

# Calibrating Türkiye's Role in Post-Assad Syria

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Two months have passed since the collapse of Bashar Assad's rule in Damascus. Syria starts progressively disappearing from the news headlines. Fewer "white noises" generated by media makes it possible to construct initial conclusions and intermediate projections related to potential developments in Syria and around it. The most fundamental conclusion is that after the fall of the *ancien regime*, the Syrian crisis is not over; it is just transforming into the next stage and taking different form. Therefore, the vast cast of domestic and external actors engaged in the Syrian plot reassesses their roles, goals, and objectives in the new environment that emerged after December 2024. One of the key actors in the play is Türkiye.

At first glance, Ankara appears as a principal winner of the regime change. Official Turkish statements and activities as well as a flurry of "analytical expertise" published in mainstream media outlets and posted on social networks in the West and the Middle East give the impression of Türkiye as the mastermind behind the fall of Assad. Some suggestions go as far as imagining the full control and even subordination of the new Syrian authorities to Ankara's will. That is an incorrect perception. Indeed, Türkiye now has a broad window of opportunity in Syria. Yet, beyond this window lies a set of compounding and potentially precarious challenges and risks.

## *Türkiye's Opportunities and Challenges*

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, which rapidly transformed into a civil war and subsequently produced a de facto division of the country, Türkiye faced several interconnected challenges. Ankara's most serious tests were preventing the spread of

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the conflict into Türkiye, managing the problem of Syrian refugees flooding into its own territory, and keeping the ethnic Kurdish paramilitary outfits in Syria away from the Turkish border.

The refugees (estimates vary but are thought to number 3-4 million) continue to pose a [multifaceted problem](#) that has produced societal tensions and caused political complications for the government. As such, their expected repatriation back to Syria now that the Assad regime has fallen would ease both a political and socio-economic burden for Türkiye.

Moreover, the postwar rehabilitation of Syria will require a massive reconstruction effort, including housing, transportation, telecommunications, and other infrastructure. It naturally opens a broad array of opportunities for Türkiye. The Ankara-Doha tandem (i.e., Turkish companies plus Qatari money) can play a pivotal role in the Syrian edition of what amounts to a Marshall Plan, albeit perhaps taking place under a UN umbrella. Damascus's advantage in accepting a Turkish (and GCC) assistance bid is that it is plainly interest- and profit-driven, whereas Western aid (originating in the EU or the U.S. and the development agencies and banks under their control) would likely come with a bundle of "values-based" conditionalities (e.g., free and fair elections, liberal democratic reforms, and adherent to human rights norms).

Some observers believe that in the longer-term perspective, Türkiye will also benefit from the standpoint of geoeconomics. In particular, they believe the new Syrian regime will give a "green light" to construct the long-proposed and then postponed [gas pipeline](#) from Qatar to Europe via Turkish territory. In addition, Syria would ostensibly agree to proceed with the [delimitation](#) of its territorial waters with Türkiye in a way that would allow the latter to extend its claim on the natural gas-rich Eastern Mediterranean seabed shelf.

Ankara does not deny such suggestions and even seems to be trying to magnify them (for political purposes). However, one should take those conjectures with a grain of [skepticism](#). A pipeline project cannot bypass the territory of Saudi Arabia for plain reasons of geography, and it is hard to imagine that Riyadh would consent (unconditionally) to a strategic undertaking that would boost the reputation and coffers of its regional competitors (i.e., Türkiye and Qatar). Similarly, the far-fetched delimitation of the Turkish-Syrian maritime border remains more a contemplation than a reality.

In the meantime, the honeymoon relationship of Ankara with the new regime has already entered uncharted waters after Damascus suddenly imposed up to [300 percent customs duties](#) on imported Turkish goods and commodities, which before flowed freely across the border; the economies of the territories controlled by various anti-Assad factions practically lived off this wartime arrangement. However, in the new conditions, Damascus apparently wants to recover and reinstate its national industries and thus

protect its domestic manufacturers from cheap Turkish imports—or at least it wants to be able to generate revenues for its empty coffers. Although two weeks later, Syria [reduced](#) the imposed customs duties on certain kinds of Turkish imports and agreed to [continue](#) consultations on the subject, the core problem of the protection of local industries (and revenue generation) remains unsolved.

All Turkish opportunities, realistic or not, are contingent on the still-uncertain prospects of Syria’s internal stabilization. On that track, the new government faces enormous all-encompassing problems. One of its most pressing tasks is the unification of the assorted pool of armed rebel factions into a sort of unified regular army and security force. Türkiye has already [pledged its assistance](#) in this regard.

The problem, however, is that many extremist actors in the Syrian paramilitary realm have not (yet) agreed to follow the DDR (disarmament-demobilization-rehabilitation) road and refuse to lay down their arms. Not only do the hardliner Islamist jihadists (especially foreign fighters) represent a real threat to Syria’s stability, their underground cells linked to the so-called Islamic State also pose a significant security threat to Türkiye proper. The possible dominance of radical Islamist elements in a future Syrian government (as a potential relapse to a new edition of the civil war) would be a nightmare scenario for all regional actors, but particularly for Türkiye, given its immediate and intertwined proximity to Syria.

## *The Kurdish Dilemma*

The thorny Kurdish factor represents the toughest dilemma for Ankara. Türkiye sees the potential emergence of Kurdish autonomy or some other sort of control over Kurdish-majority enclaves in Syria as a grave national security threat. The fear is that such developments would reignite the persisting terrorist-insurgent activity in Türkiye (especially because the ideologies of the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Türkiye and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria adhere to the localized versions of Marxism, unlike their ethnic kin in Iraq).

To prevent and interdict the threat, the Turkish military made numerous incursions into Syrian territory during the 2010s civil war, establishing a security belt along the common border between the two countries. Furthermore, they recruited, trained, armed, and operationalized a proxy force, consisting of members of some local Turkic and Arab clans, and operating under the brand of the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA). The FSA mission is to fight the armed wing (People’s Protection Units, or YPG) of the PYD, which controls a vast area of northeastern Syria between the Euphrates River and the Iraqi border, known as Rojava. The complicating factor is that YPG is a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an ad hoc coalition of Kurdish militias and Arab tribal forces established with the direct support of the United States near the end of the Obama Administration to combat the Islamic State and other terrorist-extremist outfits in Syria.

In the wake of the fall of Assad, the FSA supported by Turkish firepower, [intensified its pressure](#) on Syrian Kurdish forces in an apparent attempt to capitalize on the emerged power vacuum. However, in a month and a half of fighting, the FSA could not show any impressive success. Despite some losses, the YPG continues to hold key terrain, including the strategic Tishrin dam on the Euphrates. Its use of drones and sophisticated surface-to-air missiles that can hit Turkish high-altitude UAVs became a surprise, and Turkish sources have [accused Iran](#) of supplying those weapon systems to hostile Kurdish forces. Those accusations appear well-founded: it is too premature to write off Iran from the list of actors operating in the Syrian theatre. What can be said with a high degree of confidence—given the centuries-long Persian-Turkish rivalry—is that Iran will keep the Kurds in their field of view.

Under such conditions, Ankara faces uneasy choices and decisions. A possible direct intervention to support the faltering FSA advance holds significant risks of becoming bogged down in a protracted attrition campaign on territories populated mostly by Kurds. Furthermore, such a course of action would likely complicate relations with the new regime in Damascus.

Moreover, the possible reaction of the U.S. (as the SDF's sponsor) remains a wild card, at least until the Trump Administration (re-)calibrates its regional policy (in the meantime, American forces have already established their outposts in the Rojava area closer to the FSA-SDF line of contact). Some [media reports](#) that surfaced in early February 2025 suggest that the complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops will take place over the next 1-3 months. However, there has not yet been any official confirmation from the Trump Administration on this matter.

In any case, the potential federalization of Syria and the onset of broad, territory-based Kurdish autonomy (along the Iraqi model, but run by hostile, PKK-sympathetic local Kurdish leaders) could reinvigorate the PKK-led separatist movement inside Türkiye. Any resulting inaction by the country's armed forces would cause fierce criticism from the ultranationalist parties that are part of the ruling coalition, which is led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), with the ensuing political consequences.

Given all those considerations, at the current stage, Ankara is buying time and limiting itself to [warning of an intervention](#) in case Syria “breaks up,” while the Turkish military continues to provide supporting firepower and logistics to the FSA forces. At the same time, Türkiye is considering other alternatives, too. One quite unorthodox potential option is the engagement of the former Kurdish warlord Abdullah Öcalan (convicted in 1999 of “treason and separatism” and sentenced to death, which was later commuted to life in prison) into the potential deconfliction process. Still, this option remains a contemplation for now and remains far from its practical implementation.

## *Türkiye vs. Other Regional Actors*

Amid the ejection of Russia from Syria, Iran's diminishing posture, and a yet-to-be-determined U.S. strategy under the new Trump Administration, other regional actors are keeping a close eye on developments in Syria.

The informal coalition of Arab states that includes Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE is cautiously testing the waters and establishing bridges with the new Syrian government. One of their most demanding missions—at least in the current still uncertain stage—is the prevention of reverse migration of extremists from Syria (many thousands of citizens of the mentioned countries had to Syria under the banner of jihad in the past decade).

Furthermore, the Arab coalition is also focusing its attention on the stabilization of neighboring Lebanon (potentially in cooperation with EU member state France) by clearing it of the vestiges of Iran's influence (in general, Arab states consider Lebanon and Syria to be a single strategic space). Nonetheless, the objective of preventing an assertive Türkiye (together with its ally, Qatar) from incorporating Syria into its sphere of interest will move to the forefront sooner rather than later. The geopolitics of strategic competition, fueled by historic rivalries, remains a primary constant in Middle Eastern affairs.

Israel is another story. The collapse of Assad's regime contributed further to the restoration of its credible deterrence, which had been upset by Hamas's terrorist attack launched from Gaza on 7 October 2023. However, the Israeli response to that attack significantly damaged Turkish-Israeli relations, due to Ankara's protestations about the severity of Israel's counterstrike and a series of concrete (yet not particularly successful) steps to weaken Israel's international position. In the new post-December 2024 strategic environment, there is a potential (yet still distant) possibility that Türkiye and Israel could eventually find themselves engaged in a direct confrontation in Syria. Such a hypothetical scenario stems for the most part from Ankara's recent [verbal criticisms](#). Israel takes these quite seriously: a [governmental committee report](#) released to the public in early January 2025 suggests that bilateral tensions could escalate into open conflict under certain conditions.

## *Summary*

Given all the mentioned circumstances, it is premature to consider Türkiye as the sole or even the primary winner in Syria. A torturous road must still be traveled before Ankara can reap the real fruits of the regime change in Damascus. The new Syrian authorities will continue to cooperate closely with Türkiye, especially at the current stage. Meanwhile, they apparently will counterbalance the presence of their powerful and ambitious neighbor with other international alignments, first with fellow Arab states.

Yes, indeed, during the twelve-year civil war, the Islamist opposition rebel movements (one of these now leads the new regime in Syria) forged an alliance of convenience with Türkiye, from which they benefitted. In particular, Turkish economic, financial, and humanitarian support (a part of which was not gratuitous) helped the rebel-controlled enclaves to withstand pressures directed against them by the Assad regime's military forces, which was actively supported by both Iran and Russia.

However, the fall of Assad has changed the equation. In that sense, it is probably proper to recall the history of relations between Pakistan and the Taliban. The latter was a creature of the former in the 1990s; however, they are now involved in shooting war.

Unlike the Pakistan-Taliban correlation, however, the association between Türkiye and the new rulers in Damascus has different roots and nature. This further increases the chance that their symbiosis will evolve into something different, as the forcibly cut Gordian knot of Syria is transformed into an increasingly entangled skein.