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Syria Opinion: Turkey's Leaders Face The Conundrum of History (Foley)

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Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Syrian President Assad
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Throughout Damascus, there are small blue plaques with yellow Arabic writing, providing a brief history of an important building, event, or person who once lived nearby. The plaques are not only in the historic medina adima --- The Old City --- but also in newer neighborhoods, such as Sha'alan. Some commemorate the martyrs who died resisting the Ottoman presence in the city during World War I --- they are a reminder of Syria's troubled ties with its northern neighbour Turkey and the factors which are shaping the response of Ankara, and the "West", to recent events in and beyond Damascus.

For Turks, World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire ended a period of decline and corruption. It is an era which defines their national identity to this day. In the eyes of many, Ottoman leaders needlessly sacrificed their young men to defend Arab lands beyond Turkey's natural frontiers for the sake of a universal Islamic state.

In his landmark October 1927 speech, Mustafa Kemal, the president and founder of the Turkish Republic, asked, "How many sons of Anatolia had died in the scorching sons of Yemen?" In the future, he promised, Turks would not fight in Yemen, a state that has become synonymous with the plight of ordinary soldiers in Turkish folklore.

Kemal's promise was kept by him and subsequent Turkish leaders, who built a successful modern nation modeled on the West and generally kept Turkey out of Arab affairs. Turkish leaders remained mindful of the fact that many of their people never forgot countrymen who died in the Ottoman Empire's vast Arab provinces. Meanwhile, Arabs looked at World War I as a period of national rebirth after centuries of oppression under Turkish rule. That idea of rebirth is enshrined in the name of Syria's ruling party, the Ba'ath, which sees itself as a secular and nationalist leadership committed to the defence of Arab rights against all rivals, including Turkey.

This historical legacy creates a conundrum for Turkish leaders. Ankara's interests are clearly intertwined with events in Syria, and Turkey is the one power with the assets to immediately and decisively intervene. However, while the Erdogan Government has been a vocal and frequent critic of the violence in Syria, most Turks continue to oppose intervention. A June 2012 poll showed that 41.1% of Turks wanted their nation to remain neutral in the conflict, while only 11.7% favored toppling the Syrian government. Ankara may also fear that a prolonged military intervention in Syria could ignite an Arab nationalist backlash in the country and in the region.

This current complication, based on history, helps explain Ankara's complex stance towards Syria, with the gap at times between its strong rhetoric and the caution of the Turkish military, even after one of its aircraft was shot down by Assad forces. It also helps explain the limits on the West's direct action in Syria. Turkey is a member of the NATO alliance, and its airspace, bases, and ports would be critical to any US or European military operation in Syria. If Ankara is unwilling to intervene, it is unlikely that such an operation can take place.

That in turn means that Western suggestions for resolving the conflict in Syria will not carry so much weight. Absent a change in global or the regional balances of power, it will be largely up to Syrians themselves to resolve their military and political conflicts.

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