



**SYRIAN-TURKISH
RAPPROCHEMENT:
Historical enemies,
bosom friends,
warring neighbors and
... reconciled realists?**

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by Sam Dagher

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Sam Dagher is a journalist, author and researcher working in the Middle East for two decades. He reported from Iraq for years in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion and then covered the Arab Spring revolutions and the conflict in Syria as senior correspondent for the Wall Street Journal. Between 2017 and 2019 he contributed to The Atlantic and worked on a book (Assad or We Burn the Country) about the Assad family's 50-year rule in Syria which was published by a division of Hachette Book Group. Starting in mid-2020 he has been a non-resident scholar in the Middle East Institute's Syria Program and has been collaborating with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Syria office on researching the asylum and integration experiences of Syrian refugees and Syria-Turkey relations. At the end of January 2023 he joined Bloomberg News as a reporter covering the political, economic and social transformation underway in Saudi Arabia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last days of 2022, the defense and intelligence chiefs of Syria and Turkey were hosted in Moscow by Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

"Syrian crisis, refugee issues and efforts of joint fight against terror organizations on Syrian soil were discussed in the constructive meeting," the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement.¹ The meeting was a culmination of multiple rounds of talks between the Syrian and Turkish intelligence chiefs in Damascus and months of overtures by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan toward Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. On several occasions since August 2022 Erdoğan expressed interest in meeting Assad without preconditions. The response from Damascus, at least the public one, has been lukewarm at best.

After months of silence, Assad commented in a terse statement issued by his office in mid-January 2023 after a meeting in Damascus with Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy.² He said meetings between Syrian and Turkish officials will only "bear fruit" if there is "prior coordination and planning between Syria and Russia" hinting that the push for reconciliation with Turkey is mainly being driven by Moscow. Assad also said that progress in talks must be predicated on Ankara "ending its occupation and support for terrorism," referring to Turkey's presence in northern Syria and its support for Syrian armed groups there.

Still there were reports right after the defense ministers' meeting in Moscow that the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers will meet with their Russian counterpart fairly soon.³ It would be the highest level meeting between Turkey and the Syrian regime since the start of the peaceful-uprising-turned-war in Syria in 2011 albeit both ministers talked briefly on the sidelines of a summit in 2021 and both sides have been communicating indirectly through the Russians and Iranians as part of the Astana talks between the Syrian regime and opposition launched in 2017.

A rapprochement between Syria and Turkey would be a major turning point in the conflict given the significant role Ankara has played over the past decade. Turkey along with Iran are the only two regional powers that remain deeply involved in the conflict. But unlike Iran, Turkey's role is even more personal. Turkey shares a 910-kilometer border with Syria and hosts an estimated 3.6 million Syrian refugees. These Syrians inside Turkey along with those living in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria effectively give Turkey authority and administrative and economic control in one form or another

over one-third of Syria's population. This comes in addition to the pivotal role Ankara has played in supporting the Syrian opposition, both its armed and political wings.

Erdoğan appears to be chiefly motivated by Turkish domestic and national security concerns. First, there are the upcoming general elections scheduled for mid-May⁴ with the large Syrian refugee presence being one of the top issues on the minds of most voters including those loyal to Erdoğan and his party. For years Turkish opposition parties have vilified Syrian refugees and blamed them for Turkey's woes including the economic crisis⁵ while linking the refugee presence to Erdoğan and his policies in Syria and vowing to return them all to Syria if elected. For many Turks if the price of returning refugees is restoring ties with Assad then be it. By showing his willingness to meet with Assad and touting measures to reduce the Syrian refugee presence Erdoğan has effectively upstaged the opposition when it comes to one of its core issues. Second, there is the semi-autonomous Kurdish-led enclave that has emerged in northeastern Syria with U.S. and Western support and which Turkey is determined to dismantle at any cost. Even though the reality is more nuanced and complicated, Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish entity leading this area as simply an extension of its sworn enemy the Kurdistan Workers' Party (known by its Kurdish acronym PKK), which has been waging a deadly insurgency against the Turkish state for decades.

Turkey knows that Assad's ability to deliver on its key demands is doubtful. The regime is in no position to partner with Turkey to go after the empowered Syrian Kurds and the last thing Assad wants is hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, mostly displaced from areas that fought him, returning to Syria. But any intelligence from the regime on the activities of Kurdish militants in Syria is valuable for Turkey and there are reports this may be happening.⁶ And for a Turkey, which feels betrayed by the U.S. and West over their support for the Kurds in Syria, strengthening ties and cooperation with Putin's Russia is equally valuable. Russia, which saved the Assad regime from collapse by its military intervention in Syria in 2015 has been pushing the two neighbors to work together by reviving their 1998 security cooperation known as the Adana Agreement. For Moscow holding all the cards in Syria and working so closely with North Alliance Treaty Organization (NATO)-member Turkey are important levers in its ongoing confrontation with Europe and the U.S. over its invasion of Ukraine.

Beyond condemning Turkey's recent airstrikes against Kurdish positions in Syria, the European and U.S. reaction to Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian

regime has been muted or non-existent. It may be just a matter of priorities for the West: Despite his cozy ties with Putin, Erdoğan has played a crucial role on a number of fronts in the Ukraine war like supplying Kiev with Turkish-made drones that have made a difference on the battleground and helping broker the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine.⁷ The West also needs Erdoğan's acquiescence to finalize Finnish and Swedish membership to NATO.⁸

Certainly though Syrian-Turkish rapprochement faces a number of obstacles, not least the bad blood between Assad and Erdoğan. The two men once regarded each other as "brothers" and shared a friendship that included their respective families. Erdoğan saw Syria as the gateway for Turkish economic, political and strategic influence in the Middle East to which his country had turned its back upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire more than a century ago. For Assad, Turkey was an indispensable partner in helping him open up Syria's economy and curry favor with Syria's Sunni majority (Turks are also majority Sunni) as well as counter Western pressure over Syria's role in destabilizing Lebanon and Iraq. All the goodwill was replaced with enmity and hatred as Turkey sided with those Syrians that rose up against the regime in 2011.

There are other spoilers on this path to reconciliation. They include Iran, which has paid blood and treasure to prop up Assad and sees Turkey as a direct competitor in Syria. There are also Syrian armed groups in the north and northwest including those backed by Turkey that see rapprochement as a threat to their position. In the northeast, Syria's Kurds will do everything to counter Turkey's moves. Their main backer the U.S. still maintains a small troop presence in Syria and has the lever of sanctions against the regime and any third parties that do business with the regime including potentially Turkish entities. Last but not least are Syrians themselves, those in Turkey and in the Turkish-controlled north, who remain virulently opposed to any reconciliation with Assad.

But irrespective of whether a full-fledged reconciliation happens between Syria and Turkey, the fact that the two sides are engaged in some sort of rapprochement has already impacted the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. The repercussions are both regional and global and can be summed up as follows:

► **Worsening refugee crisis** – The majority of Syrian refugees living in Turkey are deeply opposed to this rapprochement and fear that it could ultimately put them once more under the control of the police state they escaped. Rather than waiting to be sent back to Syria, they are doing everything to

try to get to Europe illegally and some are succeeding. Those in the Turkish-controlled Syrian north are also looking for ways out.

► **Emboldened regime** – Even though the Assad regime has publicly projected reticence, or at times hostility, toward the idea of rapprochement with Turkey, the Turkish overtures have actually strengthened and emboldened the regime. They have reinforced its long-held belief that it is only a matter of time until everyone will eventually reengage with the regime. The regime has zero incentive to make any concessions, be they political or otherwise.

► **New fighting in the Syrian north** – All the non-state actors in the north see rapprochement as a threat to the territorial and economic gains they have amassed since the start of the conflict. They include the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast, the Turkish-backed factions and the extremist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib. They are willing to go to war to preserve their turfs.

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6. Daily Sabah, "Türkiye, Syrian Regime May Cooperate on Fighting Terrorism, Country's Integrity," December 8, 2022.
7. Selcan Hacaoglu and Marc Champion, "Turkey's Erdogan Finds Himself a Surprise G-20 Power Broker," Bloomberg News, November 13, 2022.
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SECTION 1 OVERVIEW

1.1 Background

In early August 2022 Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu revealed that he had met with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in October of 2021 on the sidelines of a Non-Aligned Movement gathering in Serbia.

"We need to bring the opposition and regime together for reconciliation somehow, there will be no permanent peace otherwise," said Çavuşoğlu.⁹

His remarks sent shockwaves among the estimated 3.6 million Syrian refugees inside Turkey and those in northern Syria where Turkey plays a dominant military, political and economic role. The comments provoked anti-Turkey protests in northwest Syria¹⁰, home to an estimated 4.4 million people—many displaced from their homes in military operations led by the regime and its backers or forced to move to the area to escape the regime's brutal repression.

"People felt as if Turkey was telling them go reconcile with the killer of your loved ones so that he could also kill you and bury you next to them," said Abdulrahman Al-Mawwas, a director with the Syria Civil Defense, also known as The White Helmets, who divides his time between Turkey and northern Syria.

If a reconciliation were to happen it would be a real game changer and a major turning point in the decade-long conflict. Turkey, which shares a 910-kilometer border with Syria, had for years nurtured close political and economic ties with Bashar al-Assad's regime but when a popular uprising erupted against the regime in 2011 Ankara was in the forefront of those supporting the Syrian opposition in the face of a brutal repression. It is the country that has hosted the largest number of Syrian refugees. Besides Iran, which has defended the regime, it is the only regional state that has remained deeply involved in the Syrian conflict.

Many Syrians have an emotional and religious connection to Turkey—most Syrians who rose up against their minority-led regime belong to the Sunni majority and many of them, at least until 2016, saw President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Sunni Islamist-dominated ruling AK Party as their benefactor and protector. To these Syrians and other Sunnis around the Middle East he was "Assad al-Sunna" (Lion of the Sunnis).



"Love Erdogan" sign in the Turkish border town of Reyhanli. It is part of Hatay province and has a population of more than 150,000 Syrians and about 100,000 Turks, June 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

Since 2016 Turkey has launched three military operations in northern Syria targeting Syrian-Kurdish militias it considers to be affiliated to the PKK, which has been waging a bloody insurgency against the Turkish state for decades.¹¹ And as of the writing of this report in December 2022, Turkey had resumed airstrikes against Syrian-Kurdish militias in preparation for a new ground offensive that could lead to the capture of more territory by Turkey and the Syrian forces it backs in northern Syria.¹²

The first Turkish operation (Euphrates Shield) at the end of August 2016 was seen by many Syrians as a quid pro quo with Russia and Iran to intensify their own military campaign to retake the opposition-held eastern side of Aleppo city for the Assad regime. Many Syrians regarded it as the first "betrayal" of their anti-regime cause by Turkey and Erdoğan. It's crucial to consider this context when examining the reaction of Syrian regime opponents to Turkish rapprochement with Assad.

This sense of betrayal was also one of the motivating factors for Turkey itself which felt "stabbed in the back" by its NATO allies the U.S., U.K. and France when they partnered with the PKK's Syrian affiliate

to fight the Islamic State which eventually allowed the Kurds to establish a new semi-autonomous entity along the border with Turkey.¹³ This accelerated the Turkish pivot toward Russia in Syria.



To retake the opposition-held eastern side of Aleppo for the Assad regime, Iran and Russia reached a deal with Turkey whereby it brokered the surrender of rebels in return for getting the green light to conduct a military operation in 2016 against Syrian Kurdish-controlled areas. Source: Anne Bauer.

And Russia is behind the shift in Turkey's posture toward the Syrian regime. It began to emerge immediately after Erdoğan's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in early August 2022 and their announcement of greater cooperation.¹⁴ Russia, the most powerful player in Syria and the regime's indispensable patron, has long pushed for reconciliation between Erdoğan and Assad.

Signs of Turkish steps toward this reconciliation are hard to ignore:

► In late August Erdoğan said it was "necessary" to keep dialogue channels with the Syrian regime open.¹⁵

► The head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Hakan Fidan held a series of meetings with his Syrian counterpart Ali Mamlouk in the Syrian capital Damascus, according to media reports in mid-September.¹⁶ The meetings sought to

lay the ground for sessions at a higher level. The two intelligence chiefs have had on-and-off contacts since the start of the conflict in Syria but the late summer meetings were the most sustained and substantive since the diplomatic rupture between the two countries in 2012.

► "I wish Assad had come to Uzbekistan, I would have spoken to him," Erdoğan told a columnist with Turkey's leading newspaper *Hurriyet* on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Summit held in the Uzbek city of Samarkand in mid-September.¹⁷

► At the end of September, the MIT announced it had killed a "high-ranking PKK terrorist" in a neighborhood inside the regime-controlled city of Aleppo. Turkish operations targeting suspected PKK members in Syria have so far been mostly carried out in areas under the control of Syrian Kurds leading to speculation that the Aleppo assassination relied on intelligence provided by the Syrian regime.¹⁸

► "Our intelligence service is conducting negotiations there (Damascus) and we will define our roadmap based on the results," Erdoğan told CNN Turk at the end of September.¹⁹

► In early October Erdoğan said he was ready to meet with Assad "when the right time comes."²⁰

► Also in early October Turkey's Foreign Ministry reappointed three of the most senior diplomats assigned to Syria including Director General of Syria Selçuk Ünal to new posts.²¹ Although this coincided with several other reappointments within the Turkish foreign service, some saw this as part of a reset in Syria policy and reengagement with the Syrian regime. The two countries severed diplomatic ties in March 2012.

On the Syrian regime side, the only public comment at the time came from Mekdad, the foreign minister: "There are no negotiations, there are no contacts, there is nothing at least on the level of foreign ministers."²² Syrian state media and government bodies have continued to lambast the "Turkish occupation" and "Turkey's mercenaries," even blaming Turkey for an outbreak of cholera in Syria's northeast.²³

Assad himself commented briefly on the matter in a press release issued by his office in mid-January 2023 following a meeting in Damascus with Putin's special envoy Alexander Lavrentiev.²⁴ He said meetings between Syrian and Turkish officials will only "bear fruit" if there is "prior coordination and planning between Syria and Russia" hinting that the

push for reconciliation with Turkey is mainly being driven by Moscow. Assad also said that progress in talks must be predicated on Ankara “ending its occupation and support for terrorism,” referring to Turkey’s presence in northern Syria and its support for Syrian armed groups there.

Turkey has more than 5,000 soldiers stationed inside Syria—the largest Turkish military presence outside the country since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War.²⁵ In addition, Turkey trains and pays the salaries of an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Syrian rebels who have fought on behalf of Turkey and its allies in places like Libya and alongside Azeri forces in their latest confrontation with Armenia.²⁶

A media report in early December 2022 said Assad has so far resisted Russian efforts to host a summit that would bring him together with Erdoğan.²⁷ Damascus’ main precondition for any reconciliation with Turkey, at least the one it states publicly, is the withdrawal of all Turkish forces from Syria and the end of all support to both rebels and the political opposition.

This is a non-starter for Turkey which has invested blood and treasure over the past few years in establishing a presence in northern Syria. Erdoğan and other Turkish officials have continuously stressed that this presence is vital for Turkey’s national security and part of the strategy of continuing to take the fight against the PKK and its allies across the border to Iraq and Syria instead of conducting it on Turkish soil.

“We will not stop our struggle until we secure our southern neighbors from end to end with a corridor extending to a depth of 30 kilometers,” vowed Erdoğan in a speech at the end of August 2022 referring to both Iraq and Syria.²⁸

In fact, this safe zone, as Turkey calls it, is one of its top demands in talks with the Syrian regime. Russia has pressed both sides to work out their differences and come up with an acceptable compromise within the context of revising the Adana Agreement, a 1998 security deal between the two countries (see section 2 for more details on agreement).²⁹

Another priority for Erdoğan and his ruling party is to return as many Syrian refugees as possible to Syria before Turkey’s crucial presidential and parliamentary election, which are scheduled to be held in mid-May 2023. Opposition parties of all stripes, from the far left to the far right, have for years now latched on to public anger and resentment toward the Syrian presence in Turkey turning it into a key theme in their bid to unseat Erdoğan and his AK

Party. Syrian refugees have been blamed for all of Turkey’s woes including the economic crisis and inflation that has ravaged Turks’ spending power. They have been the target of physical violence and social media hate campaigns instigated in some cases by Turkish political figures.³⁰ Many opposition leaders and figures have vowed to restore relations with Damascus and return all Syrians home as soon as they gain power³¹. A few including the ultra-nationalist Doğu Perinçek, whose Homeland Party is a member of Erdoğan’s current governing coalition, have visited Damascus and met with Assad and other regime officials since 2015.³²

By revealing that he has been holding talks with Assad to secure the border and return refugees, Erdoğan has in a way taken some of the wind out of the opposition’s sails when it comes to one of their central electoral promises. No day goes by without ministers or officials in Erdoğan’s government making media announcements about how many Syrians have returned to their country since the launch of cross-border military incursions in 2016 (about 527,000 as of October 6, 2022 according to the Ministry of Interior) or new housing and infrastructure projects in Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria that are supposedly meant to accommodate more repatriated Syrian refugees.³³

Many Syrians in Turkey also note that intensifying campaigning ahead of the elections and all the talk of rapprochement with the regime have been accompanied by a visible increase in measures, particularly in urban centers like Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep, to deport Syrians to northern Syria for the slightest violation relating to their protected status in Turkey.

In its talks with the Syrian regime, Turkey has reportedly sought guarantees from Assad and his backers that Syrian refugees from major urban centers like Aleppo, Damascus and Homs as well as the rural areas surrounding these cities would be allowed to return to rebuild their destroyed homes and would not be pursued by the regime’s notorious secret police organs.³⁴ Ankara has reportedly also dangled the prospect of billions of dollars in reconstruction funds from its closest Gulf ally Qatar.³⁵ It is worth noting that Moscow launched back in March 2021 “a new trilateral consultation process” with Qatar and Turkey to help achieve “a lasting political solution in Syria.”³⁶

Also noteworthy is the fact that Assad and Putin have spoken in the past of the need for Western countries and regional ones like Turkey and the Gulf states to bear the financial brunt of rebuilding Syria. According to the Syrian regime-Russian view, all these countries were supposedly “complicit in the

global conspiracy against Syria” and the destruction that ensued because they backed protesters and then rebels when the conflict morphed into a prolonged armed struggle.³⁷



Home in Aleppo's old city that was destroyed by a missile through the roof. In its talks with the Syrian regime, Turkey asked Assad for guarantees that Syrian refugees would be allowed to return to rebuild their homes, Aleppo, August 2022, source: Anne Bauer.

The Syrian regime has so far resisted pressure from its ally Russia to make major political concessions to the opposition or allow the meaningful return of refugees particularly in and around major cities. There is real fear within the regime that any large refugee returns could destabilize it and threaten its tenuous grip on power. Although the secret police has reasserted and tightened its control over the population, the Syrian army is a shadow of its former self and the regime still relies heavily on Iran and Russia to conduct any significant military or security operations. Complicating returns is the fact that the regime has already adopted policies and laws that could result in significant demographic changes in areas known to be hotbeds of opposition to Assad's rule. (see section 3.4 for more details)

In this high stakes game of rapprochement between two antagonists who despise and mistrust one another, the Syrian regime appears to have the

upper-hand and the most cards to play to win concessions—at least as long as Erdoğan and his party remain vulnerable ahead of elections.

Istanbul-based Syria researcher Sinan Hatahet notes that Assad is trying to decide at the moment whether to take a bet that the Turkish opposition will succeed in defeating Erdoğan or set aside all the bad blood with Erdoğan in order to reach an agreement with him that would probably boost the Turkish leader's fortunes and that of his party ahead of the elections. (Assad and his wife Asma have called Erdoğan a “thief” and “bandit”³⁸ and Assad has called him a “pretend Ottoman Sultan and caliph.”³⁹ For his part Erdoğan has called Assad “a terrorist” who has “killed close to one million” people adding that it would be “absolutely impossible” to achieve peace in Syria as long as he remained in power.)⁴⁰

“The regime is trying to decide whether to listen to the heart or the mind,” says Hatahet. “Syria has very little to lose in the game of negotiations (with Turkey) and more to gain.”

In fact, the Assad regime, which is heavily sanctioned and treated as a pariah by the U.S. and Europe, has already gained some measure of diplomatic recognition by the fact that Turkey's top intelligence chief has paid several visits to Damascus, while the Turkish leader speaks openly of rapprochement and the possibility of meeting Assad.

For the regime, Turkey is a far more important prize than Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, two countries that have reengaged with the regime in recent years.⁴¹

Even after more than a decade of conflict Turkey remains Syria's number one trading partner. The former exports more than \$2 billion worth of goods each year to Syria, far eclipsing the regime's main regional ally and backer Iran (the figure encompasses all Turkish exports to Syria including those to areas outside Assad regime control).⁴²

In short-term, the Syrian regime does stand to gain some potential political and economic benefits from engaging Turkey. It could negotiate with the Turks to win back some hotly contested and strategic areas around the M4 Motorway that links the coastal city of Latakia to Saraqib in Idlib, which was captured by the regime and its allies in 2020. There is also talk of opening border crossings between Turkish-controlled areas in the north and regime areas, which could possibly see the resumption of the transit of Turkish goods through Syria to the rest of the Middle East. This could provide a boost to the desperate economic conditions of most Syrians living in regime-controlled areas.

“There was optimism when there was reengagement with the United Arab Emirates and some people are also hoping rapprochement with Turkey could ease things a bit when it comes to daily life and the economy but there are others who are upset that they’re going to reconcile after everything that’s happened,” said one resident of Damascus.

1.2 The Spoilers

Beyond the bad blood and animosity there are some formidable obstacles and challenges to any meaningful rapprochement/reconciliation between the Assad regime and Turkey. Those that could stand in the way and complicate this effort include:

► **Syria’s Kurds** – By partnering with the U.S. and its Western allies starting in late 2014 to combat ISIS, Syrian Kurds from the *Partiya Yeketîya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party / PYD) and their military wing the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People’s Defense Units / YPG) succeeded in establishing a de facto state on a swath of territory in northeast Syria that has brought together Kurds, Arabs and other minorities. The semi-autonomous region, as it is known, has set up its own local government structures and folded the YPG into a larger coalition of militias known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which remains dominated by Kurds.

The region controls Syria’s main oil production facilities and a border crossing with Iraq’s Kurdistan region and a number of other unofficial crossings. It sells oil to the Assad regime, which has continued to maintain a security presence in the northeast. Many of the region’s top security and military leaders are veterans of the PKK-led fight against Turkey and the PKK maintains strong influence over the region and has a covert presence in the area. It is precisely for this reason that Turkey is determined to smash and dismantle this Kurdish dominance in northeast Syria.

To hedge against Turkish-Syrian regime rapprochement, leaders from the region have resumed their discussions with Damascus, which has so far opposed self-rule of any sort. Although the SDF, which has more than 100,000 fighters,⁴³ is no match for the Turkish Army, for sure it and the PKK behind it won’t give up what they have achieved without a big fight that would have major security and humanitarian repercussions.

The Russians appear to be playing the role of a double-agent: on one hand pressing the Turks to reconcile with the regime and on the other telling the Syrian Kurds that they better strike a deal with the regime before the Turks beat them to it.

► **Iran** – For more than a decade Iran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah in Lebanon, have shed blood and treasure to defend the Syrian regime. This has allowed Iran to significantly bolster its presence and influence within the regime. Iran has sway over militiamen on the ground, commanders in the security forces and powerful businessmen and Iranian leaders have cultivated personal relations with Bashar al-Assad and his family.

Syria is of immense strategic and national security significance for Iran and Hezbollah in their existential fight with Israel and its main backer the U.S.. Iran and its proxies have gained presence in southwest Syria from where they could attack Israel - a second front for Hezbollah after southern Lebanon. They are also present in areas in the east along the Iraqi border from where they could keep an eye on the U.S. and its plans in check. They have established an important presence in Aleppo and the surrounding areas and maintain longstanding ties with the PKK. Iran won’t sit back and allow for a meaningful Turkish-Syrian regime rapprochement that would chip away at everything it has worked so hard to accomplish in Syria. But at the same time, further instability in Iran, which is linked to the ongoing protests against the regime’s brutal imposition of the veil for women, could distract Tehran and potentially motivate Assad to search for other patrons—even sworn enemies like Erdoğan.

► **The U.S. and its European Allies** – Although the U.S. only maintains some 900 troops in northeast Syria,⁴⁴ it remains committed to supporting the SDF and the semi-autonomous region and considers this crucial to preventing any resurgence by ISIS and other militant groups. This presence has allowed the U.S. to keep a close eye on the Iraq-Syria border, which over the past two decades has been the place where Al-Qaeda and all the extremist groups it has spawned have been able to regroup and remerge after every military defeat. This objective is for sure shared by Europe, which has suffered devastating attacks masterminded and planned in this region. Many European countries must also grapple with the ultimate fate of hundreds of their own nationals that had joined ISIS at the height of its power and are now languishing in prisons overseen by the SDF. So both the U.S. and Europe will be watching very carefully any moves by Turkey to destabilize the status quo by cutting a deal with the Syrian regime and Russia, which the West is already confronting over its invasion of Ukraine.

One source of leverage for the West are the sanctions they have maintained and even ratcheted up in recent years against the Syrian regime in an attempt to force it to agree to major political reforms (The Caesar Act in the U.S.⁴⁵ which targets

anyone doing business with the regime including potentially Turkish companies and individuals). Europe also has sway over Turkey in the form of payments it has provided Ankara to avert a repeat of the 2015 refugee crisis (nearly \$4 billion⁴⁶ has been disbursed so far). Others argue the U.S. is largely disinterested in Syria and that it's only a matter of time before Russia fully takes over the Syrian Kurdish dossier.

► **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant** – HTS, an Islamist militia previously known as the Nusra Front and once openly touting its affiliation to Al-Qaeda, is the most dominant force in half of Idlib province and few surrounding areas—which together are roughly the size of Lebanon. The area is home to about 3 million people many of them displaced from other parts of Syria. Although HTS remains committed to replacing the Assad regime with an Islamic state, it has sought in recent years to act more pragmatically and to moderate its image. HTS governs the area through the Syrian Salvation Government, which was formed in 2017. While HTS does at times cooperate and coordinate with Turkey, which has forces in Idlib to monitor a ceasefire it brokered along with Russia to end fighting between rebels and regime forces, it definitely pursues its own agenda. At a time when Turkey was touting rapprochement with the regime, HTS and some Turkish-backed factions clashed in mid-October 2022 with rival Syrian rebel groups also backed by Turkey. This allowed HTS and its allies to seize the northern Aleppo province town of Afrin and surrounding villages which Turkey captured from the Kurds in a 2018 operation before Turkey intervened and asked HTS to retreat. Many saw what happened as a direct result of Turkey's shifting priorities and posture in Syria and its announcement of rapprochement with the regime.⁴⁷

HTS is believed to command anywhere between 12,000 and 15,000 fighters and while it needs to have a working relationship with the Turkish military and intelligence services, it is not a group that's wholly dependent on Turkey.⁴⁸ "HTS are ones that Turks can't move around like the Syrian opposition," says Amberin Zaman, a senior correspondent for Al-Monitor, who has been reporting on Turkey and the region for more than two decades.

► **Syrians** – While Syrians themselves are often neglected when analyzing the situation in Syria, they may have the ultimate say when it comes to any serious rapprochement between Turkey and the Syrian regime. Most Syrians, particularly those living in Turkey and areas outside regime control in northern Syria, remain committed to seeing Assad and his cronies removed from power and tried for

war crimes. For them any deal with Assad, whom they blame for the death of hundreds of thousands, displacement of half the population and destruction of the country, would be unthinkable. Syrians have already made their voice heard by protesting in northern Syria. This led Turkish officials to attempt some damage control by minimizing the nature and scope of their contacts with the Assad regime.

One Syrian opposition leader said he told a senior Turkish official the following when the subject of Turkish-Syrian rapprochement came up during a conversation they had days after Çavuşoğlu's remarks in August 2022: "It's up to you to seek whatever understandings you want with the regime but I assure you that we will not accept. Neither you or anyone else can force us to accept...even if I accept, the families of the some 500 martyrs from my town won't accept."⁴⁹

In addition, most Syrians who are currently in Turkey absolutely have no interest in returning to Idlib or other parts of northern Syria including those under control of factions loyal to Turkey. They consider these areas as lawless and dangerous where rival warlords are competing to impose their will over the population. They would rather risk everything to try to escape to Europe rather than be forced to return to northern Syria.



Workshop of a Syrian master coppersmith from Aleppo who fled to Turkey in 2013 and successfully established his business there, Gaziantep, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

► **Gulf Arab States** – While Turkey has sought to repair relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both remain very wary of all Turkish moves including in Syria.⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia is looking to reassert itself in the Syrian conflict by reengaging with Damascus and proposing a political solution in conjunction with Arab allies.⁵¹ “We are working with our partners to figure out a way to engage with the government in Damascus in a way that delivers tangible movements toward a political solution,” said Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan.⁵² The Emiratis who have already normalized ties with Assad⁵³ are also eager to make moves in Syria potentially in coordination with Israel for whom the situation across the border in Syria is a matter of vital national security.⁵⁴

1.3 Many Questions

No matter how the current rapprochement between Turkey and the Syrian regime evolves—whether it ends up being limited in scope or goes further into a full-fledged reconciliation—and regardless of who wins Turkey’s 2023 elections, there will be far-reaching consequences for Syria and Syrians.

Some say there is already a certain momentum that is hard to reverse. “The genie is out of the bottle, there’s one direction for this and it’s forward. They will be sputtering along and baring some major external event, I see this relationship (Turkey-Syrian regime) progressing,” says Al-Monitor’s Zaman.



Banners on a van of Turkey’s Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Esenyurt, Istanbul Province, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

“Turkish people embrace this rapprochement with Assad; they can’t wait to get rid of the Syrians,” she added. She explained that the vast majority of Turks including supporters of President Erdoğan are supportive of reconciliation with Assad seeing it as the price that has to be paid to repatriate Syrians from Turkey. It is something President Erdoğan must take into account going forward even if he secures another term in office.

But still many questions and uncertainties hang in the balance:

► **Refugees, Repatriation and the Internally Displaced** – What will happen to the estimated 3.6 million refugees in Turkey? How many of them will be willing to go back to Syria and under what terms—be it the northern areas controlled by Turkey or those controlled by the regime? What conditions and challenges await them upon return to these areas? Will anything change for the millions of internally displaced Syrians? What impact will this have on illegal smuggling of Syrians to Europe—people who can’t stay in Turkey and don’t want to return to Syria?

► **Humanitarian Situation and Channeling of International Aid** – What is the fate of the last humanitarian aid corridor that remains outside of regime control? What are the repercussions of channeling all aid through the Syrian regime in Damascus and what impact will this have on the lives of people on the ground as well as large donors like Germany who have no diplomatic ties with the regime?

► **Political Reforms, Peace and Justice and Accountability** – What will happen to what remains of the Syrian opposition which is mostly supported by Turkey? What will happen to all efforts including those overseen by the United Nations to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict? What is the fate of efforts to push political reforms in Syria? What chance remains for the regime to make any compromise to the opposition? What impact will Turkish-Syrian reconciliation have on efforts to hold the regime and other actors in the Syrian conflict accountable for their war crimes and crimes against humanity?

► **Non-state Actors and Areas Outside Regime Control** – Besides northeast Syria and Turkey’s determination to crush any form of Kurdish autonomy along its border with Syria, how does Turkish-Syrian reconciliation impact other non-state actors and areas outside of regime control or where regime control is tenuous? This includes HTS and other rebel factions in Idlib, rebel factions and local administrations in Turkish-controlled northern terri-

tory, areas of checkered control in the east (Deir Ezzour) along the border with Iraq where some tribes are working with Kurds and Americans and others are with the regime and its allies and areas in the south (Suwayda and Daraa) along the border with Jordan and Israel where regime control is tenuous.

► **Foreign Actors and Regional Geopolitics** – Besides Turkey, there are a host of other external actors with direct stakes in Syria. How does Syrian-Turkish reconciliation stack up for them? They include Russia, Iran, the U.S. and Israel, albeit the latter has no presence in Syria but conducts regular strikes against Iran and its proxies inside Syria. How does reconciliation impact the balance of power in the region where Turkey competes with powers like Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia for influence and control? Beyond the region but very much affected by what happens in Syria, how does this reconciliation affect Europe, which continues to look at Syria mainly through the prism of refugees and security threats?

► **Economy and Sanctions** – What impact will the rapprochement/reconciliation have on economic conditions in Syria and the formal and non-formal economy as well as web of economic and trade ties among all actors? Will it bolster the regime and weaken or erode current international sanctions imposed on it?

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SECTION 2 HISTORICAL SURVEY

For much of the nearly 400-year period from 1516 until 1918 the territories of modern-day Syria were governed directly as provinces of the Ottoman Empire. At the time, the Sublime Porte in Istanbul attached great importance to the Provinces of Aleppo and Damascus because of their tax revenues. Aleppo played a crucial role in international trade and Damascus was one of the centers from which the pilgrimage to Mecca was organized.⁵⁵



Khan al-Wazir, a caravanserai located in the old city of Aleppo. As a province of the Ottoman Empire, Aleppo played a crucial role in international trade for Istanbul, August 2022, source: Anne Bauer.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War the newly established Turkish Republic looked west and turned away from what it regarded as its “backward” former dominions that had “stabbed us in the back” during the war. The British-backed Arab Revolt against the Turks had culminated in the takeover of Damascus. “We want neither the sweetmeats of Damascus nor to see the face of the Arab,” says a Turkish proverb which encapsulates the hostility many felt at the time toward their southern neighbors.⁵⁶

During the French mandate over Syria, Paris decided in 1938 to grant Turkey the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Liwa Al-Iskandaroun in Arabic; it was composed of the Antioch and Alexandretta administrative divisions of Aleppo Province but enjoyed special status under the mandate) in an effort to ensure Turkish neutrality at the onset of the Second World War. This amounted to a national trauma for many Syrians and served to amplify the image of Turkey as

“a repressive historical enemy.”⁵⁷ The liberation of Liwa Al-Iskandaroun, which became Hatay Province when it was attached to Turkey, was a major theme for Syria upon gaining independence from France in 1946. The following narrative was at the core of the ideology of the Baath Party which would later seize power in Syria in 1963: Arabs were in need of “rebirth” and “renaissance” after four centuries under the Turks who had sought to “Turkify” Arab lands and whose reign was followed by Western colonial rule and the loss of Iskandaroun and Palestine.⁵⁸

The antagonism between the two nascent Syrian and Turkish states worsened during the Cold War. Staunchly nationalist Turkey was a member of NATO, allied to the U.S. and a member of the Baghdad Pact military alliance aimed at thwarting communism in the Middle East. In contrast, Syria under the Baath was the so-called “beating heart of Arab nationalism” allied to the Soviet Union and supporting Palestinian fighters and “anti-imperialist” causes.

Water was another highly contentious issue that further hampered any effort to ease hostility between the two neighbors. The Euphrates River originates in Turkey and flows through Syria on its way to Iraq. Instead of trying to find a way to share this precious resource, both countries adopted unilateral irrigation plans and inaugurated two major dams across sections of the river right around the same time in the mid 1970s. The Keban would be the first of five dams in the river’s Turkey section and the Tabqa/Al-Thawra would be the first of three dams on the Syrian side.⁵⁹

In the late 1970s and almost a decade into his rule, Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad faced a series of major challenges to his grip on power. First from a diverse cross-section of Syrian society increasingly unhappy with his authoritarian and clannish rule and economic mismanagement and then from an Islamist insurgency tied to the Muslim Brotherhood party. Hafez survived with brutal and bloody repression and then had to confront a botched coup attempt by his own brother Rifaat in 1984. Seeing enemies all around him, Hafez sought to hedge against any further threats to his regime, particularly, as he saw it, those coming from the US and its allies in the region.⁶⁰ He deepened ties with Iran and backed groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the PKK which was regrouping and preparing to relaunch its insurgency following the 1980 military coup in Turkey. The PKK was allowed to establish training camps in Syrian-controlled Lebanon and in Syria itself and its leader Abdullah Öcalan was hosted for years in Damascus coordinating his every move with the Syrian regime’s intelligence services.⁶¹

Hafez was hardly backing the PKK out of sympathy for the Kurdish cause. Since the 1950s successive Syrian governments have sought to repress Syrian Kurdish identity under the guise of promoting Arab nationalism. The Baath Party went further by resettling Arabs in the north and deporting Kurds to the interior in order to create a so-called "Arab belt" that would act as a counterpoint to awakening Kurdish identity in Turkey and Iraq.⁶² For years Syria's Kurds, who account for at least 10 percent of the population, were banned from speaking their language in public and celebrating their festivities. There is also a sizable number of Kurds that had been denied Syrian citizenship for years because they were alleged to be "infiltrators" from Turkey.⁶³

Tensions between Syria and Turkey simmered for years and flared in 1996 when Ankara entered into a military and intelligence-sharing alliance with Israel, which Damascus saw as a direct threat. Turkish anger with the Assad regime over its support for the PKK reached a boiling point in October 1998 when Turkey signaled that it had amassed 10,000 soldiers at its border with Syria and was ready to take military action unless Syria ended all support for the group.⁶⁴ The PKK had been designated as a "foreign terrorist organization" by the US State Department the year before.

Instead of facing Turkey, Hafez al-Assad's response was to close PKK camps, imprison PKK members and expel Öcalan, who was subsequently apprehended by Turkish agents with the help of the CIA in Kenya in February 1999.⁶⁵ In tandem representatives of the two countries met in the Turkish city of Adana and released minutes of what was called a Special Security Meeting, in which Syria had pledged to cooperate with Turkey in "combatting terrorism" and to never again support the PKK or "permit any activity which emanates from its territory aimed at jeopardizing the security and stability of Turkey." This document became later known as the Adana Agreement.⁶⁶ Senior Syrian regime figures later said the ailing Hafez was focused at the time on paving the way for his son and anointed heir Bashar to assume the helm of power and that the last thing he wanted was military confrontation with Turkey given the weakened state of the Syrian Army in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's demise.⁶⁷

Syria and Turkey held meetings in 2001 to discuss water-related issues and problems but the real breakthrough in relations between the two countries happened after the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in the 2002 general elections in Turkey.⁶⁸ The new prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his chief foreign policy advisor at the time Ahmet Davutoğlu embarked on repairing and expanding political, economic and cultural

relations with former territories of the Ottoman Empire. Neighboring Syria with its close historic, cultural and in many instances familial ties to Turkey was seen as the gateway for this new policy.

Syria's perceptions of Turkey began to shift in 2003 when the AK Party-controlled parliament voted against allowing US troops to use Turkish territories in their invasion of Iraq.⁶⁹ The Syrian public was overwhelmingly against the invasion and so was their youthful president Bashar al-Assad who had taken over upon the death of his father in 2000 with promises of greater openness and reform particularly in the economic sphere. Bashar had patched up Syria's relations with Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein after decades of enmity and was receiving vital oil supplies from his eastern neighbor. After Saddam's demise, the interests of Syria and Turkey coalesced further as both were extremely worried about the contagion effect from the potential break-up of Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines and the rise of the newly empowered and independence-minded Iraqi Kurds.

In January 2004 Assad became the first Syrian head of state to visit Turkey. Before Assad's visit, Syria handed over to Turkey 22 people suspected of involvement in a series of suicide truck bomb attacks against British and Jewish targets in Istanbul in November 2003. "We have moved together from an atmosphere of distrust to one of trust," proclaimed Assad in Ankara.⁷⁰ Less than a year later, Erdoğan and his wife Emine were in Damascus for a visit in December 2004. Photos of the leaders and their wives hand-in-hand touring the Syrian capital's old city effused warmth and familial bonds.⁷¹ From that moment onward, contacts between the two countries intensified. A free trade agreement known as The Association Agreement between the Republic of Turkey and the Syrian Arab Republic was signed at the end of 2004. It abolished customs on manufactured goods and reduced them for agricultural products. The following year Syria effectively but not formally recognized Turkish sovereignty over Hatay (Liwa Al-Iskandaroun) with several Syrian officials including Assad stating that the historic dispute should not stand in the way of fostering deeper bilateral ties.⁷² The two sides agreed to develop a free trade zone between Hatay and Idlib and build a shared Friendship Dam across the Orontes River, which flows from Lebanon to Syria and ends in Hatay.

Turkey played a pivotal role in pulling the Assad regime out of the international isolation it suffered between 2005 and 2007 over its alleged involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri as well as its active role in supporting and fueling the insurgency in neighbor-

ing Iraq.⁷³ Europe and the US, which at the time viewed Turkey as a model for a democratic predominantly Muslim state that others in the Middle East could emulate, relied on Ankara in a strategy of “regime reengagement and rehabilitation.” It was predicated on moving Damascus away from Iran and Hezbollah and closer to the camp of the West and its regional allies.⁷⁴

By 2008, political and diplomatic ties had been repaired and strengthened to the point where Turkey was mediating indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria in Istanbul.⁷⁵ Trade and tourism was also flourishing between Syria and Turkey with trade volume more than doubling to about \$2 billion within the span of a few years. The free trade agreement between the two countries, which was signed in 2004, came into effect in January 2007. It abolished customs on all manufactured goods and reduced them for agricultural products.⁷⁶

The apogee in Syrian-Turkish friendship and cooperation was during the 2009-2010 period. In an unprecedented move the two countries conducted a joint three-day military exercise in April 2009.⁷⁷ That same year they signed an agreement that allowed Syrians to travel to Turkey without visas and vice versa for Turks and established a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council to deepen ties in practically every domain including trade, training of civil servants and police, health, education, housing and media among others. The council had its first ministerial-level meeting in both Aleppo and Gaziantep in October 2009, followed by a meeting at the leadership level in December 2009 in Damascus, which was “held in a high spirit of cooperation and mutual trust,” according to a joint statement issued by the council. The meeting culminated in the signing of 50 memoranda of understanding and protocols.⁷⁸

In the summer of 2010 Syrian security forces arrested more than 400 Syrian Kurds that the regime claimed were linked to the PKK and reportedly killed 11 PKK fighters in clashes in northeast Syria—the news was hailed in Turkey as one of the fruits of deepening ties between the two countries.⁷⁹ But beyond official bilateral ties, Assad and Erdoğan developed a personal friendship that also included their wives and other members of their respective families. The exchange of visits both official and unofficial became almost routine. The Erdoğan once hosted the Assads for a vacation in the Aegean Sea resort town of Bodrum.⁸⁰

“The Syrian-Turkish relationship is no longer just a bilateral one but also a strategic partnership between two countries whose benefits not only accrue to Syria and Turkey but have spread to other

countries; Lebanon and Jordan have joined this partnership and with time it will expand in the direction of other countries,” said Assad in a press conference with Erdoğan in Damascus in October 2010. He kept referring to Erdoğan as “my brother.”⁸¹

Calling Assad “my dear brother,” Erdoğan expressed his gratitude to Syria for being one of the few Arab states to formally and publicly express solidarity with Turkey in the aftermath of the killing of 10 Turkish activists by Israeli commandos during a raid at the end of May 2010 on a six-ship humanitarian aid flotilla that was attempting to breach Israel’s blockade of Gaza.⁸²

But not everyone was happy with the consequences of this Syrian-Turkish bromance. Although the majority of Syrians like many in the rest of the Middle East could not get enough of everything Turkish, from washing machines and suits to baklava and TV series, members of Syria’s merchant and business class and also some officials within the regime felt that Assad practically gave away the house and opened the country to a virtual Turkish invasion. They felt Syria conceded too much and got little in return. Many Syrian businesses particularly in the textile and clothing sector could not compete with Turkish products that were flooding the local market custom free. By 2009 Turkish exports to Syria rose to \$1.4 billion while Syrian exports to Turkey were almost halved to \$300 million.⁸³

The October 2010 meeting in Damascus would be the last face-to-face encounter between Assad and Erdoğan before the start of the Arab Spring uprisings, first in Tunisia in December 2010 and then in Syria itself in March 2011. The two leaders continued though to speak regularly by phone and at first Turkey was restrained in its criticism of Damascus despite the regime’s decision to use deadly force against protesters from day one. In April and May 2011 Turkey tried incessantly—both of its own accord and at the behest of the U.S. and its European allies—to convince Assad to stop killing protesters or using heavy weapons like tanks against rebellious communities and instead to launch serious political reforms. Ankara even worked on brokering a “historic reconciliation” between the regime and the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood party. One Turkish proposal supposedly entailed Assad remaining in power as president but embarking on constitutional reforms that would create a more independent government with a Brotherhood member perhaps at the helm as a token of this reconciliation.⁸⁴ Turkey kept trying well after its Western and regional allies had given up on the possibility of any change in Assad’s position.

Turkish officials including the foreign minister at the

time Ahmet Davutoğlu—the mastermind of Turkey’s “zero problems” policy with neighbors of which Syria was supposed to be the most visible success story—visited Syria several times in the spring and summer of 2011.⁸⁵ Assad also dispatched emissaries to Ankara during that period. In early August 2011, which coincided with the start of the holy Muslim month of Ramadan, the Syrian army launched a blistering military operation against the city of Hama, where protesters had occupied the main square that summer. Abdullah Gül, the Turkish president at the time, reacted with “deep shock”⁸⁶ and Erdoğan, who was prime minister, said Turkey had “run out of patience” with the regime and that Davutoğlu would go to Damascus to deliver “a tough message” to Assad.⁸⁷ By then the death toll, overwhelmingly among protesters and opposition activists, had exceeded 2,000.⁸⁸

Davutoğlu met one-on-one with Assad for nearly three hours and reportedly told him that “time was running out” and that he had to take drastic measures if he wanted to avoid the fate of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein or that of Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi, who was by then fighting for his survival in the Libyan capital Tripoli as NATO-backed rebels were closing in. He warned Assad that his pursuit of scorched earth policies against rebellious communities would compel Turkey to side with the West in backing the Syrian opposition and sanctioning the regime.⁸⁹

Turkey was under pressure over Syria both domestically and regionally. Turkey is a predominantly Sunni Muslim country and the AKP’s main constituency are conservative Turkish Sunnis who were pressing their government for more decisive action to end the slaughter of fellow Sunnis in Syria. Syria is a majority Sunni country too and the protests were as such dominated by Sunnis while real power in the regime is in the hands of Assad, his family members and intelligence chiefs who all belong to Syria’s Alawite minority. Regionally Erdoğan was increasingly looked upon as the defender of Sunnis and the Arab masses, who were in the grips of revolution, also expected more from Turkey. Turkey’s deep-pocketed Gulf ally Qatar, which had called for Assad’s ouster several months before and was seen as a champion of the revolutions, was also pushing Turkey to do more.

The regime intensified its crackdown after Davutoğlu’s visit, prompting him to issue in mid-August 2011 what he called Turkey’s “final word” about the need for an immediate and unconditional end to military operations against civilians.⁹⁰ It is worth noting that three days later, the US president at the time Barack Obama and the leaders of Britain, France and Germany called on Assad to step down

from power.⁹¹

Although from that moment onward Turkey aligned its position closer to that of its Western and regional allies and began to step up support for the Syrian opposition, it would not be until November 2011 that Erdoğan would publicly and explicitly call for Assad to step down from power.⁹²

“We do not have eyes on any country’s land, we have no desire to interfere in any country’s internal affairs,” said Erdoğan. “But when a people is persecuted, especially a people that are our relatives, our brothers, and with whom we share a 910 km border, we absolutely cannot pretend nothing is happening and turn our backs.”⁹³

Although by then Turkey was providing refuge to Syrian army defectors, publicly it denied it was backing the armed resistance to Assad which began to build up in the autumn of 2011. Turkey also kept repeating its opposition to external military intervention to help topple Assad as had happened in Libya.⁹⁴

In March 2012, Turkey formally severed its diplomatic ties with Syria and closed its embassy in Damascus.⁹⁵ The following month it hosted a meeting of the Syrian opposition and its international backers.⁹⁶ The rhetoric from Assad and others in his regime was that “Erdoğan stabbed Syria in the back” and that Turkey was becoming a “staging ground for the global conspiracy against Syria.”⁹⁷

The period between mid 2012 and late 2015 was the worst for Turkey-Syrian regime relations with the two sides coming into direct conflict a few times. By the summer of 2012, Turkey was among the most vocal in calling for a no-fly zone in northern Syria that would offer opponents of the Syrian regime, both civilians and rebels, a haven from the incessant aerial attacks by the regime, which by then included the horrific barrel bombs. But Western countries, particularly the US, felt this would effectively mean direct Western military intervention in the conflict potentially pitting Western powers against regime backers Iran and Russia.⁹⁸ In June 2012, the Syrian regime shot down a Turkish F4 reconnaissance jet over the Eastern Mediterranean near the Syrian coastline.⁹⁹ Subsequent shelling by the regime of areas inside Turkey in October 2012 led Ankara to ask NATO to deploy Patriot air and missile defense batteries in southeastern Turkey.¹⁰⁰ In May 2013, Turkey accused the regime of being behind a bombing at a border crossing between Turkey and Syrian opposition-held areas in the north which killed more than 50.¹⁰¹ Turkish forces shot down a Syrian helicopter in September 2013, which they claimed was inside Turkish territory.¹⁰² In March 2014 Turkey

said it shot down a Syrian fighter aircraft near the Kasab border crossing between Latakia and Hatay.¹⁰³

During this period the Syrian regime was cheering the wave of protests that consumed Turkey between May and August 2013 and which were centered around Gezi Park in Istanbul. It regularly invited and hosted in Damascus media and political figures hostile to Erdoğan and his ruling party.¹⁰⁴

Turkey's priorities began to shift away from toppling Assad and his regime triggered by a succession of events all linked to Syria: the U.S. alliance with the PKK's affiliate in Syria, the direct military intervention by Russia in September 2015 on the side of the regime (Turkish forces shot down a Russian jet in November 2015 near the Syrian border)¹⁰⁵, a series of major attacks inside Turkey and the July 2016 failed coup.

In January 2017 Turkey joined regime backers Iran and Russia in launching the Astana process of talks between representatives of the Syrian regime and opposition.¹⁰⁶ Syria has been at the top of the agenda in all summits held by the Iranian, Russian and Turkish leaders since then.

In late 2019, Turkey revealed that it has been in indirect contact with the Syrian regime via Iran and Russia but later Erdoğan said "lower level" intelligence contacts between Damascus and Ankara never ceased. "Leaders may be cut out. But intelligence units can communicate for their interests," Erdoğan said. "Even if you have an enemy, you should not break the ties. You may need that later."¹⁰⁷ His foreign minister Çavuşoğlu said Turkey would work with Assad if he "won a democratic election."¹⁰⁸ The overtures to the regime culminated in a face-to-face meeting between Turkish intelligence chief Fidan and his Syrian counterpart Mamlouk in Moscow in January 2020.¹⁰⁹

But relations were on a clash course again the following month when differences between Russia and Turkey over the future of Idlib and the desire of the regime and Iran to take back as much of Idlib as possible came to a head. At least 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an airstrike in Idlib, which Turkey blamed on the regime. Turkey retaliated by conducting a sweeping attack on regime forces in Idlib and adjacent Hama and Latakia provinces killing dozens of Syrian soldiers.¹¹⁰ The confrontation ended with a ceasefire announced by Putin and Erdoğan in early March 2020.

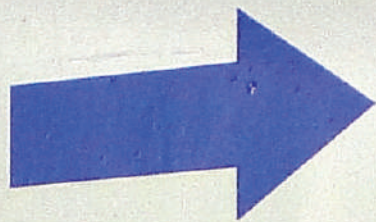
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MANİFESTO MERKEZİ**

مركز منقست
للسيارات السورية



Sign showing where to register Syrian-plated cars in the border town of Kilis, Turkey, May 2011, source: Wikimedia Commons.

SECTION 3 REPERCUSSIONS OF SYRIAN-TURKISH RAPPROCHEMENT

3.1 Refugees and the Internally Displaced

Since 2016 Syrian refugees in Turkey have been under increasing pressure from the Turkish government to move to areas in northern Syria that it says it “liberated” from Kurdish militias.

Over the past seven years, Turkish authorities have also sought to control the Syrian refugee population by implementing a series of administrative measures whose enforcement has ebbed and flowed depending on internal Turkish political dynamics. Since the start of 2022 and in the lead up to the crucial general elections, which are scheduled to be held in mid-May 2023, the Turkish Ministry of Interior has closed off 1,200 districts and neighborhoods in major cities to foreigners including Syrian refugees¹¹¹ and suspended the practice of allowing Syrian refugees to return to northern Syria to visit relatives for the Muslim holidays (if they go, they won’t be allowed back into Turkey).¹¹² In addition, it stopped renewing or issuing new tourist residency visas, which have allowed some Syrians in Turkey to go in and out of the country to meet loved ones who have remained in Syria in third countries like Lebanon.



Arabic signs on shops proliferate much to the chagrin of many Turks, Esenyurt district, Istanbul, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

Authorities have also been unforgiving in their crackdown on any Syrian refugee who breaks the law or is in violation of the terms of their temporary protection status. New rules were recently introduced to combat the practice whereby Syrian refugees deported to northern Syria pay smugglers to return to Turkey clandestinely. Syrian refugees

interviewed by the author of this report have described detention, coercion and in some instances violence by authorities to make them sign off on their “voluntary return” to northern Syria. Independent Syrian media outlets based in Turkey and rights organizations including Human Rights Watch have documented similar practices.¹¹³ Turkish authorities have publicly denied this but a Turkish official speaking on condition of anonymity to the author conceded that the Turkish government is now applying a “zero tolerance” policy toward violations committed by Syrian refugees.

“There was flexibility from time to time ... but those violations unfortunately increased a lot and you know the public reaction against that ... It’s already a big debate in Turkey,” said the official referring to the sea change in the Turkish public’s mood and tolerance toward refugees especially Syrians over the years. “Secondly, if there is any Syrian committing a real crime, I think deportation is to those areas in the north, we are basically saying if you’re breaking the rule here, you have to go back there.”

But the turning point for many of the nearly 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey and the estimated 4 million Syrians living in northern Syria in areas under direct Turkish control or influence came in the summer of 2022.

The Turkish government’s announcement that it was holding talks with the Syrian regime and Erdoğan’s repeated statements that he was ready to meet with Assad, someone he previously called a “butcher” and “murderer” and vowed never to deal with,¹¹⁴ came as a real shock to Syrians in Turkey and those in northern Syria—many of them displaced multiple times since 2011 largely by the regime.

Turkey effectively has authority and administrative and economic control in one form or another over one-third of Syria’s population. So any moves or policy changes by Turkey vis a vis Syria have a direct impact on the lives of millions of Syrians.

“You have been planting in the heads of Syrians and Turks for 10 years that I (Erdoğan) would never reconcile with such a killer regime that has used chemical weapons and then without any introduction and preparation of the ground, you return from Russia and say it’s actually possible to meet with the regime. The shock is coming from this fact,” said Omar Kadkoy with the Ankara-based Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey.

The announcement coupled with constant talk by Erdoğan and ministers in his government of returning up to one million Syrians to northern Syria as well as the previously outlined new measures that

have come into effect this year have provoked a sense of betrayal, fear and panic among many Syrians. Many are not sure if the announcement and the new measures are part of an irreversible shift in Turkey's position or are meant to appease Turkish citizens and upstage opposition parties ahead of the general elections.



The Mülteclir Dernegi refugee association was established in 2014 to support refugees and foster a better understanding between them and the local communities, Istanbul, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

Complicating matters and clouding the prospects for Syrians is the opaqueness of the figures relating to refugees that are periodically released by the Ministry of Interior and which are hard to independently verify. At the end of October, President Erdoğan said his government has since 2016 “ensured the voluntary return” of an estimated 530,000 Syrians to “safe zones we created in Syria.”¹¹⁵ But the UNHCR documented only 153,306 voluntary returns during the exact same period.¹¹⁶

Local Syrian authorities that control the two main crossings on the Syrian side—Bab al-Hawa in Idlib and Bab al-Salam in the Aleppo countryside—also release their own figures of voluntary returns. But many independent Syrian journalists working both in Turkey and in northern Syria say these figures cannot be trusted because those who control the

border on the Syrian side have to maintain close relations with the Turkish side and feel compelled to take the word of Turkish forces who deliver the deportees at the border about the circumstances of return—they are in the vast majority of cases marked as “voluntary.”

President Erdoğan has reiterated the plan to secure the “voluntary return” of 1 million Syrian refugees to the so-called safe zones.¹¹⁷ It is not clear if this will be on top of the estimated 530,000 that he says have already “voluntarily returned” to northern Syria.

Thus, it is no surprise that the sudden talk of rapprochement with the Syrian regime coming in the context of the confusing messaging from Turkish officials and the tough new measures implemented this year has destabilized most Syrians spurring many both in Turkey and in the northern areas controlled by Turkey to start weighing their options.

Very few people want to return to northern Syria which is hardly the safe zone being portrayed by Turkey (see section 3.2 below). Many fear Syrian-Turkish rapprochement could eventually lead to them being returned to areas under regime control like Aleppo city, Damascus and Homs—a nightmare scenario for many Syrians in Turkey who largely come from areas known for bitter opposition to the regime at the start of the uprising.

For many Syrians in Turkey and Turkish-controlled areas in the north the writing is on the wall already and the way they see it they will not wait around in order to pay the price of Turkey's shifting strategic priorities in Syria.

A defected Syrian army officer based in the Middle East and currently advising Western intelligence services and militaries on Syria offered this stark warning: “Europe should expect 1 million refugees, many Syrians are hiding at home in Turkey, hoping to secure some sort of educational scholarship or to take to the sea.”

In August 2022, European member states received 77,595 first-time asylum applications, a 17 percent increase over the previous month and a 54 percent increase over the same month in 2021, the EU's statistical office Eurostat reported at the end of November 2022. The largest number of first-time applicants were Syrians at 11,860 persons, added Eurostat.¹¹⁸

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence culled from phone and in-person interviews with nearly 50 Syrians conducted by the author between the summer and autumn of 2022 that suggest that the number of Syrians attempting to reach Europe via

smuggling networks may keep increasing. The prospect of normalization between the Syrian regime and Turkey is the clenching factor for many.

“What happened has really tipped the scales for Syrians in Turkey; at any gathering of Syrians in Istanbul these days most of the talk is about who has left, who’s leaving and how and for how much,” says Ammar Ziadeh cofounder and managing editor of Enab Baladi, an Istanbul-based independent Syrian media outlet. Many Syrian refugees feel they are down to two options: wait to be returned to Syria or try their luck in reaching Europe.

“When we talk about return, we are initially talking about people returning to northern areas. We’re trying to make things easier for those who are volunteering to return to the north: hospitals, job opportunities, accommodation, employment. Not easy for anyone to return to areas where they have no connection,” a Turkish official told the author on condition of anonymity.

“We’re not talking to the regime yet about returning people to Homs, Damascus etc. We’re not there yet because that would necessitate (progress on the) bigger picture: ideally if the political process is working and constitutional committee is covering ground, there will be outcomes, whenever this outcome will be achieved then Cham (Damascus) most probably will not interfere with people who may wish to return.”



Syrian and Turkish women working side by side in a kitchen at the Mülteclir Derneği NGO in Sultanbeyli district, Istanbul, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

Murat Yeşiltaş from the Ankara-based SETA think-tank who also advises the Turkish government on Syria policy said that Turkish officials “want to believe that the refugees can return [but] I don’t think this mission is achievable with Assad, it’s not possible because of many reasons on the ground, because of the conflict dynamics on the ground.” (see sections 3.1 and 3.4 for more details)

All of these caveats are hardly a source of solace for Syrians, who are increasingly taking matters into their own hands:

► Mohammad Jouja, a native of Homs, now lives with his family in the coastal Turkish city of Mersin. He once served as the representative of Homs armed factions in UN-mediated talks between the regime and opposition in Geneva. “Many people are leaving from Izmir and Marmaris, some people are going VIP,” he said. He recounts the story of a friend, who paid \$8,000 in September of this year to charter a yacht from Marmaris that took him to one of the nearby Aegean Greek islands. Using forged European travel documents he then flew from Greece to the Netherlands, where he surrendered himself to airport authorities and asked for asylum. Jouja said that since the rapprochement announcement many Syrians in northern Syria, the areas Turkish officials call “safe zones,” have been paying smugglers anywhere between \$1,200 and \$4,000 just to get to Turkey and from there they try to figure out a way to reach Europe. “If people are forcibly returned to Syria there will never be stability, always source of problems and people won’t stop trying to get to Europe,” said Jouja. Most Syrians feel “Turkey is on a path and if it gets what it wants from the regime, it will sign [to normalize with the regime],” he added.

► A father and three sons from the Damascus suburbs: The men were arrested in the spring of 2019 in Istanbul because their temporary protection documents did not authorize them to leave Hatay Province in the south. They say they went to Istanbul in search of better work opportunities. Instead of being told to return to Hatay as was the practice previously, they say they were detained and subjected to immense pressure to sign “voluntary return” documents. Only one of the brothers cracked and signed but in the end all were returned to Syria. The Turkish officer trying to get them to sign the documents supposedly told them: “No matter how much you try, you will sign in the end, and even if you do not sign I’ll find a way to deport you. If it was up to me I would have handed you over to the Assad regime at Kasab checkpoint” (Turkey maintains one checkpoint with the regime in the area between Latakia Province in Syria and Hatay Province in Turkey, which it only uses for exceptional humani-

tarian circumstances.) Since the men were natives of Idlib they were deported there. But they hardly have any connection to the province because they had lived their entire lives in Damascus. Ten days later, they paid a smuggler to return to Turkey because they had been separated from the women in their family. They are all now in Hatay barely venturing out of their apartment because there are regular patrols in the area checking documents of Syrians on the streets. If they are caught their deportation is certain. All the men are looking for ways to get to Europe.



View from the Syrian side of the border wall, which Turkish forces started building in 2016 to stop Syrian refugees from reaching Europe through Turkish territory, Kasab, August 2022, source: Anne Bauer.

The author has contacted several Turkish officials for comment on forced deportation allegations but they have declined these requests.

3.2 Non-state Actors in Northern Syria

The announcement of Turkey's rapprochement initiative with the regime appears to have triggered a scramble by many of the non-state actors currently operating in northern Syria to consolidate their positions on the ground in order to be better prepared for the possibility of reconciliation between the regime and Turkey.

Following the anti-Turkey protests in northern Syria over the summer of 2022 in reaction to Turkish statements about reengaging Assad and even meeting with him, Ankara summoned seven commanders of rebel factions within the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA)—the body was established by Turkey in 2017 and is made up of remnants of the Free Syrian Army and Islamist rebel groups. Turkish officials assured the Syrians of their commitment to preserving the areas under Turkish supervision and control

until there is a “real solution” in Syria, according to individuals with knowledge of the meeting's proceedings.¹¹⁹

“This is not something we want to negotiate [with the regime],” one Turkish official told the Syrians, according to the same sources. “We shed blood in three military operations.”¹²⁰ He also told them the “rapprochement initiative” is more than anything else linked to the pressure the ruling AK Party is facing in the lead up to the general elections.

“If we lose these elections all Syrians will be affected,” added the Turkish official.¹²¹ During the same meeting, the Turkish officials had harsh words for the commanders reprimanding them for not doing enough in June 2022 to drive out HTS from a number of villages not far from Afrin in the north-western section of the Aleppo countryside, which it had occupied—the area was supposed to be under the control of the Turkish-backed SNA.¹²²

“500 guys stood against HTS while we have 30,000 fighters,” one Turkish official said. It took Turkish intervention to force HTS to leave.

The same scenario repeated itself four months later. Infighting in early October 2022 among SNA rebel factions gave HTS an opportunity to advance on Afrin town itself this time and threaten to continue toward Azaz, the strategic border town north of Aleppo city. Turkey issued HTS an ultimatum to retreat to Idlib and it appears to have complied. At the same time there were reports on social media and in some online media outlets of yet another meeting between Turkish intelligence and military officials and some of the commanders of the 54 factions that make up the SNA. Turkish officials had very harsh words for the commanders lecturing them about the need to unite under one joint command, shut down separate operation rooms, relinquish all urban checkpoints to a joint apparatus, give up border crossings which are the main source of revenue for these groups and shut down prisons where grave human rights violations have been reported.

The report's author was able to confirm the second meeting and its content with multiple sources in Turkey and northern Syria who spoke on condition of anonymity. One source said Turkey has been urging the Syrian interim government, the civilian government that is nominally in charge of areas under Turkish control, to set up a military justice mechanism to punish rebel factions committing violations.

Two things appear to be motivating Turkey: the need to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the

Syrian regime by projecting that it is in full control of the northern areas and also the desire to create the conditions on the ground that will encourage more Syrians to move there from Turkey.

A Syrian opposition leader and a member of the interim government who spends his time between Turkey and northern Syria have both told the author that the interim government in its current format is a “hollow” and “toothless” institution, so it is completely unrealistic to expect it to be able to rein in the rebel factions. They said that everybody knows that the real power is in the hands of the Turkish Interior Ministry, Turkish intelligence services, Turkish Defense Ministry and the Syrian warlords they have empowered who have the weapons and control the revenue from smuggling operations in every direction imaginable.

“The situation in the north is disastrous; the presence of the [rebel] factions in the towns and cities is ruining everything and they are fighting with each other,” said the opposition leader on condition of anonymity.



Refugee camp in Azaz, the strategic border town north of Aleppo controlled by Turkish-backed rebel groups, May 2019, source: Adobe Stock.

“The factions on the ground are beholden to Turkish intel, defense and interior; the Turkish Minister of Interior is going back and forth to Syria and the walis (Turkish provincial governors) are responsible for the majales (local administrative/municipal councils on the Syrian side) as well the health and education sectors.” (See economy section)

SETA’s Yeşiltaş predicts the turf battles and struggle for control of the area’s limited resources will only intensify in the coming months fueled by all the talk of “normalization” between Turkey and the regime. He said HTS, which has managed to impose an iron-fisted rule in Idlib, won’t give up on its ambition

to control more areas in the north.

The situation could get even messier as Turkey prepares to launch a fresh military operation to drive out Kurdish militias from Manbij and Tal Rifaat, which some Turkish analysts say may involve some kind of coordination with the Assad regime this time.¹²³ Indeed, the opening salvos of Turkish airstrikes against Kurdish-controlled areas in what Ankara said was retaliation for the Istanbul bombing, which it blamed on the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the YPG,¹²⁴ were followed shortly after by Russian and regime airstrikes on positions in Idlib.¹²⁵

“Before the elections Turkey needs to conduct a military operation, they need to get a success in Syria in Manbij and Tal Rifaat, it could be in coordination with the regime or alone,” said Oytun Orhan, coordinator for Levant Studies at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM), which also advises the Turkish government on Syria policy.

A person with knowledge of the recent talks held in Damascus between the Turkish and Syrian intelligence chiefs said that Turkey asked the regime to remove the SDF from Manbij and Tal Rifaat but that the regime said it was not an operation it was willing to undertake.

Hence, if Turkey has to do the job itself then one potential concession to the regime would be the reopening of the vital M4 Motorway that connects the regime’s coastal stronghold of Latakia with Idlib, according to ORSAM’s Orhan.

This could provoke a reaction from HTS in defiance of the Turks and it could also spur some factions that are under the nominal umbrella of the Syrian National Army to actually switch sides and join forces with HTS.

“They definitely have concerns about their future and are getting ready for a new era and they must decide their commitment to the national army in the north; shifting alliances and dynamics among Syrian armed groups happen fairly quickly,” said SETA’s Yeşiltaş.

And this does not even take into account the reaction of the SDF, which has forces numbering at least 100,000 to being squeezed further by Turkey and losing Manbij and Tal Rifaat, which would cut it off from Kobani—a border town of strategic, symbolic and emotional significance to Syria’s Kurds. It is where the US-backed campaign against ISIS was launched in the autumn of 2014. Not to mention what would happen to the camps and prisons in the northeast holding former ISIS members and their families if the SDF is forced to divert military

resources to defend its territories.

Charles Lister, senior fellow and director of the Syria and the countering terrorism programs at the Middle East Institute, says there are divisions among Syria's Kurdish forces at the moment. Those close to PKK hardliners advocate forging closer ties with Russia and the regime as a way of countering Turkey while the more moderate ones are still committed to the relationship with the US despite their sense of letdown and betrayal.



View from the Turkish side of the fence that was erected to separate the country from Syria and stop more Syrians from coming, Reyhanli, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

In short, the entire Syrian north could possibly be enflamed in a fresh round of conflict on multiple fronts that could provoke a new humanitarian and refugee crises.

One idea floated by some Turkish analysts advising the government is to actually bolster the Turkish military presence in the north—it is estimated to be 5,000 at the moment but some say the actual number could be larger—and appoint an interim administrator/governor who would bring all the Syrian factions under their control. But this negates Turkey's efforts and talks with the regime to try to maintain its current military presence in Syria and its demand for a 30-kilometer buffer zone in northern Syria within the framework of a revised Adana Agreement with the Syrian regime.

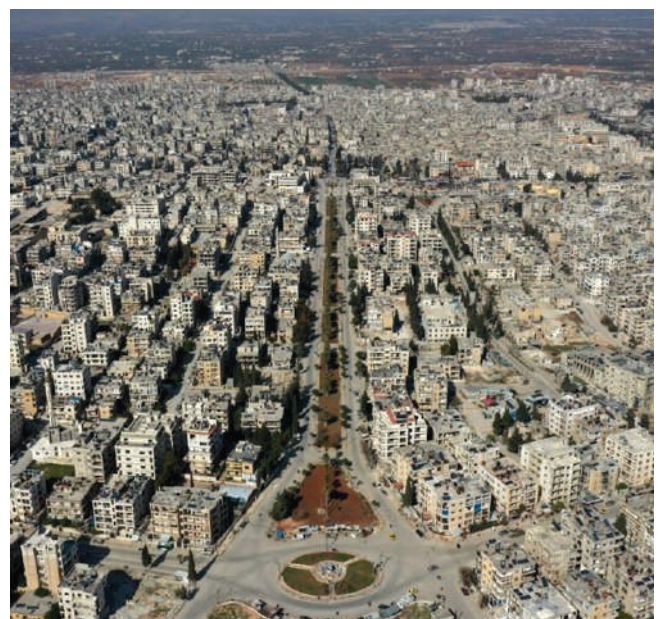
Meanwhile most Syrians are fed up with all non-state actors no matter their affiliation. "There is actually no big difference between the Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, the regime and Al-Nusra (the previous name of HTS)," notes Ziadeh from Enab Baladi, which has a network of reporters throughout Syria including the north. It has documented countless human rights abuses including summary executions, assassinations, torture and property confiscation among other violations com-

mitted by factions linked to the SNA.

Mohammad Jouja, the Mersin-based Homs native and activist, recently spent one week in northern Syria and this is the brief portrait he offered of Fahim Issa, commander of the Sultan Murad militia, who is very close to Turkey: "He is definitely not willing to give up his gains: he controls the town of Al-Raie and the surrounding countryside, a border crossing with Turkey, he sends mercenaries to Libya and gets a cut and he's driving a 2022 armored Lexus SUV."

3.3 Humanitarian Situation and Channeling of International Aid

The area in northwest Syria, which encompasses most of Idlib Province and northern sections of Aleppo Province under Turkish control, is home to an estimated 4.4 million people, of whom 2.8 million are internally displaced people (IDPs). About 1.7 million IDPs live in tent camps scattered around the area.¹²⁶ The Syrian regime does not recognize any responsibility in providing economic and social services to inhabitants of the northwest and has refused to negotiate an agreement with groups in the area to provide basic services such as electricity as it has done with the US-backed Kurdish zone in the northeast. In Idlib an alternative body known as the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) was formed by HTS in 2017 and was supposed to fill this governance void but corruption, turf battles, lack of resources and the fact that the HTS has been designated as a terrorist group has limited the scope of what the SSG could provide to civilians in the northwest.



Aerial shot of Idlib, where around 4.1 million are dependent on UN cross-border aid from Turkey, December 2022, source: Wikimedia Commons.

In areas under more direct Turkish control, which are separated from the HTS-controlled territory by two internal border crossings, healthcare, education and basic services such as electricity are provided through Turkish ministries and designated authorities in border Turkish provinces but the weakness of the Turkish appointed-Syrian interim government and clashing agendas of the area's competing warlords has resulted in non-uniform access by civilians.

Most civilians in the northwest (both in HTS and Turkish-controlled areas), particularly the IDPs, are reliant on cross-border aid provided by the United Nations and its partners on the ground since 2014 for their most basic needs. Through the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), which was established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2165, UN agencies through Syrian humanitarian organizations on the ground provide people with food, water, hygiene, sanitation, health, education, shelter in the form of tents and basic protection.¹²⁷ Initially, the aid was being funneled through four border crossings but this has been cut down to one—Idlib's Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey—as Russia and China have pushed for the dismantling of the program and the provision of aid solely through the regime in Damascus.

In July 2022, Russia vetoed an extension of the program for one year as has been the case since 2015.¹²⁸ A compromise six-month extension was agreed in the end followed by another similar prolongation in early January 2023 but the program's ultimate fate remains uncertain.¹²⁹ Already the program has been significantly strained by lack of funding from donor states and the shifting focus to other crises, particularly the war in Ukraine.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), one of the largest medical relief organizations operating in areas out of regime control, and other NGOs working in northern Syria recently hired a legal team to study the possibility of continuing cross-border operations in the absence of a Security Council resolution.

Many NGOs though are wary of doing anything that might upset Turkish authorities, which have been for years applying more scrutiny and control over the activities of humanitarian organizations doing work in northern Syria. Turkey has effectively served as the staging ground for all aid operations in northern Syria.

Now the prospect of rapprochement between the Syrian regime and Turkey is adding yet another layer of uncertainty for humanitarian organizations and the hundreds of thousands of Syrians, who rely on

this vital aid as their last remaining lifeline. There are real fears that if Turkey gets what it wants from the regime, particularly on those demands that relate to combating and dismantling the Kurdish-led semi-autonomous region in northeast Syria, then it may be willing to offer the regime concessions like the suspension of cross-border aid. In fact, one of the preconditions set by Russia for allowing the cross-border aid to continue from Turkey is to increase the shipments of aid that go from Damascus to the northwest, which humanitarians refer to as cross-line.



Map of parts of the Syrian-Turkish border along Idlib and territory held by Turkish-backed rebels, December 2022, source: Wikimedia Commons.

Dima Marrawi, a senior officer for advocacy and communication at SAMS based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, says the whole point of the Russian demand is to prove that cross-line aid is possible and that all humanitarian aid can be and should be channeled through Damascus, further bolstering Moscow's efforts to push the West to accept that in the end there is no solution but to reengage with the Assad regime.

There is a sense that Turkey for the sake of its own interests may be now more open to entertaining this Russian view, especially that it has already started to engage with the regime on a range of issues in Syria.

Marrawi says more advocacy work is needed to demonstrate to Turkish authorities the perils and challenges of just relying on cross-line aid. At the moment, the bulk of the cross-line aid that comes to the north via the UN and its partners in Damascus involves food rations, which are dropped at designated border crossings between the regime-controlled areas and those controlled by HTS in the case of Idlib, according to Marrawi. She says local NGOs have to do the distribution. But the work that is now done through the cross-border program and the vital needs it tries to fulfill go beyond food rations.

At least 1.5 million people in the northwest for example rely on the water, sanitation and health services supported and funded through the cross-border aid program.¹³⁰ The aid also goes toward supporting the safety and habitability of the tents and temporary structures many people are forced to live in as well as the remaining medical facilities that provide people with urgent care and free healthcare services. They are often the only places left in these areas. From the very start of the conflict the regime has been systematically and relentlessly targeting medical staff and facilities in areas out of regime control—a practice that continued and widened when Russia joined the war directly on the regime's side in 2015. In the round of bloodshed between April 2019 and Feb 2020 the regime and Russians destroyed 53 medical facilities in the northwest. SAMS documented 12 attacks in 2021 as the world was starting to emerge from COVID lockdowns. The WHO estimated in early 2022 that at least one quarter of the 600 medical structures and facilities in the area are no longer functioning because of the incessant attacks. Those that remain standing are critical to the urgent health care needs of 3.1 million people of whom at least 2.5 million get these services for free through support from the cross-border program. Services in all sectors including health are mostly provided by the UN's local NGO partners, who rely on the funding and support they get.

"The solution is not cross-line, there is a system and cadres that have been trained for 11 years inside these areas, they are locals," says Marrawi.

Hisham Dirani, the CEO of Violet, one of the main local NGOs involved in the cross-border program, said an estimated 40 local groups including his will on average lose 60 to 65 percent of their resources if the cross-border program ceases. He said the ripple effect will be felt at the most basic level including the operation of bakeries.

At the moment, the regime classifies everyone involved in humanitarian aid in rebel-controlled areas including doctors, medics and nurses as

"terrorists" that it has every right to target. If there is a shift to cross-line, all of them will need to get approval from the regime to work with the UN and the UN will have to comply as it currently does at its Damascus-based operation. From the very start of the conflict, the regime has sought to control every aspect of humanitarian aid being provided through Damascus—cutting off UN aid including live-saving medical one has been a brutal weapon used by the regime to decimate opposition enclaves.¹³¹ On top of that, allegations of corruption and the diversion of UN aid and procurement to regime officials, their cronies and supporters have never ceased.¹³² At the moment, the cross-border operation is funded mainly by contributions from European states led by Germany, which accounted for nearly 50 percent of the \$155 million given in 2021.¹³³ It's not clear whether these states are ready to put all the strings of the disbursement and allocation of humanitarian aid in Syria fully in the hands of the regime in Damascus, which already has immense power and control over everything the UN and its Syrian partners do on the cross-line level. It's ultimately up to the Assad regime to decide if it wants to greenlight shipments and where it may or may not go.

During the period of July 2021 and July 2022 after the Russian demand that the UN do more cross-line aid delivery as precondition to renewing the cross-border authorization, the UN actually asked the Assad regime for permission to deliver aid not to the northwest but to the suburbs of Damascus (Ghouta), which have been under regime control since 2018 following an operation with Iran and Russia, and the regime refused.

"The regime rejected 17 operations to Ghouta," Saad Baroud, First Secretary at the Syrian opposition's mission in Qatar, told the author.

The consequences of the suspension of cross-border aid can be seen in the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria's northeast where the UN had to stop aid deliveries from Iraq's Kurdistan region in 2020.

"Tens of thousands of children in the northeast are malnourished now and there's also a cholera outbreak," warned Joseph Chalhoub from Geoform during an online panel discussion on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings in New York in September 2022.

The other aspect of this is that the potential end of the cross-border operation and the switch to cross-line will also give HTS and other factions in the north more power over what they allow in and on what terms. The current cross-border dynamics actually give the UN and its local partners much leverage over how and where to direct their aid.

Marrawi explains that cross-border aid is filling a huge gap for civilians that neither HTS nor its front government can address at the moment. So regardless of what scenario they favor when it comes to aid delivery to Idlib, HTS is in a way benefiting from the cross-border program, which is responding to the needs of civilians in its area of control.

However, the cross-border program is also empowering civilians. “Because of their connection to humanitarian agencies, people are able to call out and even confront HTS when it tries to interfere too much,” she says recounting the popular backlash once when HTS tried to segregate medical facilities by gender forcing the group to backdown.

It is worth underscoring that Turkey has not publicly said that it would stop allowing international aid to flow through its borders to northern Syria. Turkey welcomed the latest six-month extension of the cross-border program¹³⁴ but still humanitarians in Turkey are sensing a certain ambiguity in the Turkish position and a pivot toward the Russian position when it comes to so-called early recovery and resilience funds for Syria or what some simply call reconstruction funds.

At the moment, the West has continued to block big spending on infrastructure and recovery in regime-controlled areas unless there is meaningful progress on the political track.

“We have a bit of a different view of that, we always believed that the political process and infrastructure issues can work hand-in-hand...if there is some kind of development in the political process, there could be other developments in other fields, so that these tracks can work parallel to each other,” a Turkish official told the author.

“It’s not realistic to wait for all of Syria to be stabilized, at peace and prosperous before people start to return, we may never reach that goal.”

The regime and its allies have for years tied refugee return to receiving reconstruction money from the West. A shift would also help Turkey, which is seen by many in the West as having occupied northern Syria and “displaced” Kurds by force from some parts of the north. As such the West does not want to be seen as complicit in this by providing reconstruction money for areas under Turkish control. At the moment most of the funding has come from Turkey itself and its ally Qatar.

3.4 Economy and Sanctions

The current status quo of a frozen conflict interrupt-

ed by occasional conflagrations and characterized by ever-shifting internal boundaries separating the multiple belligerents, has spawned a web of economic ties and interests that have largely benefited and enriched smugglers and warlords on all sides.

The following are a few examples of these criss-crossing ties in the war economy of today’s Syria:

▶ In the Turkish-controlled areas in the north, Azaz, which has seen its population nearly triple in the past decade to about 450,000, is now the hub for Turkish goods that come into Syria and are then smuggled in every direction imaginable and sold throughout the country, according to Istanbul-based researcher Sinan Hatahet. They go to the Kurdish-controlled areas, which are supposed to be at war with Turkey and its proxies. They also go to regime-controlled areas with the help of Syrian regime and intelligence officers, who are paid directly by the smugglers/transporters, added Hatahet.

▶ Also in Turkish-controlled areas, the border town of Al-Raie has emerged as a hub for bringing cars from Turkey—specifically pre-2012 models which Turkey gets from Europe custom free as per a deal it has—and then selling them throughout Syria including the Kurdish-controlled areas that Turkey has been at war with, according to Hatahet.

▶ The Kurdish-controlled areas in the northeast that hold most of the oil resources are still shipping tankers of crude oil to regime-controlled areas using a fleet that belongs to the Katerji brothers, who are sanctioned by the U.S. but protected by the Russians. Several unverified reports claimed the brothers were arrested by the regime and their assets confiscated following a dispute with Bashar al-Assad’s brother Maher and his cronies.¹³⁵ The Kurdish areas are partly paid by oil products refined at regime-controlled refineries in Homs and Baniyas on the coast. Syria’s Kurdish-controlled areas have also sent crude oil to Turkey via the neighboring Kurdish region in Iraq.

▶ HTS-controlled areas are restricted by Turkey on what they can bring through the border crossing they share with Turkey (Bab Al-Hawa). For instance, sugar traders from Idlib recently had to bring a shipment they bought in Mersin to the crossing in Azaz (Bab Al-Salameh) and then onward to Idlib. But the Turks have started easing HTS’s ability to trade through crossings with the regime. HTS commanders have developed trade ties with Syrian military commanders and businessmen that answer to Maher al-Assad.

After a period of decline, Turkish export volumes to Syria are back to pre-2011 levels of around \$2 billion

a year, estimates Jihad Yazigi, the Paris-based founder and editor of The Syria Report. Most of these goods including construction materials, food products and textiles are smuggled to regime-controlled areas of Syria through the north, according to Yazigi who adds that the figure represents 10 times the size of Iranian exports to Syria excluding oil (about \$200 million a year). This is despite the fact that Iran invested blood and treasure to save Assad and his regime. Many Syrians perceive Iranian products as being of inferior quality compared to those made in Turkey.

Rapprochement between Turkey and the Syrian regime under current circumstances would certainly boost trade volumes and enrich the smugglers and warlords, particularly those on the regime side, but beyond that it is hard to see how it will lead to much in terms of investments, say several economic experts including Yazigi. Yazigi believes the same factors that have impeded any meaningful benefits on the economic front after the Syrian regime normalized its relations with Jordan and the United Arab Emirates apply in the Turkish case:

1) International sanctions - Both the European Union and the U.S. have imposed over the years wide-ranging and extensive sanctions on hundreds of Syrian regime officials including Assad and members of his immediate and extended family. Sanctions have also targeted specific sectors such as aviation, banking and energy. But the most problematic ones from an investor standpoint are those associated with the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which took effect in mid-2020 and allow the U.S. to sanction non-U.S. individuals doing business with the regime. So for example an Emirati or Turkish company that wants to do business in Syria could be exposed to U.S. sanctions. But sanctions have hardly made a dent on the networks of cronies and smugglers which continue to sustain the regime and Assad personally as they have done in other periods of recent history when Syria was under Western sanctions (normalization with Jordan and the reopening of the border crossing with Syria was accompanied by a dramatic rise in Captagon drug shipments from Syria to the Gulf sustained by these same networks).¹³⁶

2) Dysfunctional and corrupt institutions - The banking sector is hardly functioning and state institutions and what remains of the bureaucracy is crippled and consumed by corruption. Skilled labor is missing and most of the country's business elites have left and the famed Aleppan and Damascene business networks have largely disintegrated supplanted by war profiteers, militiamen and smugglers. Add to that crumbling infrastructure and shortages in nearly every sector of the economy. "Nothing

really encourages you to invest or build economic ties in the country," says Yazigi.

A Damascene businessman and industrialist, who still manages to go in and out of Syria, spoke at length to the author in late September 2022 about the current situation in the country. Here's an excerpt of what he said in his own words: "It's a state by name only. In fact, it's more of a mafia. The state is bankrupt, no natural resources. All in the hands of the Kurds; 80 percent of the gas and oil is in the northeast. The regime can produce 15,000-20,000 barrels a day south of the Euphrates and take out some gas around Qarah and Tadmor (in the desert east of Homs city) but nothing more than that. The wheat is also in the Kurdish-controlled areas and the framers there want to be paid in dollars. Because of the war in Ukraine, there is great demand for wheat and oil and buyers in Iraq and Turkey are ready to pay the Kurds in dollars.

The Syrian pound has lost more than 12 percent of its value in the period between July and September 2022, costs are increasing for the regime while resources are dwindling. So what they did to replenish their coffers is that they arrested more than 50 businessmen and forced them to cough up millions of dollars in alleged back taxes. Many businessmen were told to pay millions of dollars into a fund for the victims of the war and their families controlled by Asma al-Assad in order to be released and allowed to resume their activities.

A friend who had stopped all his business activities in Syria in 2013 came back this summer to visit his parents. They detained him and made him pay \$300,000 in alleged back taxes. They wanted \$3.3 million from Ayman Brinjakji, who owns the Indomie noodles factory. They detained him a first time and released him on the promise that he would find the money. But they detained him a second time when he announced that he was closing his factory and forced him to retract his statement. He can't leave Syria. Others are trying to wind down their businesses in Syria but many are afraid to meet the same fate as Brinjakji if they do it abruptly."

Turkey is fully aware of the decrepit state of the Syrian regime's finances and the dangling of economic benefits of rapprochement like increased trade volume and potential reconstruction money appears to be a way of enticing the regime to cooperate on Ankara's twin demands: confronting YPG/SDF and dismantling their semi-autonomous region and returning refugees from Turkey to areas beyond the north.

"There have been hints from the Turkish side during negotiations with the regime that reconstruction

money will be forthcoming if the regime does nothing to hinder the return of refugees to Damascus and Homs,” said the Syrian businessman and industrialist based on his conversations with Syrian intelligence officers privy to the meetings between Turkish and Syrian regime intel chiefs over the summer.

They may be simply just “hints” at this stage because, as previously mentioned, a Turkish official denied to the author that talks with the regime had reached the point of discussing refugee return to areas under regime control. The same official said that getting into this discussion is linked to making progress on the political and constitutional track between the regime and the opposition. But he also said that if this (progress on the political front) were to happen then “that [would be the] moment when Western countries would come into the picture with financial support for some kind of reconstruction.”

But assuming Western reconstruction aid will be as forthcoming as the official makes it sound, there are a whole set of other problems. Over the past 10 years the regime has been demolishing and confiscating the property of Syrians from opposition hotbeds around Damascus, particularly those on the southside of the city under the guise of urban planning or on trumped up terrorism charges. New housing projects with names like Basilia City and Marota City are going up in these places with new residents and owners.¹³⁷ Most of the original owners are refugees living in Turkey and elsewhere. Returning these people whose homes and properties no longer exist could be grounds for a fresh conflict.

It is easy to see how going down further the rapprochement path with the Syrian regime under the present circumstances could be a slippery slope for Turkey that could have a number of negative repercussions including for Turkey’s own economy as well as its current vision for northern Syria as a buffer zone with an economy that can support refugee returns.

About 10,000 new companies, half of them micro-size employing less than 5 people, have been established by Syrians in Turkey between 2011 and 2018, creating tens of thousands of jobs for both Syrians and Turks, according to a study conducted in 2018 by the Ankara-based Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey.¹³⁸ Omar Kadkoy, a researcher who worked on the report, told the author that this number has kept increasing and that it now stands at about 14,000 companies. Many of them have become crucial links between Turkey and Arabic-speaking markets throughout the Middle East. There are also at least 650,000 Syrians believed to be employed in Turkish factories getting paid wages and laboring under conditions most Turks

would never accept. At the same time, there are about 40,000 Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities at all levels, according to Kadkoy.



Syrian fast food restaurants now dominate Istanbul's Fatih district, an area very popular with Syrians and other immigrants, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

“Turkey needs these people given its opening to the Middle East, if you speak to tourism companies in Istanbul, Trabzon and Gaziantep, they tell you we want people that speak Arabic because clients from the Middle East want people that can communicate with them in the same language,” says Kadkoy. “It’s actually the Syrians, who can do this work, for example a Syrian university student working during the summer holiday.”

There are already vocal complaints from Turkish business owners that the government’s changing Syria policies that is pushing Syrians to northern Syria or making them escape to Europe will deprive them of a crucial skilled and semi-skilled labor force that will be very hard to replace with Turks.¹³⁹

Abu Subhi, originally from the Shaar neighborhood of Aleppo, has been in Turkey since 2014 working as a furniture maker in Ankara’s Altindag district. He is one of four people, all of them Syrians, working at a workshop owned by a Turk. His boss has five other

workshops in Ankara making furniture for export to France, Germany and the Netherlands. Almost all the workers are Syrians. Abu Subhi was among those who had to leave Altindag in August 2021 following a wave of attacks on Syrian homes and businesses employing Syrians, provoked by the killing of a Turkish man during a quarrel with a Syrian.¹⁴⁰ He lives elsewhere but commutes to Altindag for work after tensions have calmed largely due to constant police presence in the area. But now he and others are worried they could be “deported back to Syria” because as he put it “ties are being restored with the regime.” His Turkish boss told Abu Subhi that he will do everything to keep his Syrian workers because they are “more productive and do better quality work [than Turks] and cheaper.”

3.5 Political Reforms, Peace and Justice and Accountability

Just by announcing that it is holding talks with the Assad regime and that its president would be willing to meet with Assad without any preconditions, Turkey has already accorded Assad a big gain. Turkish actions have gone one step further in helping ease Assad’s international isolation and they have also served as reaffirmation for him that he does not need to make any concessions on the track of political reforms because eventually everyone will come back to speak with him, even his most ardent enemies. Although Turkey has not gone as far as many Arab states in its reembrace of Assad, its overtures toward the regime are powerful and meaningful and in a way, they undercut ongoing international efforts to hold Assad and his cronies accountable for their well-documented alleged war crimes in Syria.

Publicly everyone including Turkey still says they are committed to a political solution in Syria pursuant to UN Security Resolution 2254 passed in December 2015. The resolution envisioned a “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian” government six months after passage of the resolution with this government then launching the process of writing a new constitution and then holding “free and fair” elections under the supervision of the UN within 18 months.¹⁴¹

Seven years later and round after round of direct and indirect talks between regime representatives and the opposition in Geneva—including most recently eight rounds dedicated solely to the task of drafting a new constitution coupled with separate secret and public negotiation tracks most notably in Astana under the auspices of Iran, Russia and Turkey—none have produced a break through in the elusive task of brokering a political solution to end the conflict.

The regime remains as intransigent as ever in its positions suggesting that the most it can offer if anything is a government of so-called “national unity” that includes some members of the opposition under Assad’s leadership. Until this day, many in the regime still consider opposition members “traitors” who have to be put on trial or given the chance to repent and reconcile with the regime if Assad deigns to be benevolent.

For its part the Syrian opposition is adrift hardly relevant for the majority of Syrians and increasingly lacking the resources and support it once enjoyed from its Western and regional allies most notably Turkey.

“The situation is very delicate...there is a new policy and we are not part of it,” said a Turkey-based member of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or Etilaf in Arabic, which has long been seen as being under Turkish control.

“Their priorities have changed and the Syria dossier is changing in accordance with these priorities.”

There is nothing surprising in the fact that Turkey would change its priorities and pursue its own interests in Syria but what many are wondering including those close to Turkish policymakers is whether reengaging with Assad or even meeting him will in the end further any of Turkey’s goals or advance the political solution that everyone says they remain committed to. Some are even arguing that it could backfire and jeopardize the last remaining bit of good will that Assad’s opponents still feel toward Turkey for protecting them from a killer regime.

SETA’s Yeşiltaş says it is wrong to speak about a “new policy” in Syria describing Turkey’s outreach to the regime as more of a “new initiative” and “normalization attempt” that still lacks a “clear road map” or “plan” and appears to be driven mainly by the ruling party’s desire to show that it’s doing something to tackle the public concerns over refugees and the security threats emanating from Syria.

He says he has seen nothing yet that explains how Syrian-Turkish rapprochement will further the goal of implementing resolution 2254: establishing a transitional government, writing a new constitution and holding “free and fair elections.” The diametrically opposed views that Turkey and the Syrian regime hold when it comes to this issue will in fact be an obstacle to any rapprochement, Yeşiltaş believes.

He says now is the perfect opportunity for Turkey to reorganize and reconsider its overall strategy in Syria and if it has an exit plan it should articulate it.

If Turkey believes there needs to be a political compromise between Assad and the opposition and is fully committed to Syria's territorial integrity and unity, then it should work toward that. But everything Tukey has done so far has been in the direction of building its own local order in northern Syria, notes Yeşiltaş.

The Middle East Institute's Lister agrees: "Almost everything Turks have done in Syria (since 2012) and all their leverage, credibility and influence comes from investments in and military deployments and relationships with forces that are 100 percent hostile to any form of reconciliation with the regime."

Osman Sert, research director at the Ankara Institute who previously served as press advisor for Ahmet Davutoğlu for 15 years, believes Turkey's rapprochement efforts may pay off in the short-term when it comes to things like intelligence sharing but they will yield no meaningful dividends in the long-term and will probably cost Turkey credibility with the Syrian opposition.

"Many Syrians in Turkish-controlled areas feel they are being betrayed by Turkey and the same inside Turkey," says Sert.

"They won't trust the Turkish government and they have seen Turkey selling them out at various junctures; Turkey is losing huge credibility with the Arab public."

SETA's Yeşiltaş also worries about how Turkey is being perceived by Syrian opposition forces both military and political: "If there's some uncertainties about your strategy and ambiguity about your signals, it's not possible to govern the dynamics on the ground."

In fact, many in the Syrian political opposition appear to look at this Turkish-Syrian regime rapprochement as an opportunity for them to assert some measure of independence from Turkey and to push other powers most notably the Americans, Europeans and Arabs led by Saudi Arabia to get involved once more in brokering a political solution in Syria.

One opposition leader argues that since Syria is now de facto partitioned into zones of influence and control carved out by regional and world powers, many of whom are the same powers enmeshed in the Ukraine conflict, then the solution in Syria is in the hands of these powers.

"The solution in Syria is not Syrian-Syrian as the UN keeps preaching, this is a lie," the leader told the

author. "Who's going to get all these countries out of Syria? There has to be an agreement among the big powers and then you take it to the Syrian level, you can't do it in reverse."

He says Syria has to be put on the table too in any potential negotiations between the West and Russia over Ukraine even though the Turks oppose this because they fear it may upset the Russians with whom they have forged deeper common interests in recent years.

"As the world awaits how the Ukraine war will play out: whether Russia will emerge defeated or victorious and which players will sit around the table, we (Syrians) need to be thinking about getting a seat at the table instead of just being an item on the menu," said the opposition leader.

3.6 Foreign Actors and Regional Geopolitics

Turkey's current moves in Syria and its rapprochement efforts appear to be based on the premise that this is an opportunity for Ankara to get what it wants in the country while the Americans, Europeans and Russians are busy with Ukraine. And the way Ankara sees it, these powers should do nothing to obstruct or oppose what it does in Syria for the sake of its own interests and national security because these powers owe Turkey for the positive role it has played in the Ukraine war, most notably helping broker the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine and keeping Moscow on board after several threats to withdraw. And Ankara believes Moscow owes it a lot because it has refused to go along with Western sanctions against Russia and Turkey remains one of the few outlets for Russians in Europe.

While Russia has pulled out air assets from Syria to redeploy in Ukraine, and has tried its best to tamp down tensions in Syria to focus on Ukraine, while telling Turkey to try negotiations with the regime instead of another military operation to solve its Kurdish problem, it does not mean Russia has given Turkey free rein in Syria. Russia regards Syria as a very precious and strategic foothold on the Mediterranean in the heart of the Middle East from where it can project power and confront NATO, even more important now in the context of the war in Ukraine.

As Turkey started striking SDF positions in Syria in late November 2022 in what it said was a prelude to an imminent military operation, the US-backed SDF commander Mazloum Abdi met with the commander of Russian forces in Syria Alexander Chayko in a bid to get Moscow to lean on Turkey to reconsider its plans.¹⁴²



Billboard of Erdogan in Eyüp Sultan, a district that is popular with immigrants and refugees, Istanbul, September 2021, source: Sam Dagher.

The other power Turkey must contend with in Syria is its old nemesis Iran with whom it has had a complex relationship that has oscillated between friendship and cooperation, competition and confrontation. Turkey has been particularly concerned about the inroads Iran has been able to make in the Arab world in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. For Turkey the social fabric of great Iraqi cities like Baghdad, Basra and Mosul has been completely decimated and the demographic dynamics and character of these cities have swayed in Iran's favor. It does not want to see the same thing happen in Syria, particularly in a place like Aleppo in the north. Hence, it sees rapprochement with the Assad regime as one way of countering this, particularly given that all the powers in Syria are wary of Iran's role and influence – thus, in a way, back to one of the main themes that underpinned the blossoming of ties between Turkey and the regime in 2002-2010. But like in the past, and even much more so now given everything Iran has invested in saving the Assad regime, Tehran will be the main and most formidable obstacle to a full-fledged rapprochement between Turkey and Syria.

"There is total Iranian control of the political, security and economic decision making within the

regime," said a Damascus-based businessman who has contacts and dealings with various security apparatuses and ministries within the Syrian regime. Even though both countries are under sanctions, Iran has continued to bankroll the regime with billions of dollars in the form of a revolving credit line, oil shipments and other forms of support—no other country has done this for the regime. Iranians, particularly companies and individuals linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have been trying to make more inroads into the economy and have been snapping up assets all over Syria including Aleppo.



The area adjacent to the Shia Al-Nuqtah mosque in Aleppo is said to be bought up by Iranians. Turkey is concerned about the inroads Iran is making in Syria and wary of potential demographic shifts, Aleppo, May 2021, source: Anne Bauer.

Iran will do everything to impede any serious rapprochement between Turkey and the Syrian regime and has several cards to use against Turkey including supporting the PKK in Iraq and YPG/SDF in Syria in their fight against Turkey.

A Turkish official told the author that when it was revealed over the summer of 2022 that Turkey was holding talks with the Syrian regime there were many fake news stories aimed at driving a wedge between Turkey and the Syrian opposition and the

source of most of these stories was: Iran and Russia.

Iran also has vulnerabilities in Syria, which Turkey could also exploit. Israel has not relented on targeting the positions of Iran and its proxies in Syria. Moreover, Israel and Arab states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and UAE are all concerned about the presence of Iran and its proxies in the southwest all along the demilitarized zone separating Syria from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as well as in Daraa province. Turkey, which has recently sought to repair its ties with Israel and Arab states, could find common cause with them in confronting Iran in Syria.

While the US still has about 900 soldiers in northeast Syria and has remained focused on preventing any comeback by Islamic State in the Iraq-Syria border area, the US is also determined not to get entangled in any unnecessary confrontations in Syria.

"The Biden administration's philosophy when it comes to the region is that under the best-case scenario the region contains its own problems," says the MEI's Lister. Russia's gambit in pushing Turkey to talk to the regime while at the same time pushing the YPG/SDF to also cut a deal with the regime in response to Turkish pressure on them may be ultimately aimed at completely squeezing the US out of Syria, according to Lister.

Russia can make a case to Syria's Kurds, who feel increasingly betrayed and abandoned by the US, that "the US is not what it used to be, its words do not match its actions."

This is bad news for the Europeans who may have to look to Russia once more as the arbiter of peace in Syria to make sure the situation does not degenerate again to the point that it creates the conditions for an ISIS comeback and provokes a new refugee and humanitarian crisis. The Europeans are also keeping a close eye on Turkey's actions in Syria for similar reasons.

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SECTION 4 CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Regardless of whether Turkey's current rapprochement with the Syrian regime leads to full normalization of ties or remains limited to cooperation in certain areas like security, refugees and the economy, it is already having real-life consequences especially for Syrians both within Turkey and Syria. It has also created a new dynamic in what has largely been viewed as a frozen conflict in Syria. It presents new opportunities and perils for all players involved in the conflict but also lays bare the obligations they have:

- ▶ Turkey, which at the moment has authority over nearly one-third of Syria's population, both refugees inside Turkey and those living in areas under Turkish control in northern Syria, must be a lot more transparent and forthright about its plans for Syria and explain to Syrians how its rapprochement with the regime will affect them. Its moves have created real panic and fear among Syrians about what the future holds for them.

- ▶ Western powers especially European Union member states and the U.S. must rethink their policy toward the Syrian refugee problem and adopt more coordinated responses. They cannot ignore the actions of Turkey in Syria because they will have a direct impact on the millions of Syrians in the region and also affect the flow of illegal migration to Europe. Resettlement of more Syrians to third countries outside the region, particularly such as the US that have taken very little refugees compared to other states, has to become a tangible option. The future of Syrians cannot be left to the whims of policy changes like Turkey's. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away.

- ▶ Western powers also can't just assume that the Syrian conflict is frozen and that there is not much that can be done given the current dynamics. Turkey's rapprochement with the regime presents a viable opportunity to help the Syrian opposition to reassert itself and gain independence from powers like Turkey and others in their talks with the regime. It is also an opportunity to make sure that in any rapprochement with the regime Turkey uses its levers of influence to pressure the regime to make meaningful concessions in political talks with the opposition.

- ▶ Lastly, Western powers also have to ensure that humanitarian aid that remains vital to millions of Syrians does not become a bargaining chip in the shifting priorities of regional and world powers involved in the conflict.

ABOUT KAS

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education program aims at promoting freedom and liberty, peace and justice. Through its work, KAS strengthens democratic values, good governance and the rule of law while providing civil society support as well as research and analysis. The KAS Lebanon Office engages with topics of political, social and economic relevance including political reforms and participation, transparency and accountability, reconciliation, conflict transformation and combating the root causes of flight and migration that do not only concern Lebanon but also neighboring Syria and the Middle East more broadly. A continuous political dialog and cultural exchange between Lebanon, the region and Europe is encouraged to find common ways and solutions to such challenging questions and to contribute to greater regional peace and prosperity.

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