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Turkey peculiarly absent from Tehran

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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Ankara has decided to boycott this week's Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Tehran, which has been much maligned in the Western media despite the summit's potential to contribute to mediation efforts on the conflict in Syria. By all indications, this decision reflects a low point in Turkish foreign policy.

Despite a personal invitation by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Turkish President Abdullah Gul has cited personal health and scheduling conflict. Even the resourceful Foreign

minister Ahmet Davutoglu has balked at the idea of attending the summit, which brings dozens of leaders from the South to discuss their issues, including regional conflicts such as Syria. [1]

Tehran has called for a serious discussion of the Syrian conflict on the summit's sideline, in light of the participation of Egypt's President Mohammed Morsi, who has proposed a Syria contact group consisting of Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead of welcoming this opportunity, the Turkish leadership has chosen to ignore it and, instead, focus on its "regime change" strategy vis-a-vis Damascus that is inching closer to the "no-fly" option by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Ankara's decision will be viewed negatively by both Tehran and even Cairo, which unlike Turkey's desire to toe NATO's policy in the Middle East, is eager to play an independent role that mandates conflict mediation in a fellow Arab country. The latest report from Egypt indicates that Cairo was hoping to hold a meeting on Syria with the quartet (ie Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt), but that is a long shot given Turkey's non-cooperative behavior.

The trouble with Turkey's Syria policy is that it is short-sighted and incapable of factoring in the likely ramifications of a no-fly zone in exacerbating its problems with the regime in Damascus and Syria's regional allies such as Iran and Russia - for example, it risks becoming the recipient of much greater heat on its Kurdish problem, in light of Damascus' decision to play the "Kurdish card" against Ankara.

A prudent Turkish approach would have been to endorse Morsi's above-mentioned plan, which was unveiled at the recent Mecca meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and thus agree to work with Iran to support the United Nations' renewed effort at creating a dialogue between the government and the opposition in Syria.

By participating at a high level at the Tehran summit, Turkey could have taken a timely proactive step toward a regional approach on the conflict. Its decision to opt instead for NATO's militaristic solution-in-making, among other consequences, widens the political rift at home between the government and the political opposition, which favors a more independent Turkish foreign policy.

If the present pattern of Turkish foreign policy continues, then we are likely to witness a qualitative deepening of Turkey's problems with its neighbors (and near neighbors) in the near future, including Iraq, Russia and Iran. This is particularly unfortunate for Davutoglu, who told this author at a conference in Istanbul last year that he was "very optimistic" about the future of Turkey's relations with Iran.

It is impossible to ignore a thickening air of cynicism, even doom and gloom, now surrounding Iran-Turkey relations, particularly since Ankara stubbornly refused to admit a role for Iran in the diplomatic efforts regarding Syria (see [Missteps in Turkey's neighborly ties](#)", Asia Times Online, October 12, 2011).

According to a Tehran University political science professor who spoke with the author on the condition of anonymity, the mere chance that Syria's President Bashar al-Assad may participate at the NAM summit must have contributed to the Turkish leaders' collective decision to stay away "simply because they have completely written him [Assad] off and therefore they cannot reconcile themselves with the fact that Assad has survived and will be around no matter how much they dislike him."

As of writing, the Iranian authorities were tight-lipped about Assad's participation at the Tehran summit, saying only that a Syrian "higher than the foreign minister" will be coming to Tehran along with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

In the event that Assad does show up, it is a small gamble by Tehran, hoping that he will be able to present his case to the NAM nations and thus shore up international support. At any rate, Damascus is not about to fall, and all the vital signs indicate the likelihood of an ongoing political stalemate in Syria that requires mediation effort by regional players.

Ankara's refusal to accept this simple fact is costly to Turkey itself, since it reflects the country's

substitution of political realism with the wish list on Syria, indicating a deep identity gap in the Turkish political system and its contradictory existence as a nodal point between East and West.

Yet, in many ways Turkey is just another Middle Eastern developing nation, not an advanced European nation, and this in turn gives plenty of stimulus for Turkey to join or become an observer at the NAM. Maybe then the Turkish leaders would begin cherishing NAM's core principles in terms of independent foreign policy.

Note:

1. Gathering Hope in Tehran, The New York Times, August 23, 2012.