

Turkey realizes it needs Iran and Russia as Friends?

By [Global Research News](#)

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Turkey is turning to regional powers Iran and Russia, backers of the Damascus regime, to help it deal with Syria's bloody civil war that has spilled across its border with deadly shelling and a flood of refugees, analysts say.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave the first signs last week that Ankara may be shifting the way it approaches the 19-month conflict after holding what local media called a "surprise meeting" with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in Baku.

Ankara has proposed to Iran establishing a set of trilateral mechanisms involving key regional players to face the Syrian crisis raging at their doorsteps.

"This (trilateral) mechanism might involve Turkey, Egypt and Iran," Erdogan said. "A second mechanism could involve Turkey, Russia, Iran. A third could be made up of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia."

"This represents a significant shift in position by Ankara," Semih Idiz wrote in the English-language Hurriyet Daily News.

"It was no more than a few months ago that Ankara looked coolly on any discussion on Syria which involved Russia and Iran due to their unconditional backing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," he argued.

Erdogan's government, a one-time Assad ally, has burnt bridges with Damascus after its deadly crackdown on popular dissent that erupted in March last year and has turned into a civil war.

Turkey has since then provided sanctuary for some 100,000 refugees fleeing the conflict, as well as the exiled Syrian rebel and political leadership, in camps along its volatile border.

At the same time Turkey's parliament has approved military action against Damascus "when deemed necessary", shortly after Syrian shells killed five Turks in a border town on October 3. The Turkish military has beefed up border security with aircraft and tanks.

But in the region, Ankara's deterrent measures have not set well with Iran and Russia and have changed the perception of Turkey as troublesome.

Sami Kohen, a veteran columnist of liberal daily Milliyet, said Ankara began to seek an "exit strategy" after the policies pursued so far by the government pushed Turkey to become a part of the problem.

“While on the one side Ankara is keeping on its policy of showdown against Syria, on the other side it is signalling that it wants to be involved in efforts for a peaceful solution.”

‘Has to have friends’

A Turkish foreign ministry official contacted by AFP said Turkey has never ruled out regional initiatives, noting its support for regional quartet talks proposed by Egypt and involving the other two key players Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey and Iran have diverging views on the Syrian crisis but recent weeks have seen an intensive diplomatic exchange between the two countries, resulting in both Ankara and Tehran’s backing a ceasefire plan floated by international envoy Lakhdar Brahimi during the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday starting this week.

Turkey is also talking to Russia despite a recent diplomatic row sparked after Ankara grounded a Syria-bound plane en route from Moscow to Damascus on suspicion that it had military cargo.

Turkey has not yet said what exactly the suspect cargo contained, but both countries have preferred to downplay the incident, and denied there was a crisis in their trade-based relationship.

It is however hard to predict if Turkey’s new overtures, interpreted by some observers as a change in Turkish foreign policy options, will have any chance of success as long as Russia and Iran cling to their support for Assad’s regime.

Yet Turkey finds itself grasping for support over the Syria crisis, amid criticism that the Western powers are not doing enough to stop the bloodshed.

“Turkey has been desperate for 19 months,” Soli Ozel, a professor of international relations at Istanbul’s Bilgi University, said. “It doesn’t have enough strength to change the circumstances in Syria, or to convince Syria’s allies (to find a solution), or to convince its Western allies to stand by it.”

A new initiative to build cooperation with key regional players may be Turkey’s way of mending fences with its neighbours over Syria.

“I think Turkey’s leaders are rediscovering the idea of having zero problems with neighbours,” a Western diplomat, familiar with Ankara’s efforts, said.

“Turks have come to the conclusion that they need to do something as regards Russia and Iran. They have realised Turkey is not alone and even if it were a super power, Turkey has to have friends.”

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