

Körber Dialogue Middle East

Syria, Iran, Turkey: The Future of an Uneasy Triangle

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The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relating to the Middle East. At the workshop in Berlin high-ranking foreign policy practitioners and representatives of leading think tanks gathered in order to discuss various aspects of the conflict-ridden triangular relationship between Turkey, Syria and Iran. This summary contains a selection of arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy discussion. It is being distributed to the participants of the Körber Dialogue Middle East and selected policymakers.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

I. Turkey in the Middle East: Big Player or Great Pretender?

Turkey's role in the Middle East was examined through the prism of the Syrian crisis. One participant asserted that Turkish policy on Syria reflected **the general tenets of Turkey's "post-Arab Spring" engagement** in the MENA region, i.e. 1) retention of its **regional power status**; 2) support for **opposition movements**; and 3) coordination of its policies with its **allies**. One of the discussants said that Turkey's decision to **withdraw its support from the Syrian regime** was based on the insight that Assad's days were numbered. Support for an increasingly powerless dictator would ultimately weaken Turkey's position. Moreover, Bashar Al Assad had antagonized the Turkish leadership by allowing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to operate from Syrian territory.

Turkey's **support for the Syrian opposition** – which has included giving sanctuary to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – was deemed to be in line with the Turkish response to the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. One participant said that the Turkish strategy amounted to **"picking the winners"**. He voiced concern over the fact that Turkey was backing radical factions of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and claimed that the refugee camps on the Turkish-Syrian border were developing into a "mini Muslim Brotherhood state". There was general agreement that in the short term Turkey's policy towards Syria constituted a significant **departure from the "zero problems with our neighbors" approach** which had underpinned the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement in the recent past.

With reference to the general tenets alluded to above, it was pointed out that Turkey, which was a member of the *Friends of Syria* group, closely coordinated its policy towards Syria with its allies,

and especially with the US. Thus, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, **Turkish-US relations** had **improved** significantly. They had reached a low ebb as a result of the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations. On the other hand, some of the participants believed that relations between Turkey and Iran were increasingly characterized by a striving for regional predominance. Against this backdrop, one discussant stated that the Turkish leadership was firmly convinced that regional conflicts such as the Syrian crisis should on the whole be resolved by regional powers. Nevertheless, the participants thought that Turkey was unwilling to lead any kind of outside intervention in Syria.

There was no agreement on whether or not **Turkey** would turn out to be the **winner of the Arab Spring**. Whereas some of the participants believed that Turkey and its AKP government would benefit from the advent of similar Islam-oriented governments in the transformation countries of North Africa, since these would probably try to imitate the Turkish model, others were more sceptical and pointed out that good relations with the new governments would not necessarily compensate for the loss of Turkey's close ties with the old regimes.

II. To Intervene or Not to Intervene?

The Syrian Endgame and What Outside Actors Can Do

One participant believed that the center of the Syrian state was still functional, although cracks in the decision-making structures were beginning to become apparent. However, at the municipal level, **government departments** were **no longer operational**. The vacuum was increasingly being filled by the **security forces**. One of the discussants thought that **40 to 45 percent of Syrian territory**, in particular the area between Homs and the Turkish border and the poorer areas of Damascus and Aleppo, was **no longer under the control** of the central government. Another participant said that there were obvious signs that a **civil war** with a sectarian subtext was in the offing, though the situation had not as yet become an all-out conflict.

The **armed opposition** in Syria was described as an amalgamation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), armed tribesmen and ordinary civilians who had taken up arms. In order to increase the opposition's military clout, the FSA was trying to unite the armed resistance groups under its command. At the same time the **civilian opposition** was attempting to establish a political leadership on the level of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The influence of the **expatriate opposition** "on the ground" was considered to be of no more than marginal importance. One participant added that **money** for the Syrian uprising was pouring in mainly from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it was coming not only from government sources, but also from the *Sahwa Islamiya* movement, which was said to be channelling its assistance to fundamentalist groups.

Several participants emphasized the fact that the **economic situation** in Syria had deteriorated dramatically since the beginning of the crisis. There had been a 90 percent drop in tourism over the past year; the manufacturing sector had shrunk by 50 percent; and agricultural production was down to 40 percent of its pre-crisis levels. One discussant pointed out that members of the influential business community in Damascus (*bazaaris*) were starting to withdraw their support

for the Assad regime. In conjunction with the exodus of Syrian businessmen (some of them associated with the regime) and a very high level of capital flight, this places severe restrictions on the regime's economic room for manoeuvre.

There was general agreement among the participants that the **time for reconciliation** between President Assad and the Syrian people has **gone for good**. Thus, scenarios which suggest that Assad might perhaps cling to power as a “weak leader in a weak country” or, alternatively, be accepted as a party to a post-civil war negotiating process were considered to be rather unlikely. No one thought that Assad would be able to reestablish a social contract in Syria.

The participants all believed that **outside intervention** in Syria would come at a high cost. There were three possible courses of action: implementing R2P; arming the FSA; and establishing a humanitarian corridor or protection zone. Whereas some discussants were of the opinion that outside intervention would prevent Syria from descending into a fully-fledged civil war, others thought that intervention would **fuel sectarian violence**. The participants also disagreed with regard to the possibility of a military coup d'état designed to topple President Assad. Some considered it to be a credible option, whilst others thought that it was unrealistic. With regard to the **operational feasibility** of outside intervention, one discussant pointed out that it would not be very difficult on a technical level to impose a no-fly zone over Syria. However, in order to tip the military balance in favor of the opposition, there was a need for a “no-drive zone” and anti-tank weapons, which could not be brought into the country without the help of a state sponsor. With regard to **questions of legitimacy**, one participant believed that the US and perhaps Britain and France might be prepared to participate in a military intervention even in the absence of a UNSC mandate as long as the following conditions were met: 1) A clear request for assistance from a united Syrian opposition; 2) an endorsement of the intervention plan by the Arab League; and 3) a commitment by a lead nation to take charge of the operation (e.g. Turkey or Saudi Arabia).

Some of the discussants called on the international community to make exhaustive use of **coercive diplomacy** (including more effective EU sanctions) and to **invest in the civilian opposition** in Syria instead of advocating (military) intervention. They believed that it was of the utmost importance to send out the message that an orderly transition was a distinct possibility. As a concrete step towards “the day after” they proposed the establishment of a **reconstruction fund** by the *Friends of Syria* group. Even though there was criticism of Russia's role in the Syrian crisis, it was considered to be an important actor because it still had access to the Assad regime.

III. On Collision Course:

Western-Iranian Relations and the Difficult Search for Reconciliation

The debate centered on the question of how a **military operation against the Iranian nuclear installations** – possibly carried out by the Israeli air force – might affect the regional balance of power. Some of the participants pointed out that Iran's retaliatory capabilities, both in military and intelligence terms, were far more limited than one might have expected. Nevertheless, other discussants argued that it would be far more difficult to **contain Iran** after a military strike, since

this would probably reinforce domestic support for the nuclear program (“rallying around the flag effect”), provide the Iranian leadership with a legitimate reason to acquire a nuclear capability and ultimately help it to break out of its international isolation. One participant was of the opinion that an attack might actually be a “gift” to the Iranian government, an argument which was vehemently rejected by those who claimed that Iran was attempting to deescalate the crisis. Others maintained that an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would curtail the country’s nuclear ambitions and, in the final analysis, be an effective deterrent. Some of the discussants pointed out that, whilst the Arab states of the Gulf were wary of Iran’s nuclear motives, they were not in favor of an Israeli strike.

Some of the discussants believed that the ongoing conflict between Iran and the West went much deeper than the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program, and maintained that the tensions were nurtured by a profound sense of **mutual mistrust**. One participant pointed out that the Supreme Leader and many decision-makers in the Iranian political elite were convinced that the ultimate goal of Western policy towards Iran was to “bully Iran into submission” and in the long run to bring about regime change. Other discussants believed that the Supreme Leader’s interpretation of Western intentions had little or nothing to do with the facts. However, they called on the West to send out an unmistakable message to Iran that the nuclear conflict was “about non-proliferation” and not about regime change.

In order to overcome the mutual lack of trust there was a need for a comprehensive **set of confidence-building measures**. One of the participants proposed a three-dimensional roadmap. The first dimension would consist of a comprehensive **system of regional cooperation in the Gulf region** within which all of the partners, including the US and Iran, would be obliged to recognize and respect each other’s security interests. The arrangement could gradually be enlarged to include the Levant. There was no agreement as to whether Israel should eventually be part of the structure. The second dimension would consist of some kind of **accommodation between the US and Iran**. In order to pave the way for a US-Iranian rapprochement, the two countries would have to reconsider their policies towards Israel. From an Iranian point of view the conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation with the US. Some of the participants believed that, as a result of this, there was a correlation between the level of US-Iranian tension and the level of Iranian-Israeli tension. The third dimension would try to restore **confidence between Iran and the member states of the European Union**.

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