

Turkey reaches out to Assad

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Turkey is considering establishing normal relations with the Assad regime in Syria. A meeting in December orchestrated by Russia has now led to a further trilateral agreement with the Russian, Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers.

Since 2011 Turkey has supported, funded, and helped arm factions and militia hostile to Assad. The Free Syrian Army and the remnants of former Al-Qaeda affiliates and others relied on Turkish support. A shift towards Assad, whom Turkey's president Erdogan has previously called a terrorist, would change a decade-long policy.

The driver seems to be Kurdish issues, and Erdogan's worries about dwindling support in Turkey for his policy on Syrian refugees.

The Kurdish-nationalist PKK operated from Syria up to 1999. Turkey eventually threatened then to invade if Assad continued to give the group sanctuary. Assad responded by expelling the PKK, including its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who was then jailed by Turkey.

Turkey wants to push the Kurds away from the border and to find a way to repatriate some of the four million Syrian refugees now in Turkey. The CHP, the main opposition to Erdogan's AKP, has promised to normalise relations with Syria and take a more aggressive stance towards the refugees. Erdogan wants to undercut the CHP.

Russia has applied significant pressure to get this meeting to happen. Turkey has long been threatening to launch a full-scale invasion of Rojava, the de-facto autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Syria governed by the PYD (Democratic Union Party), which has close ties to the PKK. It seemed very close to invading in November 2022.

Turkey wants to end effective Kurdish control of this area because it wants to keep a lid on the Kurdish minority within Syria and (as it sees it) to stop "terrorism" on its border. Russia does not want Turkey to invade because that would complicate Russia's efforts to have Assad regain full control over Syria. The US does not want an invasion because the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), in which the PYD is the largest force, is its ally in the region.

The SDF is credited with doing much of the work to push back and weaken Daesh in the country, and it maintains and guards the camps in which Daesh fighters and their families are being held. The US is worried that if the SDF and PYD are forced into a confrontation with Turkey, they will abandon the prison camps and allow Daesh to revive.

Turkey feels the pressure from both sides. Russia got the wheat agreement with Turkey which allows Russian and Ukrainian agricultural produce and fertilisers to be transported via the Black Sea, restoring food supply to the Middle East and Africa. Turkey has provided a small amount of assistance to Ukraine (drones), but it has yet to impose any sanctions on Russia and continues to stall Sweden's and Finland's membership of NATO.

Russia, Syria and Turkey are in agreement that all Turkish troops should leave Syria and that Syrian units and allied militias should replace them, that would mean the regime entering the Idlib Province border areas with Turkey.

Idlib is one of the remaining hubs of the opposition to Assad, controlled by the a-Sham Liberation Authority. Opening the border will provide an opening for goods to Syria to bypass the American Caesar Act sanctions currently in place (and, since Turkey is a NATO member, it would be hard for the US to do anything about that).

Turkey continues to insist it will not normalise relations with Syria without the consent of the Syrian opposition forces it funds. But it is hard to envision how Ankara and Damascus can come to an agreement without the opposition being entirely sidelined.

Biden is likely to want no change in the current situation in Syria. The US is happy for the Kurdish autonomous region to exist, giving it a local ally which it can continue to support (the Kurdish government in Rojava has made alliances with some Arab and other forces), and would be alarmed if Turkey sent in troops to crush it. Erdogan declared in 2021 he was opposed to the US continual involvement in Syria, meaning their alliance with the SDF.

The US would also be unhappy to see a diplomatic gain for Russia in the midst of the Ukraine war.

Ankara may be trying to break up the coalition between the Rojava government and its anti-Assad Arab allies within Syria. The SDF, knowing that it would have difficulty defeating Turkey, has said it will look for peaceful relations with Turkey. So far Ankara has declared SDF commander Mazlum Kobane a terrorist and put a bounty on his head, rebuffing any attempts to reach an agreement.

Even the start of Erdogan-Assad negotiations is designed to spook the Kurds into shifting their alliances: to breaking from the US, get the several hundred US special forces in the area to leave, and to make a deal with Damascus over the oil, hydroelectric and agricultural wealth that is concentrated in Rojava, all in order to spare the Kurds from a Turkish invasion. The Kurds have been de facto on the same side as Assad against Daesh and somewhat indifferent to the other insurgencies against the Assad regime, but Damascus looks unlikely to assist the Kurds in achieving any political or military autonomy.

Yet the Kurds are not doing very well out of their relationship with the US. Turkish drones have struck joint US-Kurdish bases, and the US has not reacted beyond a rebuke. In fact, Turkey has been stopped from invading by Russia rather than by the US. Turkey is now taking a lead from Russia in their policy towards Syria.

The Kurds in Rojava are reliant on the US to ensure that aid is sent via the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. And the continuing relationship between the US and SDF has been some factor in preventing the ground invasion threatened at the end of 2022.

The KRG has an uneasy relationship with the PYD/PKK. It supports the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) in Syria, a smaller group with affiliations to the KRG, which has complained about the heavy-handedness and effective one-party rule of the PYD in Rojava.

Iran has been Russia's chief ally in Syria, but has been carved out of recent talks. Iran will be concerned to avoid pressure to remove its own forces from Syria. It continues to provide Russia with drones to use in Ukraine, but Russia has turned a blind eye to the uptick in Israeli attacks against Iranian targets in Syria. Ankara has also restored its own relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's steps to normalise relations coincide with a renewed push to welcome Assad back into the Arab League, which meets in Riyadh this spring.

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