

Turkey's Syria Policy Since 2011: Intervention, Diplomacy and Strategic Transformation

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Abstract

Since 2011, Turkey has emerged as one of the important external actors in the Syrian conflict, influencing its military, political, and geopolitical trajectory. But at the same time Syrian conflict had a significant impact on Turkey. This paper analysis Turkey's multidimensional involvement in Syria through five interrelated dimensions. It first examines the Turkey's early diplomatic and political engagements in the early phases of Syrian uprising from 2011-2014. After that, the study analyses at how Turkey's military policy has changed especially with regard to its cross-border operations in northern Syria. It further examines that how Turkey managed the Syrian refugee crisis and the domestic socio-economic and political repercussions arising from it. The paper also assesses Turkey's diplomatic balancing within the Astana Peace Process. Finally, it examines Turkey's growing influence in Post-Assad Syria after the collapse of Assad regime in December 2024. Turkey's Syria policy reflects a process of strategic adaptation influenced by changing regional dynamics, security concerns and geopolitical rivalry. Although Due to Turkey's involvement in Syrian crisis it suffered some substantial military, political and economic costs. But due to Ankara's intervention ultimately allowed Turkey to solidify its strategic dominance in northern Syria and establish itself a main actor in the formation of post Assad Syria. The paper concludes by examining the prospects and challenges Turkey faces in Post Assad Syria, along with assessing the broader impact of the Syrian crisis for Turkey's role in the region.

Keywords: Turkey, Kurdish issue, Syrian Crisis, Syrian refugees, post-Assad Syria, Astana Process, military intervention.

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Introduction:

The Syrian crisis of 2011 marked a turning point in the Turkey's foreign policy and significantly changed the Ankara's strategic outlook towards the Middle East. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict has been more complex, more costly and more significant than that of any other external player. Since from the starting of protests in Derra in March 2011 against Assad regime, Turkey has emerged as an important player in the Syrian crisis. It has served as a frontline state facing the humanitarian consequences of the crisis and had also played an active diplomatic role in international initiatives to manage the Syrian crisis. But at the same time, Turkey has carried out direct military interventions in Syria and its Syria policy has drastically changed its relations with Iran, Russia, United States and the broader Middle East. Galip Dalay of Chatham House argues that *"No other crisis has redefined Turkey's place in regional and international politics as much as the Syrian conflict,"* (Dalay, 2024). Even during early August 2011, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said *"that they were running out of patience and that Turkey could not remain indifferent to developments in Syria, as the Syrian crisis was almost an internal problem for Turkey"* (Altunışık, 2016).

Before the start of the civil war, Turkey and Syria had established relatively friendly relations under the leadership of President Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's *'zero problems with neighbours'* policy, which was given by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, the two countries increased economic ties, visa-free travel, joint military drills, bilateral free trade and promoted diplomatic engagements. There was also a close connection between Erdogan and Assad that led to the two leaders' relationship being referred to as *'family-friendly'*. (Ozturk, 2023). However, this relationship between two countries quickly changed when the Syrian uprising began in Syria in 2011 and the Assad regime responded violently. As with time Syrian conflict got transformed into a prolonged civil war, Turkey became one of the most important external players influencing the political, military and diplomatic aspects of the crisis. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis has undergone through several different phases since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. This paper examines Turkey's Syria policy across five interconnected dimensions: early political and diplomatic engagement (2011–2014); military strategy and cross-border operations; management of the refugee crisis and its domestic implications; diplomatic balancing within the Astana peace Process; and Turkey's rise to as a dominant external actor in the post-Assad Syria.

Turkey's Early Political and Diplomatic Involvement in Syria (2011-2014)

When protests began in Deraa in March 2011 and quickly spread across Syria, Turkey's first response

was not confrontation but mediation. Erdogan reportedly called Assad multiple times in the early months of the crisis, urging him to make concessions, release political prisoners, and begin a genuine dialogue with protesters (Lister, 2015). Even in the month of August Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Damascus and described methods used by security forces against protesters as '*unacceptable*' (Altunışık, 2016). He even went there with a set of demands for reform. Ankara's message to the Syrian leadership was clear that despite their close bilateral relations, the Assad regime needs to implement important reforms before the crisis gets escalated beyond out of control. Instead of implementing the proposed reforms, the Assad regime responded by using military troops against civilian protests in Deraa and Hama by killing hundreds of people. Turkish officials became more concerned and frustrated with the brutal suppression of the protests by the Syrian government. By November 2011, President Erdogan had given up on private diplomatic relations and publicly condemned Bashar al-Assad, calling him a '*murderer*' (Cagaptay, 2017). After this Turkey opened its borders for Syrian refugees, started hosting meetings of Syrian National Council, facilitated the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on Turkish soil and aligned its public diplomacy with the call for Assad's overthrow.

Few factors were responsible for the shift of policy of Turkey towards Syria. It was based on two miscalculations. Firstly, the Turkish government was expecting that the Syria uprising will end in a very short period of time as it ended in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. Secondly, they thought that an international intervention would be made to overthrow Assad from the power. With time both these assumptions proved wrong and Assad was able to stay in power for many years due to involvement of Iran and Russia. And there was also a regional competition element: Turkey was locked in an ongoing rivalry with Iran for its influence in Arab societies, and the Syrian uprising offered a chance to demonstrate Turkish leadership of a democratic, moderate Islamist political model against Iran's support for Assad. What Turkey did not fully anticipate was that Assad would not fall quickly and that the vacuum his weakening created would be filled not by a friendly Sunni democratic government but by a mix of jihadist groups, ethnic militias and great power proxies. Turkey's policy towards Syria has already changed significantly till 2014. The rise of ISIS, the disintegration of opposition groups and the growth of Kurdish factions in the northern Syria gave rise to new security issues to Turkey. These new security issues changed Ankara's primary goal of overthrowing Assad regime. As a result, Turkey's approach gradually changed from encouraging political change in Syria towards dealing with its immediate security threats along its Northern borders. The period from 2011 to 2014 saw Turkey's transition from a diplomatic actor seeking regime change to a direct participant in the conflict militarily.

Military intervention and Cross-Broder Operations

Until 2016, Turkey's military involvement was mostly indirect. It was helping different opposition factions by transferring weapons, relying on intelligence cooperation and by providing logistical support. In 2016, due to two important developments Turkey launched direct military intervention in Syria. The first was the rise of ISIS, which seized large areas of territory in northern Syria and Iraq and began using the Turkish-Syrian border area for recruitment, smuggling and transit. Turkey faced intense Western pressure to crack down on ISIS networks on its soil (Lister, 2015). The second was the expansion of Kurdish armed groups in its northern border. From Ankara's view it was more serious threat for Turkey. During the initial years of Syrian conflict Assad's forces withdrew from Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which had been fighting a bloody insurgency inside Turkey since 1984 established self-governing regions along a large stretch of the Turkish border. The PYD's armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), proved to be an effective fighting forces and when ISIS besieged the Kurdish town of Kobani in 2014, the United States began arming and coordinating with the YPG to push ISIS back (Gunter, 2021). Turkey considers that the YPG is closely associated with the PKK, which has been classified as a terrorist organization by the European Union, United States and Turkey. The consolidation of Kurdish-controlled regions along Syria's northern border raised concerns among Turkish authorities that it would encourage separatist sentiments among the country's Kurdish population and can pose a serious threat to the country's national security. From time to time Turkey had launched many military operations in Syria. Some of the major operations are as:

Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016 - March 2017): This was Turkey's first direct military operation in Syria. In this operation Turkey send its forces, backed by airpower and allied Syrian rebel groups, into the border area around Jarabulus. The operation had two main goals- eliminating ISIS's positions close to the Turkish border and preventing Kurdish forces from connecting their territorial enclaves throughout the northern Syria (Çevik, 2022). The operation was successful in achieving both objectives. The operation significantly decreased the presence of ISIS near Turkey's borders and stopped Kurdish territorial continuity. Turkish forces and its allied groups were successful in capturing key territories including Jarabulus and al-Bab. From a military viewpoint, Operation Euphrates Shield was a success for Turkey.

Olive Branch Operation (January–March 2018): In January 2018, Turkey launched its second operation in Syria, targeting the Afrin canton of Rojava in northwestern Syria. This operation was more controversial than the first because Afrin had not been a significant ISIS stronghold, it was simply a YPG controlled region that Turkey wanted to eliminate (Nadein-Raevsky, 2025). Russia,

whose forces had been present in the area, quietly withdrew before the operation began, signalling its silent approval in what was becoming an increasingly important Turkey-Russia understanding over Syria. After two months of fighting, Turkish forces captured Afrin city and established administrative control.

Operation Peace Spring (October 2019) and Operation Spring Shield (February 2020): In 2019 when President Donald Trump announced that American troops will be withdraw from north-eastern Syria, after this Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring to Target Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) locations between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The first aim of the operation was to prevent the YPG from establishing a Kurdish state. The second aim was to find a permanent solution to Turkey's refugee problem. Since the beginning of the crisis, Turkey has hosted more than 4 million Syrian refugees with Erdogan stating that one of the main goals was to relocate one million Syrian refugees in the buffer zones that would be created (Erkmen, 2020).

In February 2020, Turkey started Operation Spring Shield in Syria. It was launched in response to a Syrian government violent attack in Idlib that killed 34 Turkish soldiers. This operation showed Turkey's willingness to interact directly with Syrian government forces supported by Russia in order to achieve its strategic objectives. After the Operation Spring Shield, Turkey and Russia agreed for a ceasefire in Idlib Governorate in March 2020. According to the terms of this ceasefire, Turkey was *"allowed to keep a foothold in Idlib, with de facto control over the local economy"* (Khaddour, 2020).

Operation Dawn of Freedom (November 2024) and Post-Assad Military Presence: Turkey's most significant military involvement came through the participation of Syrian National Army (SNA) in the rebel offensive that brought down the Assad regime in 2024. The objectives of this operation were to expand the Turkish controlled territory, weaken the SDF, preventing Kurdish autonomy in Post-Assad Syria and to support Turkish efforts to create a 'safe zones' of 30 km's in northern Syria (Coskun & Gebeily, 2022). Even in 2025 Ibrahim Kalin, the head of Turkish intelligence stated, that National Intelligence Organization (MIT) has actively participated in the Syrian conflict from its beginning to its resolution and had worked to establish a new state in Syria (Middle East Monitor, 2026).

After the fall of Assad regime, Turkish controlled parts of northern Aleppo were handed over to the new Syrian government in February 2025 and parts of north-eastern Syria followed in March 2025. However, the Turkish troops remained deployed in Syria throughout the transition process. By January 2026 most of the provinces came under the control of the new Syrian transitional government. Some areas were still under the control of Kurdish forces and city of Suwayda was under the control of Druze forces. After the fall of Assad regime, Turkey continued its military presence in northern

Syria, by claiming that it was essential to protect its national security, combat terrorist threats, and promote stability throughout Syria's political transition.

These military actions by Turkey reflected a broader shift in its policies to the Syrian conflict. In the initial years of conflict Ankara's objective was regime change. Later it gradually shifted towards strengthening border security, fighting terrorism and stopping the formation of an independent Kurdish state in its northern border. This shift in policy demonstrated that Turkey's ability to adjust with the changing realities on the ground. By the late 2017, Turkish officials had come to the conclusion that stopping security risks coming from northern Syria was more crucial than overthrowing Assad.

Turkey and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

One of the most important consequences of the Syrian conflict for Turkey has been the unprecedented influx of refugees. Since the outbreak of Syrian conflict in 2011, Turkey has hosted largest number of refugees from Syria in world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Turkey hosted more than 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees by 2020 (UNHCR, 2020). At the starting of the conflict, Turkey adopted a '*open-door policy*' for Syrians escaping violence. Turkey framed its response as a humanitarian duty based on both international norms and due to historical relations with Syria. The Turkish government set up refugee camps along the border and gave them access to humanitarian aid, healthcare and education. Turkish officials initially believed that the Syrian conflict would end quickly and then refugees would soon return home following the fall of the Assad regime (İçduygu, 2015).

But as the war prolonged and the number of refugees increased day by day, the short-term humanitarian crisis turned into a long-term political, economic, and social problem. Due to the growing refugee population, public services, labour sectors, infrastructure and housing markets were all significantly impacted. Anti-refugee sentiment became one of the key issues of Turkish politics, with opposition parties continuously using what scholars called '*burden narrative*' to problematize Syrian refugees as a threat to Turkish social cohesion and economic resources.

The refugee issue also became highly politicized issue in Turkey. The opposition parties criticized the government's policy on Syria by arguing that Turkey had become excessively involved in the Syrian conflict. During election campaigns, the repatriation of refugees became an important political topic, which reflects public's dissatisfaction for presence of millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Even some surveys of public opinion revealed growing support for laws that encourage refugees to return, especially amid economic difficulties and growing nationalist sentiments (Akgündüz et al., 2015). After realizing these challenges, the AKP government eventually changed its strategy from provid-

ing emergency humanitarian aid to managing refugees over the long term. The Turkish government linked Turkey's military actions in Syria to the creation of safe zones, which it claimed would make it easier for Syrian refugees to return voluntarily. One of the objectives of Operation Peace Spring was to create buffer zones, so that refugees can be accommodated in these zones (Erkmen, 2020).

The Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the most significant long-term consequences of Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict. What started as a humanitarian response later turned into a complex policy affecting domestic politics, social stability, economic development and social stability. Turkey's management of refugees shows that how an external conflict can significantly impact the internal dynamics of neighbouring country and have an impact on the broader strategic calculations

Turkey's Diplomatic Balancing: The Astana Peace Process

While Turkey was conducting military operations on the ground in Syria, but it was also engaged in diplomatic maneuvering. Since 2011 several actors have launched a number of peace initiatives in an attempt to put an end to the Syrian conflict peacefully. The Astana Peace Process was a diplomatic initiative started in early 2017 by Turkey, Russia and Iran to encourage negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition groups. The aim of this initiative was to reduce violence by creating de-escalation zones and advance a political settlement to the Syrian crisis (Cengiz, 2020). The Astana Peace Process also offered an alternative to the UN led Geneva process and focused on practical issues such as de-escalation zones, ceasefires and conflict management. The most important success of Astana Peace Process came in September 2017 when the agreement on de-escalation zones was made. It led to decrease in active hostilities temporarily in some key areas including Idlib.

Turkey's participation in the Astana Process served its several strategic objectives. First, it made sure that Turkey remained directly involved in talks over Syria's future. That even with those two actors who were main supporters of Assad regime. Second, despite strong differences over Assad's political future, it allowed Turkey to work with Iran and Russia. Third, it offered ways to control military tensions on the ground and avoid direct conflict between external actors. The Astana Peace Process also gave Turkey an opportunity to present itself as a responsible regional power and an influential actor in the Syrian conflict. Francesco Siccaldi in a report argues that the "*Astana Process even gave Erdogan the international prominence*" (Siccaldi, 2021).

The Astana Peace Process especially improved Turkey's diplomatic position by positioning it as a crucial actor in negotiations over Syria's future. Through a combination of military intervention, diplomatic engagements and by strategic calculations, Turkey has secured a vital role in shaping regional developments. Due to this multidimensional strategy Turkey was able to manage competing

geopolitical pressures and maintained its position as one of the most influential external players in the Syrian war.

Turkey's Growing Influence in Post-Assad Syria

The overthrow of Assad regime in December 2024 was a historic turning point in the Syrian conflict and it significantly changed the balance of power in the region. Among all the external factors involved in the Syrian conflict, Turkey emerged as the primary beneficiary of the post Assad transition. The significance of the Assad government's collapse for Turkey has been highlighted by Breibart (2026), who argues: *"The fall of Assad in Syria in December 2024 marked a major victory for Turkey. With an Ankara-friendly government in Damascus, Erdogan saw a new opening to merge foreign and domestic agendas"* (Breibart, 2026). One of the most direct ways in which Ankara won from the collapse of Assad regime was through its long standing ties to the groups that overthrow the Assad regime. The Syrian National Army (SNA), a Turkish backed armed group that Ankara had formed, financed, equipped and supported, was one of the two main forces that started the offensive against Assad regime in November 2024 that ultimately led the collapse of Assad regime (Adar et al., 2025).

Ankara's growing influence in post-Assad Syria is mainly linked to its long-term strategy for keeping a presence in northern Syria. Through a series of military operations and cooperation with local opposition groups, Turkey gained significant control over border regions and developed governance structures linked to Turkish institutions. Turkey backed local councils, healthcare facilities, educational institutions and security arrangements formed a governance framework that helped Turkey to expand its political and administrative influence beyond military means in regions controlled by Turkish backed opposition forces. As a result, when Assad regime collapsed in December 2024, Turkey possessed well-established institutional and political networks that allowed Ankara to shape post-Assad developments more successfully than any other external actor.

In post-Assad Syria, one of Turkey's main goals is to make sure that any new political system does not threaten its national security. The Kurdish issues remains central to Ankara's strategic priorities. Due to which Turkey considers the northern Syrian regions under Kurdish control as a serious security concern. This is mainly due to the close organizational and ideological links between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), one of the dominant Kurdish force. As PKK is designated as a terrorist organization by the Turkey, US and European Union (Roth & Sever, 2007). Therefore, Turkey tries to prevent the formation of any autonomous Kurdish region in its southern border. This objective continues to shape Turkish involvement with Syria's new government and influences Turkey's broader regional strategy.

Turkey has also made efforts to establish itself as a major player in Syria's reconstruction and economic revival (Karbowska, 2026). There was a massive destruction caused in Syria due to the conflict which lasted for more than a decade. This has created huge reconstruction needs in many sectors such as- housing, education, infrastructure, health and economic development. The companies of Turkey have taken a leading role in the process of reconstruction in Syria especially in the fields of power generation and transportation (Ibid.). Due to Turkey's close geographical proximity to Syria and due to existing economic ties with northern Syria, Ankara is in good position to get benefit from reconstruction efforts and growing cross-border trade. The Turkish exports to Syria increased to \$2.18 billion in 2024, which even includes more than \$135 million in oilseeds, grains and pulses, which were essential for ensuring food security during the fragile transitional phase (Trading Economics, n.d.). This level of trade highlights the Turkey's crucial role in addressing Syria's basic needs while establishing long-term economic influence. In January 2025 alone, the exports from Turkey to Syria has increased by more than 38%, which shows a rapid recovery in bilateral trade restored economic interdependence (Karbowska, 2026).

The post-Assad transition in Syria also gives Turkey with an opportunity to increase its influence in the region. For more than a decade, Turkey has invested substantial political, economic and military resources in the Syrian conflict. With the formation of a new political order in Syria, Ankara will be able to transform these investments into long-term strategic advantages. By promoting stability and taking part in reconstruction projects, Turkey aims to become a key player in Syria's post-conflict recovery.

Turkey's Opportunities and Challenges in Post-Assad Syria

The collapse of the Assad regime has opened many opportunities for Turkey. First, due to the weakening of its hostile adversaries and due to the reforms in Syria's political system may improve Turkey's security environment. Turkey believes that a more friendly government in Syria will decrease cross-border threats and will enable better coordination between two countries on the important issues such as border management, terrorism and refugees. Second, Turkey is likely to benefit from the economic opportunities associated with the reconstruction of Syria, after the huge destruction caused in Syria by the conflict. Third, Turkey's role in post-Assad Syria is likely to strengthen its influence throughout the region.

Despite having numerous opportunities for Turkey, it still has to face a lot of challenges in post-Assad Syria. One of the main challenges for Turkey in post-Assad Syria is the Syria's continued political division. Some areas are still under the control of Kurdish and Druze forces. Many political factions,

ethnic communities, regional actors and armed groups still continue to compete for power. Another main challenge is the Kurdish issue. It still remains the most acute unresolved issue for Turkey. Despite the agreement between Syrian transitional government and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in March 2025, on the integration of Kurdish forces into the new Syrian national army, till now the Kurdish areas has not fully integrated with the new government. Which is a main concern for Turkey. Turkey continues to urge the new Syrian government to take strong action against the People's Protection Units (YPG) as a precondition in order to fully normalise the bilateral relations. Syrian refugees in Turkey is another concern for it. Large number of Syrian refugees are still in Turkey. Turkey also faces the challenge of balancing its regional aspirations and international expectations. While Turkey wants to keep its influence in Syria, but excessive intervention could lead to resistance from local actors or rival nations. Therefore, Syria must carefully manage its involvement in Syria in order to prevent notions of dominance or interference.

Conclusion

Turkey has emerged as one of the important external actors in the Syrian conflict. Turkey's Syria policy since 2011 shows a remarkable process of strategic adaptation in response to one of the biggest geopolitical crises of the twenty-first century. What started as an attempt to convince the Assad regime for political reforms and avoid violent repression on protesters, later got converted into full direct involvement of Turkey in Syrian conflict. That consisted of military intervention, diplomatic engagements, humanitarian assistance, refugee management and post-conflict influence building. During the initial years of the Syrian conflict, Turkey abandoned its longstanding alliance with the Assad regime and emerged as a leading supporter of the Syrian opposition. As the intensity of the conflict increased, it gave rise to ISIS and the growing influence of Kurdish armed groups, which led Ankara to shift its priorities towards national security issues. This change resulted in a series of military operations due to them Turkey became a dominant player in northern Syria and greatly increased its influence in the region.

The refugee crisis also significantly impacted the Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy. Due to presence of millions of Syrian refugees generated substantial humanitarian responsibilities on Turkey and also created significant political, social, and economic challenges for the host country. Turkey also used its role in refugee management to increase its diplomatic relations with the European Union and other international actors. Turkey's participation in the Astana Process allowed Ankara to maintain dialogue with Iran and Russia despite their support for the Assad regime, which strengthen Turkey's diplomatic position in negotiations over Syria's future.

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has further increased Turkey's strategic opportunities in Syria. Due to Ankara's already long-standing ties with Syrian opposition groups, established military presence in northern Syria and huge political and administrative networks have made Turkey as one of the most influential external actor in post-Assad Syria. At the same time, Ankara aims to convert its political and military investments into long-term economic and strategic gains through helping Syria's reconstruction, trade and cooperation with Syria's new government. After the fall of Assad regime Turkey emerged as one of the key actors shaping Syria's future. Despite having many opportunities, Ankara continues to face many challenges such as- Kurdish issue, regional competition, refugee issue, and political fragmentation in Syria.

Overall, the Turkey's involvement in Syrian conflict shows the growing importance of regional powers in contemporary international politics. The Syrian conflict shows that how regional actors can influence diplomatic processes, shape the course of the conflict and helps to create new geopolitical orders. As Syria undergoes its political transition, Turkey is likely to remain an important actor whose policies will play an important role on the stability of Syria as well as on the regional balance of power.

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