The Shifting Turkish Agenda in Syria’s Evolving Conflict

Understanding the drivers of Turkey’s policy in Syria

This paper critically examines the Turkish agenda in Syria, identifying Turkey’s domestic drivers and situating the country’s policies within an ever-changing regional and international context.

Its focus is particularly on how internal dynamics and nationalist politics are driving Turkish foreign policy in Syria. These domestic factors influence Turkey’s relationship to the West and its more recent pivot towards Russia.

The paper questions whether the Turkish-Russian relationship can be regarded as a turn away from traditional alliances such as NATO and the EU or whether it is merely a partnership of convenience based on mutual interests which is not likely to stand the test of time.
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# Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>AKP</td>
<td>Justice and Development Party (Turkey)</td>
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<td>IS</td>
<td>Islamic State (Syria)</td>
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<td>PKK</td>
<td>Kurdistan Worker’s Party (Turkey)</td>
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<td>PYD</td>
<td>Democratic Union Party (Syria)</td>
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<td>MHP</td>
<td>Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)</td>
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<td>YPG</td>
<td>People’s Protection Units (Syria)</td>
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<td>YPJ</td>
<td>Women’s Protection Units (Syria)</td>
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1. Introduction

This paper critically examines Turkey’s policy in Syria, identifying domestic drivers and situating the country’s policies within an ever-changing regional and international context. This paper is guided by the following key questions:

- What are the internal dynamics driving Turkish foreign policy in Syria?
- How do relations between Turkey and the West play out domestically?
- How can we understand the Turkey-Russia relationship and how does it impact the evolving conflict in Syria?
- How does the developing Turkey-Russia relationship draw Turkey further from the “West” and what may be some of the long-term consequences of this shift?

In analyses of Turkey’s foreign policy towards Syria, the framework has primarily focused on the geopolitical context of the great power rivalries played out regionally. With the increasing withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, Turkey, along with Russia (and to a lesser extent, Iran), have risen to become the regional power brokers.

It is worth noting that no one could have foreseen the evolution of the roles of these powers when the conflict broke out in 2011: Russia was not a Middle Eastern power, having reduced its presence and interest in the Middle East after the second Gulf War in 2003. And Turkey was still trying to conduct a “zero problems with neighbours” strategy with Syria as the gem in Erdogan’s regional crown. The shifting agendas of these two countries and their relations to one another are now shaping Syria and by extension, the Middle East. Their approaches are counterbalanced by structural constraints of the international system on Turkey, in particular its commitments to NATO, its flagging EU membership candidacy, and the EU-Turkey collaboration on migration from the Middle East to Europe. However valuable these perspectives may be, they are not sufficient to understand the drivers of Turkey’s foreign policy in Syria, especially given the nature of Justice and Development Party (AKP) governance under populist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in which domestic considerations are paramount.

This report is based on interviews conducted in June 2019 in Turkey and Brussels and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The statistics cited are from the survey “Research on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy,” published by Kadir Has University in Istanbul on 4 July 2019. The analysis is the author’s own and does not reflect the opinions of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹

¹ This research draws from the project entitled “Turkey’s Syrian Challenge” supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and conducted in 2019. The paper reflects the findings presented at an internal seminar at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign affairs on the 28 October 2019.
2. Making Foreign Policy in Illiberal Regimes: Theory and Context

Foreign policymaking in liberal democracies and illiberal populist regimes is markedly different and needs to be approached using theories whose focus favours domestic politics over international commitments.

Theories for analysing foreign policymaking in liberal democracies emphasise the complex interplay between domestic concerns and international engagement. Two examples from a multitude of theories are Putnam’s “two-level games” (1988) in which negotiations between the intranational level (domestic) and the international level determine acceptable outcomes in negotiations. Doyle’s theory of the democratic peace (2012) proposes that democracies are less likely to engage in international conflict. Both theories illustrate how, in liberal democratic regimes, government policies are formed by a combination of public opinion and international commitments.

However, in illiberal democracies, the domestic context outweighs international constraints. Scholars classify Turkey’s present regime under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in a space between “representative democracy and authoritarianism,” using terms such as majoritarian democracy, hybrid regime, delegative democracy or illiberal democracy. Each of these terms emphasizes different aspects of democratic governance. Key features of Turkey’s present governance model include the absence of horizontal accountability (weak separation of powers and corruption), weak freedom of expression, strong centralized rule by a populist leader with unchecked powers, and clientelist practices.

Foreign policymaking in illiberal populist regimes is better understood through Risse-Kappen’s Innenpolitikk theory (1991). Risse-Kappen stresses the primacy of the domestic context in foreign policymaking, be that culture, politics, economics, or regime type. Significantly, he notes that in cases where a democratically elected government, through the power wielded by a single leader, controls the state bureaucracy and the media (resulting in limits to freedom of expression), that government is capable of remaining in power even when isolated by the international community. For interactions with a regime where foreign policy is “primarily generated from within,” understanding the domestic context is therefore of critical importance.

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3. Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy

The ruling AKP's policy in Syria has generated an influx of refugees from across the border with consequences for President Erdogan's popularity. This issue impacts Turkey's weak economy, its already-polarized political environment, and its tense relations to the European Union and the United States.

The most significant domestic factor in the AKP's Syrian policy is the presence of 3.7 million Syrian refugees, making Turkey the country hosting the largest number of refugees (UNHCR 2019 figures). At the start of the conflict, Turkey had an “open door” policy for asylum-seeking Syrians. However, as a consequence of the particularities of Turkish refugee law, Syrian refugees were placed under a temporary protection regime as “guests” with limitations to their rights. Furthermore, their “guest” status signalled that their stay was temporary, which delayed programs to assist in resettlement and shaped the Turkish public’s belief that these ‘guests’ would soon return to Syria. Today, there is widespread discontent among the Turkish population regarding Syrian refugees’ continued presence.

Refugees are concentrated in urban areas (95%), and according to 2018 UNHCR figures they are predominantly young and male. In some urban centres such as Kilis, on the border with Syria, there are more Syrian refugees living in the city limits than Turkish residents and their different ethnicity and cultural practices only serve to heighten the perception of the Syrians as a societal threat to Turkish identity.6 Hostile rhetoric from all political parties feeds into popular discontent, as 80% of Turks are presently opposed to the settlement of Syrian refugees in Turkey.7 According to 2019 survey, 42% of the population believes that Turkey should have remained neutral in the Syrian conflict.8 Figures like these impact the popularity of the government, given that the same survey found that 72% of Turks regard President Erdogan as the most influential person in foreign policymaking.9

Furthermore, Turkey’s economic downturn in recent years has made the debate over the country’s Syria policy even more polarized. The Turkish lira lost almost 40% of its value against the US dollar between January 2018 and June 2019, while the unemployment rate soared to 13%. In the economic downturn, refugees became scapegoats for the nation’s economic troubles, cast as competing for jobs or supported by government grants at a time when much of the Turkish population was struggling to make ends meet. This narrative was prevalent despite significant EU contributions to Turkey earmarked for refugee support as part of the 2016 Turkey-EU migration deal.

Together, these factors weakened the position of the AKP and strengthened the footing of its right-wing nationalist partner, the National Action Party (MHP). Over the past few years, the AKP and the MHP have successfully mobilised anti-Kurdish sentiment due to concerns about Kurdish autonomy in Syria spilling into Turkey. Since 2015, the Kurdish issue has been “re-securitised” in Turkey with the consequence that many Kurdish politicians working for legal political parties

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8 These figures are from Aydin, M. et al. (2019) ‘Research on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy’, Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, 4 July. More recent figures indicate public discontent to have risen to 80% (Ibid).
9 Ibid.
(albeit in opposition to the government) have been imprisoned, including the co-chairpersons of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, who were both incarcerated in April 2016.

While Erdogan’s nationalist policies have won over a significant bloc of voters, they have simultaneously alienated Kurdish and liberal voters. As a result, the AKP lost the June 2019 rerun of the Istanbul municipal election in which the Kurdish vote was decisive in turning the election in favour of the rival Republican People’s party (CHP) and its partner the “Good” Party (Iyi - a recent offshoot of the nationalist MHP).\(^{10}\) Although only a local election, the Istanbul municipal election was a psychologically important victory for the opposition and an early warning for Erdogan looking ahead to the 2023 national elections.

\[^{10}\] In August 2019, HDP mayors from the three biggest cities of the southeast were removed from office followed by the removal of a further 32 HDP regional mayors according to Human Rights Watch. Available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights).
4. Ideological Shifts Post-2013

The most significant ideological shift in Turkish politics since 2013 is the turn towards greater nationalism following the breakdown in the AKP’s alliance with the Gülen movement, a transnational Islamic movement led from the United States by the charismatic cleric Fetullah Gülen. The Gülen movement had been a key partner in the AKP’s rise to power but the partnership dissolved following a power struggle between the Gülenists and the AKP in which the former openly accused the latter of corruption. It was the Gülen movement that was allegedly behind the aborted coup in 2016. Since then, a wide array of citizens has been accused of being members of the “Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETO)”, the name that was given to followers of the Gülen movement (both real and alleged). In the months following, 15,000 public employees lost their jobs and more than 34,000 people were arrested, accused of being FETO members.11

In search of new alliance partners, the AKP turned to the far-right conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Developments in Syria, particularly the rising position of the Syrian Kurdish PYD, allowed the MHP to once again raise the “Sèvres spectre” alluding to the historical Sèvres Treaty from 1920 in which the victorious Allied powers divided the Ottoman Empire into European spheres of influence and created a Kurdish state (to be administered by Britain). The “Sèvres syndrome” is successfully mobilised by nationalists to illustrate a European conspiracy to support Kurdish independence claims in Turkey, becoming the lens through which Western policy towards Turkey is assessed.

Developments on the ground in Syria opened up space for Kurdish claims to autonomy when the Syrian Kurdish militias of the People’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), fighting alongside the United States, defeated IS in Kobane in 2014. The Kurdish victory resulted in the United States forming an alliance with the Kurds, a move that was interpreted by Turkey as supporting their political project. In 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) established an independent Kurdish Syrian entity (Rojava) in northern Syria, once again raising concerns about Kurdish irredentism in Turkey. The PYD is organically linked to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) in Turkey and its governance structure is based on the ideology of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The Kurdish-Turkish peace of 2009-2015 would eventually end due to the combined impact of the loss of the AKP’s parliamentary vote in the June 2015 election due to Kurdish votes, the resumption of armed violence attributed to the PKK, and the Turkish military crackdown in the southern part of the country.

In addition to impacting domestic politics through defining the Kurdish and Syrian refugee issues as a threat to the state, the alliance with the nationalists has had consequences for Turkey’s relations with the West, giving rise to anti-Western sentiment sustained by both conservative and liberal (secular) nationalists, disappointed by US policies in Syria and angry with the European Union’s treatment of Turkey as a refugee sanctuary. This shift marks a deviation from the ideology of past right-wing parties in Turkey, who were generally supportive of the United States, and for secular nationalists who were eager supporters of Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

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Union. At the time of writing, right-wing populism is still driving discussions of an independent foreign policy that will have consequences for Turkey’s relations to the West.
5. Relations to the West Seen through the Prism of Domestic Politics

Anti-Westernism has become a unifying national force that entrenches and legitimizes AKP rule. Relations to both the United States and Europe have shifted as a result of the AKP’s desire for a more autonomous foreign policy.

Svante E. Cornell suggests that Turkish nationalism should be seen “as the organizing principle of Turkish politics for the foreseeable future.” The rise of nationalism and its mobilization in domestic politics has had significant ramifications for Turkey’s relations to its traditional allies.

Relations to the United States have been tumultuous over the course of the Syria conflict, characterized by a lack of trust on both sides. As illustrated above, the AKP’s sense of betrayal stems from several incidents including the US’s 2014 decision to partner with the Syrian Kurdish YPG/YPJ fighters, the Trump administration’s lukewarm response to the attempted coup against Erdogan in 2016, and the US refusal to extradite the alleged coup-maker, Fetullah Gülen. However, senior Turkish diplomats argue that these are just symptoms of a relationship that has gradually deteriorated since the Iraq War in 2003. In their words, the US’s heavy-handed approach towards Turkey in recent years has ruined the “texture” of the relationship and paved the way for the narrow defeat of US troop deployment through Turkey.

The debate over Turkey’s loyalty to NATO returned in the summer of 2019 as a result of Turkey’s decision to follow-through with the purchase of a Russian air defense missile system, the S-400 Triumph, which raised questions about Turkey’s commitment to NATO. However, Turkish diplomats stated that they had no choice but to turn to Russia due to the US’s refusal to sell Patriot missiles to Turkey in 2017. Furthermore, in Turkey’s view, NATO did not appreciate the country’s need for its own air defense system despite its precarious geopolitical location.

But this new commercial venture with Russia had negative consequences for Turkish-US military collaboration. Turkey’s decision to buy the S-400s resulted in the country’s suspension from the US F-35 joint strike fighter program (both as a customer and a manufacturer) due to concerns that Russia might use S-400 as an intelligence collection platform on the F-35’s advanced capabilities. Meanwhile, Washington threatened Ankara with sanctions based on provisions in the 2018 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which penalizes countries for buying Russian equipment. Despite these warnings, the first components for the S-400s were received on 16 July, a symbolic date as it was also the anniversary of the attempted coup against Erdogan, and the US sanctions were never imposed. In an attempt to improve US relations during a mid-November visit to Washington DC, President Erdogan stated that he would not withdraw from the S-400 deal, but Turkey would consider purchasing Patriots missiles if an offer were made “under suitable conditions,” meaning at a competitive price and (less realistically) some technology transfer.

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13 Anonymous interview with senior Turkish diplomat, 2 July 2019.
14 Ibid.
During the fall of 2019, US-Turkey relations were further tested following the withdrawal of US forces from northeastern Syria. The AKP launched “Operation Peace Spring” in October 2019 which sought to regain control over areas governed by the PYD, the Kurdish militia that had partnered with the United States in the fight against IS. In response to heavy public disapproval over the withdrawal, an angry Donald Trump threatened (in a tweet) “to obliterate the Economy (sic) of Turkey” for attacking the Kurds. Actual punitive measures followed when the US House of Representatives chose to vote on a historically contentious issue – the decision to label the mass murder and displacement of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman empire as a genocide. This decision was followed by the Senate voting in favour of a bill to impose sanctions against Turkey beginning on 11 December 2019. Although Erdogan threatened to close two critical NATO installations, including the Incirlik Airbase, which houses US nuclear missiles, and Kürecik, a NATO radar station, President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act which included measures against Turkey and a call for implementing sanctions under CAATSA.

The AKP government’s decision not to back down on the purchase S-400s while being open to purchasing Patriots is indicative of the party’s efforts to strike a geostrategic balance for Turkey. However, this balance also suggests weakened trust in their relationship with the US. This shift, however, should perhaps not be surprising. Back in 2016, Erdogan made the following statement: “Before it is too late, Washington must give up the misguided notion that our relationship can be asymmetrical and come to terms with the fact that Turkey has alternatives. Failure to reverse this trend of unilateralism and disrespect will require us to start looking for new friends and allies.”

Turkey-EU relations are less tumultuous but equally contentious. There has been a shift in the relationship gradually since the early 2000s when Turkey’s clear goal was membership in the European Union, dependent on a significant number of reforms enacted to improve democratic governance and strengthen human rights. At this time, the EU had a clear “disciplining power” over Turkey. However, as prospects for membership diminished, the incentive and motivation to fulfill the EU’s criteria for membership also declined. Anchoring Turkey in Europe was a hope for liberals and secularists alike who now are resigned to the notion that Turkey will not become an EU member.

The refugee crisis of 2015 and the subsequent signing of the Turkey-EU refugee deal in 2016 further shifted power away from the EU and gave Turkey greater leverage in its dealings with the organisation. Consequently, the relationship moved from “transformative” to “transactional”. Given the unpopularity of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the Turkish government has used the Turkey-EU Refugee deal to mobilise anti-EU sentiments by alleging that the EU does not honour its commitments under the treaty, despite total EU disbursements to Turkey reaching 3 billion Euros by the end of 2019 and a further 4 billion envisaged by the end of 2020.

These already poor relations with the EU have been exacerbated by disagreements over hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2019 in which the European
Commission has supported Cyprus’ claims while criticizing Turkey’s drilling activities.\textsuperscript{20} Turkey claims that the areas opened by Cyprus to exploration are either on Turkey’s continental shelf, or in zones where Turkish and Greek Cypriots have equal rights over any finds. The EU has expressed full solidarity with Cyprus and threatened Turkey with sanctions should it refuse to back down.

6. The Russian Pivot

The rapprochement between Turkey and Russia since 2016 has raised questions regarding Turkey’s commitment to its traditional partners in the West. However, this new alliance should not be regarded a replacement to NATO but as a partnership of convenience serving to protect the respective national interests: Turkey’s desire for a more autonomous foreign policy and Russia’s desire to challenge the Turkey-NATO relationship.

There are two key moments in the process of Turkey’s pivot towards Russia under the Erdogan government. The present Turkey-Russia relationship was difficult to imagine in 2015 when Russia entered the Syrian conflict on the side of the Syrian regime while Erdogan was advocating for the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Two months later, Turkey downed a Russian plane and Putin imposed sanctions on Turkey that equalled $10 billion in lost trade at a time when the country was struggling economically.

The relationship turned around when Putin came to the support of Erdogan after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. This support from Putin shifted AKP policy in Syria and, a month later, Turkey revised its policy on the removal of Assad. Then in 2017, Putin expressed his support for Erdogan again during the April constitutional referendum in Turkey that was widely criticised as weakening Turkish democracy. Meanwhile, the EU and the US voiced loud concerns that the move from a parliamentary to a presidential system would concentrate too much power in the office of the executive. Putin called the move an “exclusively internal matter.”

Economically, the two countries enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship. Turkey has important trade relations with Russia, particularly in the tourism, construction, and energy sectors, and they are dependent on Russia for gas, as its second largest consumer. Interestingly, energy collaboration is an area that has continued even through more recent political differences between the two. In January 2020, the unresolved status of the conflict in Idlib, Syria, and Turkey’s Libya policy threatened to drive a wedge between Russia and Turkey, but that did not deter Putin and Erdogan from jointly launching the Turkstream gas pipeline, which angered the United States who threatened sanctions. The Russian-Turkish ability to compartmentalize significant policy differences in the interest of attaining respective advantages is a key feature inherent in the transactional nature of their relationship.

However, the strains brought on by the escalating violence in the Syrian province of Idlib (as well as support for opposing sides in Libya) raises questions about the sustainability of the Turkish-Russian alliance. Idlib has become a holding ground for 35,000 opposition fighters who have been driven out of other areas of Syria. This city is now the final piece of territory needed for Assad’s government to regain completely control of the country.

The de-escalation agreement for Idlib (also known as the Sochi Agreement) from 2018 included the establishment of a 15-20-kilometre demilitarized zone, creating 12 Turkish monitoring posts,

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and opening up key highways. In return, Turkey would disarm and remove from the zone all radical terrorist groups (primarily Hay’et Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), a previously Al-Qaeda-affiliated militia). At the time, the agreement sought to deter Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime from direct confrontation in Idlib. In reality, it served to simply buy time.

Turkey was unable to uphold its end of the bargain as the shift in attention from Idlib to the northeastern Syria following the US withdrawal in October 2019 presented HTS with opportunities for increasing their hold on Idlib. Turkish outposts were in a precarious position as Syrian and Russian strikes intensified starting in April 2019. On 10 January 2020, Putin and Erdogan agreed on a new ceasefire agreement, which was broken less than week later when the Syrian army launched a new ground offensive with support from Russian air power and resulted in a new refugee influx towards Turkey’s border. The confrontations between Turkish and Syrian forces intensified further after Syrian shelling led to the deaths of Turkish soldiers. Turkey retaliated with airstrikes on Syria on 3 February. Erdogan blamed Putin for the escalation and described the situation in Idlib as “untenable”. Then he asked for international condemnation of Russia, warning of potential refugee flows into Europe.

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7. Conclusion

The anti-Westernism of the AKP in domestic politics has impacted its policies towards Turkey's traditional allies. However, the fluidity of the Syrian conflict makes it difficult to predict Turkey's future partnerships.

The continued fluidity of the conflict on the ground in Syria impacts the balance of power politics almost daily, which makes it difficult to predict Turkey's Syrian policies in the future. However, domestic politics are a useful guide for understanding the AKP's priorities.

The situation in Idlib is escalating at the time of writing and it is difficult to foresee how Turkey-Russian relations will develop post-Idlib. The premise of the relationship has been one of mutual advantage. As the conflict in Syria enters its final stages, differences between two partners are becoming too difficult to compartmentalize. Russia supports a Syrian regime with consolidated sovereignty that would allow for Russian withdrawal, but this increases Turkey's insecurity due to its lack of trust in the Syrian regime. Geopolitically, Putin's value to Erdogan is, above all, his ability to exert pressure on the Assad regime and influence outcomes in Syria. As a border country, Turkey's stability will continue to depend on developments in Syria. Idlib might force Turkey to rethink its alliances and recognize that the unpredictability that defines transactional politics has consequences for the AKP's long term goals in Syria.

In the context of domestic politics, the anti-Westernism of the past few years has served as a unifying force, which has entrenched and legitimised AKP rule. Anti-Westernism finds cultural resonance in the traditional Turkish saying “Türkun dostu Türkdür” (The only friend of a Turk is a Turk). Weakening Turkey's bonds to its historic allies, the AKP advocates for a more autonomous foreign policy, but the risk is increasing isolation within the global system.
8. Further Reading

Aydın, M. et al. (2019) ‘Research on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy’, Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, 4 July.


This paper critically examines the Turkish agenda in Syria, identifying Turkey’s domestic drivers and situating the country’s policies within an ever-changing regional and international context.

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