



Middle East Dialogue

Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative, Wilson Center

Chairs: Randa Slim, Hafsa Halawa | Report Author: Hafsa Halawa
Rapporteur & Report Editor: Faria Nasruddin

February 21–22, 2025 | Istanbul, Turkey

Turkey

For Turkey, recent developments in Syria have created the air of “victory” for Ankara, but experts stressed that was not the approach being taken by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Rather, Syria has become a “complicated” policy issue for Ankara, particularly the rising anti-refugee sentiment in recent years, the risk of the burden and cost paid by Iran and Russia for their continued backing of the Assad regime ‘transferring’ to Turkey as Syria remains fragile (albeit now under allied control), as well as the security threats posed both by Kurdish groups affiliated the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Israel’s advancing incursions into Syrian territory. There remains a strong constituency of Syrians in Turkey, of which the official number is 2.8 million, but sources believe the number to be closer to 3.2 million of which approximately 750,000 were born in the country, and Erdoğan has insisted there will be no forcible return.¹ “Turkey is waiting for reconstruction and the waiving of some sanctions for refugees to return. It may take years, and some will stay.” Elsewhere, a complicated economic relationship with Idlib, coupled with the breaking down of conflict lines and barriers that have divided major parts of the country for years, are causing tensions across the economy. Damascene and Aleppo merchants complain of the competition from Turkish goods, and Turkish businessmen complain of the rising export taxes that have been imposed by the interim Syrian authorities.

Security concerns remain a high priority for Turkey, notably regarding regional relations with the Kurds, primarily groups affiliated with the PKK. To counter ISIS threats, Ankara has sought to launch a quartet approach to counterterrorism and ISIS threats, including Iraq, Jordan,

1 “GEÇİCİ KORUMA,” Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, March 20, 2025, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>; Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/kime-yardim-ediyoruz/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-tuerkiye>; and Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections,” Heinrich Böll Stiftung, August 17, 2022, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#22B>.

and Syria.² Turkey seeks to resolve this issue on a regional level in order to leverage the US relationship with the YPG/SDF to negotiate their dissolution and disarmament.

Regarding relations with the transitional leadership in Damascus, Turkey is said to be cautious but fully engaged, taking on the role of regional and global mediator and messenger. This relates to both advocacy on sanctions lifting and waiving for Syria and providing direct support, including to recently reopen airports in Damascus and Aleppo and reinstate direct flights into the country. One expert highlighted the importance of regional stability and Syria's successful transition to Ankara's own ambitions: "Turkey doesn't have oil or natural resources and is a trading state, so to survive they need regional economic integration and the flow of trade." Another expert echoed this sentiment, noting that "[Turkey's] new approach is more realistic, and [they] try to have a good relationship with the Arab world. The main thought is that Turkey is tired of conflicts and meddling, and they want to have stable relations and normalization with the Arab states and to preserve the connectivity that Turkey sees with the Arab world, which was cut due to the security situation there [in Syria]." They reinforced this in terms of the perception in Syria, stressing that "Turkey...doesn't want Syria to be perceived as a Turkish puppet. They are trying to explain to the Arab world to have a joint approach and are pushing for Syria to become the opening gate for Turkey and the Arab world."

However, understanding the fragility of the Syrian state at this moment in time, there is a need for Ankara to step in and shore up the leadership and security apparatus in the country. This is seen as an opportunity to recalibrate security partnerships and cooperation across the Arab region. Even so, warnings from Turkish experts note the domestic pressure that Erdoğan faces on this issue, primarily anti-Syrian/anti-Arab sentiment, must be balanced with regional priorities and a "common, joint approach with Arab countries on security in Syria that should not outwardly threaten anyone." While confirming there are no security guarantee arrangements with Syria for now, one Turkish expert noted the challenges still facing the leadership in Damascus, namely the lack of any control over Syrian airspace and effectively no functioning military hardware after Israel's attacks.

In all cases, a Turkish expert noted the sensitivity around Turkish involvement in the country, reflecting that "Turkey would be blamed for it, if it is involved too much." Even so, the wider regional landscape remains dominated by the Gaza War and the plight of the Palestinians. A policy expert highlighted that it is a sensitive, national issue that encompasses all parts of the Turkish political elite and social landscape of the country, and any change in the pro-Palestinian stance (i.e., amid questions of any warming of relations with Israel) cannot be risked by Erdoğan owing to domestic pressure.

2 There remain over 9,000 ISIS prisoners and over 40,000 ISIS families/civilians held in camps and prisons in northeast Syria in SDF territory. Iraq has proposed to absorb the burden, but under Iraqi jurisdiction for all prisoners, including remaining foreign fighters (numbered at least half), with support from the international community to fund security operations and logistics. Approximately 2,000 fighters and 14,000 family members are believed to be Iraqi. "Remarks to the IJ Meeting on ISIS Prosecutions," U.S. Department of State, July 23, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/remarks-to-the-ij-meeting-on-isis-prosecutions/>.

Recommendations

- Turkey's position is that Syria should not export any security threats to the region, and the new Syrian authorities should be encouraged to form an inclusive government
- Turkey's position is that nation-states in the region should be respected, and non-state armed groups should be sidelined
- Reconstruction in Syria, preserving its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, is a shared interest with Arab countries that requires Turkish-Arab collaboration
- Turkey and the Arab region should coordinate their strategies to prevent an escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria
- Turkey and the Arab region have converging interests in maintaining the ceasefire in Gaza and should find a joint strategy towards a two-state solution