



47 / 2023

Syria–Turkey Relations: A Road to Normalization

RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

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Introduction: The State of the Region Today

The Middle East has been clearly showing signs that it is changing. It would not be an overstatement to say that a lot of what is happening now would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago.

The greatest of these changes is the China-mediated rapprochement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹ Given that these countries are regional “centers of power”, their new and improved relations may help reduce regional tensions in certain countries like Yemen.

Another significant factor that is driving the shifts in Middle Eastern state alignments could have to do with the decision of the US to rekindle its interest in establishing a new nuclear deal with Iran. Although talks have been conducted away from public view,² US attempts to contact its key regional adversary appears far from accidental. The move could have been prompted by changes in Iran’s relations with other countries, especially its evolving cooperation with China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. If any agreement has been reached (which is currently too early to judge), it would only boost Iran’s position in the region. The mere fact that the US is holding such talks indicates that it recognizes that regional changes are taking place, changes it must learn to adapt to.

The next important factor behind the region’s political transformation is Russia’s active presence in the Middle East’s diplomatic, political

and economic sectors. Moscow has been taking vigorous steps to develop relations with the Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. For example, a number of high-ranking officials from these countries have paid official visits to Russia in June 2023, including UAE’s President and Qatar’s Prime Minister. As for the UAE, it is worth noting that the country became the greatest reseller of Russian gold in 2022. Russia’s gold exports to the Emirates in 2022 totaled 75.7 tons or \$4.3 billion (versus 1.3 tons the year before).³

Another important factor shaping the Middle East’s approach to international relations is Turkey’s foreign policy. Particularly important, is Turkey’s position on Syria prior to the presidential elections in May 2023, and the new aspects it has now acquired following the victory of incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Judging by the leadership’s recent steps, Turkey wants to maintain continuity with its previous policies, as demonstrated by Turkey’s efforts to strengthen and expand ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE⁴; in 2022, Riyadh and Ankara agreed to start a new phase of bilateral cooperation.⁵ Turkey has also expressed its intention to restore diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria and Israel.⁶ Interestingly, Ankara had already taken some actions in this regard even before the May 2023 elections. Therefore, potential improvements in the relations between Turkey and Syria would fall well in line with the “relations harmonization” approach that seems to be trending across the Middle East today.

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¹ Smagin, N. What Iranian-Saudi Normalization Means for Russia // Amwaj Media. June 17, 2023. URL: <https://amwaj.media/article/what-iranian-saudi-normalization-means-for-russia>

² Ravid, B. Biden Adviser Discussed Possible Outreach to Iran on Nuclear Program with Oman: Sources // Axios. May 30, 2023. URL: <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/30/iran-nuclear-program-oman-outreach-deal-mcgurk>

³ Exclusive: From Russia with Gold: UAE Cashes in as Sanctions Bite // Reuters. May 25, 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/russia-with-gold-uae-cashes-sanctions-bite-2023-05-25/>

⁴ UAE’s President and Turkey’s Vice President Discuss Investment Partnership // TASS. June 22, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/18092859>

⁵ Sadygzade, M. Saudi Arabia and Turkey: On the Way to the “Middle East Renaissance” // Russian International Affairs Council. May 11, 2022. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/middle-east/ksa-i-turtsiya-na-puti-blizhnevostochnomu-renessansu/>

⁶ Erdogan, Netanyahu May Meet to Progress Turkey-Israel Thaw // Bloomberg. June 23, 2023. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-23/erdogan-netanyahu-plan-meeting-to-ease-turkey-israel-tensions>

Turkey's Presidential Elections and Syria: Impacting Factors on Foreign Policy

With regards to Turkey's May 2023 elections, there are two key aspects that are critical for understanding the relations between Ankara and Damascus: first, is the new foreign minister appointee and second, is the role Syria played in the presidential race.

Although the conflict in Syria saw its relations with Turkey plummet to its lowest point since the beginning of the 21st century, today, Turkey's elites have clearly realized the need to repair ties with their southern neighbor. The way both leading candidates for the Turkish presidency made a point to emphasize the importance of reconciling with Damascus reflects this.⁷ In Turkey's public opinion, the issue of rebuilding relations with Syria is directly linked to the migration crisis and the need to send refugees back home (repatriate). As of June 8, 2023, Turkey, which had already suffered from high unemployment rates earlier, particularly among younger people, hosts 3.3 million Syrian refugees.⁸ It would be fair to assume that such a large mass of relocated people has contributed to growing nationalist sentiments in Turkey.

Astana Format

The negotiations between Turkey and Syria had been preceded by an extended "preparatory" phase. Russian diplomats had taken great strides to narrow the political differences between the two countries.

The following key events are worth mentioning as part of this process:

1. The Turkey–Syria Minister of Defense and intelligence chief meeting in Moscow on December 28, 2022.¹¹

As for the newly appointed head of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are a handful of factors that should be considered. According to Amur Gadzhiev, Research Fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, prior to becoming Turkey's Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan led the Turkish National Intelligence Organization. This group was de facto in charge of maintaining contacts with countries that had no diplomatic relations with Turkey, i.e. Syria, Egypt and Israel. In spite of disrupted diplomatic communications, the respective intelligence agencies have always stayed in touch.⁹

Therefore, Hakan Fidan's appointment to Foreign Minister appears logical if only because the above-mentioned states are the ones with which the Turkish government plans to rebuild relations with after the elections. Also notable is Fidan's involvement in Syria, where he participated in the Turkey–Syria talks that were held in Moscow in December 2022.¹⁰

2. Negotiations between Russia, Iran, Syria and Turkey's Ministers of Defense in Moscow on April 25, 2023.¹²

3. The Russia, Turkey, Syria and Iran Foreign Minister meeting in Moscow on May 10, 2023.

4. The Russia, Turkey, Syria and Iran Deputy Foreign Minister meeting in Astana on June 20, 2023.

As for the latter event, although it was originally announced to take place in the middle of March

⁷ Bouzo, E. Syrian Perspectives on the Turkish Elections // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. June 12, 2023.
URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-perspectives-turkish-elections>

⁸ Registered Syrian Refugees (Turkey) // Operational Data Portal. June 8, 2023.
URL: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>

⁹ Gadzhiev, A. Turkey After 2023 Presidential Elections: Erdogan's Victory and Opposition's Breakup // Russian International Affairs Council. June 15, 2023.
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/turtsiya-posle-mayskikh-vyborov-2023-g-pobeda-erdogana-i-raspad-oppozitsii/>

¹⁰ Turkey – Syria Meeting: No Deals Made at the First High-Level Talks in 11 Years // Middle East Eye. January 2, 2023.
URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syria-meeting-no-deals-made-first-high-level-talks>

¹¹ Media: Damascus Demands Pullout Timeline for Turkish Forces in Syria // TASS. March 14, 2023.
URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17263209>

¹² Shoigu and Counterparts from Iran, Turkey and Syria Discuss Steps to Stronger Security in Syria // TASS. April 25, 2023.
URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17604947>

2023, the meeting had to be postponed for three months because Turkey would not provide a timetable for withdrawing its troops from northern Syria.¹³ Based on media reports following the session, the participants “began discussing elements of a Road Map for the restoration of Syrian–Turkish inter-state relations”.¹⁴ In other words, it could be said that some modest progress has been made on the issue.

Settling fundamental differences between the parties has proved incredibly challenging. According to some reports, part of the agenda in a Turkey–Syria Foreign Minister meeting in-

cluded steps to prepare for talks between their two presidents.¹⁵ However, there has been no progress in this endeavor so far. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, however, that the negotiating parties “are interested in restoring neighborly relations between Syria and Turkey as soon as possible”.¹⁶

In spite of a statement made by Kazakhstan expressing that the June 20, 2023 Astana meeting was going to be the last one,¹⁷ the Astana format per se is very unlikely to change. The countries involved all share core interests, including the security of the Turkey–Syria border, if not all of Syria.

The Syrian Kurds: A Factor in Damascus–Ankara Relations

Efforts to mend relations between Turkey and Syria keep stumbling over the Kurdish question. The problem lies in a self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, also known as Rojava) located in Syria, on the border with Turkey. The position of Damascus regarding the Autonomous Administration, where all leadership positions are held by Kurds, headed by General Mazloum Abdi, is as fundamentally important, as is Turkey’s military presence in northern Syria. Both positions are considered unacceptable. Or, as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad expressed, some projects of the postwar order in Syria “are associated with federalization and the autonomous Kurdish government. As I already said, northeastern Syria is an Arab region. So, if there is anyone who has the right to talk of federalization, it is the Arabs because they make up the majority there. It is self-evident.”¹⁸ In other words, the position of Damascus is that Syria should remain a unitary state.

This stance is further reinforced by the following circumstances: first, the opposition has been defeated in the aftermath of the civil war.¹⁹ Second, the government in power has enhanced its standing on the international scene and reclaimed its international recognition (legitimacy) on the regional scale, as demonstrated by Syria’s return to the League of Arab States and its restored relations with Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Third, the central government in Damascus has been able to regain its firm footing because the principle of Syria’s territorial integrity has been accepted as a fundamental premise by all states directly involved in the conflict settlement: Russia, Iran and Turkey.²¹ Here Russian diplomacy can claim credit for Turkey’s altered policy on Syria, having seen that the policy it pursued earlier in the conflict, which aimed to overthrow the government, was unfeasible and counterproductive.

Syrian Kurds, on their part, speaking through Mazloum Abdi, Commander of the Syrian Demo-

¹³ Media: Damascus Demands Pullout Timeline for Turkish Forces in Syria // TASS. March 14, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17263209>

¹⁴ Press release on quadrilateral consultations of Deputy Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran, Syria and Turkey // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. June 20, 2023. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1889691/?lang=en

¹⁵ Russia, Turkey and Syria’s to Foreign Ministers to Meet in Moscow Next Week // TASS. March 8, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17218373>

¹⁶ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks at a meeting with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Faisal Mekdad and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Türkiye Mevlut Cavusoglu, Moscow, May 10, 2023 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. May 10, 2023. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1868590/

¹⁷ Commentary of the MFA Kazakhstan on the results of the 20th International High-Level Meeting on Syria in the Astana format // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. June 22, 2023. URL: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/578402?lang=en>

¹⁸ Al-Assad: US Trying to Hamper Normalization Between Syrian Government and Kurds // TASS. November 15, 2019. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7125845>

¹⁹ What’s in Store for Syria? // YouTube. June 24, 2023. URL: <https://youtu.be/7xkC5LbdGZo>

²⁰ Arab League Brings Syria Back into Its Fold after 12 years // Al Jazeera. May 7, 2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/7/arab-league-agrees-to-bring-syria-back-into-its-fold>

²¹ Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation // President of Russia. October 22, 2019. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5452>

cratic Forces (SDF), have already declared that they may agree to some compromise with the central government, namely, to accept the inclusion of the Peshmerga, or Kurdish militia of the AANES into the Syrian Armed Forces.²² Abdi also said that the SDF has about 100,000 troops, representing a large military force. Besides, it should be noted that Syrian Kurds have substantial political and military backing from the United States, which is why Turkey accuses the US of supporting terrorism.²³

At the same time, Kurds probably understand the inherent weakness of their reliance on the United States alone and are trying to seek opportunities to negotiate with Damascus, including attempts to reach a UAE-mediated agreement.²⁴ Largely contributing to this, is Russia's successful diplomatic maneuvering to bring Turkey and Syria to a common ground, with the ultimate goal of putting a complete end to the Syrian conflict. However, the Russian Foreign Ministry claims that the United States has been hampering negotiations between AANES and the Syrian government. As the Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said shortly before the multilateral June 20, 2023 meeting in Astana, the US does not allow their Kurdish allies to "establish a dialogue with Damascus." He added that "Americans support a number of Kurdish organizations that are trying to set up a kind of a mini-quasi-state with its own administration. This is absolutely unacceptable."²⁵

Apart from the ideals of Kurdish nationalism, the Syrian Kurd issue also has another, more business-like, dimension. In 2020, an American oil company called Delta Crescent Energy LLC made its way into a SDF controlled area and began exploiting local oilfields.²⁶ The produced crude oil has been exported to Iraqi Kurdistan, a Kurdish autonomous region in northern

Iraq. Its leadership, dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Barzani clan), leans, like Syria's AANES, towards the United States. Delta is known to be connected with former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Senator Lindsey Graham. The legality of this company's business in Syria is so questionable that "even American lawyers have not taken the risk of pronouncing the agreement between the SDF and Delta legitimate."²⁷ The Syrian government, on the other hand, describes Delta's operations as blatant theft, as the company is stealing Syria's national wealth.²⁸

The greatest barrier to the normalization between Turkey and Syria is that, on the one hand, Damascus is not going to fully restore relations until Turkey's army has left Syrian soil. On the other, Turks insist that they will not leave Syria until they have received security guarantees. Turkey will not let go of the 20 kilometer buffer zone established along the border between the two countries as a result of its military operations "Euphrates Shield", "Olive Branch" and "Peace Spring".²⁹ For Turkey, it is critical that the SDF still maintains presence in northern Syria without being controlled by Damascus. Syrian Kurds are viewed by Turkey's leadership as a threat similar to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), i.e. Turkey regards SDF activity as its internal problem. Indeed, every time the Kurdish national movement was on the rise, it sent waves all across the four countries which share the ethno-geographic area of Kurdistan: Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. This is one of the reasons why Iran is taking part in the diplomatic phase of the conflict settlement. Kurds, however, distrust the central government in Damascus. Even if to set aside the Baathist government repressions in the 20th century (when Kurds were denied passports, etc.), today the central government demands complete submission from Kurds, the same way it does from

²² Mazloum Abdi: US Barred Türkiye from Carrying Out Military Operation in Syria // Asharq Al-Awsat. December 7, 2022.

URL: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4029681/mazloum-abdi-us-barred-turkiye-carrying-out-military-operation-syria%C2%A0>

²³ Turkey considers SDF to be a terrorist organization along with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), between which the Turkish government does not draw any distinctions.

²⁴ Syria's Kurds turn to UAE to ease tensions with Assad // Al-Monitor. May 2, 2023.

URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/syrias-kurds-turn-uae-ease-tensions-assad>

²⁵ Deputy RF Foreign Minister Bogdanov: United States Tries to Stop Kurds from Coming to Terms with Syrian Government // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. June 20, 2023.

URL: <https://rg.ru/2023/06/20/zamglavy-mid-rf-bogdanov-ssha-meshaiut-kurdam-dogovarivatsia-s-pravitelstvom-sirii.html>

²⁶ US Controls Our Oilfields, Representatives of Syrian Kurds Admit. See: Kurds Ready to Take Any Orders from Kremlin // National News Service. October 23, 2019. URL: <https://nsn.fm-turbopages.org/nsn.fm/s/in-the-world/kurdy-gotovy-vypolnyat-vse-ukazaniya-kremlja>

²⁷ Lyakhov, A.G. American Delta Oil Company and Its Activities in Syrian Kurdistan // Middle East Institute. June 19, 2023.

URL: http://www.iimes.ru/?p=87045#_ftnref6

²⁸ Syria Condemns Agreement Allowing US to Steal Its National Oil // teleSUR. August 3, 2020.

URL: <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/syria-condemns-agreement-that-allows-us-to-steal-national-oil-20200803-0003.html>

²⁹ A similar zone has been established in northern Iraq over the last two years of Turkey's military operations against PKK.

the “Arab” opposition, which, according to Kirill Semenov, a Middle East expert, is supported by Turkey.³⁰ According to Semenov, the process of stabilizing Syria and the removal of international sanctions is impeded by the central government’s unwillingness to reach a compromise with the opposition.³¹ This equally applies to the Kurdish case.

There is an opinion among the Kurds that disbanding the SDF would be undesirable and un-

wise.³² Thus, it is necessary to find some political compromise.

The United States, however, being a key factor in preserving AANES, is in no hurry to leave Syria. While its strategic outlook for retaining its presence in the country remains uncertain, the US moved to mobilize HIMARS rocket-launching systems to SDF territory, which according to Washington, should not be viewed as a threat to its NATO ally, Turkey.³³

Conclusions

1. On the one hand, Turkey and Syria are as close as ever to patching up their relations since their breakdown at the start of the Syrian conflict. The efforts taken by the two countries are fully supported by Russia and Iran. Furthermore, this fits the overall political trends in today’s Middle East of “building bridges” between countries in the region. Other factors contributing to the process are Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s victory in the presidential elections in Turkey and the appointment of Turkey’s new Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, who previously was in charge of the “Syria dossier” at Turkey’s intelligence service.
2. On the other hand, Turkey and Syria still have a long way to go before the relations between the two states will be formally reinstated. Previously, some meetings between diplomatic representatives have been delayed and hopes for direct talks between the heads of state remain premature.
3. Syria’s key demand is for Turkey to withdraw its troops from its territory as a prerequisite for restoring official diplomatic relations. Turkey’s requirement is that Syria provide security guarantees in exchange. Ankara wants to be sure that once Turkey’s armed forces have left the buffer zone in northern Syria it will not be retaken by the Kurdish SDF, which Turkey considers to be a terrorist organization along with the PKK. In this context, the future of the AANES project seems to be a direct implication of America’s continued presence in Syria.
4. The United States is unlikely to leave Syria, at least in the near future. Its ties with the Kurds, including those in northern Iraq, are crucial to the US. This also allows Washington some room for maneuvering in a situation where it will no longer have a formal pretext to stay after the Syrian conflict officially comes to an end. From this perspective, Russia’s multiple initiatives to reconcile Syria and Turkey’s relations might be construed as an attempt to hasten America’s withdrawal.
5. The conflict between the central government in Damascus and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria appears currently unresolvable – at least until some progress has been made to close the gap between state positions on issues pertaining to local governance. While earlier this matter could have been discussed as part of the process to draft a new constitution, today such a scenario seems almost unthinkable. Damascus intends to suppress all opposition in the country. In dealing with the AANES problem, the Syrian government can surely expect support coming from Turkey and Iran where Kurds also make up a notable size of their populations. Moreover, the fact that Syrian Kurds are supported by the United States does not really help to endear them to Russia either.
6. It would be fair to expect that any reconciliation – initially between Russia and Turkey on Syria and now between Turkey and Syria via Russia’s mediation – would contribute to the

³⁰ Semenov, K. Idlib of Contention. How to Reconcile Syria and Turkey // Regnum. June 23, 2023. URL: <https://regnum.ru/article/3815089>

³¹ Kirill Semenov // Telegram. June 28, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/semenovkirill/6206>

³² Kurds Say They Can’t Unite with Assad Against Turkey Because of His Stubborn Position // National News Service. November 15, 2019. URL: <https://nsn-fm.turbopages.org/nsn.fm/s/policy/kurdy-nazvali-usloviya-prisoedineniya-k-siriiskoi-armii>

³³ US Denies Turkish Media Reports HIMARS Rocket Launchers in Syria are for SDF // Middle East Eye. May 31, 2023. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-denies-turkish-media-reports-himar-rocket-launchers-syria-sdf>

eventual withdrawal of US troops from Syria. De facto, this would mean yet more territorial control regained by the Syrian Armed Forces, which then will allow Turkey to pull its troops out of Syria. Until both sides have revised their demands (the Turkish force pullout, as demanded by Syria and the quashing of AANE, as sought by Turkey), any rapprochement between the two countries appears unattainable.

7. The relation-mending process between Turkey and Syria will either continue to be held hostage by the presence of the United States in Syria (if Turkey and Syria fail to soften their positions) or, on the contrary, will pave way for America's exit. It seems that Russia's diplomatic approach has its bets on a Turkey–Syria rapprochement that would then create the conditions for a US withdrawal.
8. Theoretically, Russia may become closer to the Syrian Kurdish cause, but this looks far-fetched given the strong ties the Syrian Democratic Forces have with the United States, as well as the intransigent position of Turkey and Syria regarding the Kurds. Besides, strong relations with Turkey and Iran are far more valuable for Russia than would be supporting Kurdish nationalism, whatever forms it may assume.

Notes

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