



TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker
Vol. 9, No. 1, January- February 2025

The Turkey-Qatar Axis and its Impact on Post-Asad Syria

Dr. Jonathan Ghariani

Turkey's evolving role in Syria has reshaped the regional balance of power, positioning Ankara as a pivotal player in the post-Asad landscape. From its contentious history with the Asad regime to its assertive military interventions in northern Syria, Turkey aspires to attain regional hegemony in addition to securing its borders. Backed by Qatar's economic and diplomatic support, Ankara is leveraging this partnership to reconstruct Syria's infrastructure and expand its influence. However, Turkey's growing dominance may clash with Israel and other regional powers depending on how the situation develops in Syria.

Historical Context

Turkey's relations with Syria have fluctuated in recent decades, sinking during the 1990s over Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorist group.¹ Tensions thawed when Damascus was deterred by Turkey's tangible brinkmanship on its border leading to Hafez al-Asad's decision to expel Abdullah Öcalan, the founding member of the militant PKK, in 1998 in an attempt to mend fences with Turkey.

Close relations lasted until the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian civil war. Turkey called for the resignation of Bashar al-Asad and aided the armed Syrian rebellion against the regime. Concerned about a potential Kurdish state in northern Syria, Ankara launched three military operations against the Kurdish Democratic Union of Syria-People's Defense Units (PYD-YPG) militants; Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and lastly, Operation Peace Spring (2019). These interventions were designed to remove PYD-YPG presence from the Turkish border in northwestern Syria, creating a buffer zone guarded by Turkey's main proxy, the Syrian National Army (SNA).²

In this regard, the United States faced a dilemma as it supported the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) (an umbrella organization that also includes the PYD-YPG) efforts against ISIS and opposed Turkish military intervention in northern Syria under the Obama administration. Relations between Turkey and the United States nonetheless warmed in the first presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020). Indeed, Erdoğan momentarily convinced Trump to pull out US forces deployed in the SDF-held region potentially enabling him to take over the Kurdish-controlled lands. But Secretary of Defense Gen. Jim Mattis objected, and Trump backed down from his decision.³

Qatar, like Turkey, consistently supported of the Syrian uprising. Doha demanded the end of the Asad regime and provided financial, diplomatic, and military assistance to the various Syrian opposition groups, some affiliated with al-Qa'ida such as Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴ Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar, never challenged Turkish efforts to steer the revolution.

Turkey: The *de facto* Hegemonic Power in Syria

Erdoğan sought to rebuild ties with Syria in recent years, driven by three main objectives. First, he aimed to eliminate the threat posed by YPG and PYD forces along Turkey's border, which Ankara viewed as a significant security concern. Second, he sought to create favorable conditions for the safe return of millions of Syrian refugees who had fled to Turkey due to the conflict. Finally, Erdoğan sought to diminish Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, positioning Turkey as the dominant stakeholder in the region.⁵

The rapid fall of the Asad regime in late 2024 led to a reshuffling of the cards and provided Ankara with an opportunity to expand on these objectives. The return of Syrian refugees remains a top priority for Erdoğan. Turkey currently hosts more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees.⁶ The subsequent Iranian and eventual Russian withdrawal removed barriers to increased Turkish influence in Syria.⁷ Turkey became the main stakeholder and *de facto* regional hegemonic power in Syria, having militarily supported various rebel forces including the Syrian National Army and to a lesser extent, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group.

Today, Ankara's immediate goal is to remove the SDF and other Kurdish forces in northern Syria. The SDF made some concessions to the new Syrian regime and ceded some of its held territories including Deir Ez-Zor, retreating to east of the Euphrates.⁸ Turkey is planning major military operations to remove PYD/YPG presence at its border and drive the Kurdish militias 30 km away from the Syrian-Turkish border.⁹ These acts are part of Ankara's main goal to

force all the Kurdish militia groups to disarm, dissolve themselves, and merge with the new Syrian armed forces.¹⁰

Turkey aims to consolidate its influence in Syria and eventually turn Syria into a satellite/client state.¹¹ To do so, Ankara is helping in the reconstruction of Syria's critical infrastructure such as the Damascus and Aleppo airports but also its electricity supply and phone network.¹² For this reason, Erdoğan wants to quell any Kurdish independence aspirations and transform the Syrian society into a pro-Turkish one.¹³ Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, an expert on Turkey and senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), posits that Turkey has a Neo-Ottoman policy in Syria and in fact, considers this country to be a province rather than a fully independent state.¹⁴

The rivalry between Turkey and Iran is decades old and is likely to endure as Turkey is a Sunni regional power while Iran is a Shi'a-majority country. Israel and the US sided with Turkey with respect to limiting Iranian influence in Syria. Israel repeatedly struck Iranian assets in Syria since 2015 and the US assassinated Qassem Suleimani in 2020. In 2024, Israel significantly crippled its so-called 'Ring of Fire' by devastating two of its main proxies, Hamas in Gaza and Hizballah in Lebanon. Israeli air strikes against Iran's integrated air defense and missile production facilities following Iranian ballistic missile attacks on Israel pushed the war further away from Syria. The collapse of the Asad regime, which was Tehran's closest ally, was a heavy blow for the Islamic republic, halting its plan to militarily link Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria.

Due to crippling US and Western-backed sanctions, Iran has turned to Russia and China for diplomatic and economic support. By contrast, Turkey has long maintained close ties with the United States and Western Europe since becoming a NATO member in 1952.¹⁵ Turkey enjoys a significant qualitative edge – even if it was sacked from the F-35 program – in the diplomatic, military, and economics spheres while Iran is weakened internationally.¹⁶

Qatar's Soft Power Strategy in Syria

Like Turkey, Qatar has supported opposition forces in Syria since the start of its civil war in March 2011. Turkey's foreign policy is closely aligned with Qatar as Doha provides Ankara with both economic and political support. In contrast to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar never restored ties with the Asad regime and consistently recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the country.¹⁷

The fall of Syria's Asad represented a major setback for Iran and its proxies and will undoubtedly benefit the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and Qatar in particular. Qatar was the first nation to reopen its embassy in Damascus.¹⁸ The Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Khulaifi visited Syria in 2024, soon after the collapse of the Asad regime, and an invitation was extended to Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.¹⁹ By contrast, Iran does not enjoy close ties with any of the GCC states. Qatar, however, urged the GCC states to stress their neutrality in October 2024 when Iran attacked Israel with ballistic missiles.²⁰

The new Syrian foreign minister Asaad al-Shibani made an official visit to Doha accompanied by a large Syrian delegation and urged it to press the United States to lift Asad-era sanctions.²¹ The new regime will need Qatar funding for rebuilding Syria.²² Indeed Doha stated that it will rehabilitate ports damaged by Israeli air strikes.²³ Like Ankara, Doha maintained close ties with the Sunni Islamist political organization and militia HTS throughout the civil war.²⁴ It has also provided a large amount of humanitarian aid to Syria.²⁵

The Turks are also mulling opening a pipeline across Syria linking Qatar to Turkey in order to export natural gas to Europe.²⁶ Turkey has also offered large amounts of aid and electricity to Syria, proposing military assistance to the new regime.²⁷ Close cooperation between Turkey and Qatar in Syria might reignite old tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE who may try to use their economic leverage to thwart the Qatari-Turkish economic take-over of Syria.²⁸ Although very satisfied with Iran's ousting from Syria, Israel likewise has concerns about a new Turkish-Qatar axis between Erdoğan's recent trade boycott of Israel and the Qatar's longstanding refusal to normalize relations.

Israel and Turkey on a Collision Course?

Turkey and Israel have had a volatile relationship over time. Turkey was the first Muslim state to recognize Israel, and the countries forged a military partnership in the 1990s.²⁹ Since Operation Cast Lead and the Mavi Marmara incident, however, relations deteriorated (followed by a rapprochement in 2020) and again collapsed to an unprecedented level after Hamas-PIJ attacks on October 7 and the war in Gaza. Initially, Erdoğan believed Israel would only conduct a limited military operation along the lines of the 2014 Operation Protective Edge.³⁰ The intense decimation of Hamas however resulted in Erdoğan downgrading economic and diplomatic ties with Israel due to his ideological proximity with the terrorist group.³¹

Until 2023, both countries had converging interests in Syria. Israel's military activities were focused on pounding Iranian arms depot and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) positions in Syria. The situation might change if Israel helps arm the YPG.³² Incidentally, an unconfirmed report suggests that the Israeli government requested that the Biden administration create a buffer zone in northern Syria to protect the Kurds in order to contain Turkish expansion in the country.³³ While the Trump administration appears ready to withdraw US troops from Syria, and may favor Ankara, should Jerusalem provide military assistance to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, it could be interpreted by Ankara as a provocation.³⁴ Turkey's military actions against Kurdish forces might also add to tensions with Israel.³⁵

Turkey and Israel's interests generally did not clash in Syria in the past decade as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was focused on southern Syria while the Turkish military was deployed in the north. To thwart the transfer of Iranian weapons to Hizballah in Lebanon and to prevent Jihadi terrorist infiltrations from Syria, Israel took over the Syrian buffer zone in the Golan Heights.³⁶ Turkey's close ties with the new government in Damascus effectively give Turkey freedom of action throughout Syria. To avoid confrontation, Israel and Turkey are considering setting up a deconfliction mechanism like that established with the Russian military air base in Khmeimim to counter potential incidents. More broadly, these issues could be addressed via an Israeli-Turkish strategic dialogue concerning the future of Syria.³⁷

Experts, such as Professor Efrat Aviv, a specialist on Turkey and senior researcher at Bar Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, posit that war with Turkey may be a concerning development.³⁸ Corroborating her assessment, Israel's Nagel Committee Report on the defense budget and security strategy, warns that the IDF must be prepared for a potential military confrontation. It cautions that Turkey might form a more dangerous threat than Iran as it might use its Syrian proxies to restore its historic Ottoman influence in the Middle East.³⁹ Sunni Palestinian Islamist terror groups such as Hamas and Iranian-established Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) already have ties with Turkey and Qatar.⁴⁰

Another point of concern for Israel centers around what stance Syria's HTS-led government might adopt regarding the Palestinian issue. It is highly likely that the new authorities in Damascus will eventually demand an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights zone and request international pressure on Israel to comply. Recently Turkey denounced Israel's air strikes in Syria against weapon systems of the former Syrian military and the creation of the buffer zone. Israel responded by condemning Turkey's seizure of Syrian territory in the

northern part of the country.⁴¹ Turkey aims to establish permanent air force bases in Syria, and a Turkish military deployment in Syria in the future is a possibility.⁴² This could lead to a clash, as Turkey would be the prime defender of Syria, and Syria has yet to make peace with Israel.⁴³ As Turkey is a NATO ally and the IDF and the Turkish militaries are among the strongest in the world, both sides have an interest in preventing any friction that might lead to confrontation. Establishing a deconfliction mechanism and dialogue between the two countries would help stave off a potential war.⁴⁴

Dr Nimrod Goren, a senior fellow for Israel Affairs at the Middle East Institute based in Washington D.C, recommends that both countries improve communication channels on issues pertaining to Syria. Israel and Turkey have a shared interest in maintaining the stability of Syria.⁴⁵ A deconfliction mechanism to prevent military clashes in Syria is of utmost urgency. With Qatar bolstering Turkey's new role in Syria, forging direct communication or at least indirect communication via Washington should also be a priority for Israel.

Dr. Jonathan Ghariani holds a doctorate in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from University College London and is a visiting scholar at the Moshe Dayan Center. He previously held positions at the Schusterman Center (Brandeis University) and the Azrieli Institute (Concordia University), where he researched and published on Israel's relations with Morocco and Oman. His work focuses on Arab-Israeli diplomacy, geopolitical negotiations, and Middle Eastern current affairs.

*** The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.**

All rights reserved to the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) at Tel-Aviv University. Materials may be republished for non-commercial use only, with attribution to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the MDC's website, <http://www.dayan.org>

Notes

¹ Jonathan Ghariani, "[Comparing Israeli-Turkish Relations: The 1990s Versus Post-October 7](#)," *Turkeyscope: Insights on Turkish Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 11, 2024, 1-9.

² Branislav Stanicek, "[Turkey's Military Operation in Syria and its Impact on Relations with the EU](#)," *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, November 2019, 1-4.

³ Joseph Epstein, "[Examining U.S.-Turkish Relations Post-October 7th](#)," *TurkeyScope: Insights on Turkish Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 6, December 11, 2024, p. 1-8.

⁴ Steven Merley, "[Evidence on Global Islamist Terrorism](#)," *UK Parliament Committees*, February 26, 2018, 1-4.

⁵ Alper Coşkun, "[Türkiye Has a Wish List in Syria. It Should Tread Lightly](#)," *Emissary*, December 19, 2024.

⁶ Henri J. Barkey, "[What Role Is Turkey Playing in Syria's Civil War?](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*, December 6, 2024.

-
- ⁷ Nadeen Ebrahim and Tim Lister, [“Spike in Russian Flights from Syria to Libyan Desert Base as Moscow Eyes New Mediterranean Hub.”](#) *CNN*, December 31, 2024.
- ⁸ Alper Coşkun, [“Türkiye Has a Wish List in Syria. It Should Tread Lightly.”](#) Op cit., 5.
- ⁹ [“Turkey has Turned Syria Into its New Province - Why Turkey Strengthens its Navy?”](#) *i24News (YouTube Channel)*, January 9, 2024.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Keren Setton, [“Erdoğan’s Policies in Syria Bring Turkey and Israel Closer to Confrontation.”](#) *Themedia.org*, January 5, 2025.
- ¹² Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, [“Turkey’s Vision Transforms Post-Assad Syria.”](#) *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, January 14, 2025.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ [“Turkey has Turned Syria into its New Province - Why Turkey Strengthens its Navy?”](#) Op cit., 9.
- ¹⁵ Meir Javedanfar, [“Here’s Why Erdoğan’s Turkey Makes Khamenei Uneasy.”](#) *Mideast Journal*, December 19, 2024.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Joze Pelayo, [“What Role Will the Gulf States Play in Shaping the New Syria?”](#) *Atlantic Council*, December 24, 2024.
- ¹⁸ Jennifer Gnana, [“Qatar to Reopen Embassy in Syria After 13 Years.”](#) *Al-Monitor*, December 11, 2024.
- ¹⁹ Mohammad Sio, [“Syria’s New Administration Leader Says Qatar to Have Active Role in Country’s Development Process.”](#) *AA*, December 24, 2024.
- ²⁰ *Reuters*, [“Gulf ministers stress neutrality in conflict with Israel to Iranian counterpart.”](#) October 9, 2024.
- ²¹ [“Syria’s Foreign Minister Meets with Qatari Counterpart Ahead of Visits to Jordan, UAE.”](#) *The Times of Israel*, January 5, 2025.
- ²² Lior Ben Ari, [“Take Me, Al Golani: New Syrian Leader Wooed by Many Countries. Leaders.”](#) *Ynet*, January 1, 2025.
- ²³ Ilan Zelayat and Yoel Guzansky, [“Syria as an Arena of Regional Interest and Competition.”](#) *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, January 9, 2025.
- ²⁴ Jennifer Gnana, [“Qatar to Reopen Embassy in Syria After 13 Years.”](#) *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2024.
- ²⁵ Ibrahim al-Khaze, [“Qatar Dispatches Two More Aid Planes to Post-Assad Syria.”](#) *AA*, December 20, 2024.
- ²⁶ Zelayat and Guzansky, [“Syria as an Arena of Regional Interest and Competition.”](#) Op cit., 23.
- ²⁷ Huseyin Hayatsever, [“Turkey Ready to Offer Military Training to Syria If New Administration Requests, Minister Says.”](#) *Reuters*, December 15, 2024.
- ²⁸ Zelayat and Guzansky, [“Syria as an Arena of Regional Interest and Competition.”](#) Op cit., 23.
- ²⁹ Jonathan Ghariani, [“Turkish-Israeli Relations: ‘The Golden Years’, 1991–2000.”](#) *Israel Affairs*, 30:1, January 19, 2024, 5-24, esp. 5.
- ³⁰ [“We Need to Talk About Turkey - With Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Nadav Eyal.”](#) *Call Me Back Podcast with Dan Senor*, January 14, 2025.
- ³¹ Keren Setton, [“Erdoğan’s Policies in Syria Bring Turkey and Israel Closer to Confrontation.”](#) *The Jerusalem Post*, January 6, 2025.
- ³² Lazar Berman, [“New Top Diplomat Sa’ar Calls for Boosting Kurdish Ties, Admits Failures in Amsterdam Response.”](#) *The Times of Israel*, November 10, 2025.
- ³³ Amberine Zaman, [“Turkey.”](#) *Al-Monitor*, January 3, 2025.
- ³⁴ Gallia Lindenstrauss, [“Israel’s Kurdish Dilemmas.”](#) *Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, January 1 2025.
- ³⁵ Shirit Avitan Cohen and Dudi Kogan, [“Israel Concerned Over Turkish Moves in Syria.”](#) *Israel Hayom*, January 8, 2025.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Lindenstrauss, [“Israel’s Kurdish Dilemmas.”](#) Op cit., 34.
- ³⁸ Setton, [“Erdoğan’s Policies in Syria Bring Turkey and Israel Closer to Confrontation.”](#) Op cit., 11.
- ³⁹ Udi Etzion, [“Israel Must Prepare for Potential War with Turkey, Nagel Committee Warns.”](#) *The Jerusalem Post*, January 6, 2025.
- ⁴⁰ Vali Nasr, [“In Post-Assad Middle East, Iran’s Loss Is Turkey’s Gain.”](#) *Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2024.
- ⁴¹ Israel Kasnett, [“Will Syria Become a Battleground Between Turkey and Israel?”](#) *Jewish National Syndicate (JNS)*, December 19, 2024.
- ⁴² Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Maya Gebeily and Khalil Ashawi, [“Exclusive: Syria’s Sharaa to discuss defense pact with Turkey’s Erdogan, sources say.”](#) *Reuters*, February 4, 2025.
- ⁴³ Carmit Valensi, [“A New Era in Syria: Winners, Losers, and Implications for Israel.”](#) *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, January 12, 2025.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Kasnett, [“Will Syria Become a Battleground Between Turkey and Israel?.”](#) Op cit., 41.