

Turkish PM warns of civil war in Syria

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ANKARA, Jan 10 — Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday Syria was heading for civil war and that Turkey should play a leading role in preventing this, in one of Ankara's starkest warnings over the violent uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

"The situation in Syria is heading towards a religious, sectarian, racial war, and this needs to be prevented," Erdogan told a news conference in Ankara.

"Turkey has to take on a leadership role here, because the current situation poses a threat to Turkey."

NATO member Turkey, which shares a 900-km long border with Syria and is exerting growing diplomatic and economic influence in the Arab world, is reluctant to take any unilateral military action in Syria, but is fearful escalating fighting there could escalate to a broader sectarian regional conflagration.

Erdogan, who has called on former friend Assad to step down and has slapped sanctions on Damascus, did not say what Ankara would do to prevent the country from descending into civil war.

Ankara has floated the idea of setting up a 'buffer zone' on Syrian soil if fighting triggers a flood of refugees posing an immediate threat to Turkey's security. But even then, Turkey has said it would seek United Nations backing.

There are fears not only in Turkey that Syria's ethnic and sectarian mosaic could disintegrate and plunge the country of 22 million into chaos.

Turkish senior foreign ministry officials are also concerned Syria could become a new front line in a regional rivalry between Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia and Syria's ally, Shi'ite Iran.

Last week, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu last week warned against a sectarian Cold War in the region and said raising Sunni-Shi'ite tensions would be suicide for the whole region. — Reuters

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