

The Consequences of Turkey's Shifting Position on the Syrian Crisis

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Sep 2, 2022

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Brief Analysis

Although establishing ties between Turkey and the Syrian regime may seem like a smart move by Erdogan, the decision represents a betrayal of the Syrian people and its success is not guaranteed for the Turkish government.

Though preparations for launching a Turkish military operation in northern Syria appeared to be in full swing, statements by the Turkish Foreign Minister about the possibility of supporting the Assad regime have shifted Turkish foreign policy in the exact opposite direction. Then, President Erdogan repeated similar statements after the Sochi summit, amid leaks about the possibility of high-level contact with the Syrian regime between Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and the regime foreign minister. This shift instigated spontaneous wide-scale protests in the Syrian revolutionary circles, pushing Cavusoglu to meet heads of Syrian opposition institutions to reaffirm "Turkey's support for Syrians' rights", as Bader Jamous [tweeted](https://twitter.com/JamousBader/status/1562788922022772737) (<https://twitter.com/JamousBader/status/1562788922022772737>) on August 25.

Syrian revolutionary circles, including nine associations for lawyers, teachers, engineers and other professions did not delay in launching demonstrations to express their rejection of this new position and their disapproval. These circles found the reversal particularly shocking given the developments of the past several months. On June 27, Anadolu Agency (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220728-turkiye-us-hypocritical-about-fighting-terrorism-says-fm/>) quoted Cavusoglu's statements to the Turkish TV 100 channel, which denounced the United States and Russia's retreat from their "promises to expel terrorists from Syria." Cavusoglu also [called](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkiye-condemns-attack-against-its-consulate-in-iraqs-mosul-175683) (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkiye-condemns-attack-against-its-consulate-in-iraqs-mosul-175683>) on the Iraqi government to assume its responsibilities in protecting foreign diplomatic bodies after the Turkish consulate in Mosul was attacked by a missile hours before Cavusoglu spoke.

In fact, pro-Iranian militias conducted a series of missile attacks on several Turkish bases in northern Iraq and Syria. These attacks preceded and followed the Tehran summit that brought together the presidents of Iran, Turkey,

and Russia and they were read by observers as a clear message to Turkey. Iraqi officials and pro-Iran militias accused Turkey of an attack on a tourist site in Duhok, north Iraq, leaving around 40 casualties hours after the end of the summit which unfolded deep disputes among the partners. Turkey denied the accusation and called for an independent and transparent investigation, accusing the PKK of the attack, as the UN special envoy to Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, told the UN Security Council a few days after the attack.

However, Cavusoglu's more recent rhetoric seems to suggest that Turkey is leaving Syria to the regime. What was particularly striking in Cavusoglu's new statement was his [talk \(https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220729-fm-turkiye-will-provide-syria-political-support-to-expel-terrorists/\)](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220729-fm-turkiye-will-provide-syria-political-support-to-expel-terrorists/) about "the (Syrian) regime's natural right to remove the terrorist organization from its lands," generally understood to be to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control large areas in northern Syria. Cavusoglu even went so far as to express his government's readiness to provide "all kinds of political support for the regime's work in this regard," unleashing many speculations about the Turkish government's true intentions.

With the end of the Sochi summit that brought together the Turkish and Russian presidents on August 5, the general impression—especially among the Syrian revolutionary circles—has developed that the Sochi summit represents a major adjustment in Turkey's handling of the Syrian case. President Erdogan's talk about Russia's desire to eliminate terrorist threats through Turkish cooperation with the Assad regime intersected with Cavusoglu's previous talk of supporting the regime to achieve this purpose.

With President Erdogan confirming the existence of cooperation between the Turkish and regime intelligence services, Syrian opposition figures increasingly fear that Turkey would abandon the Syrian revolution. Moreover, Cavusoglu's announcement on August 11 that he met Assad's Foreign Minister and his assertion that there must be reconciliation between "the opposition and the regime in some way, otherwise there will be no lasting peace," has confirmed that the Turkish approach is now opening channels of dialogue with the regime at the highest levels.

Turkish Normalization with the Regime is a Double-Edged Sword

Although the Turkish leadership must be aware of the dangers of a dramatic shift in its attitude towards the Assad regime, it seems determined to risk its standing and its political future. The Turkish government seems certain that the Syrian regime will not take any security, military, or political measure before obtaining the approval of Iran and Russia, and that the Assad regime lacks independent will and sovereignty. With this understanding, communication with Iran and Russia is sufficient for ensuring Turkish interests. Russia's own actions confirm this interpretation—officers from the Russian bases in Syria prevented the head of the regime and his defense minister from participating with Russian officials in reviewing the Russian forces. Moscow likewise failed to hold an official reception ceremony for him during his recent visits to the Russian capital.

Nevertheless, talk about the possibility of contact between the Turkish and Syrian sides—including the possibility of a call between the two presidents—will prove a double-edged sword for Ankara. On the one hand, the AKP government is working to strip the internal Turkish opposition of the cards it relies on in its electoral propaganda in the months leading up to Turkey's June 2023 elections. In the past, Turkish opposition has latched onto the problem of Syrian refugees as its explanation for Turkish internal and external crises, and opposition figures have proposed that the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime is the best way to solve it, as the *Modon* electronic newspaper reported from the Turkish Deutsche Welle website on August 4.

Hence, many observers interpret Erdogan and Cavusoglu's recent statements as an attempt to prevent the Turkish opposition from benefiting from this card. The statements of Turkish officials about developing a plan to "voluntarily" return one million Syrian refugees to northern Syria can be placed in the same context as extracting the papers of the Turkish opposition with which it will contest the 2023 elections.

On the other hand, opening a communication channel at a high political level between Turkey and the Assad regime may negatively affect the AKP, causing it to lose its friends without ensuring a win over its enemies. The Syrian opposition will consider any such dialogue as a circumvention of its demands and a stab in the back, and with unpredictable outcomes. With Turkey losing its position as a guarantor, it is probable it will fail to restrain opposition factions who are thereby likely to carry out operations against the regime, as they did before.

If Turkey insists on controlling the factions through its forces deployed in the opposition areas, it is not out of the question that clashes will occur between the two parties. Such a scenario would only benefit the Assad regime and its supporters. With normalization, Ankara may gain some domestic leeway leading up to the 2023 elections, but it will have lost its credit among the Syrian people revolting against the Assad regime, who may turn from a supportive friend to a permanent enemy.

Indeed, demonstrations have already begun in many areas, with calls for larger demonstrations to be held in the coming days in protest of Cavusoglu's calls to reconcile the opposition with the regime. That night, Syrian protesters went out in **nighttime demonstrations (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-turkey-reconciliation-assad-react-furiously>)** in many cities of northern Syria, some of which included attacks on symbols of the Turkish state. All faction leaders have expressed their rejection of the new Turkish position, which neglects the rights of the Syrians for the purpose of Turkish national security and to achieve the AKP's narrow electoral interests.

Many Syrian activists likewise published tweets reminding the Turkish leadership of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the regime forces and sectarian militias. Their tweets described how the regime is responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of Syrians and detaining tens of thousands of innocent people, refusing to release them or reveal their fates. These practices, and many others, make the mere presentation of the idea of normalization with the regime or compromising on principles a major betrayal for the Syrian people.

Aside from the anger of the Syrian opposition, the impact of this move on Turkish domestic politics is by no means guaranteed. The AKP government may lose a significant part of the votes of the Turkish voters who stand with the Syrian revolution, as it would be difficult for them to see their government throw the "oppressed" into the arms of the "oppressors." The ties of religion, sect, and common history constitute a strong motive for the broad sympathy of the Turkish people with the Syrian people, who are being subjected to a war of sectarian genocide. The AKP government's support for the Syrian revolution has raised its share at the popular and Islamic levels. This means that the Turkish government will lose this position if it abandons the Syrian people for any reason.

By contrast, outreach to the regime is unlikely to change the opinion of Turks opposed to the AKP government or motivate them to vote for it. They oppose this government from an ideological standpoint, rejecting the AKP's domestic policies and Islamizing political practices. Indeed, opponents of President Erdogan will use any major deviation in his relationship with the Syrian regime as an electoral card against him, proving the rightness of the opposition parties that have been asking the Turkish government to open a dialogue with the Syrian regime in return for the government's rejection of these demands. The government's newest move would show its 'short-sightedness' in dealing with the Syrian crisis, the consequences being that votes from supporters will turn in favor of the 'far-sighted' opposition.

Nor is it likely that Turkish contact with the Syrian regime will contribute to ending or even reducing the state of Turkish-Iranian or Turkish-Russian geopolitical competition in the Middle East. In fact, this dialogue will only encourage the movement of Iran's arms to the southern borders of Turkey. This is the geopolitical dynamic that prompted Ahmed Davutoglu, when he was prime minister between 2014-2016, to recommend military intervention to prevent the fall of Aleppo and to keep Turkey's enemies tens of kilometers away from its southern borders. Now leading one of the rival parties of the AKP in the upcoming elections, Davutoglu continues to strongly oppose opening a channel of dialogue with the Assad regime, knowing that this means the stationing of Iran and its arms

along the southern border of Turkey. Such a move will also mean the possibility of reconfiguring the “terrorist corridor” and compromising the gains that Turkey achieved after the “Euphrates Shield,” Olive Branch,” and “Peace Spring” operations in northern Syria against ISIS and the SDF.

Between narrow electoral calculations and complex regional and international calculations, the Turkish leadership is trying to strike a balance that this time seems more difficult than ever. While the Syrian revolution appears to be the weakest link in Turkey’s relationships, the human values it represents and the sacrifices it made make abandoning it or conspiring against it a curse that pursues everyone who tries to undermine it. Moreover, the Turkish government’s precarious balance between profits and losses indicates that their abandonment of the revolution will only postpone the major confrontation with Turkey’s enemies, bringing the conflict inside Turkey instead of extending it tens of kilometers into Syrian territory ❖

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