

A New Era for Turkish-Syrian Ties?

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Brief Analysis

The path towards reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus faces numerous obstacles, linked to a history of mistrust and significant gaps in major contentious issues.

In recent weeks, Turkish government statements—many coming directly from President Erdogan—have indicated a desire for reconciliation with President Assad of Syria. This marks a significant departure since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war over a decade ago, when Turkey-Syria relations completely broke down. Millions of Syrian refugees fled to Turkey, and pro-Turkey opposition groups have carved out territory in northern Syria. Despite the longstanding tensions between the two sides, Turkey is now charting a new course, to the point where Turkish sources are talking about an imminent meeting between President Assad and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. Additionally, there have been leaks indicating that security-level meetings have already commenced between the two sides. However, a meaningful rapprochement faces significant hurdles, and given the chaotic state of the region, securing such a deal will be an uphill battle.

For its part, Syrian leadership does not appear to be in the same hurry to issue statements related to the potential talks. President Assad's statements have remained general, stating <https://www.alhurra.com/syria/2024/07/15/%25D8%25B4%25D8%25B1%25D9%2588%25D8%25B7-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A4%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B5%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7> that "The meeting is a means, and we need rules and references for action. There is a meeting arranged with the security level through some mediators, and we were positive." This followed statements

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%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D8%25B9) from the Syrian Foreign Ministry, which included that any initiative for rapprochement with Ankara should be based on clear foundations to ensure the restoration of relations between the two countries to their natural state and demanded the withdrawal of Turkish forces that are "illegally present in Syrian territories," and combating terrorist groups that not only threaten Syria's security but also Turkey's security. In this sense, it appears that this latest endeavor is a calculated move primarily driven by Turkish political elites designed to address a number of internal and external concerns.

Even should a meeting come to pass between the two sides, a number of thorny and complex issues are certain to be at the top of the agenda, including repatriation of Syrian refugees to Syria and cooperation on counterterrorism. Additionally, serious disagreements over the role third parties should play in the Middle East remain. Turkey would like to exert itself as a regional power in its own right, spearheading bilateral initiatives with its neighbors. In contrast, the Assad regime has extensive ties with Iran and Russia, and Damascus's reliance on its allies would likely complicate Turkish efforts. Although Turkey and Syria hope to resolve a whole host of issues, there are three main conflicts remaining between the two sides.

Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Turkish and UN estimates indicate that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey ranges between three to four million refugees, with legal status varying between regions. Most of them live in Istanbul or its environs. Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) initially welcomed Syrians with open arms, but as Turkey's economy has experienced a significant and prolonged downturn, the Turkish public has grown increasingly hostile to Syrians' presence in the country. In fact, the issue is often cited as one of the reasons behind the AKP's significant losses in the recent local elections. Conscious of these shifts in internal politics, Erdogan now likely seeking a solution that will remedy this political liability.

Despite the urgent desire on the Turkish side to reach a settlement on repatriation, a number of obstacles impede a tenable solution to the refugee crisis. For one, Syrian leadership has made no indication that they see the return of these refugees as anything other than an internal Turkish issue. Additionally, many Syrian refugees residing in Turkey refuse to return to northern Syria, even in areas under Turkish or international purview. Not only are these areas not the original homes of many refugees, but Syrians in exile fear retribution and collective punishment at the hands of state security forces should they return home—despite the regime's vows to the contrary. Moreover, many of these refugees' homes have either been demolished or seized by various parties, including Iranian militias, as reported in Syrian opposition circles.

Clashing Views on Terrorism: For decades, the Turkish government has conducted an anti-insurgency campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on Turkish soil. Today, Ankara has largely suppressed the group internally but remains focused on rooting out PKK elements in neighboring Syria. Turkey accuses the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—which control much of northeastern Syria—of hosting and supporting PKK fighters. This is a central issue for Ankara due to longstanding fears of Kurdish independence demands inside Turkey. Hence, preventing the establishment of a Kurdish entity in Turkey or neighboring countries is a prominent and consistent theme in Turkish foreign policy. This issue remains a point of polarization and provocation for Turkish nationalism and a prominent issue in every election.

To translate this strategy, Turkey has conducted several major military operations along its border with Syria. Despite the varied objectives of these operations—from supporting Syrian opposition factions loyal to Ankara, striking infrastructure in SDF territory, or targeting PKK fighters, the common denominator has been degrading the

military and administrative capabilities of autonomous Kurdish elements in Syria. Among the most prominent of these operations are: Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, in addition to other smaller scale operations.

There is no doubt that Damascus and Ankara's positions intersect in key ways on the Kurdish issue, including preventing the formation of any independent Kurdish entity. However, there is a clear discrepancy in how to proceed. Ankara restricts its definition of terrorism to Kurdish groups and does not consider many Syrian opposition forces to be terrorists. In contrast, Damascus adopts a broader definition of terrorism to include all shades of opposition to the Syrian regime.

Yet given the Turkish military presence in northwest Syria, which Damascus describes as an occupation, make reconciliation efforts between the two parties seems distant. This divide is deepened by the regime's inability to take effective military measures against the PKK and SDF, even if it so desired. This is due to the SDF's alignment with the United States, which largely shields them from direct assault at the moment.

Regional and International Transformations: The proposal for reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus coincides with shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region and around the world. The war in Gaza, U.S.-Iran rivalry, the war in Ukraine, and the rise of far-right, isolationist elements in the West all have far-reaching consequences for both Turkey and Syria.

Regional and international powers are undoubtedly attempting to insert themselves in mediation efforts, some in favor and some in opposition. Russia appears to have the most to gain from such a deal; its ally Assad benefits from any normalization efforts on the international stage, and Turkish influence is a useful counterweight to Iranian power.

In addition to being one of Assad's main supporters, Russia has strong if somewhat complicated relations with Turkey and appears to be pushing both sides towards reconciliation, as suggested by a meeting in Moscow in late 2022 between the Turkish and Syrian defense ministers. Russia also mediated meetings between Syrian and Turkish security and military officials last year, although these did not result in agreements.

While there have been murmuring of Western attempts to sabotage reconciliation efforts between Ankara and Damascus, other circles have accused Iran of undermining these efforts, despite Iran's media support for this reconciliation. which could explain the emergence of the Iranian debt file on Damascus, estimated (<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4990626-iran-ramps-pressure-damascus-debt-recovery-investments>) at about \$50 billion, coinciding with any rapprochement between Damascus and its neighbors.

President Erdogan's haste in achieving reconciliation with Assad, in addition to responding quickly to a Russian initiative, could also be tied to the potential of Donald Trump winning in the upcoming U.S. presidential election, with the expectation that a Trump win could lead to declining U.S. aid for Ukraine, acquiescence to Putin's claims on annexed Ukrainian territory, and a potential weakening of NATO in exchange for Putin's concessions on Middle Eastern issues, such as pushing back against Iranian hegemony in Syria and pushing Assad towards steps towards peace with Israel.

The recent normalization efforts between Arab states and Syria, approved at the Arab League Summit (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/assad-gets-warm-welcome-as-syria-welcomed-back-into-arab-league>) held in Saudi Arabia in May 2023, likewise provide a strong impetus for Ankara and Damascus to create new approaches towards reconciliation. These reconciliations are part of a Saudi-Emirati project to end Damascus' dependence on Tehran, with clear support from Russia, which has developed its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE after increasing "doubts about the current U.S. administration" in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Successes have also been achieved in supporting Turkish transformations and "zeroing" problems, with President Erdogan ceasing

support for political Islam in the region.

The path towards reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus faces numerous obstacles, linked to a history of mistrust and significant gaps in major contentious issues, whether it be the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey to Syria, different counterterrorism priorities, or the Turkish presence on Syrian territory and support for Syrian opposition groups. While there are some intersections between the two sides in the supposed negotiation details, the implementation of any agreements that might be reached would require extensive resources and time commitments. Outside interference—particularly from Iran—in these bilateral initiatives threatens to disrupt or significantly alter the process, and the tumultuous state of the region could also put these talks on pause. ❖

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