

Syria in the shadow of the Ukraine War: Turkish sabre-rattling and Russian bargaining

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Map: Northern Syria in September 2022. Source: Pär Wikström FOI.

The war in Ukraine has weakened Russia while increasing Turkey's freedom of action, but Ankara's plans for a new attack against Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria have nonetheless been blocked by Russian objections. A murky bargaining process has begun, amid continued Turkish sabre-rattling; the outcome remains unclear.

In May 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan triggered a complicated international crisis by announcing that he intended to launch a military offensive against two Kurdish-held enclaves in northern Syria, where Turkey already controls large areas along the border. Negotiations soon began with Russia, whose military observers block Turkey's path, and which appears to have demanded the resumption of direct contacts between Ankara and Damascus. The talks have dragged on without resolution. Although Turkey now signals increased openness toward the Syrian government, public contacts have yet to resume and the promised intervention has not materialised.

This FOI Memo investigates the Russian-Turkish dynamic in Syria.¹ It focusses on the potential for renewed military intervention in northern Syria and for a resumption of Damascus-Ankara contacts. Initially describing the conflict in Syria and the role played by Turkey, it proceeds by analysing how Erdoğan's intervention plans have been shaped by the war in Ukraine and Turkish domestic politics. It then looks at how Russia has exploited these

plans to encourage Turkish-Syrian normalisation, and at the potential consequences for Sweden.

The volatility of the negotiating process discourages easy conclusions, but, in the long run, it appears likely that the Kurdish forces will lose control of the enclaves, in one way or another. It is also probable that Turkey and Syria will resume public contacts, even though early gestures in that regard are unlikely to be expanded in the short term. From a Swedish point of view, the crisis is primarily of indirect importance, but Turkey's actions may, in the short run, fuel controversy over the parallel NATO applications of Finland and Sweden. In the longer term, events in Syria could influence Turkey's foreign policy alignment as well as issues pertaining to stability, migration, and terrorism in the Middle East.

ACTORS AND SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IN SYRIA IN 2022

Although the Syrian civil war, which began after the Arab Spring, in 2011, remains a live conflict, the scale of violence has declined and the front lines are now largely stagnant.² The primary reason is that US, Russian, and Turkish forces have operated inside Syria for years, while working to keep their respective spheres of influence separate and avoid clashes.³ Iran and Israel are also active in Syria, but their presence has not had the same restraining effect.

The main front lines have remained relatively stable since 2018, although armed conflict continues at a low level and

some territories have changed hands violently, particularly in northeastern Syria, in 2019, and in Idleb, in 2019–20. The conflict's longer-term evolution remains unclear, as it will depend on inscrutable internal factors as well as on the future policy choices of external actors.

Most of Syria is under the control of President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian government, supported by Russia and Iran. Northeastern Syria is ruled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by a Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurmanji: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK).⁴ The United States also controls a small desert enclave in the south of the country. In the north, Turkish troops support the rebels of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the jihadist group Tahrir al-Sham. For a map of the situation in September 2022, see above.

TURKEY'S ROLE IN SYRIA

Turkish-Syrian relations were generally poor until the end of the 1990s, under the influence of Cold War tensions but also due to border disputes and conflicts over Euphrates River dams and water distribution.⁵ Syria sought to pressure Turkey by offering support to the PKK's insurgency.⁶ In autumn 1998, Turkey threatened to invade, which prompted Syria to close PKK training camps and expel the group's leader.⁷ In the Adana Agreement, signed on 20 October 1998, Syria committed to cooperating with Turkey and banishing the PKK from its territory.⁸ Many sources claim that the agreement contains a secret annex in which Turkey reserves the right to use "any necessary security means" up to 5 kilometres across the border.⁹ This has never been officially confirmed. In a 2010–11 bilateral counter-terrorism agreement, the two sides agree to "explore opportunities for joint operations if the need arises".¹⁰

From 1998 on, the Turkish-Syrian relationship saw a remarkable upswing that culminated in close cooperation, on economic matters in particular. It was facilitated by the arrival in power of new leaders: Bashar al-Assad, who in 2000 succeeded his father as Syria's president, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose Justice and Development Party (Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) won Turkey's 2002 elections. When an uprising against Assad's rule erupted in 2011, Turkey first sought to broker a peaceful solution, even as it facilitated the emergence of political and paramilitary opposition structures. In autumn 2011, Erdoğan broke with Assad and offered wholehearted backing to the armed rebellion.¹¹ Ever since, Turkey has been the main source of support for Assad's opponents, despite the fact that the Turkish government's own priorities have gradually shifted toward combating the SDF. During the first five years of the conflict, Ankara coordinated its efforts with several Western and Arab states, who

eventually ended their support for the rebels.¹² What now remains of the rebel army is a Turkish force for counter-SDF operations, which Ankara prevents from conducting offensive operations against Assad's government.

Since 2016, the Turkish Army has entered four areas in northern Syria: the northern Aleppo Governorate (2016), Efrin (2018), Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ein (2019), and Idleb (2017–18). According to UN estimates, some 4.5 million Syrians live in these areas. Nine out of ten depend on humanitarian aid and more than half are internally displaced.¹³

In the first three areas, Turkey has gathered local rebel factions into a coalition known as the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA militias are known to be poorly disciplined and will at times fight amongst themselves, but they are collectively under Turkish control. Several SNA groups have contributed personnel to Turkey's interventions in Libya and the South Caucasus.¹⁴ Civilian governance in these areas is also under Turkish control. The fourth area, Idleb, which is by far the largest in terms of population, is under the sway of Tahrir al-Sham, a terrorist-designated Islamist faction. Although Tahrir al-Sham cooperates with Turkey, it is not a proxy militia of the SNA variety.

Turkey justifies its presence in Syria by stating that the SDF functions as a front for the PKK and that civilian Syrians must be protected against Assad's forces. Its officially declared ambition is to create what it refers to as a "safe zone" or "peace corridor," stretching along the border at a depth of 30 kilometres, to which it aims to relocate refugees.¹⁵ Currently, some 3.6 million UN-registered refugees live in Turkey.¹⁶ Ankara makes no territorial claim to any part of Syria and insists that it will leave Syrian soil at the conclusion of the UN peace process. In practice, however, the peace process is deadlocked, and northern Syria is being steadily drawn ever deeper into Turkey's embrace.

Since 2016–17, Turkey has worked with Russia and Iran (both of whom support Assad) in the so-called Astana Process.¹⁷ The Turkish-Russian bilateral track has claimed centre stage, and Syria has in fact emerged as a key element in a close and deep yet often contentious Turkish-Russian relationship.¹⁸ Despite irreconcilable aims, the Astana troika has successfully negotiated a series of agreements. The basis for this collaborative effort is Russian-Iranian tolerance for Turkey's sphere of influence in northern Syria, in return for which Turkey has called off rebel attempts to overthrow Assad by military means. In addition, the two sides are united by a shared opposition to US support for the SDF. Low-level fighting between Syrian groups remains common and can at times trigger acerbic exchanges within the Astana troika. Such incidents can usually be brought under control

through Russian-Turkish contacts, but the level of violence may rise sharply at moments when Russia and Turkey seek to pressure each other as part of their bargaining process, before a new agreement is reached. The most recent example was a round of destructive fighting in Idleb during the winter of 2019–20, in which more than a million people were displaced; more than thirty Turkish soldiers also lost their lives, in what may have been a demonstrative Russian power play.¹⁹

On 23 May 2022, Erdoğan announced that Turkey would start to “take new steps soon regarding the remaining parts of the works that we launched to create 30 kilometres of deep safe zones along our southern borders”.²⁰ A week later, the president clarified his plans: “We will clear Tal Rifaat and Manbij of terrorists, and we will do the same to other regions step-by-step.”²¹ Since then, Turkish leaders have continued to declare their intent to launch military operations against Tell Refaat and Manbij, two areas north of Aleppo where the SDF coexists with government forces under Russian protection. They have not, however, clarified when these operations will commence.²²

Turkey has simultaneously ramped up pressure along the border.²³ Several leaders of the SDF and allied Kurdish movements have been killed in Turkish drone strikes, which have also left a growing number of civilian victims.²⁴ According to the London-based non-governmental organisation Airwars, civilian casualties nearly doubled between April and June 2022. August saw the highest monthly casualty figure to date, with 13 dead and up to 58 people injured.²⁵ In the same month, several government soldiers were also killed.²⁶

THE KURDISH-LED SDF

During the violent summer of 2012, Assad’s overstretched army finally abandoned Syria’s Kurdish-populated border regions, which were swiftly seized by the People’s Defence Units (Kurmanji: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), a Syrian offshoot of the PKK movement. The YPG takeover was largely bloodless and is likely to have enjoyed Assad’s discreet approval, as a tactic to divide the opposition and add pressure on Turkey.²⁷ In 2014, the YPG picked up US support in the group’s battles against the Islamic State (IS), a Jihadist faction. In the following year, it established the SDF alliance together with small Arab Sunni and Syriac-Assyrian Christian units. Turkey has been infuriated by the SDF’s emergence as a global counterterrorism partner, and by the fact that neither the United States nor its European allies have extended their PKK terrorism designations to the YPG and the SDF.²⁸

The SDF’s main international partner is the United States, which leads the Global Coalition Against Daesh, a

multinational anti-IS operation. There are currently around 900 US troops, in addition to an unknown number of civilian contractors, in northeastern Syria.²⁹ Although US air support matters more in purely military terms, the US ground presence serves as a political tripwire protecting the SDF from Turkish or Syrian government attack. The SDF is only lightly armed and would not, on its own, be able to defend its vast territory in northeastern Syria against a state actor. Should the United States withdraw, it is likely that a large part of the SDF’s Arab manpower would desert, or switch sides, forcing a weakened and isolated YPG to seek Assad’s protection against Turkey.

These dynamics were on clear display in autumn 2019, when then-president Donald Trump ordered US forces out of parts of northeastern Syria, while Turkey moved into the border cities of Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ein. The SDF reacted by entering into an agreement with the Syrian government and Russia, which, in some areas, stepped into the role just vacated by the United States by deploying a symbolic troop presence and initiating talks with Turkey. On 20 October 2019, a Russian-Turkish agreement concluded that Ankara’s demand for a 30-kilometre security zone could be satisfied through joint patrols and a voluntary retreat by the YPG (that is, the SDF’s Kurdish component), obviating the need for continued Turkish attacks. The deal also stipulated that the YPG should leave Tell Refaat and Manbij and that “both sides reaffirm the importance of the Adana Agreement”, whose renewed implementation Russia committed itself to facilitate “in the current circumstances”.³⁰ Three years later, however, Kurdish units remain active in all of these areas. Turkey complains that the terms of the agreement have been violated, which Russia counters by arguing that Turkey is itself violating similar agreements in the Idleb region.

In autumn 2021, Turkey threatened to launch a new intervention, but was forced to back down in the face of strong Russian and US opposition.³¹ Evidently, however, Erdoğan did not abandon the idea.

RUSSIA AND THE SDF

Russia takes a dual approach to the SDF.³² On the one hand, Russian intelligence agencies have long had good connections with the PKK; they have repeatedly played the Kurdish card against Turkey during bilateral crises.³³ On the other hand, the Russian leadership seeks to restore Assad’s control over northeastern Syria and its oil wells, and it condemns the SDF as illegitimate, US-backed separatists.³⁴

Russian leaders appear to believe that the best outcome from Turkish pressure on the SDF would be that the group surrenders areas under its control to the central government.³⁵ Russia has long prodded Damascus and the Kurdish leadership to negotiate an integration of the SDF

into the official Syrian Arab Armed Forces and the state apparatus, where it would come under Assad's control and Russia's protective umbrella. At the same time, however, Russia has also encouraged Erdoğan and Assad to initiate a dialogue to resolve their shared problems with the SDF and the United States.³⁶

In sum, then, Russia is simultaneously pursuing two separate and perhaps irreconcilable lines of effort, and it remains uncertain how it will act going forward. Moscow's general aims nonetheless appear clear: the SDF should be dismantled or merged into the government army in a safe and controlled fashion; the United States should be forced to withdraw from Syria; and Turkey should be appeased through Assad's takeover (or destruction) of the PKK infrastructure in Syria. It is not clear whether such a strategy is realistic, especially considering the lack of mutual trust among all actors involved. The Russian leadership would most probably consider it a sufficient outcome to achieve some progress while retaining its influence and avoiding costly losses. In past conflicts, Russia has often preferred the long-term "freezing" of a favourable status quo over continued efforts to achieve a difficult or uncertain final settlement.³⁷

TELL REFAAT AND MANBIJ

The two SDF enclaves that Turkey has named as targets for its intervention, Tell Refaat and Manbij, are mainly rural areas; they are both named for their main towns. They are the only Kurdish-ruled regions west of the Euphrates River. They are also the two SDF areas where Russia and the Assad government enjoy the greatest influence.

Tell Refaat was captured by the SDF in 2016 from Arab rebels now part of the SNA. Many Arab inhabitants fled the SDF offensive and now live among other internally displaced Syrians in SNA-held areas. Tell Refaat was later repopulated by Kurds fleeing Efrin, an SDF-ruled region captured by the SNA in 2018. Considering this bitter history, the area seems to be at particular risk, should conflict erupt there again, of becoming the scene of ethnic abuse and violent retribution. Two Shia villages are located southwest of the Tell Refaat enclave, which adds to Iran's interest in the area. Furthermore, the enclave controls a large share of the Aleppo region's potable water supply.³⁸

Manbij is a somewhat larger area, with a mixed Kurdish-Arab population. During the war, the area has emerged as an important transit zone for informal economic contacts, in particular for crude oil trucked in from SDF-controlled eastern Syria and sold to other conflict actors.³⁹

Both enclaves are geographically isolated and exposed, particularly after the Turkish-SNA conquest of the nearby Efrin enclave, in 2018, and since the withdrawal of US

forces from Manbij, in 2019. As a consequence, in both Tell Refaat and Manbij, the SDF has entered into a close collaborative relationship with the Assad government to secure Russian protection against Turkey. As noted above, Russia promised Turkey that the YPG would leave the enclaves in 2019; even so, Kurdish forces still appear to dominate the enclaves, notwithstanding a considerable government presence.

DRIVERS OF TURKEY'S ESCALATION IN 2022

Turkey's hostility to the SDF is genuine, severe, and reciprocated. The government in Ankara views its struggle against the SDF as a matter of national security and as an inseparable part of its long war against the PKK. But even though it is clear *why* Turkey would attack the SDF, the issue of *when* and *how* Turkey goes on the offensive in northern Syria is less straightforward. The British Middle East expert Christopher Phillips has concluded that Turkey's past campaigns in Syria were, in fact, not launched in response to sudden security emergencies. Rather, Turkey has tended to act opportunistically in response to changes in the geopolitical environment that increase its freedom of manoeuvre, and under the influence of domestic factors.⁴⁰ The escalation in 2022 fits this pattern well.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has served to highlight Turkey's geographic position, in furtherance of Erdoğan's ambition to see his nation emerge as an independent regional power.⁴¹

Since the war began, Turkey has supported Ukraine's defensive efforts and supplied the country with military drones; it also plays an important role within NATO. At the same time, however, the Turkish government has rejected the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union, opting instead to deepen trade and energy cooperation with Russia.⁴² Erdoğan has tried to position himself as a mediator with a good relationship to both sides. During this period, Turkey has also blocked the Swedish and Finnish applications for membership of NATO, citing, among other things, the support given by these two nations to the SDF.⁴³

These policies can be adjusted as needed, and, as a result, Erdoğan now holds several new cards that he can play. Russia, the United States, and the European Union now all endeavour to avoid unnecessary disturbances in their relations with Ankara, which has had the effect of increasing Turkey's margin for manoeuvre.⁴⁴ Erdoğan appears to have concluded that Russia may be particularly susceptible to pressure, given that it is now in great need of Turkish cooperation and would find it difficult to step up its military presence in Syria.

If foreign affairs have served as an enabling factor, domestic affairs have had a motivating effect. Erdoğan and the AKP view polls showing gains by the opposition with great concern. With parliamentary and presidential elections planned for summer 2023, there are primarily two issues that appear to be undermining the AKP's popularity: the terrible state of the Turkish economy, and Turkey's hosting of large numbers of refugees, primarily from Syria. The main Turkish opposition parties have floated ideas for a change in the Syria policy, urging negotiations with Damascus on refugee repatriation. The idea seems to be popular among Turkish voters, and it also enjoys support from some of the president's own allies.⁴⁵

Erdoğan's own view has long been that the refugees should return to the "safe zones" that Turkey has carved out in northern Syria, where Turkish authorities and aid groups are producing large numbers of low-cost housing units to facilitate resettlement. Erdoğan speaks of a "strategy of holding the migration beyond the border" and claims that half a million Syrians have already left Turkey.⁴⁶ In this way, the plans to attack Manbij and Tell Refaat can be connected to the migration issue, and the government's new Syria rhetoric can serve as a form of political triangulation to wrest a potent campaign theme from opposition hands. Moreover, an intervention would promote a warlike mood and allow Erdoğan to take demonstrative action against the PKK, which may help him attract nationalist swing votes.⁴⁷

In sum, Erdoğan appears to have concluded that the conflict in Ukraine will allow Turkey to take a more forward-leaning posture in northern Syria, especially in relation to a weakened Russia. At the same time, the domestic situation has encouraged precisely that course of action. In this sense, Erdoğan's 23 May statement about a new intervention resembles Turkey's previous escalatory episodes in Syria, including the autumn 2021 build-up that was deterred, ultimately, by joint US and Russian opposition. Whether the current crisis will culminate in an attack or not will likely hinge on Turkey's ability to secure Russian approval of an operation.

THE RUSSIAN-TURKISH BALANCE OF POWER, IN AND OUT OF SYRIA

In spite of the strengthening of Turkey's position following the Ukraine invasion, and notwithstanding several months of sabre-rattling, Erdoğan has yet to launch the intervention he promised in May. The reason appears to be that Russia, backed by Iran, has resisted it with unexpected tenacity.

On paper, the balance of power in northern Syria would seem to favour Turkey. Russia's troop presence in Tell Refaat and Manbij is of a purely symbolic character, even if the Russian air base at Hmeimim, in western Syria, could

offer significant aerial support. Russia's ability to escalate militarily in Syria is limited by the fact that most of its ready-to-deploy military formations have already been sent to Ukraine. Additionally, Turkey has closed the Bosphorus Strait for naval traffic; and, in April, it blocked Russian overflights to or from Syria, further complicating Russian military logistics.⁴⁸ Moscow can still move military supplies through the Bosphorus on civilian cargo vessels, but in the event of a serious crisis, Ankara would most likely also block or stall such traffic.⁴⁹

With all that said, the situation cannot be analysed in purely military terms. Both Turkey and Russia clearly remain unwilling to engage in a direct confrontation, or even suffer the risk of one. They appear to want to avoid large-scale instability in Syria and to continue to seek common ground on Idleb, the SDF, the peace process, humanitarian assistance, etc. The fact that Turkey and Russia also remain engaged in non-stop bilateral dealmaking on other issues (e.g., energy, trade, Libya, Azerbaijan-Armenia, and Ukraine) may also promote mutual restraint in Syria.

Last but not least, Putin has a card up his sleeve. The UN's humanitarian assistance operations in northern Syria are designed in such a way that Russia will have the opportunity, at regular intervals, to cast a veto that would block the aid flow. Should that happen, it would likely trigger a serious crisis and increase refugee pressure on the Turkish border. The Security Council's most recent vote on this matter took place on 12 July, after weeks of tense negotiations with Russia. New votes are scheduled for January and July 2023, and the process could be dragged out indefinitely, leaving Turkey at permanent risk of being exposed to Russia's weaponisation of aid flows.⁵⁰

In sum, then, the Turkish government must pay close attention to Russia's views, irrespective of the purely military conditions in the conflict zone.

THE BARGAINING BEGINS

The United States immediately rejected Erdoğan's 23 May statement; Iran, too, quickly sought to dissuade Turkey from launching another intervention.⁵¹ Russia's response was less swift. It seems safe to assume that bilateral talks took place behind the scenes, but Moscow was not to put its foot down until early June, when it announced that a new Turkish operation "would be a direct violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity", unless pre-agreed with Damascus.⁵² Since then, Russian officials have continued to criticise Erdoğan's plans, albeit in a respectful manner.⁵³

According to the Arabic-language press, Russian military officials in Syria sought to persuade the SDF to hand Tell Refaat and Manbij over to Assad, as a way to avoid a military attack.⁵⁴ Iran's foreign minister, Hossein

Amir-Abdollahian, also tried to facilitate a resolution, travelling between Ankara and Damascus during the summer.⁵⁵ Diplomatic attention was quickly focussed on the Astana summit, which was planned for 20 July 2022, in Tehran, when Erdoğan was to meet with Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. The dispute could not be resolved in time, however, perhaps because Putin and Erdoğan were preoccupied by their parallel talks over Ukraine's grain export, about which an agreement was concluded on 22 July.⁵⁶ In the end, the Tehran summit's final statement had little to say on the subject of northeastern Syria.⁵⁷ All three leaders subsequently kept up appearances, underlining their shared opposition to the role of the USA and the SDF in the area, while acknowledging that they had failed to reach agreement on Turkey's demands. Both Putin and Raisi made a point of stating that Turkey would need to cooperate with Syria's government, creating the impression that Moscow and Tehran were trying to condition their approval for a new intervention on Turkish-Syrian rapprochement.⁵⁸

Two weeks after the Tehran summit, Erdoğan travelled to Sochi for yet another meeting with Putin, which resulted in a deepening of trade relations.⁵⁹ There was no resolution of their Syria dispute, and Putin once again encouraged his guest to seek Assad's cooperation. The Turkish president publicly commented that Turkish-Syrian relations had already resumed at the level of intelligence agencies, without producing meaningful results.⁶⁰

In all likelihood, Erdoğan was referring to the intelligence-level contacts that had been publicised two and a half years earlier, in January 2020, when the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (Turkish: *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, MİT), Hakan Fidan, had been brought together with Assad's intelligence co-ordinator, Ali Mamlouk, in Moscow.⁶¹ Reports of new meetings between Fidan and Mamlouk had emerged in the spring of 2022, only to meet with denials in Syrian regime media.⁶² The exchanges between Putin and Erdoğan in summer 2022 would nonetheless soon reinvigorate the intelligence contacts.

CAUTIOUS TURKISH SHIFTS

Soon after the Sochi meeting, Turkey began to roll out a series of rhetorical concessions, or policy shifts, without, however, enunciating a clear end goal. The public reaction of the government in Damascus was cautious and passive.

On 11 August, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu revealed that he had in fact already met his Syrian counterpart, Feisal Meqdad, the year before, on the sidelines of a conference in Belgrade. Çavuşoğlu also said that the fight against terrorism in Syria will require a strong central government, which, he said, means that regime and opposition forces must be reconciled.⁶³ On 19

August, Erdoğan spoke favourably of diplomatic contacts and reconciliation among nations and added that "[w]e should take further steps with Syria".⁶⁴ A few days later, Çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey had no conditions for resuming public contacts with Damascus, except that such contacts must aim for tangible results.⁶⁵ On the same day, Meqdad appeared with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, repeating his well-practiced demand for a full Turkish withdrawal, but also underlining, twice, that such demands must not be interpreted as "conditions". Lavrov noted that Russia wants to repair the Turkish-Syrian relationship and made a passing reference to the 1998 Adana Agreement.⁶⁶

Syrian opposition members were deeply alarmed by the new rhetorical signalling, fearing that they could be sacrificed as pawns in Turkey's regional power games. Anti-reconciliation demonstrations erupted in SNA areas, and numerous opposition groups condemned any form of normalisation with Assad, though most were careful to avoid direct references to Turkey.⁶⁷ The Foreign Ministry in Ankara sought to calm the protests by reiterating its support for the general ambitions of the Syrian opposition, but the ministry would not explicitly rule out normalisation, as Assad's enemies had hoped.⁶⁸

In the following weeks, the press once again reported that Mamlouk and Fidan had met face to face. One such meeting had allegedly taken place in Moscow, in July, with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu in attendance.⁶⁹ In September, Turkish sources confirmed, for the first time, that Fidan had visited Damascus on several occasions in August and September, trying to scope out whether arrangements could be made for a public meeting on the foreign minister level.⁷⁰ According to information received by the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet*, Erdoğan also told a group of AKP leaders that he would be interested in meeting Assad.⁷¹ Russia has welcomed these statements, with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov declaring that Moscow would be willing to host a meeting of the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers.⁷²

INTERVENTION, RAPPROCHEMENT, OR BOTH?

The crisis initiated by Erdoğan's statements in May 2022 has been put on the back burner through purposeful Russian obstruction, likely aimed at forcing a diplomatic opening by Turkey. In this, Russia has been supported by Iran, which may also be pursuing its own mediation efforts.

At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether there will be an intervention against the SDF in Tell Refaat and Manbij, and, if so, of what kind or when it would be launched. It is equally unclear whether Turkey and Syria will resume bilateral relations, and, if so, in what form or to what extent.

The answers to these two questions will depend on the outcome of several sets of secret negotiations, primarily between Moscow and Ankara, but also involving Damascus, Tehran, and the leadership of the SDF. Unknown factors will play a major role, including the question of how much influence Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran can exercise over the SDF. The effects of the Ukraine conflict on Russia's endurance and ties to Turkey will, of course, be of major importance. Last but not least, while the issues of intervention and normalisation are obviously linked, the connection is neither linear nor predictable. On the one hand, a unilateral Turkish intervention could torpedo Ankara's rapprochement with Damascus; but on the other hand, a Turkish-Syrian political thaw could facilitate some form of mutually agreed intervention, perhaps through a revival of the Adana Agreement.

Predictions of the near future are, accordingly, very difficult, but certain general trends can be discerned in the longer term.

For example, it appears highly unlikely that the SDF could indefinitely sustain the Tell Refaat-Manbij status quo in the face of Turkey's unrelenting hostility. That said, SDF rule may expire in many different ways. It remains possible that Turkey will decide to call Putin's bluff through a unilateral military intervention, and that Russia will then step aside. Another possibility is that Ankara would trade in other concessions to win the approval of Damascus and/or Moscow for a military operation, perhaps framed as a product of the Adana Agreement. (Such a negotiated outcome would not necessarily be smooth or painless, however: unplanned violence may erupt, and SDF leaders in the enclaves may opt for a desperate final stand instead of submitting to Assad.) Another option is that Turkish-Syrian contacts will prompt the Syrian government itself to act against the SDF with Turkey's approval, or persuade the SDF to surrender power to Damascus, for lack of better options. More limited agreements are also conceivable, e.g., over Turkey's use of drones.

It now seems likely that some form of limited diplomatic normalisation will take place within a relatively short time frame, possibly even before year's end, not least because Erdoğan appears keen to show results in the run-up to the 2023 elections. The foundation for renewed contacts already seems to have been established through intelligence-level discussions. A meeting of foreign ministers would be a likely first move, but other options include contacts on lower or higher levels (including between Erdoğan and Assad); the establishment of a formal bilateral negotiation channel; etc.

Such contacts could, over time, be deepened and routinised, but a Turkish-Syrian process of reconciliation would under no circumstances be a simple matter. The interests of the Ankara and Damascus governments are only partly opposed, but they are in complete disagreement on certain key issues (e.g., a Turkish troop withdrawal). Both sides harbour deep suspicions of the other, and neither side could easily disentangle itself from the conflict's entrenched structures. The most likely outcome, therefore, is that the two parties will initially move toward a cold, transactional relationship, burdened by continuing conflict. Although additional steps may be agreed later, comprehensive diplomatic normalisation appears unlikely. An agreement to fully resolve the conflict in Syria in a peaceful fashion is unlikely even in the longer term.

Any form of political thaw between Ankara and Damascus would nonetheless be of great importance to the Syrian conflict, in view of the opposition's near-total dependence on Turkey and of the considerable influence exercised by Turkey and Russia over the UN peace talks. For critics of the regime, a Turkish recognition of Assad's legitimacy would be a devastating political blow. Opposition supporters also fear that a process of normalisation could be followed by intensified Turkish repression of Syrian activists, political parties, human rights groups, and media outlets, in the diaspora as well as in SNA areas, and by stepped-up refugee deportation. A large-scale Turkish retreat from northern Syria would nevertheless be very unlikely, especially while the SDF question remains unresolved. That, in and of itself, is an obstacle to deepened cooperation between Damascus and Ankara.

In any event, the United States and Europe will likely enjoy very little influence over how the bargaining process plays out, especially in light of their unwillingness to disrupt relations with Turkey while the conflict in Ukraine is ongoing.

POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES FOR SWEDEN

The conflict in Syria is not, generally speaking, a major concern for Swedish national security, but it can indirectly influence issues and actors of greater significance. Among these are migration issues and Turkey's foreign policy. Notably, if Turkish actions in Syria were to trigger political disputes in Sweden, it could impact the Swedish NATO accession process. In addition, more than 200,000 of Sweden's inhabitants (citizens and residents) hail from Syria, and the issue is also of interest to many other Swedes with roots in the Middle East, including Kurds and Turks.

Considering the sensitivity of the negotiations over Sweden's application for membership in NATO, which requires Turkish approval, it would be of major significance to Swedish security if events in Syria were to disrupt Swedish-Turkish relations.

Such a disruption is possible both in a shorter and a longer perspective. For example, if a hypothetical Turkish intervention were to be followed by reports of abuses against Kurdish civilians, as appears very likely, it would trigger protests, not least within the Kurdish diaspora. When Turkey attacked the SDF in 2019, such reports elicited strong responses in Sweden. The government protested, and the sale of military equipment to Turkey ground to a halt, which Ankara later cited as a reason to block Swedish NATO membership.⁷³

In a longer time frame, developments in the Syrian crisis could affect Turkey's ties to Russia, the United States, and NATO; or draw attention to the SDF issue in the run-up to the Turkish elections. That, too, could influence Ankara's policy on Swedish NATO membership.

Renewed Turkish contacts with the Assad government would not be likely to have much of an impact on Turkey's relationship with the United States, but a new attack against the SDF would probably harm US-Turkey ties to some extent. Even then, the Biden administration would likely limit its criticism in order to not disturb relations more than necessary, despite Erdoğan's unpopularity in US politics. Members of the media and of Congress could not, however, be expected to show the same degree of tolerance. In practical terms, an attack might complicate Ankara's efforts to win congressional support for an expansion and modernisation of Turkey's F-16 fighter jet fleet, which, to Turkey, has been both urgent and important ever since the country was expelled from the F-35 programme.⁷⁴

Turkey's relationship with Russia is directly at stake in Syria. Positive progress in the Syria talks could help achieve two Russian policy goals: to support and legitimise Assad's rule, and to deepen bilateral cooperation with Turkey. Moscow seems to stand a good chance of wringing limited concessions from Ankara regarding the Turkish view of Assad, and may be able to improve its bargaining position on other issues. The process could also produce a negative outcome for Turkey-Russia relations, but even in the event

of an increase in tensions, both sides appear keen to safeguard the Putin-Erdoğan relationship.

Syria is important to the Middle Eastern region's overall stability and development, particularly as relates to migration and counterterrorism. In that regard, however, the effects are difficult to predict.

The consequences of any hypothetical operation against the enclaves would depend on its nature, but, in most scenarios, there would be little direct impact on international terrorism and migration. It could destabilise SDF governance in other parts of Syria, however, or trigger a spread of conflict along the remainder of the Turkey-Syria border. Any weakening of the SDF would complicate the US-led anti-IS campaign, to which Sweden contributes (without being militarily present in Syria). Should an intervention appear imminent, the SDF will likely try to mobilise support by playing the IS card and announcing that it must divert personnel away from guarding IS prisoners (a small number of whom are Swedes). The SDF's manpower shortages are sometimes exaggerated for political effect, but the group does genuinely need to prioritise between deployments. The extent of the problem became clear when, in January 2022, IS attacked a poorly guarded prison in Qamishli.⁷⁵

A normalisation process, too, could come in different forms and be more or less successful. Generally speaking, détente and renewed cooperation between Turkey and Syria would matter considerably to the future development of the conflict. Even a limited dialogue could enable some level of joint deliberation of security affairs and contribute to the institutionalisation of ceasefires. That could, in turn, facilitate trade inside and through Syria and simplify the management of critical infrastructure straddling the frontlines. Such developments could benefit Sweden and the European Union if and in so far as they contribute to regional stability and economic recovery, reduce migration pressures, and facilitate the struggle against IS and al-Qaeda. Normalisation can also trigger new crises, however, especially if an Ankara-Damascus rapprochement were to raise pressure on the SDF. Migration toward the EU may also increase, at least temporarily, if Syrians in Turkey feel compelled to flee the country to escape deportation to Syria.

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Endnotes

- 1 This text was first published in Swedish on 24 October 2022 as "Syrien i ukrainakrigets skugga: turkiskt vapenskrammel och rysk kohandel" (FOI Memo 7943).
- 2 On the Syrian conflict, see Lund 2014; Phillips 2016; Lund 2018.
- 3 On external actors, see Phillips 2016; Lund 2018, pp. 25–34.
- 4 On the PKK, see Marcus 2007.
- 5 In 1939, some years prior to Syria's independence from France, colonial authorities transferred the city of Antakya and the surrounding region of northwestern Syria to Turkey, where it now forms the province of Hatay. The French decision violated the terms of Syria's League of Nations mandate, and Damascus has consistently refused to recognize Turkey's rights to the area, which it refers to as Iskanderoun.
- 6 *op. cit.*, pp. 58–61.
- 7 *op. cit.*, pp. 269 ff.
- 8 Turkish Foreign Ministry 1998.
- 9 Hamidi 2019; Taştekin 2019.
- 10 Quoted and referenced in Taştekin 2019.
- 11 Lund 2014, p. 156–9; Phillips 2016, pp. 70–75
- 12 Lund 2017.
- 13 UN/OCHA 2022.
- 14 Lund 2018, p. 54; Lund 2022a, pp. 52–54.
- 15 Turkish Presidency 2019.
- 16 UN/UNHCR 2022.
- 17 Lund 2019, p. 31f.
- 18 Baev 2021; Hamilton & Mikulska 2021; Lund 2022a, pp. 31–34.
- 19 Roth 2020.
- 20 *Hürriyet Daily News* 2022a.
- 21 *Reuters* 2022a.
- 22 Aliyev 2022.
- 23 *Reuters* 2022b; Weinthal 2022.
- 24 *Hawar News* 2022; Kube 2022; *ANF News* 2022.
- 25 Interview: Emily Tripp, director of Airwars, email, Sep. 2022.
- 26 *SANA* 2022.
- 27 Lund 2015, pp. 478–83; Phillips 2016, pp. 133f.
- 28 On the SDF and the YPG, see Lund 2015, pp. 464–88; Phillips 2016, pp. 133f, 206–12, 227; Jonsson 2019.
- 29 OIG 2022, p. 8.
- 30 Turkish Presidency Directorate of Communications 2019.
- 31 Asi & Omar 2022.
- 32 On Russia's role in Syria, see Lund 2019.
- 33 *op. cit.*, p. 32, footnote 158.
- 34 Lund 2018, p. 65.
- 35 Merei 2022; Sheikho 2022.
- 36 Lund 2019, pp. 36f.
- 37 Grant 2017.
- 38 Taştekin 2022.
- 39 Wilkofsky 2020.
- 40 Phillips 2022.
- 41 Serveta, Holmquist & Bergenwall 2022.
- 42 Seddon et al. 2022.
- 43 Serveta 2022.
- 44 Serveta, Holmquist & Bergenwall 2022, pp. 4f.
- 45 *Syria TV* 2022; *BIA net* 2022.
- 46 Turkish Presidency 2022.
- 47 Siccardi 2022.
- 48 *TASS* 2022a.
- 49 Malsin & Faucon 2022.
- 50 Lund 2022b; see also UN Security Council Resolution 2642 (12 July 2022).
- 51 US State Department 2022; *Mebr News* 2022.
- 52 *Aljazeera English* 2022.
- 53 *TASS* 2022b; *TASS* 2022c.
- 54 Merei 2022; Sheikho 2022.
- 55 *Fars News* 2022.
- 56 *TT-AFP* 2022; *TASS* 2022d.
- 57 Iranian Foreign Ministry 2022.
- 58 Turkish Presidency Directorate of Communications 2022; Iranian Presidency 2022; Russian Presidency 2022.
- 59 Seddon et al 2022; Güldoğan 2022.
- 60 Güldoğan 2022.
- 61 *Reuters* 2020; *SANA* 2020.
- 62 *Baath Media* 2022.
- 63 *Hürriyet Daily News* 2022b.
- 64 *Hürriyet Daily News* 2022c.
- 65 *Reuters* 2022c.
- 66 ORTAS 2022.
- 67 *Enab Baladi* 2022.
- 68 Turkish Foreign Ministry 2022.
- 69 Hamidi 2022.
- 70 Coşkun & Bassam 2022.
- 71 *Reuters* 2022d.
- 72 *Sputnik Arabic* 2022.
- 73 Lapidus 2022.
- 74 Mahshie 2022.
- 75 Loveluck 2022.

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