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Syria crisis shows limits of rising Turkish power

By **Alistair Lyon**
9/9/2012

Turkey's bark seems worse than its bite.

Ask the Syrians, who shot down a Turkish reconnaissance jet on June 22 and got away with it.

Turkish leaders shrilled up their rhetoric. They sent anti-aircraft missiles to the border and repeatedly scrambled F-16 fighters when Syrian helicopters flew too close. Ankara won supportive noises from its NATO allies. But that was it.

Ask the Israelis, who killed nine pro-Palestinian Turkish activists on the Gaza-bound Mavi Marmara aid ship in 2010, and got away with it. Turkey threatened to send its navy to protect future flotillas to Gaza, but never followed through.

The danger for Turkey is that its truculence, whether over the Mavi Marmara ship incident with Israel or over the loss of its F-4 off the Syrian coast, begins to look toothless.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has likened Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on his opponents in the past 16 months to the practices of Nazi Germany - only to be accused in turn of being implicated in the bloodshed.

"With his desire from the beginning to interfere in our internal affairs, unfortunately ... (Erdogan) has made Turkey a party to all the bloody acts in Syria," Assad told Turkey's Cumhuriyet newspaper last week. "Turkey has given all kinds of logistical support to the terrorists killing our people."

After Erdogan announced that Turkey had toughened its rules of engagement on the Syrian border, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, accused him of playing poker with national interests.

"Whatever the prime minister said at the time of the Mavi Marmara incident, he said the same thing today. If you bluff, you lose your deterrence internationally," Kilicdaroglu said.

So far, neither Turkey nor Syria seems eager for a confrontation, although the pricklier Turkish military posture raises the danger of an accidental one along a border that winds 900 km (550 miles) from the Mediterranean to the Tigris river.

Turkey is a serious regional power with a powerful military and an economy far more dynamic than any comparable nation in the Middle East, where many envy its combination of new-found prosperity and democracy under a party with Islamist roots that finally tamed the generals who for decades called the shots.

A simplistic image of Turkey, perhaps, but one whose appeal resonated in the Middle East when Erdogan reached out to a region long seen by Turks as more problematic than promising, with a policy breezily dubbed "zero problems" with neighbours.

For much of the past decade, it worked well.

Turkey maintained its strong alliance with Israel, while avoiding friction with Iran and cultivating new friendships with old foes such as Syria and the Kurds in Iraq, smoothing out tensions with trade, construction and development aid. Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad became personal friends.

It began to unravel when Israel assaulted the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in December 2008, drawing acid criticism from Turkish leaders who until then had worked hard to broker a peace deal between Israel and Syria over the occupied Golan Heights.

When unrest in Arab police states spread to Syria in March 2011, Turkey urged Assad to defuse protests with genuine reform. Instead, he tried to crush them with ferocious violence.

Turkish leaders, feeling betrayed by Assad's spurning of their advice, turned decisively against him in September.

But Assad, defying their predictions that he would go the same way as other Arab autocrats challenged by their people in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, is still clinging to power.

Turkey embraced the Syrian opposition and gave sanctuary to the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as to Syrian refugees, even talking of setting up some kind of buffer zone inside Syria if that desperate human inflow turned into a flood.

But Ankara cautioned that it would do nothing militarily without NATO or backing from the U.N. Security Council, which has been paralysed on Syria by Russian and Chinese vetoes.

That means its practical options are limited, particularly since it is still struggling with its own Kurdish insurgency in the southeast that has festered for nearly 30 years, costing about 40,000 lives, including an estimated 500 in the past year.

Some worry that Erdogan, who stalked off a Davos stage he was sharing with Shimon Peres in 2009 saying the Israeli president knew "how to kill", is prone to add pique to the more conventional foreign policy mix of pragmatism and principle.

"Turkey could have pursued a more cautious, measured policy toward Syria," said Lale Kemal, Ankara bureau chief of Turkey's Taraf daily. "Outspoken Turkish policy has provoked the Assad regime. Turkey made the mistake of thinking Assad will go soon."

She argued that Turkey should not have flown jets near an "irrational" country like Syria in the throes of a civil war.

"Syria has demonstrated to Turkey by downing the jet that 'Look, we have the power, we can shoot down your aircraft. You are a NATO member, but we also have big firepower'."

Former Turkish Foreign Minister Ilter Turkmen said his country had been unwise to swing so fast from being Assad's chum to his most virulent critic, dismissing the idea that support for Syrian rebels might pay off for Turkey later.

"I don't think countries are ever grateful," he said, predicting that any future post-Assad government would be extremely nationalistic, perhaps reviving problems with Turkey, whose Hatay province has long been claimed by Syria.

"We have been prisoners of our own rhetoric," Turkmen said, adding that any unilateral Turkish military intervention in Syria would be folly. "You can get in, but how do you get out?"

For much of its modern history, Turkey has avoided foreign entanglements, intervening unilaterally only in Cyprus in 1974, while standing ready to join U.N.-backed peacekeeping missions in troublespots around the world, from Somalia to Afghanistan.

Turkey remains widely admired in the Middle East, but the excitement at Erdogan's tough talk against Israel that made him so popular in the Arab world a couple of years ago has cooled.

And for all their military might and economic muscle, the Turks now find themselves with almost no leverage in Damascus.

"They can sell stuff. Lots of Middle Eastern people have Turkish goods in their homes," said International Crisis Group analyst Hugh Pope. "But their ability to project power into those dysfunctional states in the Middle East is very small."