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## **Erdoğan and Asad’s Slow Rapprochement: Too Weak to Make a Deal**

Dr. Joel D. Parker

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Asad have both been in power in their respective countries for more than two decades. Erdoğan and Asad maintained a very intimate, good neighborly relationship up until Turkey sided clearly with the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria in the Arab Spring. Even then, it took time for Erdoğan to fully turn against Asad. Turkey went from observer to active participant in the Syrian uprising in a matter of months in 2011, as Erdoğan famously said: “Suriye bizim iç meselemizdir,” [Syria is our internal matter].<sup>1</sup> Driven by Neo-Ottomanist and Muslim Brotherhood originated ideals, Turkey pivoted to support of the Sunni-based Syrian efforts to overthrow Bashar al-Asad and his Alawi-dominated Ba’thist regime. However, following a shift in policy in 2022, Erdoğan has invited Asad to visit Turkey on several occasions since mid-2023 including this past June. Each time, Asad has declined, saying that he will only meet Erdoğan on “his terms”<sup>2</sup> and if “core” issues are addressed.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it seems that until Turkey ends its occupation in the northern Syrian cantons of Jarabulus, Afrin, Ras al-Ayn and Tel al-Abyad, Asad will not proceed with any type of normalization. In addition, Turkey is the sole backer of the rebel groups in northeastern Syria, and the area they control is the prime destination for Syrian refugees who wish to return to ‘liberated’ Syria.<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that Erdoğan is not able to cut them off completely given they are both loyal and useful in countering Kurdish expansion,<sup>5</sup> while Asad is not able to defeat them on the battlefield. So, the rapprochement will have to wait.

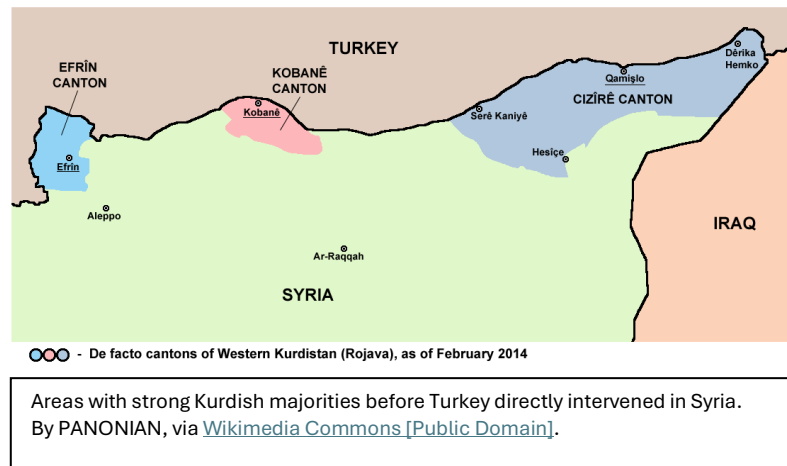
In the past decade, Turkey became the dominant patron and host of Syrian refugees, Syrian opposition political organs, and operates in certain areas of northern Syria as an indirect ruling force. A turning point occurred in 2015-2016 culminating with Operation Euphrates Shield,<sup>6</sup> which brought Turkish forces directly into Syria to prevent the Kurds from forming a large zone of influence along the Turkish border – though on paper the operation was primarily launched against ISIS. Today Turkey directly controls half of the border between Turkey and Syria, and it is unclear whether Turkey is willing to fully give up its influence over rebel groups in northern Syria. However, it seeks to return many of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees to Syria while at the same time ensure that the Kurds are not moving towards greater autonomy.

### **Turkey's Clash with Syria's Kurdish Minority**

Bashar al-Asad inherited the role from his late father, Hafez, with rubber-stamp elections since July 2000. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected prime minister in 2003 and became president in 2014 through Turkey's democratic process. Even before Erdoğan came to office, Syria opted to restart the relationship with Turkey and turned against the PKK after years of tacit support, starting with the expulsion of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1998. The leftist revolutionary Kurdish leader, Öcalan, tried to lead a rebellion of the Kurds in Turkey in the late 1970s, where they comprise about 20 percent of the population. Tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians were killed in the ensuing violence. Erdoğan was determined to end this conflict and join the EU. While talks were ongoing in Oslo between Turkey and the PKK for a peace accord, one of the main worries Erdoğan had with the outbreak of the uprising in Syria was a resurgence of violence with the strengthening of the PYD (Syria's branch of the PKK).<sup>7</sup>

Since 2011, Turkey has tried to juggle three distinct goals that have at times clashed with each other: supporting the Syrian rebellion against Asad, managing the Syrian refugee crisis, and limiting Kurdish steps towards autonomy in Syria. Turkey's position as a key NATO member and host to a number of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood opposition members enabled Ankara to be a key player in backing the Syrian revolt with support from the EU and US in the early years of the civil war. However, since 2015 when Russia directly entered the battlefield, Turkey joined the negotiating table with Russia and Iran in the Astana talks to resolve the Syrian crisis. Turkey along with several Arab states and covert support from NATO countries was able to create an autonomous region in Syria through cooperation with dozens of groups of Syrian rebels.

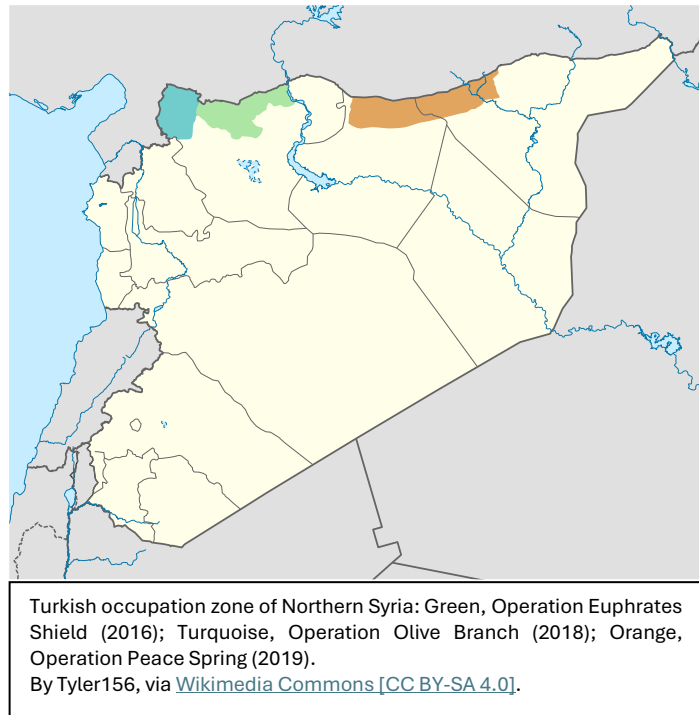
Despite backing the rebellion against Asad, Turkey feared that Kurdish groups in favor of Kurdish autonomy would inspire the PKK in Turkey. So, it worked to limit Kurdish autonomy especially in Afrin and Kobane. However, the northwestern area of Syria



near Qamishli is where the Syrian Democratices (SDF) operate under American patronage. The SDF is not a Kurdish force, but many of its members and officers are Kurdish Syrians, and they played a key role in containing the Islamic State. There are about 10,000 IS fighters being held in SDF-run prisons in addition to tens of thousands of family members that were part of IS who remain in the custody of the SDF at locations such as al-Hol, which is both a displaced persons camp and a prison.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, it's possible that the Kurdish groups will be able to negotiate limited autonomy if Erdoğan abandons Turkish holdings in Syria and allows the Asad regime to return.

Turkey was a host to Syrian opposition figures and the primary destination for Syrian refugees in the first years of the Civil War in Syria. This period has received a good bit of attention from researchers and journalists. In August 2016, nearly a year after Russian forces entered Syria to intervene on behalf of Asad's failing regime, Turkish forces entered Syria directly for the first time with Operation Euphrates Shield. Two subsequent offensives over the next three years occurred with Operation Olive Branch in 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019. These moves were designed to block Kurdish forces from consolidating their various pockets of influence from the border with Iraq to Afrin, which was seen as a threat to Turkish security. In addition, Turkey established close economic ties with mostly non-Kurdish Syrians in occupied areas (including ethnic Arabs and Turkoman groups), leading to the usage of Turkish telecommunications, currency and even health and education services. This also helped establish links between Syrians inside Turkey and those in the rebel-held areas of the north of Syria. These areas are still very unsafe, as militia groups carry out kidnappings for ransom, and drug abuse has become a part of everyday life.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey played a major role in driving out ethnic Kurds in the Afrin area of northern Syria, which paved the way for a deal with the Asad regime in 2018 to expel Syrian fighters and their families from the area of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus. Rebels supported by Gulf States like Qatar and Saudi Arabia had survived there despite constant bombing, artillery fire, and even chemical attacks. The Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War in September 2015 enabled the Syrian regime to tighten the siege



on rebels near Damascus and in several other key pockets in the southern areas of Syria, leading to the consolidation of power by the end of the decade.

### **The Turn Towards Asad in 2022**

Over the course of 2022, Turkey began to establish direct ties with the Syrian regime with Russian encouragement. This led to the August series of meetings in Damascus with Hakan Fidan, the director of Turkish intelligence (MİT).<sup>10</sup> Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu publicly called for reconciliation between Turkey and Asad in August 2022 following his meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad the year prior. The most significant demand of Syria was the end of the Turkish occupation of Syrian territory and for Turkey to stop supporting rebels in Syria. Turkey demanded a complete destruction of Western-supported YPG/SDF forces as well as the return of Syrian refugees to Syria. The announcement of reconciliatory talks sparked furious demonstrations in multiple Syrian cities in which Turkish flags were burnt in Turkey's Syrian stronghold, Azaz. The multiple anti-Asad rebel forces, including ISIS terrorists and other extremist groups that were supported by Turkey and used primarily against Kurdish forces and occasionally against Asad, felt betrayed. In December 2022, Syrian and Turkish Defense and intelligence Ministers met in Moscow for talks for the first time since 2011. Turkey lifted economic sanctions against Syria in March 2023, and it seemed that reconciliation between Erdoğan and Asad could be near.

On the way back from the SCO 2024 Summit,<sup>11</sup> President Erdoğan gave an extensive interview in which he addressed multiple issues. Amongst them he addressed a question about resuming the four-way dialogue between Turkey, Syria, Russia and Iran. Erdoğan stated that they may soon extend an invitation to both Putin and Asad which may mark the beginning of a new era of dialogue. He also addressed the anti-Syrian refugee attacks in Kayseri, which were among the worst in a long series of racist attacks against Syrians in Turkey. Turkish citizens burned properties and cars of Syrians while chanting slogans for them to go back to their country. This fueled unrest in Syria, where protesters in the northern Aleppo province smashed trucks with Turkish plates and burned Turkish flags. In return Turkish forces opened live fire, killing five and injuring at least 40 others, according to media reports in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

### **Turkish Elections in 2023**

One of the key issues that appeared prominently in the Turkish elections was that of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. For the first years of the Civil War, Erdoğan was one of the most important figures welcoming refugees to Turkey. Initially, Turkey was a crossing ground for many refugees heading to Europe, where Germany was initially open to asylum seekers fleeing the brutality of the Asad regime's war against the rebellion. However, the EU shifted its policies when the numbers grew from thousands to hundreds of thousands of Syrians, and leaders in the EU asked Turkey to close the gateway to Europe. Erdoğan found this was a great bargaining chip and used the refugee card for some time. However, inside Turkey in Istanbul and other large cities, the Syrian population was seen as a foreign element, and xenophobia grew.

The Turkish opposition leader in the presidential elections of 2023, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, of the CHP, tapped into this xenophobia and exposed a weak side to Erdoğan's Syria policy – namely, that Erdoğan was primarily responsible for allowing so many Syrians to stay in Turkey. This combined with a series of economic woes, including rampant inflation and a devaluation of the Turkish lira. There was talk in the period leading up to the May election that Kılıçdaroğlu would have made peace with Asad and worked closely to repatriate the Syrian refugees as soon as possible. This, in fact, gave Asad a reason not to work directly with Erdoğan. However, the tragic earthquake of February 2023 also forced Erdoğan to focus on domestic matters and pause the moves toward normalization that he had already begun. However, the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel further shifted Erdoğan's foreign policy. If anything, downgraded ties with Israel, and even threatening to militarily intervene on behalf of Hamas,<sup>13</sup> shows that he views the Syria-Russia-Iran axis as his natural direction, if he can break with the Syrian rebels in the northeast.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *TRT Haber*, “Erdoğan: Suriye Bizim İç Meselemizdir,” August 6, 2011, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/erdogan-suriye-bizim-ic-meselemizdir-4907.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Sabah*, “Syria’s Asad refuses to meet Erdoğan ‘on his terms’,” August 9, 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/syrias-Asad-refuses-to-meet-erdogan-on-his-terms/news>.

<sup>3</sup> *Reuters*, “Syria's Asad says will only meet Turkey's Erdogan if 'core' issues addressed,” July 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-Asad-says-will-only-meet-turkeys-erdogan-if-core-issues-addressed-2024-07-15/>.

<sup>4</sup> Salwa Abdalrahman, “At risk in Lebanon, Syrians gamble on smuggling routes to Idlib,” *Syria Direct*, July 8, 2024, <https://syriadirect.org/at-risk-in-lebanon-syrians-gamble-on-smuggling-routes-to-idlib/>.

<sup>5</sup> Malin Mohammad, “As Ankara and Damascus inch closer, northeastern Syria stands to lose,” *Syria Direct*, July 16, 2024, <https://syriadirect.org/as-ankara-and-damascus-inch-closer-northeastern-syria-stands-to-lose/>. The article notes that Turkey officially calls the SDF a “terrorist” organization.

<sup>6</sup> Sinan Ülgen and Can Kasapoğlu, “Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and Gains,” *Carnegie Endowment*, January 19, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/01/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains?lang=en&center=europe>.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed: Atrocities, War, and the Failure of International Diplomacy* (Columbia University Press, 2022) 16-18.

<sup>8</sup> Leila Molana-Allen, “Prisons holding ISIS members in Syria a breeding ground for radicalization,” *PBS News Hour*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/prisons-holding-isis-members-in-syria-a-breeding-ground-for-radicalization-officials-say>.

<sup>9</sup> In July there were 28 kidnappings in Afrin alone, reported by Kurdish media, *ANF*, “Occupation forces abducted at least 28 people in Afrin in July,” July 29, 2024, <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-syria/occupation-forces-abducted-at-least-28-people-in-afrin-in-july-74514>; On drug abuse and domestic violence, see Bayan Dhiab, “Cycle of violence: Addiction fuels abuse of women in northern Syria,” *Syria Direct*, September 13, 2023, <https://syriadirect.org/cycle-of-violence-addiction-fuels-abuse-of-women-in-northern-syria/>.

<sup>10</sup> Orhan Coşkun and Laila Bassam, “With a Russian nudge, Turkey and Syria step up contacts,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-with-russian-nudge-turkey-syria-step-up-contacts-2022-09-15/>.

<sup>11</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization met July 3-4 in Astana, Kazakhstan, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024\\_SCO\\_summit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_SCO_summit).

<sup>12</sup> *North Press Agency*, “Turkey’s Erdogan threatens Syrians who burned country’s flag,” July 3, 2024, <https://npasyria.com/en/115114/>.

<sup>13</sup> Dean Shmuel Elmas, “Should Israel take Turkey's invasion threat seriously,” *Globes English*, July 29, 2024, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-should-israel-take-turkeys-invasion-threat-seriously-1001485392>.