

## US AND TURKEY DIVERGE ON SYRIA



The US and Turkey have yet to develop a plan to deal with the monumental challenges the Syrian conflict poses to their interests. Finding common ground among regional and global stakeholders in Syria has already proven to be a challenging endeavor. While broad international consensus against the use of chemical weapons might have provided grounds for robust international action, US reluctance to get involved in Syria resulted in a scaled back approach. In the wake of Syria's violation of President Obama's so-called "red line" on the use of chemical weapons, Turkey declared its readiness to join a military operation against the regime with the goal of ending Assad's rule and establishing a transitional government. The US administration's preference for negotiations with Russia to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons highlights a broader lack of policy synchronization between the US and Turkey on Syria. Although opposing policies regarding the regime's chemical weapons use is critical, it is only one component of a larger and increasingly more complex set of problems created by the Syrian conflict. It is crucial for the US and Turkey to work out their differences if they are to contribute to a mutually beneficial resolution of the Syrian conflict.

**SALLY JUDSON**  
[sjudson@setadc.org](mailto:sjudson@setadc.org)

**KADIR USTUN**  
[kadirustun@setadc.org](mailto:kadirustun@setadc.org)

The SETA Foundation at  
Washington, D. C.  
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite #1106  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: +1 (202) 223-9885  
Fax: +1 (202) 223-6099  
[www.setadc.org](http://www.setadc.org) | [info@setadc.org](mailto:info@setadc.org)

## Lack of International Action

Despite President Obama's "red line" and the warnings of the international community, there is strong evidence gathered by regional and Western intelligence networks that the Assad regime used chemical weapons several times during the Syrian civil war with impunity. The regime allegedly employed small-scale uses of these weapons on, possibly to gauge international response, before eventually launching the August 21st large-scale attack on a Damascus neighborhood that resulted in the deaths of more than 1,400 civilians.

Although the use of chemical and biological weapons is prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention, Syria was not a signatory to the treaty and has one of the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons in the world, including sarin, mustard, and VX gases. Western nations had evidence of the use of chemical weapons several months before the attack in Damascus in August. In a letter to United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in April 2013, Britain and France informed the UN that chemical weapons had been used multiple times since December 2012. The US later admitted that Assad had been using chemical weapons against rebel forces on a small-scale, killing between 100 and 150 Syrians. In June 2013, a UN panel reported that it had "reasonable grounds" to believe that chemical weapons attacks had occurred in Syria at least four times between March and April 2013.

During his visit to Washington in May, Prime Minister Erdogan had already presented Turkey's assessment that the regime had repeatedly used chemical weapons. Despite receiving 14 reports of alleged chemical weapons use and ample evidence proving the use of sarin gas in Syria - such as blood, tissue, and soil samples - the technical data was not enough to convince the UN to act. While Turkey shared its intelligence and assessments of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, the US remained hesitant and wary of bolder moves. The gridlock in the UN Security Council (UNSC) combined with US reluctance to become involved in another Middle Eastern conflict complicated the emergence of a coherent international response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. This in turn embol-

dened the Assad regime to continue to use chemical weapons on an increasing scale, culminating with the massive attack in August.

Turkey has long been frustrated with the absence of a favorable and broad international consensus on Syria. Despite Ankara's efforts to urge the global community to intervene, the US and European allies have been unwilling to act due to conflicting interests and the complexity of the situation on the ground. Several UNSC permanent members opposed a Turkish proposal for the establishment of a buffer zone and NATO expressed hesitancy to become involved in yet another Middle Eastern conflict. Without the preferred option of multilateral action, Ankara provided sanctuary and funds to the Syrian opposition. Faced with potential spillover across the Turkish border, the Turkish government received authorization from the Turkish Parliament to deploy ground troops in Syria if the government deems it necessary.

The large-scale chemical attack in August put severe pressure on President Obama to offer a stronger response. Speaking after the attack, Foreign Minister Davutoglu told Secretary of State John Kerry that Turkey would join an international operation against Assad. Although Davutoglu emphasized that Turkey's priority was a UNSC agreement, the Foreign Minister said for the first time that Turkey would join any international coalition if the UNSC were unable to agree. Following President Obama's decision to use military force against Syrian regime targets, Prime Minister Erdogan pledged Turkey's readiness to be involved in any international coalition, regardless of UN backing. However, in the face of domestic opposition to involvement in Syria, the Obama administration decided to seek congressional support for a limited strike partly to share the political risks with Congress.

The discussion of a limited strike made it clear once again that the US had no intention of making a long-term commitment in Syria that could drag it into a costly "adventure" without a clear political outcome on the horizon. The Turkish government was opposed to a limited strike in Syria, arguing that any military action should

be thorough and intended to remove President Assad from power. Erdogan stated that a limited strike would be insufficient and any military move should mirror the intervention in Kosovo. While Obama declared that the US military does not do “pinpricks,” Erdogan asserted that a military strike without a strategy for a political solution would be unlikely to change the situation on the ground. Though a limited strike may have deterred Assad from using chemical weapons again, it would have done little to tip the balance of the war in favor of the rebels. This too underscores a gap between the US and Turkey over the scope of involvement in Syria.

### The Turkish View on the US-Russia Deal

After Secretary of State John Kerry made a statement outlining a hypothetical scenario for Syria to avoid a US military strike by cooperating in a chemical weapons disarmament (whether his remarks were planned or not is irrelevant here), Russia immediately announced that it was ready to broker such a proposal. On September 14th, following three days of negotiations in Geneva, Secretary Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reached an agreement to destroy some 1,000 tons of chemical weapons in Syrian stockpiles by the first half of 2014. Facing an attack by the US – and under Russian and Iranian pressures to cooperate – the Assad regime admitted to having chemical weapons and accepted the Russian proposal to dismantle its chemical weapons program.

While the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons is an important step, the process provides legitimacy to the Assad regime through the Turkish lens. Foreign Minister Davutoglu declared that Turkey would not be satisfied by the agreement, as the proposal would “pave the way for forgetting the recent massacre” and give Assad “a green light for further massacres.” Prime Minister Erdogan expressed his doubts about whether Assad would fulfill his promise to hand over his chemical weapons, believing that the proposal was simply a stalling tactic. President Gul confirmed that Turkey “welcomed and firmly supported” the US-Russia deal over Syria’s chemical weapons while maintaining that the perpetrators should be held accountable. One week later, the UNSC unanimously agreed on a resolution for the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons. However, the resolution

did not include any automatic triggers if Syria were to use chemical weapons again or failed to comply. Implementation of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which authorizes the use of military and nonmilitary actions to ensure peace and security, would require a separate resolution. Therefore, the resolution did not have the “binding” and “enforceable” measures that Turkey called for.

Although Turkey has welcomed the chemical weapons deal, it has expressed its reservations about its political impact, as the Assad regime may be legitimized in the process. The US seems to single out and focus on the chemical weapons issue, while Turkey sees it as only one of the problems emanating from the continuation of the conflict. If the chemical weapons deal serves as a first step for a broader political solution, as some have suggested, it would align with Turkey’s interest. However, if the US remains primarily concerned with the removal of chemical weapons and adopts a minimalistic approach to the broader conflict, US-Turkey cooperation over Syria will be further hampered due to policy differences.

### Risks and Pitfalls of the Syria Conflict

Turkey, along with much of the international community, has asserted that peace is not possible while Assad remains in power. However, there are several other serious consequences of the continuation of the crisis. In the absence of a solution to the conflict, the refugee crisis will continue to deteriorate. Turkey currently hosts almost 500,000 Syrian refugees within its borders. The UNHCR has predicted that by the end of the year, the influx of Syrian refugees in Turkey may be as high as 1 million. So far, the international community has only provided half of the funds requested by the UN to aid Syrian refugees. If Assad remains in power, the refugee crisis will continue to worsen, leaving Turkey to shoulder the financial burden and face persistent security risks.

Continuation of the conflict will also exacerbate confrontations along the Turkish-Syrian border. In 2012, the downing of a Turkish F-4 fighter jet on a reconnaissance mission by a Syrian missile prompted Turkey to request NATO assistance. Following the US threat to strike Syria, Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad threate-

ned retaliation against Turkey – and other US allies – if they joined a US-led operation against Assad. In September 2013, Turkish fighter jets shot down a Syrian helicopter that entered Turkish airspace near the border town of Yayladagi, and Turkish F-16s routinely scramble Syrian military planes that come too close to the border. Since 2011, over 70 people have been killed in Turkey as a result of stray bullets and shells, and many more have been injured in violence related to the Syrian conflict. In May 2013, two car bombs exploded in the town of Reyhanli – largest single terrorist incident on Turkish soil – leaving at least 51 dead and 140 injured. Turkish authorities declared that nine Turkish nationals connected to the Syrian intelligence undertook the attack. As the country with the longest border with Syria, such security risks pose serious challenges to Turkey although Lebanon and Jordan are much more affected by the spillover of the conflict. In October 2013, The Turkish Parliament renewed its authorization to conduct cross border operations in the event of increased security threats from Syria. It is clear that the US and Turkey need to coordinate plans about how to handle the potential escalation along the border.

As the conflict continues, radicalization among the opposition groups will increase. The so-called “moderate” opposition will either lose out against radical groups or, in some case, submit. This trend is already apparent, as many key Syrian rebel groups declared the exiled opposition leaders irrelevant in September. The 11 groups, including several elements of the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), issued a statement that the Syrian opposition could only be led by individuals who have “lived their troubles and shared in what they have sacrificed.” The rebels urged all groups fighting in Syria to “unify in a clear Islamic frame.” Moreover, infighting between the fractured opposition groups has contributed to the regime’s resilience and resulted in the strengthening of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the north of the country. For example, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took control of a Syrian border town near Turkey from the FSA as part of a larger strategy to seize major border crossings in order to control supply lines, leading Turkey to close the border gate. These developments pose further risks to Turkey’s border security and its ability aid the moderate opposition. None of this

should come as surprise as outsiders – including the US and Turkey – have been unable to help unify the opposition and ensure the outside opposition’s coordination with fighters within Syria.

While the US and Turkey are both concerned about the growth of extremist groups in Syria, they lack a common approach to empower and unify the internal and external opposition groups. As opposition groups fight over the supply lines and inflow of external support, both the US and Turkey need to work on a strategy to ensure that supply lines are streamlined to help render the “moderate” groups more relevant. Such a strategy should not be aimed at exacerbating the situation through a proxy war with Iran but it must ensure that the country is not divided into tiny fiefdoms held by different rebel factions. Assad has shown little interest in serious negotiations with the Western-supported Syrian National Coalition or the FSA. It is only through the forging of a unified opposition that the international community can force the Syrian regime into meaningful talks with the rebels and lead the process toward a political outcome. Otherwise, various independent groups supported by outside powers will continue to pull the country in opposite directions and lead to further fragmentation.

### The Need for a Comprehensive Solution

Over 115,000 people have been killed over the course of the two and half year conflict. The most recent chemical weapons deal has done little to limit the violence, as nearly 5,000 Syrians have died in September alone. Furthermore, chemical weapons have caused only a marginal percentage of all casualties in Syria. Without a comprehensive political solution, the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons will do little to stem the violence in Syria. While ridding Syria of its chemical weapons is a necessary step towards peace in the region, the destruction of the weapons will not substitute for a lasting solution.

Lack of international agreement over the Syrian crisis will only exacerbate the policy differences between Turkey and the US. Both countries share the stated goal of an end to the Assad regime and the forging of a transitional government. However, the US has reduced its

concern with Syria to the removal of chemical weapons and containment of possible spillover effects into neighboring countries. Although Turkey shares these concerns, it also calls for a more comprehensive approach. If the US and Turkey cannot devise a common political strategy, their disagreements might create tensions between the allies, and more importantly, contribute to

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sally Judson is a research assistant at the SETA Foundation at Washington, DC. She received her bachelor's degree in International Political Economy (IPE) from the University of Puget Sound in Washington. Ms. Judson's undergraduate thesis focused on the extent to which Turkey can provide a "model" for emerging democracies in the Middle East. In 2011, she was the recipient of an IPE Summer Research Fellowship where she conducted research in Istanbul and Ankara on the impediments to Turkish EU accession. Ms. Judson also worked in campaign finance during the 2012 US Presidential Election and the Presidential Inauguration. Her research interests include US-Turkish relations, democratic development in Turkey, political Islam in the Middle East and Turkish foreign policy.

Kadir Ustun is the Research Director at the SETA Foundation at Washington, D.C. He also serves as an Assistant Editor of *Insight Turkey*, an academic journal published by the SETA Foundation. Mr. Ustun holds a PhD in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies from Columbia University and a Master's degree in History from Bilkent University. Mr. Ustun has taught courses on history, politics, culture, and art in the Islamic World as well as Western political thought at Columbia University and George Mason University. His research interests include civil-military relations, social and military modernization in the Middle East, US-Turkey relations, and Turkish foreign policy. Mr. Ustun has contributed to various SETA reports and his writings have appeared in various publications such as *Insight Turkey*, *Al Jazeera English*, *Hurriyet Daily News*, and *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* among others. He is also co-editor of an edited volume – *History, Politics and Foreign Policy in Turkey* – published by the SETA Foundation.

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The SETA Foundation at Washington, D. C.  
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite #1106 Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: +1 (202) 223-9885 | Fax: +1 (202) 223-6099  
[www.setadc.org](http://www.setadc.org) | [info@setadc.org](mailto:info@setadc.org)