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Issue Brief

Türkiye's Evolving Engagement with Syria

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Summary

Following the overthrow of Assad's regime in Syria by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in December 2024, Türkiye has been strategically positioning itself as a key player in Syria's reconstruction and political stabilisation efforts, thereby enhancing its regional influence in West Asia.

Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made efforts in 2024 to normalise relations with Syria’s then-President Bashar al-Assad when the primary military allies of Damascus—Iran and Russia—faced significant resource constraints due to their involvement in other regional conflicts. However, Bashar al-Assad’s precondition for resuming diplomatic discussions with Erdoğan was to demand that Turkish military forces fully withdraw from the four northern Syrian districts under their control. As both leaders could not reconcile the diverging interests, this attempted rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus failed.

However, in a significant development, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant), a former affiliate of al Qaeda, dislodged Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024, marking an end to the Baath Party’s rule, which had been in power since 1963. Given that Ankara was backing HTS and other Syrian opposition forces for a long period, the present transitional situation in Syria is being harnessed by Türkiye to increase its influence and stake in Syria.

For instance, Syria’s transitional government has appointed several key officials with strong Turkish educational and professional backgrounds, including the new Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al Shibani, a 37-year-old academic who was pursuing his PhD at Istanbul’s Sabahattin Zaim University with research focusing on Turkish–Syrian relations before his appointment in December 2024.¹ This pattern extends to other significant appointments. Aleppo Governor Azzam al Gharib holds a master’s degree from Türkiye’s Bingöl University while Ayse Eldibs, heading the Women’s Affairs Office previously led a Türkiye-based Syrian organisation. Such appointments can potentially strengthen Turkish-Syrian diplomatic and societal ties, with al Shibani’s Turkish language proficiency and cultural understanding particularly noted as assets for bilateral relations.

On 23 December 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, speaking after a cabinet meeting in Ankara, articulated key positions regarding Türkiye’s engagement with Syria.² Erdoğan specifically confirmed the existence of close dialogue with Syria’s de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, while announcing an anticipated increase in diplomatic visits to Syria. The Turkish President’s statement was notably specific in pledging comprehensive support to the Syrian people to consolidate their gains.

¹ Berra Ince, “[What Damascus’s New Cabinet Reveals about Türkiye’s Soft Power in Syria](#)”, *TRT World*, 26 December 2024.

² “[Erdoğan Says Turkey in Close Dialogue with Syria’s de facto Leader](#)”, *Reuters*, 24 December 2024.

Recent High-level Diplomatic Visits

On 12 December 2024, Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin visited Damascus to hold talks with the new rebel leadership in Syria.³ It is worth recalling that diplomatic ties between Türkiye and Syria have been cut since 2012. However, Türkiye reopened its embassy in Syria on 14 December 2024, becoming the first country to do so after the overthrow of the Assad regime,⁴ and Ankara is now constantly engaging in high-level discussions.

On 22 December 2024, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited Damascus and met the new Syrian administration leader, Ahmed Al Sharaa, to discuss significant developments regarding Syria’s future governance. Al Sharaa highlighted Türkiye’s consistent support of the Syrian revolution since its inception while outlining critical steps towards state consolidation.⁵ During the joint news conference, Al Sharaa noted that strategic relations will evolve between Ankara and Damascus across political, economic and social domains, emphasising strengthening bilateral relations and Syria’s institutional development.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of Al Sharaa’s position was his firm stance on weapons control, asserting that all armed groups, including those in the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)/ the People’s Protection Units (YPG)-controlled territories, must be disarmed in favour of centralised state authority. Interestingly, on 24 December 2024, Al Sharaa reached an agreement with previous rebel faction chiefs to dissolve all groups and consolidate them under the defence ministry.⁶

These actions align with Ankara’s security objectives, particularly regarding PKK/YPG presence. However, it raises crucial questions about the practical challenges of disarmament and integration of various factions into a unified state structure, as the daunting task of avoiding future clashes between these myriad groups will remain for the new Syrian administration.

Prospects of Cooperation

Bilateral discussion between Al Sharaa and Fidan also touched on practical challenges in Syria’s reconstruction while advocating for the removal of international sanctions that were imposed in response to the previous regime’s actions against

³ [“Turkish Spy Chief Makes Symbolic Visit to Pray in Damascus after Assad’s Fall”](#), *Kathimerini*, 12 December 2024.

⁴ Orestes Georgiou Daniel, [“Turkey Reopens its Embassy in Syria for the First Time in 12 years”](#), *Euronews*, 14 December 2024.

⁵ Esra Tekin and Seda Sevensan, [“Syria’s Territorial Integrity ‘Non-negotiable,’ No Place for PKK/YPG Terror Group in Country: Turkish Foreign Minister”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 23 December 2024.

⁶ [“Syrian Ex-rebel Factions Agree to Merge Under Defence Ministry”](#), *Reuters*, 25 December 2024.

civilians. There are various sanctions in place against Syria. International sanctions against Syria comprise extensive multilateral measures imposed by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations. Initially enacted in 1979—when the US designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism—sanctions expanded significantly following the 2011 civil war outbreak. The 2020 Caesar Act marked a notable measure, targeting both the Assad regime and foreign entities engaging with Syria.⁷

On 6 January 2025, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued General License No. 24, effective till 7 July 2025, which authorises specific transactions with Syrian governing institutions following 8 December 2024.⁸ The license permits energy-related transactions and personal remittances to Syria, while maintaining restrictions on transactions involving military entities, Russian or Iranian interests, and certain blocked persons. According to OFAC, the licence has been issued to help Syria maintain essential services and continued governance, including the provision of energy, electricity, water and sanitation.

For Türkiye, as a neighbouring country with significant economic and security interests in the region, this license could facilitate more structured commercial engagement with Syria. Turkish businesses may find new opportunities to participate in Syria’s energy sector within the prescribed limitations. This could strengthen Türkiye’s regional economic position while potentially providing a framework for more normalised cross-border relations.

According to Türkiye’s Energy and Natural Resources Minister Alparslan Bayraktar, a Turkish delegation reached Damascus on 30 December 2024 to evaluate Syria’s energy infrastructure and discuss opportunities for cooperation and assistance. Bayraktar identified electrical infrastructure as Syria’s critical challenge, emphasising the development of viable solutions to address power supply deficiencies. He proposed the exportation of electricity from Türkiye to both Syria and Lebanon to ameliorate the acute energy shortages affecting neighbouring nations.⁹ Notably, Türkiye is already providing electricity and energy services to some regions of Syria.

Türkiye’s Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, Abdulkadir Uraloglu, outlined a plan to assist in rebuilding Syria’s critical infrastructure. The initiative

⁷ Dilara Zengin Okay and Ata Ufuk Şeker, [“Syria’s Economy Burdened by Sanctions”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 23 December 2024.

⁸ [“U.S. Treasury Issues Additional Sanctions Relief for Syrian People”](#), Press Release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 6 January 2025.

⁹ Handan Kazanci, [“Turkish Delegation in Damascus Begins Assessment of Syria’s Energy Needs”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2024.

encompasses the rehabilitation of Syria’s airports, particularly Damascus and Aleppo, which currently operate with severely outdated technology and without proper radar systems.¹⁰ The plan also includes restoring the historic Hejaz Railway connection and improving strategic highways M4 and M5, which are crucial for regional connectivity and economic development. Uraloglu further emphasised Syria’s strategic importance, particularly regarding Mediterranean access, and indicated Türkiye’s intention to pursue maritime jurisdiction agreements similar to its arrangement with Libya. It shows Türkiye’s significant strategic interest in rebuilding Syria’s infrastructure while expanding its regional influence through major transportation and development projects.

According to Turkish Trade Minister Omer Bolat’s statement at the Türkiye Exporters Assembly meeting, Türkiye anticipates significant bilateral developments with Syria across trade, investment and reconstruction sectors. The minister highlighted the evolution of trade figures, noting an increase in Turkish exports to Syria from US\$ 1.8 billion in 2011 to US\$ 2.2 billion in 2024, while imports from Syria decreased from US\$ 660 million to US\$ 438 million during the same period.¹¹

The Free Trade Agreement between the two nations, initially signed and ratified in 2007, was suspended due to the Syrian civil war in 2011. Turkish authorities are now finalising preparations for both a new Free Trade Agreement and customs protocols in collaboration with Syrian officials, aiming to maximise bilateral economic relations in support of a robust Syria.¹²

It is also worth noting that Jordan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Major General Yousef Huneiti, and General Intelligence Department Director Major General Ahmad Husni met Erdoğan on 6 January 2025 and held talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler, and Head of the Turkish National Intelligence Agency Ibrahim Kalin. Discussions focused on the roadmap to support the Syrian people in rebuilding their country, ensuring its unity, independence and sovereignty, and preserving the rights of all components of the Syrian people.¹³

Fidan highlighted that discussions took place on what Türkiye and Jordan can do together against the threat of Daesh in Syria and the region. Notably, Safadi remarked that “Jordan is coordinating with Türkiye to contribute to increasing security and stability in the region in light of the challenges we face” and specified

¹⁰ Gokhan Ergocun, [“Türkiye Ready to Repair, Rebuild Infrastructure in War-torn Syria, Says Minister”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 24 December 2024.

¹¹ Mucahithan Avcioglu, [“Türkiye to Enter into 'Great Move' with Syria in Trade: Trade Minister”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 3 January 2025.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ [“Turkey’s Erdogan Receives High-Profile Jordanian Delegation, Reaffirms Ankara-Amman Relations”](#), *The Jordan Times*, 6 January 2025.

that “anything that threatens Türkiye’s security also threatens the security of the region”.¹⁴ A joint roadmap has been made, especially regarding transport, agriculture and food security in Syria. The voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees living in Türkiye and Jordan to their homeland was also one of the major agendas in the discussion.

PKK and Conflict Resolution

During his recent visit to Syria, Fidan affirmed that Türkiye’s

priority for Syria is to ensure stability and security in the country, eliminate terrorism, reach national reconciliation, achieve economic development and create the conditions that will enable Syrians, who have been separated from their country for years, to return to their homeland.¹⁵

For Fidan and Al-Sharaa, the central focus of the talks was the establishment of robust governmental institutions, particularly the creation of a Defense Ministry and the principle of state monopoly over military forces.

Türkiye considers PKK as a terrorist organisation which has been designated as such by many countries, including the European Union (since 2004), the United States, Canada and Australia.¹⁶ Historically, the PKK operated with Syrian support until 1998, when its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, fled the country and was subsequently captured. He now serves a life sentence in Türkiye. Öcalan has shown receptivity to the Nationalist Movement Party’s (MHP) initiative, indicating a willingness to facilitate the organisation’s potential disarmament.

This development manifested through communications via DEM Party parliamentarians during a sanctioned visit to his Imralı prison facility on 29 December 2024.¹⁷ The engagement, representing the second such interaction following an earlier meeting with his nephew, emerged in response to MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli’s unprecedented proposition for Öcalan’s temporary release to address Parliament regarding PKK disarmament. This diplomatic overture has received endorsement from the ruling coalition, comprising the AK Party and MHP, potentially signalling a significant shift in Türkiye’s approach to conflict resolution.

¹⁴ [“Türkiye Believes PKK/YPG’s ‘Eradication’ in Syria Imminent”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 6 January 2025.

¹⁵ Seda Sevcen [“Turkish Foreign Minister Calls His Visit to Syria a Step Toward a Hopeful Future”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 23 December 2024.

¹⁶ [“PKK”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye.

¹⁷ [“PKK’s Öcalan Confirms Support for Terror-free Türkiye Initiative”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 29 December 2024.

On 9 December 2024, in a cabinet meeting declaration, Erdoğan made two particularly pointed assertions regarding the security and territorial integrity of Syria. First, he explicitly stated that “there is no place for any terrorist organisation, including Daesh and the PKK”, in Syria.¹⁸ Second, he emphasised Türkiye’s unwavering line in protecting Syria’s territorial integrity and unity under all circumstances. This carefully worded position clearly articulates Türkiye’s security priorities in the region. Erdoğan indicated on 6 January 2025 that Türkiye stands prepared to intervene in Syria in the event of state fragmentation following what was described as the opposition’s displacement of Assad’s government in the preceding month.¹⁹

Regional security in Kurdish-controlled areas is maintained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which incorporates YPG among its components. The Turkish government categorises the YPG as a terrorist entity, asserting that it maintains connections with the PKK. Erdoğan warned that “the only fate that awaits those who prefer terror and violence is to be buried in the ground with their weapons.”²⁰ President Erdoğan’s declaration indicates a readiness to pursue military intervention in Syria regardless of international reactions.

Ankara’s assertive stance could significantly impact regional stability in several ways. It may lead to increased military operations in northern Syria, potentially disrupting the existing security framework maintained by the SDF. Also, it could strain relations with Western allies who have historically supported the SDF in counter-terrorism operations. Moreover, there remains a potential for further deterioration in the already complex relationship between Türkiye and Syria’s Kurdish population.

Refugee Repatriation Prospects

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syrian refugees have expressed measured optimism about potential repatriation. According to UNHCR, while the development has sparked renewed hope for return among many, most refugees are taking a prudent “wait-and-see” approach. Their willingness to return is contingent upon three primary factors: the stabilisation of the post-Assad political

¹⁸ Seda Sevenscan and Serdar Dincel, [“Syria’s Territorial Integrity Must ‘Absolutely’ be Protected: Turkish President Erdogan”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 9 December 2024.

¹⁹ Merve Yıldızalp, Mümin Altaş, Fatma Sevinç Çetin and Muhammed Nuri Erdoğan, [“President Erdoğan: We Will Not Consent to the Disintegration of Syria. If We See a Risk, We Will Take the Necessary Steps”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 6 January 2025.

²⁰ Ibid.

landscape, security assurances in their original communities in Syria, and the restoration of fundamental services and infrastructure.²¹

Table 1: Total Persons of Concern (Syrian Refugees) by Country of Asylum

Country	Population
Türkiye	2,901,478
Lebanon	768,353
Jordan	611,473
Iraq	301,494
Egypt	148,439
Other (North Africa)	43,283

Source: [Operational Data Portal](#), UNHCR, 31 December 2024.

As shown in Table 1, Syrian refugees are distributed across several neighbouring countries, with the largest populations being 2.90 million in Türkiye (registered by the Turkish government) and approximately 1.88 million spread across Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon (registered by UNHCR). A smaller population of approximately 43,283 Syrian refugees are registered in North Africa. Given that Türkiye hosts the largest Syrian refugee population, it will be playing a crucial and decisive role in any repatriation dialogue or process with Syrian transitional administration and regional stakeholders.

Conclusion

The political landscape in Syria has undergone a dramatic change following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, fundamentally altering Türkiye’s strategic position. Türkiye’s swift diplomatic engagement, marked by the reopening of its embassy and high-level visits, demonstrates its proactive approach to shaping Syria’s future trajectory. The receptiveness of PKK leader Öcalan to disarmament initiatives, coupled with Türkiye’s involvement in Syria’s reconstruction efforts, particularly in energy and transport infrastructure, indicates Türkiye’s growing influence in post-Assad Syria.

Türkiye is positioned to play a crucial role in Syria’s political future, leveraging its military presence in northern Syria, influence over various opposition groups, and

²¹ [“Regional Refugee Community Feedback about Developments in Syria”](#), UNHCR, 19 December 2024.

status as host to nearly 3 million Syrian refugees. The Turkish government’s engagement with Syria’s new leadership, particularly in areas of security cooperation and economic reconstruction, suggests that Türkiye will be a key stakeholder in Syria’s institutional rebuilding and governance structure. Türkiye’s approach to support new transitional administration in integrating various armed groups under centralised state authority and its potential role in facilitating refugee return further cement its significance in Syria’s political process.

Given these recent developments, Türkiye’s enhanced role in Syria has considerably elevated its regional profile in West Asia. By positioning itself as a key mediator and stabilising force in post-Assad Syria, Türkiye has strengthened its diplomatic leverage across the region. Türkiye’s ability to balance various interests—including managing refugee issues, coordinating with different political factions, and contributing to Syria’s economic recovery—has established it as one of the crucial players in shaping West Asian geopolitics.

While the path to normalisation between Türkiye and Syria remains fraught with challenges, the ongoing diplomatic efforts and proposed initiatives suggest cautious optimism. The success of such initiatives will likely depend on the ability of both nations to navigate their complex mutual security concerns, address the Syrian refugee issue humanely, and find common ground in combating mutual threats. As this situation evolves, it will undoubtedly have significant implications for regional stability and the broader geopolitical and geo-economic landscape of the West Asia region and beyond.

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