

By Ali Durkin

As a neighbour to a strife-ridden country that is, as some experts argue, rapidly headed towards civil war, Turkey finds itself in a precarious position as it attempts to stay out of the conflict in Syria, even as it encourages the international community to take military action. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and leaders of various member countries have made clear their intention – they repeatedly reinforced that message during the May summit in Chicago – to stay out of the conflict in Syria. Yet, Turkey’s leaders continue to express that an invocation of Article V remains on the table.

At the beginning of 2012, the fighting in Syria between the government forces led by President Bashar Assad and the opposition intensified greatly. After a lull in the violence in April due to a cease-fire agreement, the conflict has again escalated in the latter half of May. “The chance of a collapse into total civil war seems to be increasingly high,” said Richard Gowan, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations who is based at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Assad has committed ‘widespread, systematic and gross human rights violations,’ according to a February 2012 report of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. Estimates for the number of deaths since the beginning of the violence in March of 2011 are heavily disputed, but some argue the toll is as high as 9,000. The UN estimates that 300,000 have been displaced within Syria as a result of the conflict, according to the report.

The violence in Syria once again received intense international attention after a massacre in Houla on May 25 left 108 people dead, including 34 children. The UN Security Council met on May 27 for an emergency meeting to discuss and condemn the killings. ‘Widespread violence and increasingly aggravated socio-economic conditions have left many communities in a perilous state,’ according to the Human Rights Council report. ‘Meeting basic needs to sustain everyday life has become increasingly difficult.’

Through diplomatic measures and sanctions, the international community has taken steps towards addressing the violence in Syria. The Friends of Syria Group, a contact group composed of countries, Syrian opposition groups and other international organisations, was established by (then) French President Nicholas Sarkozy in early 2012. The group met in Istanbul in April to discuss the situation in Syria and put pressure on the Syrian government to end the violence. In April 2012, unarmed military observers were sent to Syria under a UN Supervision Mission.

As it shares its longest common border with Syria, the conflict has had enormous ramifications in Turkey, both for economic and security reasons, said Bayram Balci, visiting scholar in the Middle East Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington D.C. “For Turkey it is important and urgent to help the opposition to topple the Syrian regime because as long as the conflict is not resolved, Turkey will continue to suffer from this situation.”

Turkey has had to cut off trade with Syria, although that has hurt Turkey’s economy significantly. “For Turkey the sanctions against the Syrian regime mean not only the end of business and trade with Syria but also with some other countries,” Balci said. Turkey can no longer trade with Lebanon, Jordan or Egypt due to border closing as a result of this conflict. The violence in Syria has also left Turkey in a precarious security situation. Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees have fled into Turkey. In April 2012, Syrian forces fired across the border into Turkey, killing two Syrian refugees and wounding several people, including a Turkish citizen.

Another serious threat to Turkey security as a result of the conflict in Syria is the Kurdish issue, Balci said. The Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist group by both NATO and the EU, has clashed for years with the Turkish government in its quest for autonomy. Turkish leaders say that with the escalation of the conflict in Syria, the PKK is now able to work in Syria to operate against Turkey. "The Kurdish guerilla in Turkey can again get support in Syria, which is a disaster because it makes the Kurdish opposition in Turkey more powerful," Balci said. Turkish leaders have welcomed refugees into their country and supported the opposition against Assad's army, yet they remain fearful of being drawn into the conflict. NATO member countries, including the US have urged Turkey to consider preparing for military action when the time is right, Gowan said.

Turkish leaders have signalled their willingness to invoke Article V, which states that an armed attack on one NATO member country be considered an attack on all. Experts disagree over whether an invocation would have merit unless Syria were to undertake a direct attack against Turkey. The possibility of invoking Article V is very slim unless the number of refugees flooding into Turkey increases dramatically, said Anne Marie Slaughter, former director of policy planning for the US Department of State, now professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. Yet, while the chance of an invocation of Article V is slight, experts say Turkish leaders are using their rhetoric to send a message to the international community.

"What the Turks are doing is basically signalling that if they end up going into Syria they will not go alone," Gowan said. "They expect their NATO partners to be there with them. They are prepared to think about intervening, but they will not intervene unilaterally." Turkish leaders are not only trying to show the international community the seriousness of the situation in Syria, but also send a message to Assad. "Unfortunately, nothing impresses him," Balci said. Despite Turkey's appeal to the alliance, NATO officials have insisted that they will not intervene in Syria. "NATO has no intention whatsoever to intervene in Syria," said Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen during the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago.

Yet, through their message of Article V, Turkish leaders hope to show that their troops will not be used as a proxy force by NATO, Gowan said. Consequently, Turkish leaders are walking a very fine line when it comes to addressing the conflict in Syria. While supporting the opposition forces of Syria and encouraging the international community to get involved in the conflict, Turkey is doing everything it can to avoid military action, Gowan said.

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