

Turkey and the Syrian Conundrum after Assad: A Test for Ankara's Capacity and Credibility

Riccardo Gasco and Samuele Abrami

Until recently, Syria appeared to be locked in a stalemate, with few anticipating the rapid and dramatic turn of events unfolding. That is why many were caught off guard when, on 27 November, armed opposition groups launched a swift and coordinated offensive on Aleppo and other parts of the country. Less than two weeks later, during the night of 7-8 December, the rebel forces made their way into the Syrian capital, Damascus, putting an end to the Assad regime that had retained power for over 50 years. With the government forces offering no resistance, the Syrian President fled the country after being granted political asylum in Russia. Thus, led by the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – an Islamist group formerly linked to al-Qaeda – the rebels quickly took control of the country's main institutions.

Such a fast-paced evolution in a scenario where many state and non-state actors have been involved since 2011 raises

questions about Syria's political future and its implications for the Middle East regional equilibrium. On 7 December, the members of the Astana Process – Iran, Russia and Turkey – met in Doha to discuss the next steps. While Moscow and Teheran lost their historical ally in the region and appeared powerless to shape the events, Ankara is now seen as the regional winner. Certainly, its more active role could position it as the primary beneficiary of the Assad regime's downfall. However, the path ahead will be neither easy nor free of challenges. What is Turkey's actual role in Syria? What does it aim to achieve? And what are the implications for its domestic and foreign policies?

Where does Turkey stand?

The recent Doha meeting emphasised a commitment to United Nations Security Council resolution 2254, which states that Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence must be protected and calls for fundamental

Riccardo Gasco is a PhD Candidate at Bologna University and Foreign Policy Programme Coordinator at IstanPol. Samuele Abrami is a Mercator-IPC Fellow, Istanbul.

steps for a comprehensive political solution. Yet, much will depend on the intentions of the rebel groups and whether the international community will be able to create a cooperative dialogue with them. In this regard, Ankara surely has some cards to play. At the same time, aware of the volatility of a context where all actors' priorities are shifting, Turkey seems to be swinging between a "wait and see" and a "proactive approach".

Although Turkish officials have denied all allegations of directly supporting the rebel operations, many observers pointed out how Ankara exerts some level of influence on the rebel groups and that their actions could not have started without Turkey's tacit consensus.¹ Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Turkey's policymakers could fully anticipate the magnitude of the revolts. This is because Ankara's relationship and leverage on the rebel groups is hard to discern. Indeed, the ideological orientations of the SNA and HTS put Turkey in a conundrum. The former, which emerged from the ashes of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), represents a heterogeneous entity that includes several Sunni groups and has been overtly backed by Turkey since 2017. While it is clear that the SNA could count on Ankara's economic and military support from the time of the first Turkish cross-border military operation in August 2016, HTS's position is more blurred. The latter figures in the ranks of transnational jihadism and is led by Abu Mohammed

¹ Ömer Özkizilcik, "What Does Turkey Gain from the Rebel Offensive in Syria?", in *MENASource*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=811798>.

al-Jolani, who now seems to be trying to soften the organisation's ideology in search of foreign legitimisation.²

In this scenario, following a week of cautious statements by Turkish officials, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan demonstrated his increased confidence for positive outcomes: "It is our hope that, I will say that may this march in Syria continue without any accidents and troubles."³ His words came just hours before Assad's fall, not only signalling Turkey's hope for a regime change but also its convergence of interest with the rebels' immediate objectives.

Ankara's domestic agenda

Indeed, one immediate development is the return of hundreds of Syrian refugees. Should this continue, Ankara would address one of its most pressing domestic challenges in recent years. Since 2011, Turkey has hosted over 3.5 million Syrians, an issue that has fuelled widespread public discontent, leading to a loss of votes for the ruling party. Compounded by a deep economic

² Jomana Karadsheh et al., "Syrian Rebel Leader Says Goal Is to 'Overthrow' Assad Regime", in *CNN*, 6 December 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/06/middleeast/syria-rebel-forces-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-jolani-intl-latam/index.html>.

³ Turkish Presidency, *President Erdoğan Performs Friday Prayer in Istanbul*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/155752/president-erdogan-performs-friday-prayer-in-istanbul>; "Turkish President Says He Backs Rebel Advance on Damascus - Video", in *The Guardian*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xx4adc>; Ragip Soylu, "Turkey's Erdogan Backs Rebel Offensive in Syria", in *Middle East Eye*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/415041>.

crisis, the issue of Syrian migrants was a focal point in the recent campaigns for the 2023 presidential and 2024 local elections. Both the incumbent and the opposition parties employed harsh rhetoric toward Syrians, pledging to repatriate hundreds of thousands.⁴

At the same time, Turkey's strategic interests are deeply intertwined with the longstanding Kurdish issue. Recently, the Turkish government renewed domestic efforts to address the Kurdish issue. Both President Erdoğan and his ultranationalist ally Devlet Bahçeli recently made an unexpected overture toward the Kurdish cause, including a bold proposal to invite Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), to parliament to declare the dissolution of the party.⁵ This move by the government was surprising, especially considering that the PKK has been engaged in an armed struggle against Turkish forces since 1984, seeking Kurdish autonomy and self-rule within Turkey.

This initiative might look primarily driven by domestic political calculations, specifically the need to amend the constitution and secure votes among the Kurdish electorate to enable Erdoğan's potential re-election bid in 2028. This might also come at the expense of the pro-Kurdish Peoples'

Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which has been lately struggling to detach itself from the PKK completely.

Indeed, the fall of Assad and the loosening of Russian protection over the strongholds of the People's Protection Units (YPG) – a US-backed Kurdish militia – open new avenues for Ankara to counter what it regards as a primary national security threat. To some extent, Syrian rebels have already pushed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – a US-backed, Kurdish-led coalition of militias created in 2015 – and its affiliated armed groups out of Tel Rifaat, Manbij and Deir ez-Zor, while the destiny of Raqqa, Kobani and Tabqa remains uncertain.⁶ On the whole, Turkey now has greater flexibility to either launch a military operation or support an offensive by the SNA to weaken Kurdish militias, especially those associated with the US-backed SDF.

Thus, SNA and HTS have been functional in what Turkey has long sought to achieve: halting the Syrian government forces' relentless bombardment of Idlib, which frequently drove waves of Syrian migrants toward its borders; undermining Kurdish militias in the northeast; and – from a broader perspective – countering the regional influence of Russia and Iran.

Regional triggers and outcomes

Zooming out, it is worth noting how the timing of recent developments

⁴ Yusuf Selman Inanç, "Turkey Elections: Politicians Vow to Send Syrians Back - But to Where?", in *Middle East Eye*, 13 May 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/288531>.

⁵ Huseyin Hayatsever, "Erdogan Ally Makes Offer to Jailed PKK Leader Ocalan to End Conflict", in *Reuters*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-ally-makes-offer-jailed-pkk-leader-ocalan-end-conflict-2024-10-22>.

⁶ Pinar Dinç, "CMES Regional Outlook: The Fall of the Assad Regime: Challenges and Opportunities for Rojava", in *CMES News*, 10 December 2024, <https://www.cmes.lu.se/node/1528>.

is tightly related to the broader regional and international dynamics. Indeed, this unravelling situation stems from the increasing instability in the Middle East, including the recent fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, Russia's and Iran's constrained capacity to support the Assad regime, and the deteriorated state of the Syrian government's military troops. At the international level, the transition to the new US presidency likely provided Ankara with greater room for manoeuvre. On the one hand, this could signal to Washington Ankara's ability to balance vis-à-vis Russia and Iran in Syria. On the other hand, since as mentioned the SNA has reportedly captured control over Manbij – a location of symbolic and strategic importance for Turkey and for the US-backed Kurdish militias – recent developments could also bring back to the surface one of the bones of contention between Ankara and Washington.⁷

Indeed, since 2016, Ankara has launched multiple incursions into Syria. What was first aimed at countering the Islamic State in an international coalition led by the United States then transformed into a more unilateral modus operandi targeting the Kurdish "threat" along its south-eastern border.⁸ In this context, although Turkish military operations against the SDF and the YPG

⁷ Laura Pitel and Ayla Jean Yackley, "Turkey: Will Erdoğan Emerge as the Big Winner of the Syria Crisis?", in *Financial Times*, 9 December 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/74251ede-5441-4950-abc5-551944f767e0>.

⁸ Burak Bir, "Turkey 'Cannot Wait Minute Longer' for Op. in Syria", in *Anadolu Agency*, 7 October 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1604934>.

put Ankara at odds with the US, they enabled Ankara to control a significant stretch of territory in northern Syria, including twelve military outposts in the rebel-held northwestern Idlib region.⁹ Concurrently, the shifting power dynamics on the ground led to a balkanisation of Syria, where Turkey could secure its sway by balancing Russia and Iran through the framework of the Astana process.

Now, the fall of Assad has exposed the inability of Moscow and Tehran to deliver the same level of military support and protection to the regime as in the past. While Turkey's exact next steps remain difficult to predict, current developments offer elements for informed speculation about its strategic direction. In the wake of Assad's fall and a potential Russian withdrawal, Turkey finds itself in a position of relative strength both on the ground and in shaping the regional set-up.

Outside-in challenges ahead

The fall of Assad presents Turkey with a pivotal moment to reshape its role in Syria, strengthen its regional and international position and address some of its domestic hurdles. Throughout the Syrian Civil War, Turkey's foreign policy suffered setbacks, straining relations with the US, tarnishing its regional reputation and making Ankara vulnerable to Russian leverage. However, now that

⁹ "Foreign Armies in Syria and How They Came to Be There", in *Reuters*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/foreign-armies-syria-how-they-came-be-there-2024-12-06>.

Assad is gone, Turkey can sit in a stronger position at the negotiation table, as recent talks in Doha have already demonstrated. Domestically, the prospect of Syrian refugees returning home could resolve a critical issue that has eroded his support in recent elections. Additionally, business figures and building companies tied to Erdoğan's circle stand to benefit from Syria's reconstruction efforts, and a weakened YPG provides a chance for the President to bolster his nationalist credentials.

The rapid evolution of events makes it challenging to predict the future of the Syrian Kurds. The Trump administration, despite appointing several pro-Kurdish figures, is likely to face a dilemma shaped by the complex realities on the ground and the involvement of regional actors. One factor influencing US policy is President Trump's desire to continue disengaging from the Middle East. Combined with the growing financial and political costs of supporting the Kurds, this could lead Washington to scale back or withdraw its support for the SDF.

However, treading carefully is fundamental for Ankara, also to avoid any further escalations with Israel, another actor with strategic interests in Syria. Overall, much will depend on the capacity of HTS to garner international legitimacy. If the latter succeeds in gaining recognition, Turkey could enjoy a position as a key interlocutor with the international community. Thus, Turkey's potential gains come with leveraging the rebel forces. As US Secretary of State

Antony Blinken travelled to Ankara to meet with President Erdoğan on 12 December, Washington seems willing to engage Turkey as a crucial player in shaping Syria's future. With European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also due to visit Ankara on 17 December, Europe is also trying to balance its position on the situation in Syria by keeping a dialogue open with Turkey.

Sure, domestically, Syria looks like a strategic success for President Erdoğan. However, with Damascus now heading to a new but still unstable phase, Turkey should steer away from the hectic and unilateral actions that characterised its previous engagement in Syria. A more transparent and cooperative approach would not only help secure a smooth transition to a stable and functioning "friendly" government in Damascus but also elude the risk of new waves of sectarian policies that would undermine Syria's internal order, reinitiate the competition between external actors and prevent any peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. Without stability, Syria will remain a source of challenges, continuing to test Ankara's capacity and credibility to manage its domestic and regional interests without disruptive actions that could further destabilise the regional order.

13 December 2024

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 24 | 75 Riccardo Gasco and Samuele Abrami, *Turkey and the Syrian Conundrum after Assad: A Test for Ankara's Capacity and Credibility*
- 24 | 74 Stefan Meister et al., *Call for the EU to Act Now to Sanction the Violent Regime in Georgia*
- 24 | 73 Maria Luisa Fantappiè, *Europe and the Syrian Crisis: Keep Calm and Clear-minded*
- 24 | 72 Thin Lei Win, *Tackling the Climate-Food-Migration Nexus through Urban Food Systems*
- 24 | 71 Luca Barana, *Is Migration Really Solved? Managing Expectations on the New Pact and External Deals*
- 24 | 70 Giulia Daga, *NATO's Dilemma in the MENA Region: A Critical Reflection*
- 24 | 69 Polina Sinovets, *US-Germany Missile Agreement: Deterrence or Escalation?*
- 24 | 68 Federico Petrangeli, *International Law versus Realpolitik? The European Union Court of Justice and the Western Sahara*
- 24 | 67 Alessandro Marrone, *Trump, Ukraine and NATO: Two Crossroads for Europe*
- 24 | 66 Chiara Scissa, *Environmental Crimes and Forced Migration: An Overlooked Nexus*