

Turkey Wants to Stitch Iraq and Syria Back Together (Part 1)

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Oct 8, 2024

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Having observed two decades of instability across its southern borders and anticipating U.S. withdrawals, Ankara is planning steps to end the volatility, including potentially wide-ranging agreements with the Assad regime.

Events in the Fertile Crescent since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq have not been in favor of Turkish security interests. The ensuing Iraqi civil strife, the rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), and Syria's civil war collectively resulted in regional instability for over two decades, including numerous terrorist attacks against Turkey. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a NATO-designated terrorist entity that has been fighting Ankara for decades, took advantage of Iraq's decentralization to establish itself along the border in the semiautonomous Kurdistan Region. On Turkey's other southern border, the multinational campaign against IS led to a U.S. partnership with the People's Defense Units (YPG)—the PKK's armed Syrian wing that later took a leading role in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and gained control over a large swath of the frontier. This partnership became the greatest impediment to a reset in U.S.-Turkey ties.

Today, anticipating that the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Syria will decrease significantly, Ankara aims to promote soft recentralization in both neighbors, toward the broader goals of curbing instability across its borders and denying operational space to the PKK. Part 1 of this PolicyWatch discusses how these goals affect Turkish policy in Syria; [Part 2 addresses the implications for Iraq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-2\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-2).

Handshake with the Assad Regime?

The leitmotif of Ankara's Syria strategy is eliminating the YPG (which Turkey perceives as a future security threat given its PKK ties) while ultimately ending the war. This suggests a circuitous strategy that may involve simultaneous negotiations with Damascus and Washington. The United States and the YPG/SDF currently control

parts of northeast Syria, and Turkey will be eager to coordinate the future of these areas with Washington. Ultimately, however, Ankara believes that recentralizing Syria serves its interests best in the long term, so the Assad regime will be its main interlocutor in resolving key issues—from resettling some of the nearly 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey to addressing the fate of the YPG and the Turkish military presence in northern Syria.

Hard asks. Turkey’s core request of the Assad regime is that it stifle the YPG and bring SDF-controlled areas back under its rule. In the process, Ankara wants Assad to pursue “soft recentralization”—that is, returning regime forces and governance to the north while giving nonviolent portions of the Syrian opposition some access to local power (including Kurdish groups, so long as they are not the YPG). Last but not least, Ankara wants Assad to repatriate at least some of the Syrian refugees who have resided in Turkey for more than a decade now. In return, Assad wants Turkish troops to leave Syria.

The challenge to this sequencing is that many of the nearly 6 million Syrians who live in Turkish-controlled parts of the north do not want the Assad regime to return in the near term, if ever. Similarly, many refugees in Turkey do not want to be repatriated, spurring Ankara to resort to various legal loopholes to get them out (e.g., some have been deported to Turkish-held zones in Syria for minor infractions like traffic tickets). Since March 2023, such tactics have decreased (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/09/12/turkey-is-trying-to-deport-syrian-refugees-back-to-a-war-zone>) the number of Syrians in Turkey from 3.7 million to just over 3 million.

A “gray zone” in the northwest. One of Ankara’s chief fears is that withdrawing from northern Syria too hastily might result in a security collapse similar to the U.S. departure from Afghanistan. In addition to creating more refugee flows into Turkey, this scenario could enable Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—the violent al-Qaeda-aligned group that holds territory in northwest Syria—to feed on popular resentment and launch terrorist attacks, whether inside Turkey or against Turkish troops as they withdraw from Syria.

To avoid this scenario, Ankara may ask Assad for a transitional “gray zone” in northern Syria, with Turkish military forces and militia proxies providing law and order. Inside this proposed zone, nonviolent opposition groups would enjoy some access to local power, while Damascus would provide key public services such as education, utilities, postal deliveries, and so forth. The ultimate goal would be to end the civil war and establish full regime control in the north over time, with guarantees for peaceful opposition groups.

Of course, HTS will aim to spoil this strategy by rising up against whatever deal Ankara strikes with Assad. Ironically, however, combating HTS may become the first test case of Syrian-Turkish cooperation since the beginning of the war, potentially bringing the two neighbors closer. And given the group’s ties to al-Qaeda, foreign powers may step in to help Turkey quell an HTS uprising—including the United States and even European allies, who remain concerned about the risk of fresh refugee flows from Syria (though see below about U.S. concerns regarding initiatives that benefit Assad).

A mosaic settlement in the northeast. Even as it holds talks with Assad, Turkey will also engage the United States on the future of northeast Syria amid the possibility that Washington might reduce its military footprint there or withdraw entirely. Ankara envisions a transition period in which the northeast is informally divided into spheres of influence overseen by the Assad regime and Turkey, with the United States providing indirect technical assistance (see below).

Currently, the small U.S. military presence in the northeast plays a vital role by partnering with the SDF to prevent an IS comeback. As part of this effort, YPG forces and other SDF elements maintain prisons and detainment camps that hold around 70,000 IS militants and their family members, many of them foreigners who are awaiting long-delayed repatriation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-returnees-syria-reveal-much-about-repatriation-challenge>) to their home countries. Washington is also concerned about Iran’s growing ambitions

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-iran-east-syria-means-moderating-sdf>) in the area.

To thread all these needles, Turkey will likely engage in simultaneous talks about coexisting spheres of influence:

- For some parts of the northeast—particularly the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV)—Ankara will engage the United States to iron out the details of an eventual post-American order, with Turkish forces seeking to prevent an IS comeback with help from Turkey-friendly Arab tribes and U.S. intelligence (and, perhaps, U.S. Special Forces).
- For the rest of the northeast, Ankara will talk with Damascus about arranging the regime’s return and ending YPG control, as part of a broader compromise to end the war.

The near-term result would be a mosaic of sorts, with different political tiles fitted together across northeast Syria. The longer-term goal would be a full regime return to the entire area.

Russia’s double play. By pushing the United States to abandon the YPG, Turkey could create backlash in Washington, especially if the next administration is not ready to leave Syria precipitously. To smooth over such tensions, Ankara could offer to establish a Turkish military presence in key parts of the northeast.

One obstacle to this suggestion is Iran, which remains a top foreign patron to Assad and is keen on expanding its influence in the northeast. Indeed, a Turkish military presence could substantially disrupt Iran’s “land bridge” connecting Syria with Iraq and Lebanon. Yet Assad’s other main patron—Russia—may have more to say on these issues.

In one scenario, the next U.S. administration could decide to push for a ceasefire with Russia in Ukraine, which could have the follow-on effect of enabling Washington, Moscow, and Ankara to find a modus vivendi in Syria. Yet if the Ukraine war drags on and Turkey fails to reach a separate understanding with the United States about the YPG, Ankara will defer to the Assad regime. After all, Turkey’s northeast Syria policy is informed by its broader Syria policy, not the other way around.

In the latter scenario, Vladimir Putin would likely urge Damascus to reach its own modus vivendi with Ankara. This would presumably entail Assad’s forces returning to the northeast and committing to finish off the YPG with help from Turkey, Russia, and Turkey-friendly Arab tribes. If the YPG resists this push and armed clashes ensue, U.S. forces would face the unpleasant choice of either firing at troops belonging to NATO ally Turkey or withdrawing from the northeast involuntarily.

Besides potentially damaging Turkey’s relations with the United States, this “fait accompli” approach would carry the major risk of facilitating an IS resurgence—partly due to the loss of vital U.S. assistance, but also because the jihadist group would feed on local opposition to the returning Assad regime. Accordingly, Ankara would prefer to work with Washington on crafting a transitional governance model for northeast Syria.

U.S. Policy Implications

As the above complications make clear, there are no easy policy options for the United States in Syria. Washington and many other foreign governments are understandably hesitant to approve any agreements that rehabilitate the Assad regime or enable it to reassert full control, especially given its continued violence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/year-suwayda-protests-show-assad-no-partner>) against the Syrian people and numerous contributions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/year-arab-engagement-assad-has-failed>) to regional instability. As for the YPG question, some in the U.S. Defense Department will push to maintain this partnership even at the expense of a reset with Turkey, citing the bond that the U.S. military has developed with the group over the years, the utility that it provides as the main ground contingent in SDF operations against IS, and the need to effectively maintain prisons and detainment camps in northeast Syria.

Yet this strategy would put the United States at risk of being left out of a potential northeastern deal between Ankara and Damascus. It could also alienate Turkey, which has NATO's second-largest military and is a key U.S. partner on numerous other fronts—against Iran in the Middle East, and in great power competition with Russia and China in Africa and other locales. As noted above, Moscow would quickly take advantage of a U.S.-Turkish impasse on these issues, perhaps to the point of supporting a joint Syrian-Turkish military expedition into the northeast. This would also meet Putin's broader goal of fracturing NATO by pulling Turkey into his orbit.

A wiser policy choice for Washington would be to maintain "ownership" over northeast Syria by ending speculation about a near-term U.S. withdrawal and helping Turkey plan for the "day after" an eventual U.S. departure. This includes plans for maintaining IS prisons and camps while preventing the group from launching a comeback.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Turkish Research Program. ♦

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Oct 8, 2024



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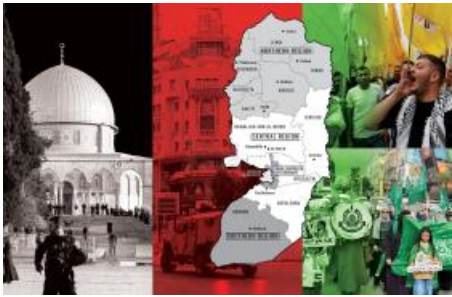
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