000 Syrians had crossed over in the past 24 hours, with more than 14,700 Syrians now sheltered in five camps in Hatay, a Turkish province on the border.

Turkish officials said the country was making contingency plans in the event of a large inflow of refugees, as Syrians demonstrate a willingness to brave an area that has been mined and military forces willing to shoot unarmed civilians. Turkey is to open a refugee camp near the southern town of Kilis next month to host 10,000 more Syrians. Another camp is being built at Ceylanpinar, near the eastern end of the border, for up to 20,000 people, officials said.

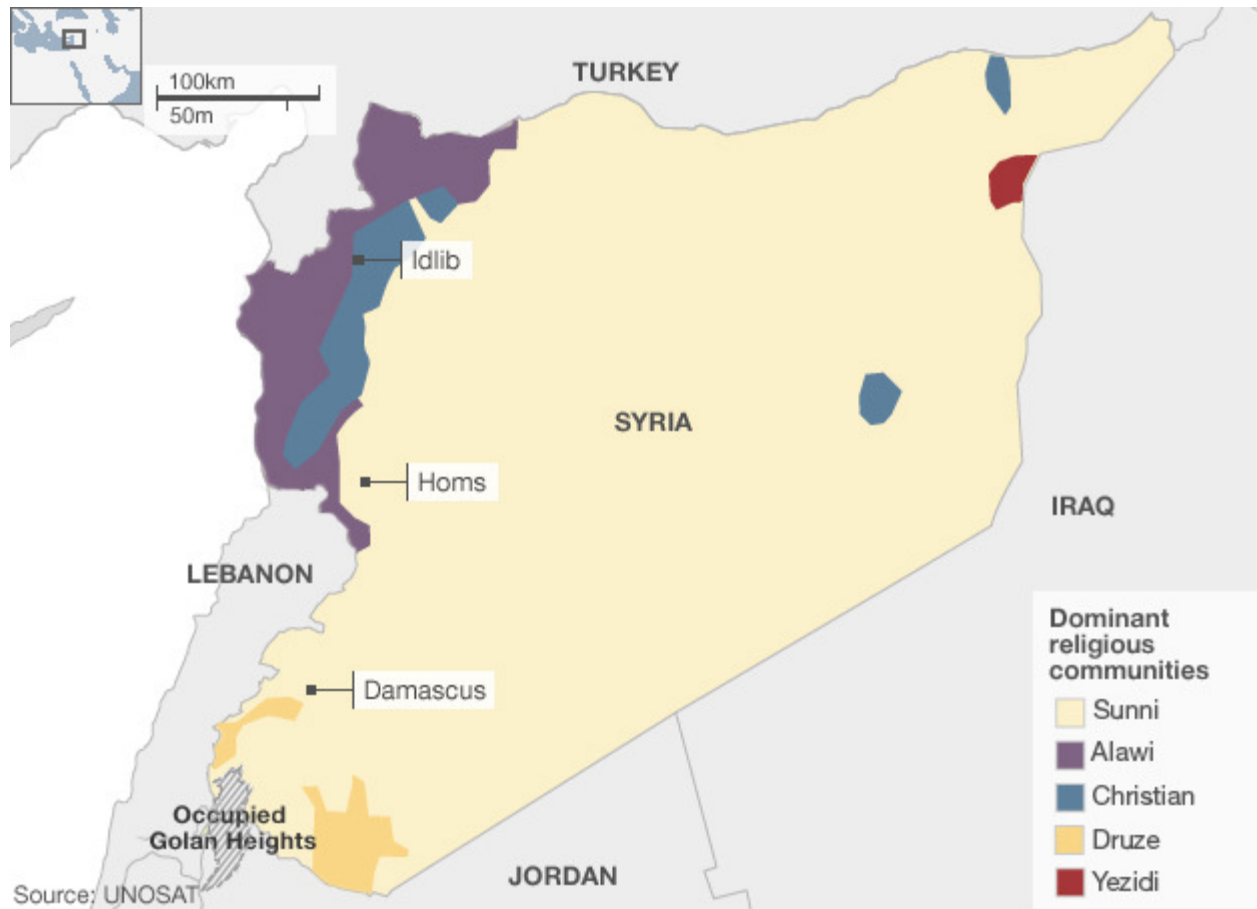
Yet that is as far as Turkey is willing to go in terms of unilateral action, analysts say. It will not act alone to impose a buffer zone in Syria because, they say, Russia and Iran are backing Syria, and Turkey does not want to risk a confrontation. They say Turkey also fears that boots on the ground could undermine its popularity in a region where memories of Ottoman rule still run deep. Despite

its limited room to maneuver, Turkey has been jockeying to position itself to have influence in a post-Assad Syria. It is hosting the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian National Council, and the rebel Free Syrian Army, about 10,000 soldiers that are being housed in an army camp in Turkey near the Syrian border. Neither group has proved to be cohesive or effective enough to present a viable challenge to the power of the Syrian government. As Mr. Assad continues to cling to power, and divisions in the fractured Syrian opposition intensify, Turkey risks finding itself the patron of weak opposition forces.

Turkey has been playing a leading role in marshaling a coalition to put international pressure on Syria. At the same time, American and Turkish officials say, the Syrian crisis has made Mr. Erdogan an indispensable ally to President Obama, helping to overcome some of the tensions caused by a break between Turkey and Israel. Yet the conflict has also laid bare the limits of Turkey's power in the region. Before the Syrian conflict erupted, Turkey was emerging as one of Syria's closest allies, with the two countries holding joint cabinet sessions and Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Assad even vacationing together. Turkey's 500-mile border with Syria is its longest, and trade between the countries more than tripled to \$2.5 billion in 2010.

But despite years of diplomatic engagement and economic investment, Turkey could not persuade Mr. Assad to cease the violence and move ahead with political reform. The conflict in Syria is seen as a crucial test for Turkey as it struggles to carry out its newly muscular foreign policy in the region. Turkey's aspirations to join the European Union are all but dormant. The conflict with Cyprus appears as intractable as ever. Efforts to reach a solution over Armenia are at an impasse. Diplomatic ties with Israel are frozen over an Israeli commando raid in May 2010 on a vessel that tried to reach Gaza from Turkey. Iran remains deeply suspicious of Turkey's agreement to host a NATO missile shield.

Bordered by Syria, Iraq and Iran, Turkey, a majority Sunni country of 79 million, risks becoming mired by the sectarian divisions convulsing its neighbors. While Syria is tipping toward civil war, Iraq is once again buffeted by sectarian strife while Iran has aligned itself firmly behind the Assad government. Turkey has a significant population of Alevis, a Muslim sect that shares certain beliefs with Mr. Assad's Alawite sect, some of whom are sympathetic to Mr. Assad and could become politicized. At the same time, Turkish officials express concern that Syria, backed by Iran, could seek to embolden the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., as a means to punish Turkey for supporting the Syrian opposition. While Turkey would clearly benefit if Mr. Assad were overthrown, analysts note that Arab countries would be loath to see Turkey exert too much influence.



Is it ethnically or religiously divided?