



Türkiye Exerting Influence on Post-Assad Syria

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Türkiye, which backed some of the Sunni opposition during the 2011 Arab Spring in Syria, is the main beneficiary of the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Turkish policymakers will want to use the political changes in Syria to strengthen their country's position at the expense of Iran and Russia, and to engage in dialogue with the new Syrian administration on the Kurdish issue. Cooperation between Türkiye and the EU will be beneficial to stabilising Syria and could improve Turkish-EU relations.

On 4 February, the leader of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group and interim Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, arrived in Ankara for talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The visit followed January missions to Syria by Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalın and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, and a visit to Ankara by Syrian diplomatic chief Asaad Hassan al-Shibani. These talks, the frequency of which indicates that Turkish decision-makers have particularly good access to the new authorities in Damascus, have focused on Syria's post-conflict reconstruction, economic recovery, and security.

Evolution of Turkish Policy towards Syria. Türkiye's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Erdoğan, prime minister at the time, supported the wave of demonstrations that swept the Arab world in 2011. In the early stages of the Syrian war, Erdoğan, along with then-head of Turkish diplomacy Ahmet Davutoğlu, made attempts to persuade Assad to make a democratic transition, but these efforts were unsuccessful. Erdoğan, over time, began to condemn the Syrian president's actions and concluded that Assad should leave. At the same time, Turkish policymakers supported Sunni anti-Assad rebels. In the summer of 2011, efforts to consolidate the anti-regime opposition movement began on Turkish soil, leading to the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which transformed into the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) in 2019. According to reports by Human Rights Watch, this organisation was both radical and responsible for war crimes against the Kurdish population in northern Syria.

Since the beginning of the war in Syria, the main goal of Iran and Russia was the survival of the Assad regime. Türkiye, however, sought to remove the Syrian leader from power and to weaken Kurdish forces. Despite the divergent interests, the protracted conflict resulted in transactional rapprochement between the authorities of Türkiye and Russia and Iran. The countries made a concerted effort to end the war, including trilateral talks in the so-called Astana format. Although they brought relative stability to some regions of Syria, for example, through the establishment of de-escalation zones between the regime and rebels (including in [Idlib province](#), previously controlled by HTS), it did not lead to a resolution of the conflict.

Türkiye's Goals in Syria. For Turkish policymakers, the priority is for the new Syrian administration to gain the ability to ensure the security and stability of the country to neutralise potential threats. The relocation of Syrian refugees is also important from the perspective of Turkish interests. It is estimated that there are more than 3.6 million of them on Turkish territory and their presence stirs up anti-immigrant sentiment and is a political burden on the ruling AKP. The Turkish authorities also want to participate in Syria's post-war reconstruction. President Erdoğan has said he is ready to support the new Syrian administration in restructuring the state, as well as help draft the country's new constitution. Türkiye's Transportation Ministry has also proposed plans to help rebuild Syria's road and rail infrastructure. According to Türkiye's state-run Anadolu news agency, the countries intend to cooperate on joint educational and cultural projects. The change of power in

Damascus could also greatly benefit Turkish construction companies with close ties to the government. Although Turkish rulers want to influence the security situation in the region and have declared an interest in establishing air bases in Syria and taking a leading role in training troops of the new Syrian army, no official decisions have yet been made.

The Conflicting Kurdish Issue. The Kurdish minority issue carries the greatest risk of destabilisation for Türkiye and Syria. Between 2016 and 2020, Türkiye carried out four [military operations](#) in Syria (*Euphrates Shield* in 2016, *Olive Branch* in 2018, *Crisis of Peace* in 2019, *Spring Shield* in 2020) to create a buffer zone free from the influence of Kurdish forces. In the domestic policy dimension, military interventions have served to mobilise the conservative-nationalist electorate and consolidate Erdoğan's power, while in foreign policy they have led to rapprochement with Russia and an escalation in Türkiye's relations with the [United States](#).

U.S. support for Kurdish forces in Syria is one of the main conflicts in Turkish-American relations. While the U.S. administration has backed the SDF, the quasi-army of the Kurdish-dominated autonomous region of northeastern Syria, in the fight against ISIS, Turkish policymakers consider it an extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Türkiye has been fighting the PKK since the 1980s. President Donald Trump, during his first term in office, decided to withdraw most U.S. troops from Syria in 2019, a circumstance conducive to a Turkish military operation against Kurdish forces.

The Turkish authorities view [the fall of Assad](#) and the assumption of power by HTS as a convenient moment to disarm the People's Defence Units (YPG), the main Kurdish component of the SDF, and to weaken the Democratic Union Party (PYD), its political wing, which Türkiye considers a major national security threat. Türkiye is refraining from open military action against the SDF in Syria, hoping that the Syrian authorities will carry out a "bloodless" transition. Türkiye expects SDF members affiliated with the PKK to lay down their arms. The head of Turkish diplomacy stressed that at the same time it recognises the need to give the Kurds a place in the structure of the new Syrian army, which will be formed by the al-Sharaa government in Damascus.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The functioning of a friendly government in Syria is crucial to Turkish national interests.

Although the Turkish authorities deny any involvement in last December's offensive, given Türkiye's activity in the region, as well as its extensive intelligence network, it seems unlikely that they were not informed in advance of plans for HTS to take power.

Türkiye is an important partner for the new Syrian authorities, as the HTS-backed grouping and various militia factions that make up the SNA were responsible for toppling the Assad regime. However, due to the prevailing economic crisis in the country, HTS does not have enough financial resources to lead the post-war reconstruction. Nevertheless, Türkiye, through diplomatic tools, can help the new authorities in Damascus gain international recognition.

In the long term, the new grouping's assumption of power in Syria may allow Türkiye to gain an informal advantage in its rivalry with Russia and Iran, countries that have so far been expansive in the Middle East and Africa region and will now have to redefine their regional policies.

With the uncertainty of Trump's policy towards the new authorities in Damascus, the future nature of the SDF's functioning is unclear. The absence of Turkish military involvement in Syria and the continuation of political consultations on the [Kurdish issue](#) with the Damascus administration and in consultation with the U.S. authorities will be beneficial for regional security.

Türkiye remains one of the key countries influencing Syria's political future, as recognised by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen during a visit to Ankara last December, when she announced an additional €1 billion in funding for healthcare and the education of refugees in Türkiye and their voluntary return to their country of origin. Although, in the opinion of the EC head, "President Erdoğan and Turkey play an important role in stabilising the region," one threat to Syria's peaceful future is the activity of radical SNA members. Therefore, it is worthwhile for Poland, in line with EU policy, to advocate a conditional lifting of sanctions on Syria. It might also consider supporting Turkish-EU cooperation in Syria on refugee relocation. In the long term, this could become the impetus for closer Turkish-EU relations and a renewed dialogue on the issues of modernising the customs union and visa liberalisation.