

Will Turkey and Syria Reconcile?

by Roberto Aliboni

Between August and September 2022, news emerged about a possible reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus. If effective, such rapprochement could translate into significant improvements and a more general de-escalation of the Syrian crisis, potentially even opening new avenues for a political settlement.

Such prospects have naturally sparked much interest in international debates. Yet, a closer analysis of the motivations on the side of Turkey seem to point to tactical considerations rather than a whole-hearted effort to bury the hatchet with its Syrian neighbour. This should translate into some caution when assessing the actual possibility of such a reconciliation.

A difficult detente in Syria

Since the outbreak of the so-called Arab uprising in 2011, the conflict in Syria has evolved from a local revolution into a regional and international proxy war. Today, the conflict is no longer

between Damascus and the disparate Syrian opposition groups – which have long since been defeated – but rather between Syria and Turkey. In this context, the Syrian crisis has moved from the heartland to the borderland regions along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Ankara has extensive security interests that depend on Syria. These include the Kurdish issue in Syria's north-eastern regions and the influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey (which Ankara would now like to repatriate). Before 2011, Turkey and Syria were bound by strong cooperation which had overshadowed the legacy of deep rivalry during much of the previous decades.

Since 2011, the Turkish government has repeatedly intervened in Syria, backing the Syrian opposition's efforts to topple the Assad regime. To this day, Turkey occupies Syrian territories in the north and along the north-eastern border with Syria, in an effort to unilaterally provide for its own security. As a result,

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Turkish-Syrian relations have moved from cooperation to deep enmity.

More recently, there have been some indications of a change in policy. In mid-August 2022, Ankara and Damascus exchanged requests to revive official dialogue channels. Then, in late August, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu made it clear that Turkey does not have “preconditions for dialogue” with the Syrian government as long as the talks focus on border security.¹

Conversely, Syria’s Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad stated that Syria placed no preconditions on the resumption of dialogue but that any “normalization with Turkey will only be achieved when Ankara meets three demands: withdrawal from Syrian territory; an end to support for opposition organizations; and non-intervention in internal Syrian affairs”.²

The Kurdish question

With regards to the Kurdish issue, several parties – Russia in particular – are now suggesting that a restoration of the 1998 Adana Agreement could provide a groundwork to facilitate Turkey-Syrian dialogue.³ According

to Turkey, Annex 2 to the agreement grants Ankara a “natural right to self-defense”, while Annex 4 grants Ankara the right “to take all necessary security measures within 5 km deep into Syrian territory”.⁴

Could the Adana mechanism work under current conditions?

For it to succeed, the mechanism would require a strong political understanding as well as needed updates to the original deal. In 1998, a strong political understanding existed, but today it does not, given Ankara’s legacy of support for the Syrian opposition. Around 2015, Turkish policy changed, partly as a result of Russian intervention in Syria. Since then, Turkey gradually abandoned its policy of regime change in Syria, potentially creating room for a political understanding between Ankara and Damascus, albeit one that will necessarily be less solid compared to 1998.

If a deal were to happen, Assad would have to ensure that the Syrian Kurds, regarded by Ankara as a mere extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), no longer control the north-east of Syria and that coordination between Syrian and Turkish Kurds be prevented by the authorities in Damascus. Such objectives are by far harder to achieve today compared to 1998.

¹ Ece Toksabay and Ali Kucukgocmen, “Turkey Has No Preconditions for Dialogue with Syria – Foreign Minister”, in *Reuters*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-does-not-have-preconditions-dialogue-with-syria-foreign-minister-2022-08-23>.

² Carmit Valensi and Gallia Lindenstrauss, “War or Peace? Turkish Moves in Syria”, in *INSS Insights*, No. 1640 (4 September 2022), p. 4-5, <https://www.inss.org.il/?p=108275>.

³ See for instance, “Russia: Turkey-Syria Cooperation Must Be Based on Cross-Border

Adana Accord – RIA”, in *Reuters*, 16 October 2019, <https://reut.rs/31h7gen>; Ali Younes, “Analysis: What Does the Adana Deal Mean for Turkey and Syria?”, in *Al Jazeera*, 23 October 2019, <https://aje.io/5y7pg>.

⁴ See, Fehim Tastekin, “How Realistic Is Erdogan’s Vision for Security Belt from Syria to Iraq?”, in *Al-Monitor*, 30 August 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/51383>.

The Kurdish-Syrian nationalist wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its military wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), boasts greater military power and political organisation than it did in the past. Based in an area where Damascus enjoys limited presence, these Kurdish actors have established a local administration in which Arabs opposing the regime also participate – the so-called Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – as well as a joint military force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The Syrian Kurds are also backed by the US, which still maintains a military force in the north-east of the country in the vicinity of Syria's oil fields and the Kurdish enclave. Stripping the Syrian Kurds of their territorial control is therefore arduous, but finding a convenient arrangement for Kurdish autonomy is perhaps even more problematic.

The US would likely oppose any movement towards a return of Syrian control over these areas. Iran on the other hand, would favourably view and support a Syrian return, albeit Tehran is itself also worried about increased Kurdish transboundary cooperation in the region.

The question is more complicated regarding Russia. Moscow has long supported an Adana-type solution and could possibly have a role in Damascus's acceptance of Ankara's proposed dialogue. Yet it also has been pushing for an autonomy understanding between Damascus and the Kurds in the north-east. Russia maintains that reforms,

however moderate, must first be carried out by the regime in order for it to be re-integrated in the international system, strengthen its legitimacy and obtain funds from abroad for reconstruction. Such reforms would include some kind of autonomy for the Kurds.

Such calls have so far been unanswered, however. The idea of autonomy for Syrian Kurds of the PYD and the YPG, like that of the PKK, is based on the Öcalan model of "confederal democracy",⁵ which the Westphalian and nationalist regime in Damascus does not accept. In this regard, it should also be noted that Turkey, no less of a Westphalian and nationalist state than Syria, would also be unlikely to accept such a model.

Russian pressure, therefore, while no doubt politically relevant for Damascus, is unlikely to convince Syria of the need for an agreement with groups it still considers a national security threat. Russian influence is also likely to have diminished in light of the Ukraine invasion. Turkey, moreover, would be unlikely to pressure Syria into such an agreement.

On the whole, therefore, it appears more likely that Syria would follow a policy that is more in line with Turkey's own approach: i.e., that of gradually increasing repression over the Kurds rather than granting forms of autonomy in the north-east.

⁵ Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, revised ed., Cologne, International Initiative Edition, 2017, <https://www.freeocalan.org/books/#/book/democratic-confederalism>.

Ultimately, the nexus connecting Turkish security interests and Syria's control over the Kurds will be hard to ignore. To defuse this nexus, one would need either a constitutional agreement between Damascus and the Kurds on autonomy or a strong return of Syria to the north-east, accompanied by increased repression of the Kurdish enclaves.

Both these scenarios appear unlikely and in this regard a return to the Adana model of 1998 also seems difficult to imagine, not least given the fundamentally changed regional and international environment. At a minimum any such effort would require a profound revision and updating of the Adana agreement.

Syrian refugees in Turkey

Let us turn now to the issue of Syrian refugees in Turkey (approximately 3.7 million). Leaving aside the complex dynamics that led to this situation,⁶ the potential for new migration flows towards Turkey is particularly present with regards to Idlib, the last bastion of the opposition under Turkish influence and located in northern-western Syria.

Aside from Idlib, potential new migration waves could materialise from the three Turkish-occupied cantons on Syria's northern border, to the east of Idlib and along the north-eastern border between Syria and Turkey.

⁶ See for instance, Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, *Border Nation: The Reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish Borderlands*, Beirut, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/86758>.

The key issue here is that of repatriation. The presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey has long since become a domestic political issue, as the population has increasingly turned against their permanence in the country. A very limited number has been resettled by Ankara in the Tel Abyad Ras al-Aini canton, along the Turkish-Syrian border and in the Idlib area under its influence. Syria, at least in the absence of a comprehensive agreement with Ankara, remains adamantly opposed to any repatriation.

Finally, one must also underline the differences that exist across the various areas of Turkish influence in northern Syria. The border to the north and north-east of Idlib are areas where Turkey enjoys an almost exclusive presence and influence, while in the Idlib governorate Ankara enjoys influence but not exclusive access, as this is shared with other local groups and actors.

In Idlib, Turkey has entered into agreements with the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition of armed Syrian opposition groups with Islamist leanings, which has since become something of a proxy for Ankara with regards to its efforts to stymie refugee flows into Turkey.

While Turkey does not rule Idlib directly, it does retain considerable influence over the governorate. Recent tensions in Idlib stem from the fact that Turkey is interested in preventing the defeat of its proxy, while Syria is pressing ahead to recapture the last bastion of the armed opposition. Russia supports Syrian objectives, yet it also

seeks to avoid a direct Turkish-Syrian clash over Idlib, part of Moscow's policy of mutual convenience with Ankara in Syria and beyond.⁷

A possible Syria-Turkey agreement on the issue of migration and repatriation is perhaps less difficult than one concerning Kurdish autonomy. If Syria offers sufficient guarantees, Turkey should have no difficulty withdrawing from occupied cantons.

What would these guarantees imply? One element would include a Syrian engagement to renounce its reprisals on Turkish proxies (such as the Syrian National Army and some Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups in Idlib). A second guarantee would be that of a waiver on reprisals targeting Syrian returnees.

It is hard to imagine how generous Syria would be in this regard, given that many of those who fled Syria were opponents to the Assad regime.

It is also necessary to consider that with the passage of time, the population living in the Turkish-occupied cantons along the border have gradually developed deep trade and economic relations with governorates inside Turkey (Sanliurfa, Gaziantep, etc.), where a large population of Syrians are also living.⁸ With time, this dense population has socially and economically connected and

integrated with Turkey which exercises full governance over its territory.

Such connections, and the fact that Turkey effectively enjoys an almost unrivalled dominance over these territories, emerges as a further sticking point in any potential reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus that includes a Syrian return to the north-east and a consequent need for Turkey to leave Syrian occupied border areas.

Overall, the likelihood of this coming about is slim. There are clearly many challenges affecting the sides and it is hard to imagine a genuine understanding emerging in the short term without a solid political agreement between the two countries similar to that of 1998.

What should one make of the recent change of rhetoric therefore? Noted analysts have argued that Ankara's objective is not really an agreement with Syria, neither is it a sort of "grand bargain" with Assad and Russia.⁹

What really interests Erdoğan is a victory in the upcoming 2023 legislative and presidential elections in Turkey. Unfortunately for the Syrian population, for the future of the conflict and the overall stability of the region, they might be right.

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⁷ Galip Dalay, "Deciphering Turkey's Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia", in *SWP Comments*, No. 35 (May 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C35>.

⁸ Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, *Border Nation*, cit.

⁹ Francesco Siccardi, "Look for the Local", in *Diwan*, 5 September 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/87817>; Carmit Valensi and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "War or Peace? Turkish Moves in Syria", cit.

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