

EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

Will Turkey's Meddling in Syria Solve the Kurdish Dilemma?

JANUARY 11, 2023

Turkey's long-lasting Kurdish issue, which embodies the political, economic, and cultural problems that Kurds have faced over the past century, has become more complicated than ever, largely due to the Syrian conflict and the upcoming presidential election in 2023. Not only has the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) Syria policy contributed to the country's refugee crisis, but it has also given rise to—among other things—an unanticipated conundrum: the issue of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Any decision to carry out another military incursion in northeast Syria will continue having overreaching effects on the Kurds both in Syria and Turkey, eventually affecting Turkey's domestic politics. Without a clear roadmap, the AKP government will struggle to offer a feasible solution to the Kurdish issue at home and in Syria.

At the domestic level, [facing](#) an existential challenge in the upcoming 2023 elections, the ruling AKP must either win the Kurdish votes or persuade Kurds to boycott the elections. As we saw in Turkey's 2018 local elections, the Kurdish vote is a decisive factor. To realize the former, the AKP and its leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have no options other than introducing another Kurdish resolution process that might propose solving the Kurdish issue through democratization, judicial reforms, and peace negotiations. [In this case](#), the ruling AKP might end up working with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, and the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP). The downsides of this option are three-fold. First, there are fewer than six months left before the elections, which is not long enough to convince the Kurdish voters about the sincerity of the plan. Second, considering the AKP's hard-earned nationalist credentials and the staunch opposition of its far-right ally, the National Movement Party (MHP), the ruling government may view the resolution

process as risking the loss of its nationalist base. Third, there needs to be an expressed unified position among the leaders of the Kurdish movement who advocate for a resolution.

Ocalan, now 73 years old, has been [aligned](#) with Erdogan. Having [rooted for](#) the AKP's win in Istanbul's local elections in 2018, Ocalan sees Erdogan as his last chance to end his confinement. Selahattin Demirtas, the charismatic and currently imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP, has been a steadfast opponent of any initiative that will pave the way for an AKP victory. While [struggling to take a clear position](#), the HDP leadership might be leaning more toward the third way. Initially proposed by Ocalan, the third way refers to aligning with neither the ruling People's Alliance nor the opposition's Nation Alliance, which will eventually be indirect support for the AKP and its leader. However, it is not clear whether Kurds would follow the HDP's lead if the political party were to choose the "third way."

Another pressing issue on Erdogan's agenda is the contentious situation of Syrian refugees at home. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, Turkey [hosts](#) 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, which makes it the world's largest refugee-hosting country. Importantly, this number does not include the country's tens of thousands of [unregistered refugees](#). In the context of Turkey's deepening economic crisis and upcoming elections, the status of Syrian refugees has been highly politicized and brought pressure on the AKP government. Erdogan has been seeking to generate a 30-km-deep (18.6 miles) "safe zone" within northern Syria for the resettlement of Syrian refugees. A military operation will help Turkey create the "safe zone" for resettlement and clear the border, at least to the west of the Euphrates River, from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). A deeper military incursion into the SDF-controlled areas could lead to another flow of refugees and internal displacement of the local people. So, though the AKP's electoral success may hinge on the votes of the Kurdish people, its policies vis-à-vis Syrian Kurdish refugees will only deepen the severity of the humanitarian cost and further alienate them.

In the realm of Syria's Kurds, Ankara has at least three policy options. The first is [using military force](#) against the SDF, which has so far included limited incursions, air strikes, shelling SDF targets, and mobilizing the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). The second is leveraging the United States and Russia to pressure the SDF, which Ankara [sees](#) as a Kurdistan

Workers' Party (PKK) affiliate and an existential threat to its national security, to compromise. Ankara [aims](#) to force the SDF to pull back to the border lines that the United States and Turkey agreed on in 2019. The third option is to seek rapprochement with the Assad government in Damascus to deal with the Kurdish problem in Syria. The irony with this option is that the AKP government sought the Democratic Union Party's (PYD) support to topple the Assad regime in the early years of the Syrian civil war. Now, the same AKP government is exploring ways the Assad regime may help Ankara deal with the Kurds in Syria.

What will the Kurds' fate be under Turkey's increasing threat of military intervention in northeast Syria and the leadership vacuum left by the United States and war-exhausted Russia? The Turkish offensive against the Kurdish SDF has gained momentum and escalated following the 13 November terrorist bombing in the heart of Istanbul. AKP [government officials blamed](#) the PKK and Syria's Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) for the attack and accused the US of complicity. Yet, the PKK and YPG denied any role in the attack, and the Biden administration expressed deep frustration with the AKP's baseless claims against the United States.

Despite being long-time strategic allies and NATO members, Turkey and the United States have repeatedly found their relations at odds over Syria. Their interests have diverged around several issues, including the United States' relations with the Kurdish SDF and Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, which was followed by CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions against Turkey, including its removal from the F-35 fighter jet program and imposing restrictions on the licensing and authorization of specific defense technologies. The lack of a clear road map by the United States to address Turkey's concerns about the SDF has exacerbated bilateral ties. Yet, the Biden administration has no feasible [solution](#) to satisfy Turks and Kurds in Syria.

Turkish-Russian relations, on the other hand, have been strained due to their conflicting interests on regional battlegrounds, including Syria, Ukraine, and Libya. Turkey has supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, provided critical weaponry and drones, and closed the Turkish Straits to warships from all nations, including Russia. Despite being geopolitical rivals, however, Turkey did not join the sanctions against Russia. Both countries have [maintained](#)

economic ties and energy cooperation, receiving more open and direct criticism from the West. With flagrant opportunism, Turkey has shown drawbacks and given mixed messages regarding the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. In northern Syria, Turkey and Russia aim to maintain their balanced relations. Having concerns about Turkey's military operations to establish a "[safe zone](#)" along the border, Russia doesn't want Turkey to expand its territorial control and has warned Ankara to refrain from a new escalation of tension in Syria. Furthermore, Russia has attempted to persuade the SDF to step back to avoid an additional Turkish military incursion, but the SDF's reaction has failed to satisfy Turkey's demands. Under the pressure of the Ukraine War, Russia might need to green-light a military operation to assuage Turkish concerns.

Despite all these intricacies on the Syrian front, Ankara has been making head-spinning U-turns in its foreign policy to amend its relationships with several regional countries, including Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. As part of this charm offensive, Ankara is also looking for a possible breakthrough with the Assad regime. Remarkably, Erdogan [expressed](#) his desire to meet Bashar al-Assad and said, "It is possible for me to meet with Assad, as there is no permanent rivalry in politics, and we will take our steps in this regard." Having Russian President Vladimir Putin as a [mediator](#) to restart the diplomatic conversations with Assad, Erdogan aims to achieve [two primary objectives](#): to resettle the refugees in Syria and to have the Assad government on his side to control the Syrian Kurds. Yet, Ankara's recent policy shift has been met with skepticism from Assad, who [reportedly said](#) that he "doesn't want to hand an election victory to Erdogan."

Russia's approach to the Kurdish issue in Syria is unclear due to the Ukraine War. Turkey now has more room to maneuver and act independently of the United States, which—until recently—has been hesitant to intervene against another Turkish ground operation in Syria. In addition, the tensions between US troops and Iranian-backed militias in Syria have escalated in 2022 with increasing [Iranian provocations](#). Despite the mutual distrust and deepening conflicting priorities between the two countries, the US is looking for ways to collaborate with Turkey to contain and deter Iran's activities and accomplish its counterterrorism objectives.

Against all odds, then, how can Ankara disentangle its complex relationships with Kurds at home and in Syria in 2023? Is there any feasible strategy for Turkey in Syria that will benefit the ruling AKP at home? To answer these questions, let's break this complexity down into three areas.

First, a more plausible but challenging option for the ruling AKP government is to revitalize democracy and the rule of law at home and seek peaceful and reconciliatory venues in Syria. Any attempt to bridge the gap between the Kurds and AKP should envision a much broader and more inclusive approach to rejuvenate the democracy encompassing not only the Kurds but all the other alienated opposition in Turkey. However, this is easier said than done—such reform is unlikely under the rule of Erdogan, who has institutionalized authoritarianism for over a decade.

Second, the Kurdish problem in Syria could get out of control if Turkey insists on handling the issue militarily—as this has failed numerous times in the last four decades in Turkey. Third, in recent years, [Ankara's policy toward the Syrian Kurds](#) has become a powerful catalyst for Kurdish nationalism in the region—only second to the Kurds' struggle against ISIS between 2014 and 2017. In the recent years leading up to the Syrian conflict, Turkey's Kurdish issue was mostly related to domestic politics and policies—with the exception of military incursions into northern Iraq. However, the YPG's fight against ISIS, supported by Western nations, had elevated its status before the international community, which chose not to identify the PYD and YPG with the PKK. Turkey's major concern is that if the Kurds gain autonomy in Syria, this would be the first time a PKK-linked group was successful in its geopolitical objectives, thereby creating a ripple effect in Turkey.

Erdogan's objectives in Turkey-controlled territories and relations with Kurdish and Syrian non-state actors, including the Turkey-backed SNA, contradict Assad's objectives. [For Assad](#), Turkey has been “supporting terrorism by fostering a number of militants” in Syria and its military presence has been violating Syria's sovereignty. However, despite these historical disputes and their rhetorical and policy differences, there is room for cooperation between Turkey and Syria as long as they can compartmentalize their priorities in the conflict. Time is not on Erdogan's side, however, as Turkey is set to go through a presidential and general

election in mid-2023. That is why Assad has avoided any rush decision before Ankara puts forward a clear and feasible plan to address Damascus's concerns.

The defense ministers of Turkey, Syria, and Russia [met in Moscow](#) on 28 December 2022, in a significant push by the Kremlin to facilitate a faster rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus. This move could benefit Erdogan by allowing him to portray himself as a leader who is capable of resolving both the refugee crisis and the Kurdish threat in Syria before the upcoming election. An agreement between Turkey and Syria under the auspices of Russia could heighten the chances of military incursion in Syria.

At this point, the US and Russia are [occupied by other priorities](#)—i.e., the Ukraine War—and are hesitant to show a strong enough position to block the launch of a new Turkish ground military campaign. As the US will oppose a Turkish military incursion against the Kurds in Syria, Russia may see it as an opportunity to push for a likely Turkey-US confrontation. Conscious of this situation, Ankara might conduct a limited ground operation west of the Euphrates, a move that may be tolerated by the US and Russia, albeit with significant reservations.

In recent years, Turkey has invested and engaged in military activism in its neighborhood and across the Middle East. Syria has been a training and launching ground. Mixed with Islamist and nationalist aspirations, military activism has led to the alienation of Turkey in the region. Despite a high price that includes compromises, betrayal of its current allies, and humanitarian costs, such as the refugee crisis, Ankara is eager to rectify its foreign policy errors and realign itself with regimes it deemed to be unfriendly and, at times, termed as “terrorist.”

2023 will be one of the most momentous years for Erdogan and his legacy. He could return to democratization and reconciliation or embrace security-oriented, short-term, band-aid policies aimed at winning the election. Whilst the former is extremely unlikely given the circumstances, the latter is a more programmatic and appealing option. Regardless, his decisions will have consequences that will go far-beyond Turkey or Syria.

The article was first published in [Manara Magazine](#) by the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF) in Cambridge, England.

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