

# US-Turkey Relations in The Context of Syria: Crossroads for New Bilateral and Regional Alignments - Derya Göçer



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Tunisian uprising in late 2010

inspired different segments across the Middle East to have bolder demands for change. The change in focus was broadly conceived, ranging from political change, change of leaders and regimes to social and economic changes. Despite the varying political and historical dynamics in the region, this demand for change resonated and contributed to the protests in other countries, including Syria. Starting with children's protest and subsequent repression in Daar'a,

Syria's Assad regime faced increasingly vocal and later armed opposition. Syrian regime in the late 2000s was on the cusp of domestic restructuring of its economy. Traditional Syrian alignment in the Middle East included support from Iran. New alignments included increasing cooperation with Turkey, especially during Davutoğlu's time as Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs. Labelled as 'zero problems with neighbors' policy, Davutoğlu had emphasized the economic and social benefits of being closer to Syria, all under the narrative of former Ottoman unity in these lands. These new economic and social links translated increasingly to political affinity. The end of US predominance in global affairs had affected Turkey's sense of increased maneuvering space and Syria presented an opportunity to try out that maneuvering capacity. So, in 2011 Turkey attempted to play the role of the peace maker in Syrian affairs as well as in the larger Middle East.

That role has failed as Assad regime turned to more violent repression of the opposition and as the opposition turned outwards to foreign powers for support. Syrian uprising turned to Syrian civil war. The general Arab uprising transformations in the region also quickly turned against Turkey's positioning. Turkey found itself with a desire for increased autonomy in global and regional affairs, yet a not-so-friendly region. In Syria, Turkey threw its weight against Assad regime and supported the opposition groups in various ways. This did not affect US-Turkey bilateral relationships that intensely at that time. The rise of ISIS and US interest in fighting ISIS while at the same time sending minimal military support culminated in US support to YPG. Turkey raised its objections to this support in several and very clear ways but did not reach a tangible result. There was a new proactive stance of Turkey in late 2000s, early 2010s which can be considered as a rupture from the foreign policy of 1980s and 1990s. However the objection to its allies' building bridges with YPG could be counted as the continuation of earlier Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East, from 1990s. Turkey counts PKK, the armed group, as a continuous national security threat. That has been a constant theme in Turkey's bilateral and regional relations. Turkey also considers YPG to be organically linked to PKK.

#### US-Turkish

tensions on the topic only deepened after 2015/6. 2015 was the year of Russia's

entrance to the Syrian civil war and 2016 was the year of the failed coup attempt in Turkey. While Russia's entrance showcased how increased multipolarity at the global level was experienced in the region, the failed coup attempt strained US-Turkey relations further as Fethullah Gülen, believed to be behind the attempt was residing in the USA. After 2016 Turkey's foreign policy tools changed drastically. "In terms of foreign policy tools, the AKP government started to resort to military means, frequently using military intervention, escalation, and gunboat diplomacy to achieve foreign policy objectives" (Altunışık, 2022a: 171). The last military intervention that was announced by President Erdoğan himself towards Syria in the late Spring of 2022 was stalled, despite several attempts to get a greenlight from Russia. So, Turkey is using these tools with limited maneuvering capacity and with mixed results. Turkey has been unable to change US policy on YPG. Turkey did manage to control some areas in Syria and prevented full YPG control across the borderlands, and allied partially with Russia and Iran, enough to give Turkey a say in the future of Syria but not enough to change border crossings, YPG's position or its links with PKK.

The limits of these tools stem firstly from the failure of Turkey to play the intended role of 'peace maker' in the region. Turkey had to face and is still facing a Gulf region that acts increasingly more autonomous from global and regional alliances. In fact, as Altunışık argues the region itself is becoming more and more Gulf-centric (Altunışık 2022, this policy paper series), as the Gulf countries act in unison in critical issues such as Syria. One of the characteristics of this new order is containment of Iran and the second characteristics may very well be containing the newly proactive Turkey. The first front of that containment would be the consolidation of a new Syria. Assad managed to get into collaborations with Gulf states and other Arab states, most notably over the issue of gas and electricity. The new Biden administration did not object to that collaboration, signaling what Steve Cook calls [ruthless pragmatism](#) and continuation of the Trump policy of minimal involvement in Syria, and the larger Middle East. In fact, as of August 2022, the US presence in Syria is totaling to 900 officers. Even that presence is causing friction, notably with the fourth state that shows presence

in Syria, Iran. Iranian forces retaliate against Israeli attacks by attacking US base and personnel in Syria. US then responds by attacking Iran backed militias in Syria.

So, the US policy in Syria is consistent with a Great Power in rivalry with other Great Powers, most notably China and is investing more attention in Asia. US still needs to protect Israel to some degree, ensure the flow of oil and at least negotiate the price of oil. US also still offers a security umbrella to the Gulf, although there are calls from within US and within the Middle East for the Middle East to establish its own security alliance in this new Gulf-centric regional order. That seems to be another continuation from Trump to Biden administration and this perspective would deprive Turkey from a regional middle power status even further. Turkey's attempts to have more military control over Syria should be read within this context as well.

Syrian civil war challenged Turkey on domestic, regional and global levels. There are security challenges against Turkey arising from the war in Syria. There are also limits to the regional support Turkey gathers that partially stem from the Syrian civil war. There are also issues that relate to global positioning of Turkey that partially stem from the Syrian civil war. This global re-positioning explains Turkey's ease in compartmentalizing its relations with Russia and Iran and aligning itself at times with these two powers. Finally, there is a domestic political challenge to Turkey's regime that is further prolonged as the civil war itself is prolonging. That is the challenge that is presented with the Syrian refugees in Turkey and the issue of return that Turkish opposition voices as a strong criticism towards President Erdoğan. The almost 4 million refugees, by their sheer number and their various positioning within the Turkish domestic political system, provide a fertile ground for opposing the newly transitioned presidential system in Turkey. The opposition demands a decrease in the number of refugees by returning them back to Syria, a demand problematic on moral, logistical and political grounds. However, any resettlement would help the current office holders in Turkey in their bid to win elections in 2023. The rising nationalist sentiments in the general public and in Turkey's opposition

parties amount to a nationalist turn. This of course also has a bearing on the YPG issue and relations with the United States.

Since nationalism is rarely contained within distinct issues and rising sentiments against Syrians may spill over to increased nationalist discourse towards the Kurds as well.

Currently, Turkey starts a repositioning towards the Syrian regime, with talks of a future meeting with Assad and potential acceptance of the durability of the Assad regime. Despite the obstacles and red light from allies, Turkey still insists on a future military intervention to the North. Regionally, Turkey softened its position towards Israel and the GCC, attempting to gather a new regional momentum while

at least partially giving up its bid for regional middle power. US also softened its position towards Saudi Arabia and continued Trump's policies of for negotiating for better relations between Israel and the Arab Middle East. It also softened its economic pressure on Syria that had started with 2019 Caesar Act. It turns a blind eye to the Arab states re-engagement with Assad regime. Iran and Turkey's military presence will be controversial over the coming months. Iran is already using that presence in Syria to engage in clandestine conflicts with US forces to send a message to Israel.

Turkey-US bilateral relation may converge through this parallel softening towards the Assad regime and the domestic need of both countries to not engage in lengthy military frictions in the region. As US pays more attention to Asia and the rivalry with China, it needs the Syrian civil war shortened and not prolonged. Turkey entering the election season, also needs some settlement in Syria, especially to turn the refugee issue into a less damaging one for the current office holders. The main divergence will remain US-YPG relations which may change form if Assad regime consolidates itself further and pushes Iran's military presence somewhat to the fringes of the civil war zones. If it does not change form, this issue will continue to be a thorn in the bilateral relations, even in the case of electoral change in Turkey, due to the nationalist streak rising in Turkish politics. Another divergence in Syria may come from Turkey controlled zones and their future.

Turkey engages in construction projects in these zones, investing in multiple ways to these territories. So, if the Gulf-centric order decides to contain Turkey and Iran in Syria's future rebuilding, and if US continues to support that order as it seems to be doing at the moment, this containment of Turkey may be another divergence in bilateral relations, originating in Syria.

Syria presents both points of divergence and convergence for bilateral relations. The weight of the former will be determined by the coming changes in domestic electoral politics in Turkey as well as the pace and direction of the new regional order. The global dimension of the Syrian civil war, with Russian and Iranian presence may be affected by the changes in the regional order. Either way changes and developments in the global dimension will be slower than the domestic and regional levels.

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Altunışık, Meliha. "Change In Turkey's Foreign Policy: Global Shifts and Domestic Politics" in The Routledge Handbook Of Diplomacy And Statecraft, ed. B.J.C. McKercher, London: Routledge, 2022.

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