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Civil War Paths

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TURKEY'S ROLE IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA

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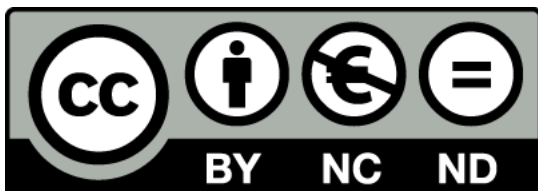
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TURKEY'S ROLE IN POST -ASSAD SYRIA

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Turkey has been one of the main regional actors throughout the civil war and will remain so during the challenging reconstruction of the country. What are the factors that brought Ankara to establish itself as one of the principal interlocutors of the new government in Syria? What does this mean for the future of the region, and how will Ankara manage the emerging balance of power?

Syria has long defined Turkish foreign policy with significant implications for the region and beyond. Other than geographical reasons – Turkey and Syria share a border of 900 km – Ankara has long been trying to eliminate the Kurdish threat and achieve a regime change in Syria, as well as exploit the Syrian crisis for domestic calculations. On the night between the [7th and the 8th of December 2024](#), the rebels, led by Hayat Tahrir Al-sham (HTS), reached Damascus, putting an [end to over a decade of civil war and 61 years](#) of the Baathist regime. With Russia concentrating its forces in Ukraine and Iran weakened by Israel's attacks, **Turkey emerged as a significant actor** in Assad's overthrow thanks to its backing of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and linkages with the HTS. It follows that Turkey seems to be in a position of strength regarding the future of Syria. Still, **several potential pitfalls could arise**. What are the factors that brought Ankara to establish itself as one of the principal interlocutors of the new government in Syria? What does this mean for the future of the region, and how will Ankara manage the emerging balance of power?

The beginning of the Syrian Civil War and Turkish military interventions

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings and the breakout of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey initially aimed to overthrow the Assad regime under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. This policy shift marked a departure from the previous period, during which Ankara enjoyed relatively [good relations](#) with Damascus. After aligning itself with the Syrian opposition and engaging in a proxy war, Ankara soon realised that **toppling Assad was not a feasible goal**. This demonstrated two key points: Turkey lacked the military and economic capabilities to achieve a regime change, and the assumption that it wielded significant influence over Assad proved to be incorrect. Consequently, **its strategy and objectives started to shift**. During the pre-2016 period, Turkey supported the Free Syrian Army and other militias without direct involvement while adopting an open-door policy that brought millions of Syrian refugees into the country. This policy earned [international praise](#) but also created long-term [socio-political and economic challenges](#).

The fall of Aleppo to regime forces in 2016 marked a pivotal shift in Turkey's approach to Syria. Since then, **Turkey has conducted four military operations**, establishing a substantial foothold within Syrian territory. Initially, these incursions were part of a U.S.-led coalition to push back against the Islamic State. Over time, they evolved into a **unilateral strategy focused on countering Kurdish forces**, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), to prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish political structure along its border. Turkey considers the YPG, the US's main ally on the ground in the fight against ISIS, as a terroristic organisation. It is estimated that Turkey maintains approximately [10,000 troops](#) across towns and military outposts such as Afrin, Azaz, and Jarablus in northwestern Syria, as well as Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad in the northeast.

This contributed to the **deterioration of Ankara's relationship with Washington** and reflected a broader goal of creating buffer zones in northwestern Syria for the potential repatriation of refugees. One of Turkey's key expectations following the fall of Assad was to facilitate the return of a significant number of Syrian refugees currently residing in the country. However, this has not materialised thus far. Most Syrians are waiting to see how the political situation evolves before committing to a permanent return. As of now, according to official figures provided by the Ministry of Interior, only [52,622 Syrians](#) have returned to Syria from Turkey.

Between 2022 and 2024, Turkey has attempted to launch a [reconciliation process](#) with Syria, beginning with intelligence-level engagements and multiple attempts to arrange a bilateral presidential meeting. After years of civil war with Assad still in power, **several European countries, including Italy, also began to take steps toward normalising relations with the Assad regime.** However, significant challenges related to conflicting priorities and demands of the two nations prevented this possibility. Syria outlined two key preconditions for reconciliation: an end to Turkey's military and political support for the Syrian opposition and the [withdrawal of Turkish forces](#) from Syrian territory. Fulfilling these demands would have represented a substantial concession on Turkey's part without any assurances of the positive outcome of the normalisation efforts.

On the domestic front, the Syrian refugee crisis has fueled [growing anti-immigrant sentiment](#) within Turkey, prompting a dramatic shift in policy. By the 2023 presidential elections, both the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) pledged to **facilitate the return of refugees**, adopting a strong anti-refugee narrative. This shift underscores the interplay between Turkey's economic difficulties, increasing **socio-political polarisation**, and its broader [involvement in the Syrian conflict](#), as

the country remains the world's largest host of Syrian refugees, with 3.6 million residing within its borders.

Turkey's goal and opportunities in post-Assad Syria

Turkey is often portrayed as the regional "winner" following the fall of Assad in Syria. This perception stems from Ankara's **significant military and economic support**, particularly the SNA, which played a crucial role in the regime change and the HTS. Furthermore, Turkey acted swiftly in the aftermath, with [Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin visiting Damascus](#) and meeting Ahmed Al-Sharra, leader of the transitional government. These actions positioned Turkey as a **key player with substantial influence over Syria's evolving political, economic, and military landscape**. Turkey's primary goal remains the elimination of the SDF and YPG presence in Syria, closely tied to Ankara's broader national security strategy of securing its borders and **neutralising perceived Kurdish threats**. A secondary aim involves facilitating the return of Syrian refugees, as previously discussed. In the longer term, **Turkey aspires to establish itself as the privileged partner of the new Syrian government**. While these objectives align with Ankara's strategic interests, they are contingent upon a volatile environment marked by external powers vying for influence during Syria's transitional phase.

Economically, Turkey envisions significant opportunities in Syria's reconstruction. The day after Assad's fall, **the Istanbul Stock Exchange's cement sector experienced a sharp rise**, reflecting expectations of a construction boom. Turkish construction companies, many of which have close ties to the government, anticipate a leading role in rebuilding Syria's infrastructure. From a security standpoint, Defense Minister Yaşar Güler announced [Turkey's readiness to provide military training](#) and advisory support to the transitional administration, including sending **military advisors to assist in training the new Syrian army** at

academies in Aleppo and Damascus. Such assistance could prove instrumental in unifying and professionalising the Syrian military, further solidifying Turkey's role in shaping the country's security landscape.

While Ankara appears well-positioned to influence Syria's future, **its success is far from guaranteed**. Internal challenges, including Turkey's ongoing economic crisis, could limit its ability to fully achieve its goals. Additionally, the transitional government's ability to address key issues—such as ensuring security guarantees for minority groups—will heavily influence Turkey's role in Syria's future. Should the transitional government falter, particularly in delivering stability and inclusivity, Ankara's position could be significantly undermined. For now, **Turkey has a favourable stance**, but the rapidly evolving dynamics in Syria will ultimately determine whether it can capitalise on its opportunities and achieve its objectives.

The Way Ahead

From a geopolitical and foreign policy perspective, the fall of Assad appears to have fostered a renewed rapprochement between Turkey and the West. The instability and civil war in Syria had previously created significant rifts, particularly between Ankara and Washington, due to Turkey's alignment with Russia and Iran within the framework of the Astana process for managing Syria's political situation.

The actual impact of the Trump presidency and the new [Kurdish opening](#) initiated by Erdogan's ultranationalist ally, Devlet Bahçeli, remains uncertain. While there is potential for alignment and progress toward a positive resolution, challenges and potential setbacks continue to loom on the horizon. The recent opening toward the Kurds, though initiated before Assad's fall, is now closely tied to the situation in Syria. Ankara is concerned that, without a solution for the future of the SDF that satisfies all parties, and **given the possible withdrawal of U.S. troops under Trump**, the SDF could seize new territories and further consolidate its position.

Adding to these concerns, Ankara's foreign policy executives are alarmed by recent [statements from Israeli officials](#) expressing readiness to **support the Kurds in the event of a complete breakdown in relations between Turkey and Israel**. This could signal the emergence of a Middle East where the balance of power might rest on two non-Arab poles: Ankara and Tel Aviv.

Yet, **the most pivotal issue in the region revolves around the future of U.S. relations with the YPG**. While the United States seems currently reluctant to abandon its on-the-ground partners in the fight against ISIS, a resolution could involve Turkey providing stronger guarantees in addressing a potential resurgence of the Islamic State. Ankara has already signalled its willingness to take [control of YPG-run prisons housing ISIS fighters](#) as part of such efforts.

Equally critical is the relationship between the transitional government in Syria and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey has consistently emphasised that if the transitional government, led by Ahmed Al Shaara, removes all non-Syrian elements within the YPG—groups Ankara designates as terrorist organisations—there would be no need for further Turkish military intervention. However, should this issue remain unresolved, and depending on the position of the United States, **Turkey has indicated it might launch another military operation in the region**.

Ankara and Washington currently share strategic interests in the region, such as the now limited, though not entirely diminished, Iranian influence in Syria. **The United States also views Ankara as a potential moderating force** in guiding HTS through its transformation from a jihadist group into a political party. Moreover, the integration of the SDF into a centralised army aligns with the interests of all parties involved. On the one hand, it could address Ankara's demands and provide the necessary assurances, while on the other, it could strengthen Syria's role in counterterrorism efforts against the Islamic State—a key concern for Washington.

The future of Syria will not depend solely on the role of Turkey. Despite the significant interest of Turkish businesses in participating in the country's reconstruction, Ankara's economic challenges prevent it from being the primary financier. Much will hinge on the **emerging regional dynamics** and the ability to establish a functional and strategically oriented dialogue among key external players—primarily the United States, the European Union, and Gulf countries—addressing Syria's immediate, medium-term, and long-term needs. Equally important will be the capacity of the new transitional government, led by Ahmed Al Shara, **to engage with all stakeholders and implement an inclusive vision** that does not limit foreign partners from contributing to the country's recovery and development.



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