MIDDLE EAST

Will Turkey-Syria Talks Reach a Real Rapprochement?

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Turkey and Syria appear poised to continue Russian-mediated trilateral rapprochement talks since severing ties in 2012. Yet while both countries benefit from ongoing discussions, upcoming Turkish elections and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rejection of any concessions dim the prospects of any near-term deal.

Talks began after an off-the-record, informal meeting between the Turkish and Syrian foreign ministers in Serbia in late 2021. Moscow then facilitated multiple meetings between the two countries' intelligence chiefs to discuss the possibility of higher-level discussions. This culminated in the historic Turkish-Syrian defense ministers meeting in Moscow on December 28 – a major moment indicating talks advanced further than initially anticipated. A foreign minister summit is set for late January or early February and would mark another significant advancement in negotiations. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also mentioned his interest in meeting Assad on multiple occasions.

The meeting produced mixed reactions in Syria and the international community. Northwest Syrian (NWS) communities erupted into protests, citing Turkish "betrayal" given the country's support of the Syrian opposition for most of the war. The Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC; the core Syrian opposition political body) response was relatively muted, repeatedly meeting with Turkish officials since mid-2022 to privately express concerns while avoiding any significant public criticism in official statements. While unsurprising, given the Syrian opposition's dependence on Turkey for its survival, the gap between the opposition and its supposed constituency speaks to its inability to influence its main backer.

Regardless of the US stance, state interests incentivize the trilateral talks. For Ankara, Syrian refugees' returns amidst increasingly racist anti-refugee sentiments across Turkey during an election year drive its thinking. Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) face their toughest election yet and are co-opting the opposition's main platform issue – namely returning refugees and re-normalizing with Assad within two years of an electoral victory. Domestic interests drive Erdogan's government in this regard.

Ankara's decades-long fight with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is also central. Turkey views the Syrian Kurd People's Protection Units (YPG) and their political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), constituting the bulk of the US-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES; the political arm of the SDF), as an extension of the PKK and dire threat to national security. Turkish intelligence argues this group is behind the November 13 Istanbul bombing and has threatened a ground invasion into northern Syria in response – an ongoing threat for years that produced three previous operations.

Damascus rejects any operation, demanding Turkey's full withdrawal from Syria and the end of support for the Syrian opposition. Assad first shared this stance publicly on January 12. However, he is not interested in millions of refugees returning, regardless of public rhetoric to the contrary, given his distrust of Syrian citizens and lack of resources to address returns. This is evidenced by the limited returns from Jordan following its re-normalization with Damascus.

Meanwhile, Moscow holds a vested interest in negotiations given their Ukraine quagmire, preferring a post-war Syria. Moscow likely views Turkey and AANES/SDF as stuck in a prisoner's dilemma, in which two parties, separated and unable to communicate, must each choose between cooperating with the other or not. In this scenario, Ankara is willing to talk to Damascus due to electoral concerns and Russia's blocking of a military offensive into northern Syria, whereas the AANES/SDF are willing to talk to Damascus – and are doing so now – out of fear of Turkey re-normalizing with Syria. In this latter case, both Ankara and Damascus would attack the AANES/SDF.

Thus, Turkey and Syria are incentivized to participate in trilateral talks due to the potential gains but are currently wildly apart. Refugee returns, the Turkish military presence, and support for the Syrian opposition present serious impediments to Turkey-Syria rapprochement. Assad's disinterest in treating the AANES and SDF as terrorists – a Turkish sticking point– further harms progress. Damascus likely understands how this stance pressures Ankara, recognizing the current prisoner's dilemma. Core to this dynamic is Assad's disincentive to give Erdogan a win ahead of the Turkish elections.

That said, small steps can advance talks. Erdogan could commit to a minimal, symbolic withdrawal of Turkish troops and nominal funds for reconstruction efforts – points that would resonate with Assad. Talks to advance the 1998 Adana Agreement – creating a 5-kilometer buffer zone along the Turkey-Syria border through security coordination between the two states – could allay Ankara's PKK and refugee resettlement concerns, although Turkey prefers a 32 km zone today. This likely means more Syrian troops in AANES/SDF areas, including minor withdrawals of the latter from those areas.

At a minimum, both sides benefit from simply talking. Erdogan displays a semblance of progress on the Syria file to his constituents, building support among the nationalist base by co-opting anti-refugee and anti-Syrian Kurd narratives ahead of elections. Assad points to growing international legitimization and his pyrrhic war "victory."

To be sure, Turkey does risk a worsened relationship with the United States if renormalization talks advance, as well as border instability in NWS, should millions flee Syria without security assurances. However, Washington at present appears disinterested in deeper engagement with Syria or upsetting Ankara given its utility on Ukraine. It will therefore struggle to influence talks, reflected by its vague statement against renormalization with Assad, just as it has with other Arab states like Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, Moscow will continue to struggle to influence Assad in the international space given its distractions in Ukraine and Iran's increasing influence in the country.

Thus, talks will probably produce minimal results before the Turkish elections, limited to a foreign ministers meeting, photo-ops, and intelligence coordination on some issues, as is

already occurring. A Presidential meeting before the election is unlikely but possible. It is difficult to pinpoint Ankara's true stance on a full rapprochement outside of present electoral considerations in this regard. Still, if Erdogan wins re-election, he will be pressured to honor deeper anti-refugee stances, forcing concessions to Assad or illegal forced returns. The alternative – annexing Idlib or launching a new ground operation – is unlikely given anti-Syrian sentiments in Turkey and US/Russian vetoes of any offensive in northern Syria, respectively. Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition will remain in limbo as its relevance continues to fade.

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