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The Turkish Rapprochement with the Syrian regime

Motives and Prospects

Unit for Political Studies

The Turkish Rapprochement with the Syrian regime: Motives and Prospects

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Statements from Turkish officials have indicated increasing steps towards rapprochement with the Syrian regime. At a meeting of Turkish ambassadors in Ankara on 11th August, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu gave the clearest indication yet of Ankara's readiness to reconsider its policy on Syria, saying "Türkiye supports political reconciliation between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime", recalling a conversation he had with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad in October 2021, when he was in Belgrade for a Non-Aligned Movement meeting.¹ After meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on 6 August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkish and Syrian intelligence services had been holding meetings.²

On his way back from a visit to Ukraine on 19 August, Erdogan released another statement suggesting Türkiye is ready to upgrade contact with the Assad regime to a political level.³ At the same time, Erdogan accused the United States of "fuelling terrorism in Syria," claiming that Washington provided terrorist organizations with thousands of shipments of weapons and equipment, and welcomed terrorists into the White House, while praising Russia as a partner in the fight against terrorism. He added, "in every step we take in Syria, our security forces, intelligence agencies and the Ministry of Defence are all in touch."⁴ The Turkish statements demonstrate a clear pivot in Ankara's position, having been the backbone of support for the Syrian opposition since 2011 in defiance of Russian and Iranian policy. But signs of change in Turkish policy began to appear as early as late 2015.

Preludes to Change

Turkish policy on Syria began to evolve following the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015, causing a rift in the relationship between Ankara and Moscow. When Türkiye shot down a Russian fighter plane on the border with Syria in November that year, relations between the two countries were pushed to the brink of collapse with Moscow imposing economic sanctions on Ankara that included suspending imports of Turkish goods, freezing projects carried out by Turkish companies in Russia, and restricting Russian tourism in Türkiye.⁵ Meanwhile, US-Turkish relations were also undergoing a major crisis due to Washington's alliance with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, and its support for the establishment of what later became known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to confront ISIS. Consequently, in spring 2016, Ankara began to reconsider its Syrian policy. This turn gathered pace following the failed 2016 attempted coup, when President Putin expressed his solidarity with Erdogan, whose associates made accusations of Western involvement in the plot.⁶

1 "Ankara Renews its Call for Reconciliation between the Assad Regime and the Opposition," *DW Arabic*, 16/08/2022, accessed on 04/09/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3RzDigi>.

2 "Erdogan: The Turkish Intelligence Service is in Contact with the Assad Regime's Intelligence," *Syria TV*, 06/08/2022, accessed on 04/09/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Rywyzl>.

3 "Erdogan: Our Goal Is Not to Defeat Bashar al-Assad, but to Reach a Political Solution to End the Crisis," *Daily Sabah*, 19/08/2022, accessed 04/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3QfiB8r>.

4 Ibid.

5 "Russia Imposes Economic Sanctions on Turkey over the Downing of Its Plane," *France 24*, 28/11/2015, accessed on 04/09/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3QkOz34>.

6 Putin calls Erdoğan, express condolences for the victims of coup attempt, *Daily Sabah*, 17/07/2016, accessed on 04/09/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wVLeKc>.



Following the Russian military intervention, the Turkish policy supporting regime-change in Damascus that had prevailed since 2011 became unrealistic, while the Washington-SDF alliance changed Ankara's priorities. Instead of working towards regime-change, Türkiye now focused on its national security through border control and preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity on its southern borders. This paved the way for Turkish-Russian understandings, governed by Ankara's abandonment of regime change policy in Damascus in exchange for Moscow's cooperation in preventing the establishment of a Kurdish entity on the border with Syria. Since then, Türkiye, in agreement with Moscow, has carried out three military operations in northern Syria: "Operation Euphrates Shield" in August 2016, "Operation Olive Branch" in February 2018, and "Operation Peace Spring" in October 2019 (the Trump administration was also part of the latest understandings). These measures put an end to any potential Kurdish entity on the border strip extending between Qamishli and Afrin.

In parallel, Ankara's retreat from regime change in Damascus was represented in an agreement with Moscow to evacuate the opposition factions from the eastern part of Aleppo in December 2016. The two countries then launched the Astana process in early 2017, which froze the conflict between the regime and the opposition through the establishment of four de-escalation zones. The regime took control over three of these zones, and Ankara approved the proposal to establish a constitutional committee to resolve the Syrian crisis during the Sochi conference in January 2018. The conference aimed to achieve a settlement between the regime and the opposition and initiate unconditional negotiations, by brokering a new constitution and elections. But negotiations continue without any prospect of an agreement.

Motivations

Since the Biden administration took over the White House in early 2021, Turkish foreign policy has taken a more profound turn towards a comprehensive approach with intersecting political, security and economic dimensions. With the appointment of Brett McGurk — known to have a negative attitude towards Türkiye and maintain close relations with Kurdish forces — as National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, Ankara's fears about the growing US support for the Kurds in north-eastern Syria have swelled. Ankara had already been apprehensive about Biden's abrasive rhetoric towards President Erdogan during his election campaign, where he called for supporting the Turkish opposition in order to bring him down "through the electoral process."⁷

At the same time, economic challenges piled up for Türkiye, which, like many countries of the world, suffered severe economic damage resulting from Covid-19. Successive lockdowns dealt a severe blow to the Turkish tourism sector during 2020 and paralyzed large sectors of the economy. The

⁷ Biden and Erdogan Are Trapped in a Double Fantasy, *Foreign policy*, 06/01/2021, accessed on 04/09/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3CUrukP>.

tense relationship with Washington and the growing economic difficulties were negatively reflected in the exchange rate, with the Turkish Lira losing about 90 percent of its value between 2016 and 2022, as well as the growing trade balance deficit. High inflation was further exacerbated by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as energy prices doubled in a country whose economy is almost entirely dependent on energy imports, reaching a record rate of about 80 percent last August.⁸ These political, economic, and security challenges prompted President Erdogan to make extensive changes in his foreign policy. This included improving relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Egypt, Iran, and others, in a re-enactment of the “zero problems” principle in foreign policy that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had adopted when it first came to power in 2002.

Among the various factors that prompted Ankara’s transformation is the specific challenges posed by hosting about 3.7 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye has received the largest number of refugees as a result of its tolerant policy. It has allowed them access to work, education and freedom of movement, but this policy has shifted in recent years. The Turkish opposition has since weaponised the issue of refugees against the AKP government, stirring up racist strife towards Syrians in particular, and holding them responsible for the economic deterioration. As the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for June 2023 approach, the opposition has ramped up its anti-refugee sentiment. Meanwhile the AKP, which lost the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara in the 2018 local elections, is pledging to repatriate nearly one million Syrian refugees. Consequently, talk has resumed about establishing a 30-kilometer-deep safe zone along the border with Syria, removing Kurdish militias from the border, and simultaneously resettling Syrian refugees.

During the Astana summit hosted by Iran in July 2022, President Erdogan tried to secure Russia and Iran’s approval for a Turkish military operation to remove the SDF forces from the border and establish a safe area in northern Syria to accommodate refugees, to no avail. A Turkish military operation aimed at expelling the Kurdish People’s Protection Forces from the areas of Manbij and Tal Rifaat, north of Aleppo, was met with fierce opposition from Tehran due to the proximity of these two areas to the Shi’i towns of Nubl and Al-Zahraa, while Washington opposed any Turkish military activity in the areas east of the Euphrates.

Erdogan again sought approval for the military operation during the summit he held with Putin in Sochi in early August 2022, taking advantage of Moscow’s isolation regarding Ukraine. Instead, Putin proposed to Erdogan an understanding with the Syrian regime to resolve the Kurdish and refugee issues. Erdogan’s statements on his return from Sochi demonstrated Türkiye’s acquiescence to Putin’s proposal, given the urgency of the upcoming elections and the economic crisis inextricably linked to energy supplies, with competition between Mediterranean countries over the newly discovered gas fields in the region serving as an additional push factor for Ankara’s rapprochement with the Syrian regime.

⁸ "Inflation in Turkey is Close to 80%... the Highest Level in a Quarter of a Century", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 3/8/2022, accessed on 4/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3TJUL7y>.



Challenges of Rapprochement

Despite the Turkish policy pivot and the Syrian regime's clear interest in an understanding with Türkiye, stripping the Syrian opposition of its main ally, several obstacles stand in the way of this rapprochement. The Syrian regime is trying to exploit the AKP's electoral need to resolve the issue of refugees and Kurds by imposing difficult conditions on Türkiye, most importantly: setting a timetable for the Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territory, the withdrawal of Turkish support for the opposition, returning opposition-held Idlib to the regime, and restoring control of the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Türkiye and Idlib.⁹ These demands equate to complete Turkish surrender and can only be implemented if the regime pledges to engage in serious negotiations with the opposition to reach a political settlement — an unlikely concession.

Furthermore, the lack of clarity in the US position on the issue serves as another obstacle to any rapprochement between Türkiye and the Syrian regime. The US still has the final say in the areas east of the Euphrates, and so far, it seems devoted to its alliance with the SDF. Unless Washington is party to any understanding on Syria, neither the Russians nor the Regime will be able to implement any pledges they make to the Turks regarding the SDF, particularly in the areas east of the Euphrates. Finally, it does not seem that the Assad regime will cooperate with Erdogan on refugee return, which he considers the main factor on which his electoral prospects are riding. On the contrary, the Syrian regime is banking on Erdogan losing the elections and the Turkish opposition coming to power, with better prospects for an understanding. This is a huge gamble however, as the Regime runs the risk of losing the opportunity to reach an understanding with Erdogan at his most vulnerable. Erdogan will be in a much stronger position to negotiate if his mandate to rule is extended yet again.

Conclusion

Recent statements by Turkish officials indicate that Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian regime is inevitable. The AKP is desperate to resolve the tensions in its regional relations, and to demonstrate some achievements regarding the refugee and economic issues before the elections. Erdogan's hopes are pinned on the aforementioned safe zone, killing two electoral issues with one stone. The Turkish government, bitterly disappointed with the continued US support of the Kurdish YPG east of the Euphrates, agreed to the Russian proposal to negotiate an understanding with the Syrian regime leading to a solution. Russia is taking advantage of Erdogan's electoral vulnerability to push a U-turn on his Syria policy, eliminating the last bastion of support for the opposition. But rapprochement also poses huge challenges, hanging on the ability to find a just political solution to the Syrian crisis — an impossible feat given the huge price paid by the Syrian people and current tensions between Moscow and Washington and intensified rivalry between global powers precluding any comprehensive approach.

⁹ "Mamlouk-Fidan Talks... Mutual Demands and Russian Solutions," *Damascus Voice*, 27/8/2022, accessed 4/9/2022, <https://bit.ly/3Qll1Ch>.