

# After the Turkish Elections, Now What for Syria?

## Introduction

On May 28, 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan solidified his 20-year rule as Turkey's premier by winning the latest presidential election. Despite facing challenges, including a declining economy and the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, Erdoğan's relationship with the government of Syria (GoS) played a crucial role in the elections and their aftermath. Before the elections, he sought to improve ties with the GoS due to public dissatisfaction with his Syria policy, particularly concerning Syrian refugees and war fatigue. Post-election, Turkey's priority will be its ongoing conflict with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the large number of Syrian refugees. As regional actors are normalizing relations with the GoS and effective engagement on Syria requires involvement with Turkish interests by the international community, an understanding of the context is vital.

## Turkish presence in Syria



Figure 1: Areas of Control in Northern Syria as of 1 July 2023. Data from The Carter Center

Turkey currently controls significant parts of northern Syria, including parts of Aleppo Governorate obtained through Operations Euphrates Shield (2016) and Olive Branch (2018) as well as parts of Ar-Raqqah and Al-Hassakah Governorates obtained through Operation Peace Spring (2019). Turkey still funds, supports, and controls the Syrian National Army, one of the largest opposition alliances. Idlib Governorate, currently controlled by the hardline opposition Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and home to at least 3 million internally displaced Syrians, has largely been spared any new GoS offensive due to Turkey's military presence in the governorate. While Turkey does not directly control HTS or Idlib, its influence has forced the former to recognize the need to please Ankara, though tensions remain. Importantly, Turkey's main foreign policy interest is to combat the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it accuses of being its Syrian affiliate. Domestically, Turkey is concerned with the approximately [3.7 million](#) Syrian refugees and desires a sustainable solution to the crisis. Thus, Turkey has critical national interests in the outcome of the Syrian conflict.

## The Elections

Previously, military operations helped boost the AKP's election prospects. However, over time Erdoğan's belligerent foreign policy in Syria has led to weariness from the general Turkish public. Further, an increasingly xenophobic [pushback](#) has led nearly all major Turkish parties to try and find a way to "return"

Syrian refugees. While Erdoğan promoted “voluntary” returns, the opposition [proposed](#) forceful repatriation of Syrians. In addition, the opposition proposed normalizing relations with the GoS as a means to returning refugees.

Preemptively, Erdoğan began outreach to the GoS. In December 2022, the GoS and Turkish defense ministers met for the first time in nearly a decade. Erdoğan signaled his readiness to meet with Assad himself. Perhaps sensing that Erdoğan was trying to undercut his opponent’s policy through outreach, President Assad [maintained](#) that any talks with the Turkish president would only occur if Turkey agreed to withdraw from Syria. Assad seemed [unwilling](#) to give Erdoğan a diplomatic win to secure his election bid. With his clear victory, this could have negative repercussions for any further engagement with Turkey going forward. It is unlikely that Erdoğan will normalize relations with Assad post-elections as several structural obstacles would impact Turkish-Syrian relations in a way that undermines Turkish interests.

### **Structural Turkish Entanglements in Syria:**

1. Turkey controls and [influences](#) a significant part of Syria. This provides Turkey a buffer and a place to “send” Syrian refugees. Even in Aleppo Governorate, [Turkish companies and government services](#) have largely taken on tasks ranging from building hospitals to postal services, intertwining the areas into the Turkish state. Even if Turkey relinquishes control, a new GoS military operation (or even peaceful transfer) will cause a new wave of refugees into Turkey, a prospect that is increasingly unpopular with the Turkish public.

2. Tens of thousands of Syrian fighters remain part of the Turkish-backed SNA in northern Syria. These fighters could go to Turkey without any assurance of protection if such areas return to the GoS. Further, based on the GoS and Russia’s ongoing experience with instability in Dara’a Governorate, they would be reluctant to regain any territory where opposition networks remain strong. Any flight of SNA fighters to other opposition-held areas, such as Idlib, would cause increased tensions and problems with HTS, who have [strongly criticized](#) both the Arab acceptance of Assad as well as previous Turkish-GoS dialogue.

3. Ankara's main interest in Syria revolves around containing the PKK and SDF. Turkey still views the SDF as inherently controlled by the PKK and as a threat to the Turkish state. The fear is that the PKK/SDF could create an independent Kurdish region in Syria and inspire Kurds in Turkey to do something similar. The SDF and its supporters argue that they only seek to gain autonomy within the auspices of the Syrian state, but it is unlikely to assuage Turkey’s concerns. In the past, the GoS has been happy to come to an [agreement](#) with Turkey that ultimately hurts the PKK. Still, this agreement is more complicated when Turkey supports multiple anti-GoS forces and while the GoS has a somewhat collaborative relationship - however tense - with the SDF.

4. The possible return of Syrian refugees remains a crucial point of tension between Turkey and the GoS. Regardless of Turkey’s aspiration to return the refugees, this will be difficult to implement because many refugees do not want to return, citing [dangers](#) to their security, a bad economic situation, and continuing instability. Even the GoS is unlikely to accept them. The dire economic situation in Syria makes it [difficult](#) to absorb a large number of returnees. Many within the GoS associate the refugees in Turkey with the opposition, which the GoS spent the last 12 years trying to eliminate. Their return is hardly a priority to the GoS, adding another hurdle to any rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus.

## **Moving Forward**

Many regional governments in the greater Middle East have largely normalized their relationship with the GoS and even readmitted them to the Arab League, providing a significant symbolic victory for Assad and his supporters. Several Gulf countries that previously supported the opposition have lost much of their influence among the armed groups. Turkey still exerts control over much of the opposition (some directly, like the SNA, and some indirectly, vis-a-vis HTS). It also controls large chunks of territory in northern Syria. Turkey's key role in the conflict gives them important leverage to effect change on the GoS. The U.S., EU, and UN should engage with Turkey on Syria. In the early years of the Syrian war, Erdoğan maintained a diplomatic backchannel with the PKK for rapprochement. The U.S. can play a productive role in de-escalating tensions between Turkey and the SDF by working with allies in the region to push for positive change towards sustainable peace and a unified Syria.