



**National Security Program**

*Foreign Policy Project*

# U.S.-Turkish Cooperation Toward a Post-Assad Syria

A Paper of BPC's Turkey Task Force

Amb. Morton I. Abramowitz and Eric S. Edelman, Co-Chairs | April 2013



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# A. Executive Summary

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Ridding Syria of President Bashar al-Assad has been the goal of the United States for almost two years. Should this objective be achieved, however, an enormous challenge will still remain: stabilizing and rebuilding Syria in a way that advances U.S. strategic goals and values. Given the internal divisions and external pressures fueling the Syrian conflict, the fate of post-Assad Syria will have as much, if not more, impact on U.S. national security than that of Assad's regime.

The removal of Assad—an important ally of Iran and supporter of the terrorist group Hezbollah in Lebanon—would represent an indispensable step forward for the Syrian people and the United States, but that achievement could prove short-lived if Assad's repressive rule is replaced with Islamist oppression or if Syria collapses into prolonged conflict or a failed state.

U.S. influence inside Syria is currently limited. Thus, any assistance in the formation of a stable and decent post-Assad Syria will require the cooperation of other countries. Turkey—a U.S. ally with keen interests in Syria—can obviously be an important partner. Ankara's interests, however, do not perfectly match Washington's, posing the challenge for policymakers of finding the right tools to align more closely the two countries' visions of Syria's future.

This paper (the first by a BPC task force focused on U.S.-Turkey relations) lays out the reasons why—putting aside U.S. policy toward the ongoing civil war for the moment—American leaders would serve U.S. interests best by beginning, if they have not yet done so, a serious effort to coordinate with Turkey planning for a government to replace Assad. Exploring the dynamics at play in the Syrian conflict, the most likely outcomes of that conflict, how those outcomes would impact U.S. national security, and the current policies and interests of both the United States and Turkey in Syria, this paper lays out the opportunities and obstacles to U.S.-Turkish cooperation toward a stable and decent post-Assad Syria. If achieved, such cooperation could lay the foundation for a renewed U.S.-Turkey relationship, one that should be oriented toward the support of non-sectarian regimes, minority rights, and pluralism amidst the upheavals the Middle East is currently experiencing.

Myriad U.S. national security interests are at stake in the ongoing civil war in Syria: thwarting Iran's aspirations for regional hegemony and raising pressure on the Tehran regime; tempering the ascendancy of political Islamism; denying violent extremists yet another haven; preventing the use of chemical weapons; avoiding the further destabilization of Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq; and reducing a threat to Israeli security. Syria is riven by ethno-sectarian fissures and has become a microcosm of the larger regional strategic competition between Sunni and Shia; simply removing Assad will not suffice to bring peace

or to secure U.S. interests. Only transitioning to a reasonably stable, more pluralist post-Assad Syria can. It could also potentially contribute to the liberal democratic values that many still hope will bloom in Muslim countries across the greater Middle East.

Achieving any of these objectives, however, becomes more difficult as the conflict in Syria grows longer and bloodier. America's main contribution to resolving the Syrian conflict has been humanitarian aid, although it is currently considering stepping up the flow of non-lethal equipment to vetted rebel forces. Diplomatic efforts to broker a political solution have been ineffective.

As a result, the immediate issue confronting American policymakers is whether or not to provide more, and possibly lethal, assistance directly to the opposition. While the members of our task force have their own views on this question, this paper does not attempt to address that policy question directly. Its concern, rather, is for the national security impact of what happens if Assad is ousted.

This is an important issue precisely because of the incongruity between the vital U.S. interests at stake in the shape of post-Assad Syria and its low standing among the Syrian opposition. Given the ever greater destruction of infrastructure and private property in the country, the accelerating displacement of Syrians, the rise in numbers and influence of radical Islamists among Syrian rebels, and the deterioration of the state apparatus, the effort that will be needed to reestablish a stable, coherent, and reasonably decent Syrian government is already enormous and only grows bigger. This incongruity between U.S. interests in the shape of post-Assad Syria and its low standing among the Syrian opposition should be a primary concern for policymakers. Regardless of this, or perhaps especially because of it, U.S. interests will be best served by taking a leading role in planning for what follows Assad's ouster, beginning now.

Although the United States has great resources and convening power to contribute to the effort, its dearth of influence inside Syria or with the opposition means that Washington will require help from important partners. Regional actors—with as much or more at stake in Syria's future and a more granular understanding of events and greater leverage there—will be critical to any effort to bring peace and stability to Syria. None will prove more important for this effort than Turkey.

The government of neighboring Turkey—led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—made close ties to the Damascus regime a pillar of its foreign policy in recent years. It reversed that policy after the Syrian national uprising began, adopting instead the most activist policy toward the Assad regime among the neighboring states, at some domestic political cost. Chronic Syrian instability is the single biggest foreign policy challenge facing Ankara today, lest it spill across the border. Turkey has asked for, and would almost certainly welcome, greater U.S. involvement in containing, if not reducing, the chaos in Syria and helping to build a new, stable government there.

Cooperation with Turkey, however, will prove challenging. While relations between Washington and Ankara have prospered in recent years, Turkey has resented America's

unwillingness to help the opposition bring down Assad. More importantly, disagreements between Turkey and the United States over which elements of Syria's opposition to support suggest that the two countries will have to overcome somewhat divergent visions of what a post-Assad Syria should look like and how to get there.

One concern for Turkish policy in Syria has been the political role of Syria's Kurds. Ankara is actively seeking, and in recent months has taken significant steps, to end a three-decade-long guerrilla conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist movement with a strong presence among Syria's Kurds. Turkey has feared both a renewal of PKK operations from Syria and that the continued collapse of the Syrian state might allow Kurds there to declare autonomy, sparking similar ambitions among Turkey's Kurds. The intense effort to resolve its own Kurdish problem will directly impact Turkey's attitude toward the Syrian Kurds and their place in a post-Assad Syria.

The treatment and political role of Syria's minorities—especially the Kurds, but also Alawites, Druze, and Christians—will be important in determining the stability of a post-Assad Syria, and of the region. Sunnis, representing three-quarters of Syria's population and long denied power by the predominantly Alawi Assad regime, will have a leading role in any new Syrian government. But if, following Assad's fall, a Sunni government takes form that asserts the tyranny of the majority, without protecting minority interests or assuring their role in government, stability will prove elusive and civil strife could well continue. It would also retard the return of refugees from neighboring countries.

Worse, such a prolonged conflict not only spells continued suffering for Syrians, but also endangers regional stability, as the fighting continues to send refugees and violence into neighboring countries ill-equipped to deal with either. Moreover, if a new Syrian government comes to be dominated, or even influenced, by the forces currently ascending among Syria's rebels—radical Islamists allied with al-Qaeda and foreign terrorists organizations—post-Assad Syria could become a dangerous breeding ground for violent extremism. Thus, it is imperative for U.S. national security interests not only to end the conflict and chaos engulfing Syria—so that instability does not further radiate outward, across the region—but also to avoid state failure or ideological excess.

Successfully navigating among these dire potential outcomes will require the creation of a post-Assad Syria controlled by a government whose authority is accepted by the entire country, one in which stability and pluralism are mutually reinforcing objectives. Protection for Syrian minorities, in other words, is both an important goal in itself for a post-Assad government and a crucial indicator of that government's commitment to peace. Creating such a government will not be an easy job, particularly given the fact that most of Syria's minorities have historically supported the Assad government or at least are staying on the sidelines of the current conflict. In any event, the United States lacks the influence to shape events in Syria by itself, and it is not certain that Turkey would support U.S. efforts to do so.

The Erdoğan government has not shown much concern for Syrian minorities. Indeed, its support for Muslim Brotherhood–allied rebels in Syria would seem to indicate that Turkey is pursuing a sectarian agenda.

The Sunni Islamist orientation of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)—combined with Ankara’s Kurdish interests in Syria—suggest that the Turkish government will favor a post-Assad government dominated by Syria’s Sunni majority, but likely with lesser concern for the rights or representation of Syria’s many minorities. Indeed, throughout the Middle East, AKP leaders have sought close relations with intolerant Sunni Islamist regimes, including the Ennahda government in Tunisia, the Morsi government in Egypt, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Erdoğan has previously declared that Turkey would consider any discussion of autonomy for Syrian Kurds, perhaps the best chance for protecting Kurdish rights, a *casus belli*. That attitude may change depending on his efforts to resolve Turkey’s long-festered Kurdish issue.

Thus, avoiding outcomes that further undermine regional stability and disadvantage U.S. interests will require the United States not just to begin immediately planning for a stable and pluralist post-Assad Syrian government, but also to take an energetic role in persuading Turkey to join and support the effort. The U.S. government should try to work with Ankara to create both a concrete declaration of the sort of Syria that the two nations want to see emerge from Assad’s tyranny and a road map for turning that vision into reality. That road map might consist of: finding and establishing ties with any relatively moderate elements in the opposition; helping to identify which elements of the existing state apparatus could be preserved after Assad departs; helping Syrians to produce political and legal transitional plans; considering how to encourage the return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons; and devising plans for the infrastructure reconstruction and economic assistance that will be needed to jump-start a new government.

To be sure, the costs of reconstruction will be enormous, and the world will look to the U.S. government to commit a serious portion of funds, a difficult proposition given the ongoing political crisis over the fiscal condition of the U.S. government. Although we are not in a position to recommend specific levels of assistance, it is a certainty that U.S. leverage with Turkey and others will be, to some degree, a function of how much the United States contributes.

Money alone, however, will not ensure a stable and decent post-Assad Syria. American policymakers need to find ways to deepen their cooperation with Ankara and to better align America’s and Turkey’s policies on helping to remake a new Syrian state.

Divergent interests in the Syrian conflict demonstrate both the challenges in resolving the Syrian issue and the obstacles to productive U.S.-Turkish relations more generally. The need for cooperation with Ankara in Syria also points to the important and beneficial role that Turkey could potentially play in supporting a non-sectarian and pluralist Middle East. By finding ways to work with Ankara on Syria, Washington can lay the foundation for a broader, more cooperative U.S.-Turkey relationship that extends throughout the region.



# B. Background: The Syrian Conflict

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Containing nearly every major ethnic and religious group found in the region—except Jews, who fled years ago—Syria serves as a sort of microcosm of the Middle East and of the troubles afflicting the region. With these divisions emerging as the front lines of the civil war, the Syrian conflict has become a proxy for a larger, strategic struggle for power and influence in the Middle East. These internal and external factors prolong the conflict and ensure its incredibly tortuous, violent, and uncertain course.

After two years of fighting, with almost a hundred thousand dead, over four million displaced, the presence of Islamist extremists among the rebels, and strong Iranian support for the regime, the possible potential outcomes—Assad retaining power, the emergence of a Sunni Islamist regime, or a prolonged civil war—jeopardize U.S. interests.

## I. Internal Fissures

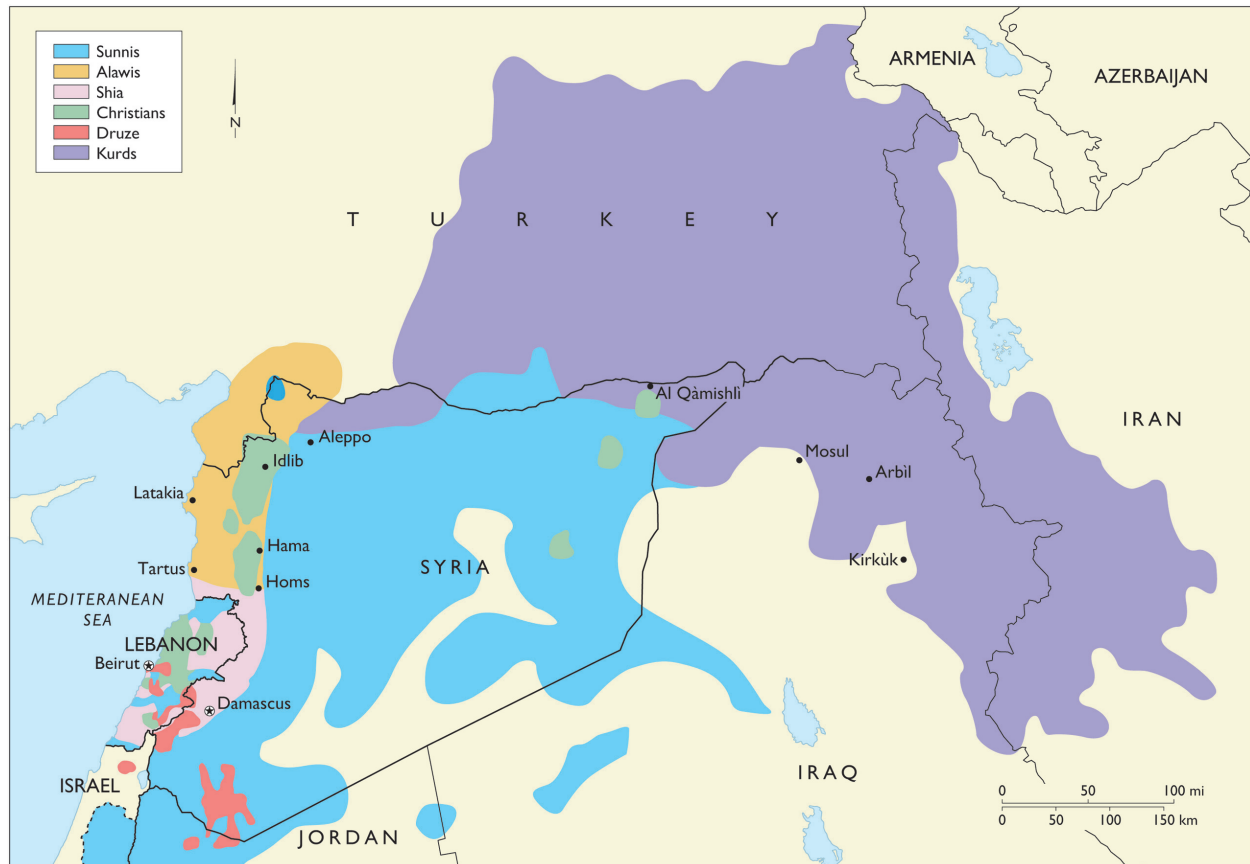
The Syrian conflict's intractability stems in large part from the deep fissures that pervade Syrian society, fissures long cobbled together with might, not right, by the country's totalitarian rulers. Rather than a unitary nation-state, the Syrian Arab Republic, which emerged from the remains of the Ottoman Empire, is a patchwork of ethnic and sectarian groups that, for the last 40 years, were held together by the strength, brutality, and corruption of the Assad regime. While the unrest in Syria initially resembled the revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen that pitted a people against its government, it has devolved into a full-blown civil war. Its internal divisions have become the front lines of that war.

Fully 90 percent of the Syrian population is Arab; Kurds form the largest ethnic minority with roughly 9 percent of the total population. Three-quarters of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, including 70 percent of Arabs and nearly all of the Kurds. Approximately 15 percent of Syrians are members of Shia offshoots, predominantly Alawis and Druze. Much of the remaining 10 percent of the population is Christian. Thus, Syria's Arabs are divided among a Sunni majority—nearly two-thirds of country's total population is Sunni Arab—and its various Shia and Christian minorities, all of whom are separated from Syrian Kurds by ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

Syria's map in Figure 1 reflects this diversity, with ethno-sectarian divisions largely falling along geographic lines, although a *mélange* of identities and beliefs can be found in the larger cities. Syria's Kurds live almost entirely in the northeast, atop many of the country's oilfields and contiguous with Turkey's and Iraq's larger Kurdish populations. Alawis

concentrate along the Mediterranean. Druze reside mainly near the Jordanian border, where they constitute a majority.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. Regional Ethnic and Sectarian Map**



The Syrian regime, however, is not representative of this patchwork country, dominated, as it is, largely by members of the minority Alawi sect. The Alawi Assad family has ensured that Alawi loyalists control the levers of power,<sup>3</sup> while subscribing to Ba’athist ideology—a combination of secular pan-Arab nationalism and socialism—to emphasize its ethnic ties to the majority of the populace and its support for the lower classes.<sup>4</sup>

But political ideology largely failed to close the cleavages in Syrian society. Sectarian and ethnic uprisings, including by the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s and Kurds in 2004, have flared up in the past and have been met with the brutal violence by the regime.<sup>5</sup> The current conflict is no different.

## II. Syria's Kurdish Question

Although much attention is focused on the sectarian dimension of the Syrian conflict, the ethnic one, namely the Kurds, will be just as crucial in determining whether a stable and

decent post-Assad Syria can be created. Many Syrian Kurds are trying to remain neutral in the escalating conflict raging around them, owing to their ambivalence toward both the rebellion and the regime as well as internal divisions among themselves. While Kurdish involvement in the conflict might not be sufficient to tip the balance in favor of either side, all involved have kept a wary eye on developments there, occasionally seeking to co-opt Kurdish support or pre-empt Kurdish engagement.

While their militias have skirmished with regime and rebel forces alike, geography aids the Kurds' desire to remain outside the fray. Their communities are based largely to the north and east of the main cities and sectarian fault lines. With its military stretched thin, Damascus made a virtue of necessity by abruptly withdrawing its forces from Kurdish regions in July 2012 and finally granting them long-denied rights like citizenship, in an attempt to secure Kurdish support and redirect their attention toward Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

This fueled Kurds' political aspirations within Syria, even as internal divisions became increasingly evident once government forces withdrew. The Syrian Kurds' militia organization ("Popular Protection Units," or YPG) quickly moved to fill the ensuing security vacuum by assuming control of many of the country's predominantly Kurdish towns. These militias are divided between two major groups: the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency inside Turkey for the last three decades; and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella organization backed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

Within Syria, the PYD is by far the stronger and harder-line of the two groups. It maintains deep political and military ties to the PKK, a well-trained and experienced insurgent movement that is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, European Union, and others for its armed struggle against Turkey. This lends the PYD a great deal of internal cohesion and military capability, which it uses to dominate the YPG militias and develop its own civilian administration. This same unity isolates the PYD from Syrian opposition forces and from neighboring countries, chiefly Turkey. Indeed, Ankara fears that the civil war might allow Syria to once again harbor and ally with the PKK or, worse yet, encourage Syrian Kurdish autonomy and fan the flames of Kurdish independence in Turkey. The AKP's revival of peace talks with the PKK may reflect this fear, and certainly further developments on this front may change Turkish concerns about Syria's Kurds.<sup>7</sup>

The PYD is also separate from the KNC, which enjoys greater international support despite being more divided internally. It was formed in February 2012 by Kurdish parties which had left the opposition's umbrella organization (the Syrian National Council, or SNC) over the refusal to discuss federalism or autonomy for Kurds in a post-Assad Syria. Beyond this, the group is held together largely by a shared dislike for the PYD's hard-line ideology. The KNC also receives diplomatic and military support from the KRG, but the latter's own political infighting and ties to Ankara limit its ability to build an effective counterforce to the PYD on the ground in Syria. This imbalance is most evident in the June 2012 Erbil Agreement, in which the PYD and KNC acceded to joint administration and parity in deployed units in

Kurdish Syria. Though the deal was brokered by the KRG, it fell apart once the PYD simply used its stronger militias and superior manpower to muscle out most KNC-affiliated forces on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all this, Syria's Kurds have yet to be drawn into the sectarian civil war. But it is proving increasingly difficult for them to stay out of it as well. Both the SNC and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood publicly denounce any Syrian Kurdish moves toward autonomy, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—which is linked to the SNC—and Jabhat al-Nusra have fought deadly, if relatively small-scale, battles with the YPG since the Syrian army withdrew. In addition, YPG members were killed by Turkish cross-border fire in October 2012.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Syria's Kurds have the potential to exacerbate the growing instability inherent in the larger conflict and will likely prove critical in any attempt to forge a stable post-Assad Syria.

### III. External Pressures

Syria's internal fissures also mirror the divisions that are increasingly dominating the Middle East. The civil war has in fact become a miniature of the larger, ongoing strategic competition for power and influence in the region, with outside countries and movements supporting proxy forces that protect their interests.

The Assad regime receives significant support from Shia forces in the region, eager to preserve the "crescent" of Shia-led states that stretches from Iran, through Iraq, to Syria. Tehran has long maintained close economic and security ties with the Alawi regime in Damascus. Now, in order to keep its ally in power and preserve its own influence, Iran has redoubled its support by sending more money and arms, providing military advisors and even deploying Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders and soldiers to support the regime. Hezbollah's close ties with Assad and the IRGC have led it to intervene as well, sending fighters from Lebanon to reinforce the Syrian government. Iraq's Shia-led government deeply worries about the possible effects of a rebel victory in Syria on its own Sunni population, and thus allows Iranian planes with arms supplies bound for Syria to use its airspace.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the Syrian regime is Russia's sole remaining Middle East client and the naval base at Tartus—an Alawi-majority region—its last vestige of power projection in the Mediterranean. Consequently, Moscow has provided material support to the Assad regime, primarily through arms contracts—including anti-aircraft artillery and attack helicopters—signed with Damascus before the uprising. Russia has also repeatedly disrupted international diplomatic efforts to resolve or intervene in the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, each of the region's Sunni powers—primarily Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—see the conflict as a means to expand their own regional influence while curtailing Shia, and especially Iranian, geopolitical leverage. These countries support the SNC, which is composed primarily of Sunni Arab parties, including a significant Muslim Brotherhood presence. They have also been providing Sunni rebel forces with weapons and logistical aid almost from the moment that the fighting began. As in other

Middle East countries, Qatar primarily aids Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated organizations—in this case the SNC via Turkey. Money from Saudi charities and wealthy individuals flows to even more extreme Salafist groups, while the Saudi government, wary of allowing its Qatari and Muslim Brotherhood rivals to become ascendant in the Sunni Arab world, provides weaponry to more secular forces via Turkey and Jordan.<sup>12</sup> While the balance between moderates and radicals among rebel forces remains unclear, Sunni countries’ overt and covert support for Islamist groups sharpens Syria’s sectarian divisions and strengthens the more extremist rebel groups. Moreover, geopolitical and ideological rivalries between Qatar and Saudi Arabia undermine internal cohesion among rebel forces in Syria.<sup>13</sup>

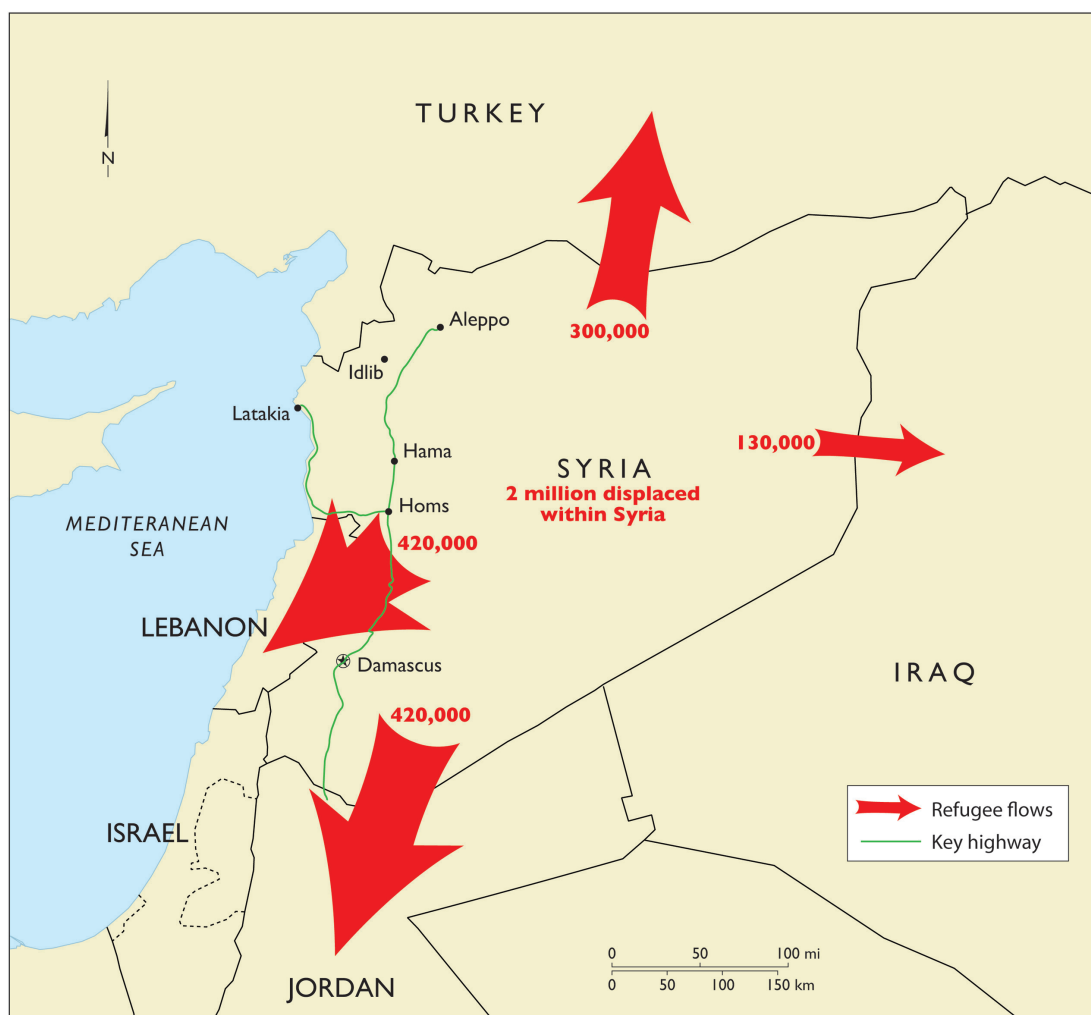
## IV. Humanitarian Crisis

The continuing conflict has created an unending humanitarian crisis, the displacement worse than any crisis since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. It is aggravated by the country’s internal fissures and external pressures. If the crisis continues, it will increasingly destabilize Lebanon and Jordan and create greater political problems for the Erdoğan government.

The regime’s military edge allows it to use force disproportionately and indiscriminately, attacking militants and civilians alike with artillery, Scud missiles and airstrikes. Rebel groups have tried to neutralize these advantages by drawing government forces into costly, close-quarter urban fighting, and by suicide bombings against regime installations. As a result of this violence, the United Nations estimates that at least 80,000 people—perhaps more than half of them noncombatants—have been killed thus far, with the monthly death rate tripling between 2011 and 2012.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the accelerating death toll, internal and external refugee flows increased sharply with the spread of violence to major population centers. Between two and three million Syrians—10 to 15 percent of the population—are displaced internally (Figure 2). Many are fleeing the physical destruction caused by heavy urban fighting between security forces and the FSA. Others are leaving for fear of being targeted by sectarian militias determined to redraw the country’s confessional map.<sup>15</sup> By the end of 2012, the United Nations warned that, “the conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature,” thus raising the risk of “large-scale reprisal attacks” on entire religious groups.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 2. Refugee Flows From Syria**



Overall, an estimated four million need humanitarian assistance, as a result of homelessness, disease, malnourishment, and other deprivations caused by the conflict. The government worsens the matter by trying to prevent foreign aid from areas controlled by the opposition, while only small amounts enter the country through private agencies.<sup>17</sup>

More than 1.3 million Syrians have fled the country and need significant assistance. This exodus has accelerated in the past year as fighting escalated in the major cities.

Turkey has roughly 300,000 Syrians registered in refugee camps along the border, and the figure is expected to increase. Perhaps one hundred thousand Syrians have entered unofficially and are now living illegally in Turkish cities. Ankara worries this influx could destabilize its southern provinces, especially in places like Hatay, which contain large Alawi communities (and which was formerly part of Syria), as well as Kurdish-populated areas.

Turkey has tried to solve the problem by forcing all Syrians into refugee camps along the border until it is better able to house and feed them.<sup>18</sup>

Syria's other neighbors are less well equipped to manage refugee inflows. At least 420,000 refugees have fled to Jordan, a cash-strapped, oil-poor monarchy already reliant on funding from the Gulf countries to prop up domestic spending. In March 2013 the United States pledged \$200 million in economic assistance to ameliorate this situation.<sup>19</sup>

An equal number have left Syria for Lebanon, posing an acute sectarian problem. Lebanon's population is much smaller than Syria's and divided much more equally along confessional lines, institutionalized in a fragile power-sharing agreement between Christians, Shias, and Sunnis. The swift arrival of this many refugees destabilizes Lebanon's delicate balance, bringing with it increasing sectarian violence.

Iraq has also absorbed some 130,000 Syrians, residing mainly in camps the government cannot afford to maintain. As with Syria's other neighbors, there is real potential for sectarian spillover in a country only beginning to recover from a brutal sectarian civil war.<sup>20</sup>

To help attenuate this drastic situation, the United States has pledged more than \$350 million in humanitarian assistance. Of this amount, \$214 million of aid has been delivered, half to Syria and half to its neighbors. The United States provides more than any other country, but the overall level of aid is grossly insufficient to meet the increasing refugee flows.

Currently a majority of U.S. aid destined for Syria is routed through the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. Because these relief agencies are obligated to disburse supplies under the authority of the Syrian government—which then withholds them from rebellious areas—U.S. assistance goes to needy Syrians but also serves indirectly to support the Assad regime.<sup>21</sup> How bad the situation is can be seen in a remarkable recent statement from the heads of five UN agencies, which ended with a call to countries “not just for more funds, needed as they are,” but “to summon and use your influence, now, to save the Syrian people and save the region from disaster.”<sup>22</sup>

## V. Uncertain Endgame

The internecine conflict remains deadlocked. Barring serious Western involvement, one of three very unpalatable outcomes is likely. First, but least likely, the regime could regain control over the country by crushing the opposition. If the regime's security and political apparatus regains control over significant parts of the country, it would have both the military and legal authority to carry out swift, draconian and wide-ranging retribution against political opponents—real and imagined—as well as rebel fighters.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the regime could fall and be replaced by an Islamist-dominated government formed from Sunni opposition groups. This would include extremist elements—including those currently involved with the SNC and FSA—and would raise the possibility of further sectarian and ethnic struggle across the country. This stems from the fact that, according to a report

published by the United States Institute of Peace, “virtually every Syrian has been subject to the systematic repression by the Syrian government since 1963, including routine and wide-ranging violations of basic human rights.” Thus, a primarily Sunni successor regime would raise the potential for bloody retaliation against Alawis, Christians, and other minorities as well as supporters of the regime.

Finally, the conflict could devolve deeper into civil war, with Syria becoming a Balkanized failed state. Given ongoing internal migrations, each ethnic and sectarian group might control a largely homogenous swath of territory but would be unable to exert power over the entire country. Such a situation would lead to continued chaos and bloodshed, with Syria resembling Lebanon of recent decades. Were this to happen, the conflict’s current tendency to draw in outside powers, while also destabilizing neighboring countries, could be expected to become even more costly and disruptive.<sup>24</sup>

None of these outcomes are acceptable. Barring greater foreign involvement—in particular by the United States—avoiding them will depend on whether the United States can convince regional players, especially Turkey, that none of these outcomes are in their interest either. While Turkey has little interest in either Assad’s continued rule or state failure in Syria, it is not clear that it shares the U.S. concern over the potential rise of an extremist Sunni government there.

Ankara’s quick decision to turn against its ally in Damascus might suggest a convergence of interests with Washington. Just because the United States and Turkey share the immediate goal of removing Assad from power, however, does not mean they agree on how to do so or what type of government should replace him. In fact, the policies of each country thus far would indicate a divergence of interests over what Syria’s future should look like.



# C. U.S. Policy and Interests in Syria

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Speaking in May 2011—after the fall of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, but with fighting raging in Libya and just beginning in Syria—President Barack Obama declared the political upheaval in the Middle East “a historic opportunity ... to pursue the world as it should be.” In pursuit of such a world, Obama continued, the United States would oppose “the use of violence and repression” against the people of the region, while supporting “a set of universal rights” and “political and economic reform in the Middle East and North Africa that can meet the legitimate aspirations of ordinary people throughout the region.” Such a world would protect America’s core interests, President Obama insisted, but he also expressed the “firm belief that America’s interests are not hostile to people’s hopes; they’re essential to them.” He ended by calling for “concrete actions” in support of this vision, actions to be “supported by all of the diplomatic, economic, and strategic tools at our disposal.”<sup>25</sup>

In the nearly two years since that speech, the world Obama described has proved elusive and pursuit of it difficult. While the administration has stood by the principles and interests the president invoked in his speech—consistently calling for the replacement of the Assad regime and insisting on the creation of an opposition group representative of Syria’s minorities—it has stopped short of articulating a vision of what post-Assad Syria should look like or of taking any concrete actions to pursue it, avoiding any firm post-war commitments.

## I. Current U.S. Policy Toward Syria

The story of U.S. policy toward Syria is one of dashed hopes. The United States has engaged Damascus extensively over the past two decades, but has little to show for it.

Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafiz, due to Syria’s longstanding rivalry with Iraq, contributed diplomatic and military support to the U.S.-led coalition for the first Gulf War in 1991. Following the Madrid Conference that same year, Washington began the most systematic and intense negotiations with Damascus on the Arab-Israeli peace process since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, including extensive efforts for a Syria-Israel peace treaty. Shortly after Hafiz’s death and the failure to achieve an accord, however, international hopes for good relations with Bashar were dashed when the new regime quickly suppressed a burgeoning reform movement in 2000. Between 2003 and 2005 the Bush Administration attempted to engage Bashar with visits from Secretary of State Colin Powell, Assistant Secretaries William Burns and Peter Rodman and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. After these efforts failed to bear fruit, the United States combined demands for political liberalization

with sanctions, support for opposition groups, and diplomatic isolation, including in response to the regime's role in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and its support for Hezbollah and insurgent groups in Iraq. In 2007, U.S. policymakers supported pursuing a diplomatic solution to end Syria's construction of a nuclear reactor—a decision that was rendered moot only by Israel's unilateral decision to destroy the site with a military strike. Even as late as 2011, as protests were beginning to gather intensity in Damascus and across Syria, American policy makers wanted to believe that the Assad regime could reform.<sup>26</sup>

Since the Assad regime's crackdown on protestors became increasingly violent in the summer of 2011, U.S. declaratory policy toward Syria has called for Bashar al-Assad's removal. As with its strategy in Libya, the United States has worked through multilateral forums in an attempt to broker a political resolution, allowing for an orderly transition of power. However, after China and Russia vetoed a February 2012 U.N. Security Council resolution to this effect, Washington's efforts shifted to the newly created, ad hoc Friends of Syria Group. Until that time, key Sunni regional actors, including Turkey, had recognized and supported the SNC, which was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and largely excluded Syria's minorities. But through a series of conferences, the United States and other Western countries persuaded Turkey and members of the Arab League to formally recognize the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (commonly referred to as the Syrian Opposition Coalition, not to be confused with the SNC) as the sole legitimate Syrian government. The SNC holds a plurality within this group, but the coalition also includes representatives of Syria's minority communities—a key factor in U.S. recognition. As with Libya, the United States sanctioned Syria's central bank and oil exports to weaken the regime's pillars of internal control.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Libya, however, the United States has eschewed direct military assistance, let alone intervention. Syria's complex internal divisions, close relationship with Iran and purportedly advanced air-defense capabilities, coupled with the potential blowback of supplying advanced weaponry to unknown and possibly unreliable opposition forces (a lesson reinforced by the direct ties between the current Islamist insurgency in Mali and the Libyan civil war), has contributed to U.S. reluctance to deepen its involvement in Syria. It has funneled \$250 million of nonlethal communications supplies and intelligence assets to various opposition groups, and begun helping to arrange—but not providing—third-party arms deliveries to Turkey for transshipment to rebel forces that have been vetted as best as possible. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and even private individuals have sought to fill the void, buying and transporting arms to the rebels via Turkey and Jordan, often to Islamist elements.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the United States has rather quietly provided slightly more than \$200 million for humanitarian relief related to the conflict, including medical supplies, food, water, and construction materials. Approximately half this amount is directed into Syria, primarily through the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGO). The other half is distributed through similar institutions to Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The United States pledged an additional \$155 million at an international donor

conference in Kuwait in January 2013.<sup>29</sup> However, the Syrian government has de jure control over all foreign aid to the country.<sup>30</sup>

## II. U.S. Interests

In his May 2011 speech, President Obama outlined the principles guiding U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East: “countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.”<sup>31</sup>

Syria has long been at the crossroads of these key U.S. interests in the Middle East. And each of the three likely outcomes of the current conflict could threaten these interests.

In the unlikely case that the Assad regime is able to reestablish its hold on power, it would be with significant help from Iran and perhaps Hezbollah. In this case, Syria would become more beholden to Iran, simultaneously limiting other regional actors’ influence there. The regime’s survival would also undermine U.S. efforts to combat extremism, given Assad’s long-standing alliance with terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and antagonism toward Israel.

U.S. interests would likewise be threatened if the regime were to be replaced by Sunni Islamists, whether dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—undoubtedly an important player in any post-Assad Syria—or, worse, more extreme groups. This would sharpen the Middle East’s growing Sunni-Shia sectarian schism, destabilizing neighboring countries with their own delicate sectarian balances, namely Iraq and Lebanon; further isolating Israel; and undermining U.S. regional influence. Empowered Sunni Islamists would fail to respect human rights at home, particularly those of minorities, while encouraging radicalism if not terrorism abroad. This general risk of instability could also create upward pressure on oil prices in the form of a risk premium, even if such conflicts do not physically disrupt the flow of significant quantities of oil. For example, prices rose nearly 4 percent for a month during the second Lebanon War in 2006, despite its limited geographic scope in an oil-poor sector of the Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

The third outcome—state failure and continued bloodshed—would displace even more Syrians, upsetting sectarian balances in neighboring countries, triggering humanitarian crises, and creating breeding grounds for disaffected and radicalized refugees. The ungoverned spaces of Syria—much like those of Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and most recently Mali—would become the newest breeding grounds of violent extremists. The result could be a Middle East caught in an ever-wider spiral of instability and terrorism.

Ending the conflict and chaos engulfing Syria—and ensuring that instability does not radiate outward, across the region—requires the creation of a post-Assad Syria that is controlled by a government whose authority is recognized by the entire country. But while Assad’s ouster would be a strategic win for the United States, weakening the Iranian-led radical Shia crescent in the Middle East, such a victory could be attenuated if Syria goes on to join the

rising Sunni Islamist bloc. Avoiding both state failure and ideological excesses will require pursuing a post-Assad Syria in which stability and pluralism are mutually reinforcing, one ruled by a more representative and more democratic government.

Indeed, such an inclusive government is the only hope for long-term stability, both within the country and with its neighbors. Any post-Assad regime that fails to recognize and protect minority rights—a Sunni Islamist one, for example—will increase Kurdish demands for autonomy, if not outright independence, which could in turn destabilize Syria’s relations with Turkey and Iraq, not to mention raise the risks of internal ethnic strife. Such a government would similarly prolong and perhaps aggravate sectarian discord between the country’s Sunni majority and Alawi, Druze, Christian, and other minorities—all of which could spill over to Lebanon or Turkey. For all these reasons, any successor government should reflect the country’s diverse internal makeup and its people’s demands for a more open and inclusive political process.

# D. Turkish Policy and Interests in Syria

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Turkey's policy toward Syria in the past decade has been a rollercoaster ride. Having viewed Syria as a threat to be handled mainly through deterrence at the turn of the century, by the early 2000s Turkey's position had flipped to engagement and courting the Syrian regime, briefly seeking to cultivate it into a client. In the last two years, however, the relationship once again turned hostile, with Ankara now overtly seeking regime change in Damascus. As the civil war continues to rage next door, Ankara is becoming increasingly alarmed about the potential for violence and instability to spill across the border. Consequently, its primary interest is to see stability return to Syria, but a stability predicated on Turkey's own domestic needs: securing the authority of Syria's Sunni majority at the cost of clamping down on minorities, especially the Kurds.

## I. The Evolution of Turkish-Syrian Relations

Until 1989, the Turkish-Syrian border was effectively an extension of the Iron Curtain; Turkey was NATO's eastern flank state against the Soviet Union, while Syria was firmly in the Soviet camp. Yet, the differences between Ankara and Damascus were much deeper than simply an extension of the Cold War.

To begin with, the countries had a bitter territorial dispute over the Sanjak of Alexandretta (what is now Turkey's Hatay province), granted to Syria under the terms of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which established modern Turkey, but then annexed to Turkey in 1939 during the French mandate over Syria. While the intensity of the dispute has varied over time, it provided the baseline for a fundamentally antagonistic relationship. By the 1960s, Turkey's decision to build dams to generate power and provide irrigation across southeastern Turkey sharpened the dispute, since Syria feared that Turkey's massive development projects would deprive it of water from the Euphrates, on which Syria is heavily dependent. Worse, in particular with the building of the gigantic Atatürk Dam in the 1980s, Damascus feared that Turkey could, and would, turn water into a weapon.

These water conflicts contributed to Damascus's decision to harbor militant and terrorist groups targeting Turkey. These included Turkish left-wing terrorist groups and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), which engaged in a decade-long assassination campaign against Turkish diplomats worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s, but also, and most importantly, the terrorist and Marxist-Leninist PKK. The PKK was first allowed to establish itself alongside ASALA in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and later in Syria proper. In fact, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan lived openly in Damascus

from the early 1980s until 1998. Thanks to Syrian support, along with the power vacuum in northern Iraq, the PKK was able to mount a near-mortal challenge to Turkish sovereignty in the early 1990s.

Unsurprisingly, Damascus became Ankara's primary foreign enemy, bringing the two countries to the brink of war in the late 1990s. Indeed, by the middle of that decade, a new strategic reality had taken hold in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey had brought the threat from the PKK under a modicum of control, through military operations far inside Kurdish-inhabited Iraqi territory, and was growing closer with Israel, strengthening Ankara's position against Syria.

As a result, in late 1998, Turkey was able to credibly threaten Damascus with war unless it expelled Öcalan, moving military hardware to the Syrian border and conducting large military exercises in the vicinity. Syria took these threats seriously, expelling Öcalan—he was captured, with assistance from the Central Intelligence Agency, a few months later—and ceasing its support for the PKK.

With the PKK gone, the main irritant in the Turkish-Syrian relationship was removed. This laid the groundwork for a relatively rapid warming of relations, a process greatly facilitated by the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000 and Syria's ensuing efforts to break out from its regional isolation. By mid-2002, merely four years after having nearly gone to war, the two countries signed a military training agreement. Ankara's rapprochement with Damascus thus preceded the rise to power of the AKP in 2003. But under the leadership of AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, what had been a gradually warming relationship turned into a full embrace, facilitated by a great jump in trade and investment between the two countries.

In particular, the AKP's perceived independence from the United States altered Syria's attitude toward Turkey. The Turkish parliament's failure in March 2003 to muster enough votes to pass a resolution acquiescing to U.S. requests to open a northern front in Iraq was a major factor in bringing Damascus and Ankara together, as they shared apprehensions about the U.S. invasion. Similarly, in 2005, Ankara refused to join the international outcry against Damascus over Syrian participation in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. President Assad conducted the first presidential-level state visit to Turkey in January 2004; in 2005, suggesting a rare convergence between secularist Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer and the AKP, Sezer visited Damascus while Prime Minister Erdoğan invited Bashar al-Assad to vacation in Turkey.

Indeed, Syria rose to occupy center stage in the AKP's new foreign policy, dubbed "zero problems with neighbors." This strategy overwhelmingly focused on two neighbors with whom Turkey had poor relations—Iran and Syria. Indeed, between 2008 and 2011, Turkish policy in the Middle East was motivated not so much by sectarianism as by an embrace of Muslim countries in general, particularly those with poor ties to the West, including Sudan and the Hamas government in Gaza. In so doing, however, the AKP broke with Turkey's tradition of avoiding entanglement in the Middle East, which had been a cornerstone of its

foreign policy since the Atatürk era. While Turgut Özal had been the first to break with this tradition in the early 1990s, the AKP went much further, as it brought an entirely new focus on increasing Turkey's role in the Middle East to Turkish foreign policy.

Syria was the poster child of this new foreign policy based on outreach to the Muslim world; it was also Ankara's conduit to the Arab world, in which the AKP sought to expand its influence. In fact, since the areas of Iraq bordering Turkey are predominantly Kurdish and outside Baghdad's control, Syria is effectively Turkey's only Arab neighbor. Indeed, as evidenced by Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran, and also in the cases of Libya and Sudan, the AKP's zero problems foreign policy had no basis in any particular set of values.

The major weakness of this approach was not immediately visible: it focused heavily on developing ties with regimes, at the expense of ignoring percolating domestic tensions. Already in 2009, Ankara's coming problems in Syria were preceded by Turkey's overly cautious response to the 2009 "green revolution" in Iran, where Turkey refused to criticize the Iranian regime's brutal repression of popular protests, congratulated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his victory in the presidential election, and termed the issue an Iranian internal affair.

Similarly, with Syria, Turkish policy focused on developing ties with the Assad regime. The relationship grew rapidly: by 2007, a free-trade agreement entered into force; Ankara sought and received Israeli support to broker talks between Damascus and Jerusalem, which ended when Turkish-Israeli relations broke down after Ankara felt blindsided by the Israeli invasion of Gaza. By 2009, a ministerial-level Strategic Partnership Council had formed, which created what were in practice yearly joint cabinet meetings. In the process, visa requirements were mutually abolished.

The pace with which such a deep relationship developed was possible mainly due to the personal ties between Erdoğan and Assad, as well as rapidly growing economic ties. From Ankara's perspective, it is clear that Erdoğan thought to cultivate Syria into a junior partner or business agent in Turkey's greater regional ambitions.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 brought a sea change to the region and led to a realignment of Turkish policy. In many ways, the uprisings reaffirmed the worldview of the AKP leaders, who had long privately complained of the stagnant authoritarian regimes across the Middle East, and expected their eventual downfall and replacement with popular and Islamic movements. But while the uprisings created historic opportunities, they also made Turkey's regime-focused policy untenable. Ankara's response to the Egyptian revolution displayed the tensions: contrary to Turkey's reticence in the Iranian case, the nimble Erdoğan emerged as the first major world leader to call on President Hosni Mubarak to resign, thus positioning Turkey on the side of the Arab populations against their regimes. When the unrest spread to Syria, Ankara was caught in a bind: its zero-problems policy appeared not to have anticipated a possible conflict between ties with regimes on the one hand and the AKP's and Erdoğan's "soft power" and image on the Arab streets on the other.

Another example of the shortcomings of the zero-problem policy is the AKP's Libya policy. Here, Turkey had focused on support for Turkish business interests. Its attempts to gain Muammar Qadhafi's favor went so far as to include Erdoğan accepting the Qadhafi human rights award in 2010. As international pressure mounted on Libya in 2011, Turkey initially opposed a NATO operation only to change position after the Arab League supported the campaign.

From mid-2011 onward, Ankara's policy gradually sought to adjust to these realities. It did so in several stages: first by demanding reform and subsequently by switching into overt opposition to the Assad regime.

In many ways, the Syrian crisis proved a test case for the zero-problems policy. Ankara had dismissed Western concerns over its ties to rogue regimes—including Hamas and the Iranian and Sudanese regimes, which Turkey had previously shunned—by claiming to its Western interlocutors that it would gain influence the West did not have over these regimes. Thus, throughout 2011, Turkish officials and especially Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu sought to convince Assad to reform and to abstain from using violence against civilians. Yet, unfortunately for Turkey, it soon became clear that Assad had no intention whatsoever of engaging in meaningful reform—thereby embarrassing Erdoğan, who had assured his Western colleagues of Turkey's influence in Syria.

By late summer of 2011, Ankara shifted gears: it worked to organize the opposition against Assad, leading to the creation of the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, while Turkey simultaneously sought to promote a broad international coalition to respond to the Syrian crisis. By the end of 2011, Ankara openly demanded Assad's resignation. By mid-2012, Turkey was actively providing training and weapons to the Free Syrian Army; and since October, there has been reciprocal shelling across the border, meaning that Turkey and Syria are effectively in a state of undeclared war.

## II. Turkish Interests in the Syrian Civil War

Turkey has multiple interests at stake in Syria, some of them conflicting. The paramount objective is to restore stability across its border. More specifically, this includes preventing violence from spilling over into Turkey and the conflict from impacting Turkey's own Kurdish question. Moreover, Ankara seeks to revive the role Syria had begun to play in its trade with the Middle East, as well as to turn the crisis into an opportunity to expand Turkey's role as a regional power.

### A. TURKEY'S QUEST FOR SYRIAN STABILITY

#### *i. Avoiding Spillover into Turkey*

During the first Gulf War in 1990, massive refugee flows from northern Iraq spilled over the border into Turkey itself. In the years that followed, Ankara had to deal with regional crises in the Caucasus (1992–1994 and again in 2008), in the Balkans (1991–1995 and again in 1999), and again in Iraq (2003). With these experiences still fresh in their institutional



memory, a key objective for policy makers in Ankara is avoiding yet another round of humanitarian crises and regional instability. Turkey's central interest in Syria, thus, is to prevent the collapse of the state.

More specifically, Turkey wants to avoid large and possibly permanent refugee flows from Syria. While it has opened its borders to more than 300,000 Syrians fleeing the violence (and the numbers are continuing to increase daily), Ankara would like to see them repatriated as soon as possible. This is both to ease the economic strains of housing, feeding, and caring for so many displaced persons and to avoid their intermingling with the Turkish population, as the tensions among Syrian groups could sow social discord within Turkey's own population. Perhaps even more importantly, the refugee influx has been politically unpopular in Turkey.

Indeed, containing the conflict and keeping it from spilling over into Turkey is another reason Ankara is apprehensive about the deadly spiral in which Syria is trapped. Any of several dynamics present in Syria's conflict could migrate to Turkey. The Sunni-Alawi conflict in Syria is already raising Sunni-Alevi tensions inside Turkey. Although Turkey's heterodox Alevi community (who constitute over a sixth of the population) have almost nothing in common with Syria's Alawis or Nusayris, there has been a tendency by Turkish politicians to conflate the two, thereby wittingly or unwittingly stoking tensions between the Alevi minority and the Sunni majority.<sup>33</sup> For example, when faced with scathing criticism by the opposition for the government's Syria policy, Prime Minister Erdoğan blamed the main opposition leader's criticism on his Alevi background, explicitly linking him to Syria's Alawis.<sup>34</sup> In recent months, however, this issue has appeared to recede somewhat.

In addition, the use of Turkish territory by Islamic extremists seeking to get to Syria—as Jabhat al-Nusra has been doing—could easily lead to such groups establishing a presence in Turkey itself, which would rapidly create tensions, especially if these groups seek to, as they often do, enforce their own religious ideas in Turkey and defy Turkish authorities. Isolated reports suggest this is already happening, and recent arrests of alleged weapons smugglers providing support to an extremist Islamic opposition group indicate Turkey may be worried. These concerns, while relevant to the longer-term outcome, are currently overwhelmed by the immediate threat to Turkey's security posed by the Kurdish issue.

## *ii. Turkey's Kurdish issue*

Two wars in Iraq have made clear to Ankara that Kurdish problems in neighboring countries can all too easily spill over into Turkey. In the early 1990s, a power vacuum in northern Iraq enabled the PKK to mount a deadly insurgency in the southeast of Turkey, challenging Turkey's sovereignty to the core. And in 2004, at a time when Turkey thought it had the Kurdish question under control, the U.S. invasion of Iraq had the inadvertent consequence of facilitating an environment in northern Iraq that allowed the PKK to rekindle its insurgency. These memories are fresh in Turkish minds; and it is no surprise that handling the Kurdish aspect of the Syrian crisis is of paramount importance for Ankara, to such an extent that it accelerated the Turkish state's efforts to negotiate with the PKK. The increase

in PKK attacks in southeastern Turkey in parallel with the deepening of the Syrian civil war suggests that such fears are hardly unfounded.

Turkey seeks to prevent the repetition of the Iraqi scenario—a collapse of central authority leading to the establishment of an autonomous or quasi-independent Kurdish entity across its southern border. Such a development would pose a twofold threat to Turkey: first, it would provide a greater base for the PKK, potentially forcing Ankara to intervene militarily to prevent the group from targeting Turkey from bases across the border. Here, the comparison with northern Iraq is not favorable to Turkey: in the Iraqi case, the Kurdish entity there was at least dominated by forces ideologically opposed to the PKK, most notably the Kurdish Democratic Party led by Massoud Barzani. In Syria, by contrast, the tables are turned: the Kurdish-majority areas are dominated by the PKK-affiliated PYD, while the more conservative forces aligned with Barzani are marginalized.

Secondly, the very creation of a self-governing Kurdish entity fans the flames of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey itself. Thus, a paramount Turkish objective is to prevent Kurdish autonomy in Syria, something Erdoğan has declared would be a *casus belli*, particularly if that entity would be run by PKK-affiliated groups. Indeed, he has termed an intervention into northern Syria a “most natural right” if an “irritant” would emerge there.<sup>35</sup>

### *iii. Trade and Economy*

On top of these acute security concerns, Turkey also has positive interests in Syria. Chief among these is Syria’s role as both a recipient of and conduit for Turkish trade with the Arab Middle East. This is because the AKP’s domestic popularity stems in part from the fact that Turkey’s GDP has tripled between 2002 and 2010, largely because of a similar increase in exports. This rising tide has lifted most boats.

Turkey’s economic opening to the Arab world has been an integral piece of this economic success, and Syria has been critical to Turkey’s penetration of Arab markets. Syria’s function as Ankara’s sole land corridor through Jordan to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and beyond reinforced the strategic appeal of closer bilateral relations in the past half-decade. During the past decade, the Arab world’s share of Turkish exports increased from 9 to 21 percent, with exports to Syria ballooning from \$250 million in 2002 to \$1.8 billion on the eve of the uprising. But the current unrest has forced Turkey to reroute its trade through other corridors—including the Kurdish Regional Government—while exports to Syria have fallen more than 70 percent since 2010.<sup>36</sup>

### *iv. Regional Aspirations*

Turkey also foresaw another role for Syria in the past decade: that of a Turkish client. Erdoğan sought to turn the Syrian government under Assad into a junior partner, allied to AKP-led Turkey and under its influence. Thus, a key element of Turkey’s interests in Syria at present is the replacement of Assad with a government that would be responsive to Turkish concerns and interests, preferably a client that would look up to Ankara for advice and support—and support Turkey’s ambitions of regional power. Of course, such a development is years away at best.

## **B. WHAT KIND OF STABILITY?**

Turkey's chief goals in Syria are inherently in alignment with U.S. interests. Turkey's internal stability is undoubtedly in the interests of the United States; and the United States certainly would not like to see a PKK-affiliated entity establish control over a chunk of Syrian territory. Moreover, given America's likely preoccupation with domestic matters in coming years, the Obama administration's preference for a "light footprint" approach, and the ongoing "pivot" to Asia, the United States may even be well-served by Turkey, a major NATO ally, taking the lead in bringing about stability in Syria. Ankara should not mind such an approach; indeed, it would stand to benefit. Turkey's role will be essential for any reconstruction work and Turkish companies stand to benefit greatly from any such effort. Turkey's view of what stability in Syria entails, however, might not match up with that of the United States.

### *i. Opposition to Syrian Kurdish Autonomy*

The Kurdish question in Syria is intimately connected to Turkey's own Kurdish question. Kurdish clans and tribes overlap across the Turkish-Syrian border, implying close family ties between the groups, as well as feelings of solidarity. With the opening of borders in the past several years, these ties have grown considerably. Moreover, given the developments in the broader region, the future of Syria's Kurds has a direct impact on Turkey's stability.

Turkey has in the past two decades been forced to adapt to the reality of a self-governing Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. It did so very reluctantly, opening up to Erbil only several years into the AKP's tenure, in what constituted one of the most successful and lasting elements of the zero-problems policy. Should Syria's Kurds also form an effectively self-governing entity as a result of the ongoing crisis, that would mean that two of Turkey's three neighbors with Kurdish populations—all but Iran—have Kurdish self-governing entities, at a time when Turkey continues to refuse to discuss any formal devolution of power, insisting on the unitary structure of the Turkish state. The obvious question is whether that will be a realistic policy going forward.

Such considerations appear not to have been fully taken into account when Turkey endorsed the ouster of Bashar al-Assad in the second half of 2011; indeed, Turkish leaders may have viewed Syria in light of the recent events in Libya and, like many Western observers, fully expected the Assad regime to crumble rapidly. Instead, Turkey suffered from retaliation by the Assad regime, which is suspected, together with Iran, of having rekindled its support for the PKK. Such claims, however, remain difficult to prove.

Thus, since late 2011, the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK in Iraq and southeastern Turkey has escalated, reaching its highest death toll in more than a decade, with regular ambushes against Turkish troops and ensuing retaliatory attacks.<sup>37</sup> This escalation clearly had partly domestic reasons, given the jailing of thousands of Kurdish activists in recent years.<sup>38</sup> Yet it was also clear that the PKK's newfound strength was related to the renewal of outside support. This support was not just from Syria: in a related development, a September 2011 cease-fire ended the open conflict between the Iranian

government and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), the PKK affiliate in Iran, which resulted in the PJAK “leaving Iranian territory.” The details of the PJAK’s role are nevertheless murky.

By the summer of 2012, the Assad regime pulled a master chess move: it made a coordinated withdrawal from northeastern Syria, making sure to leave the area under the control of the hard-line, PKK-aligned PYD. In effect, this meant handing northeastern Syria to Turkey’s archenemy. Given the extent of prior ties between Damascus and the PKK, it is difficult to believe this move was not the result of an agreement of sorts, whereby Damascus obtained assurances of the PYD’s neutrality in the Syrian civil war. Since the PYD had no obvious horse to back in the intra-Arab Syrian civil war, this was a small price to pay.

This development appears to have contributed to a sense of panic in Ankara regarding the Kurdish issue. Together with Erdoğan’s presidential ambition, these developments may have accelerated his decision to rekindle talks with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, all the while pounding PKK positions in Turkey’s southeast. Meanwhile, Turkey’s leadership at the very least looked the other way when, in November 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra attacked a PYD checkpoint near the town of Ras al-Ayn across the Turkish border, after Syrian rebels had taken over the town. This prompted a battle that left more than 30 people dead.<sup>39</sup>

These policies might seem contradictory, but they follow a certain logic, whereby Turkey applied military pressure to the PKK, sought to inflict damage by any available means on the PYD in northern Syria, and simultaneously opened the door to a political solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Taken together, these policies have a chance of bringing about their desired result. Yet they also entail significant risk and suggest that Turkish and American interests on the Kurdish issue have yet to fully align. This is especially true of the question of Kurdish autonomy: from the perspective of the United States a Kurdish autonomous region could be a critical bulwark against more hostile forces in Damascus in a post-Assad Syria, while Turks view even the mention of autonomy as a red line. This may change depending on the evolution of Turkey’s own Kurdish question, but remains Turkey’s stated position. The opening of a dialogue between Ankara and the PYD no longer seems impossible, and both sides have indicated as much.

Moreover, the growing role of Islamist militants as a counterweight to the PYD may prove a short-term benefit but at significant long-term cost. History suggests that jihadi groups have always created more problems than solutions. Indeed, dissident Turkish writers are already beginning to compare Syria to Afghanistan, with Turkey cast in the role of Pakistan.<sup>40</sup> The existence of the analogy alone should give Western policy makers pause and suggest the need for greater dialogue on the issue with Turkish representatives.

By March 2013, Turkey and the PKK had intensified negotiations, leading PKK leader Öcalan to declare an end to the armed struggle, and urging his fighters to leave Turkey. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Turkish leadership will reciprocate by granting some of the Kurdish demands – chiefly involving deletion of references to Turkishness in the

constitution, allowing school education in Kurdish, and devolution of power that would amount to de facto autonomy. While a milestone seems to have been reached in efforts to end the 29-year old conflict, it is an open question whether efforts will succeed this time.

To be successful, the process will require much greater discipline and discretion than was the case in 2009, the prior Kurdish “opening” which proved short-lived as Ankara failed to manage the process and the PKK sought to turn it into a giant publicity stunt. Since Erdoğan’s top priority is acceding to the presidency under a presidential system of government, there is a risk that policy toward the Kurdish issue will once again fall prey to electoral considerations. The PKK is hardly a reliable partner, as the organization seems split on the merits of negotiating with Ankara, with the Iraq-based militants not fully under Öcalan’s control. While there is reason for cautious optimism, the hurdles that remain along the way to peace should not be underestimated.

### *ii. Sectarian Affinities and the Syrian Power Struggle*

An important sticking point in U.S.-Turkish relations has been how to relate to the notoriously fractious Syrian opposition. In short, Turkey has focused greatly on promoting the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian opposition, while the United States has consistently advocated a broad-based, inclusive leadership.

Indeed, the AKP has strong affinities with the Brotherhood, dating back to its origins in Turkey’s traditional Islamist movement, known as “Milli Görüş,” which was deeply influenced by the Brotherhood. While the AKP moved to the center and publicly reconciled with secularism, its core leadership continued to be composed of individuals with a background in the Milli Görüş movement. It is therefore unsurprising that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have been enthusiastic about the Muslim Brotherhood’s emergence as a leading political force after the Arab uprisings. The AKP government always maintained ties with the Brotherhood’s Palestinian wing, Hamas, and strongly sided against Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak when protests started. After Mohammed Morsi came to power, Ankara moved rapidly to build a strategic partnership with Egypt.

Similarly in Syria, the AKP government’s policy rapidly changed once the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood took up arms against the Assad regime. When the opportunity beckoned to support the installation of Brotherhood-dominated governments across the eastern Mediterranean, Erdoğan rushed to endorse that prospect.

This shift in Turkish foreign policy was part pragmatic, part ideological. Popular pressure made it imperative to side with the Arab populations, something that in turn put Ankara on a collision course with Tehran. In this way, the recent political upheavals throughout the region and the rise of the Brotherhood (as well as parties inspired by it, like Ennahda in Tunisia) led the AKP to move toward its identification with the Brotherhood.

Importantly, however, the Turkish leadership would not see their policy shift as sectarian; they would defend it as democratic. In fact, Erdoğan’s policy reflects a majoritarian understanding of democracy, rather than a liberal constitutional one built on checks and

balances. Thus, in the Middle East, AKP leaders view the popular will as being embodied in the Sunni Arab majority, which is in turn represented and led by the Brotherhood. As a result, Turkish policy has paid little attention to the concerns and interests of the non-Sunni Arab population of the country—whether Alawi, Christian, Kurd, Druze, or urban-secular in Syria—or for that matter, the Copts in Egypt.<sup>41</sup> These groups also have not turned against Assad, putting them in direct conflict with Turkey's overriding priority in Syria. Turkey's policies toward those groups may change once Assad falls. Given that the Brotherhood's influence over Syrian politics is limited to begin with, this policy's chance of success is uncertain.

In practice, Turkey helped organize, host, and support the SNC as the main representative of the Syrian opposition. In particular, Turkey played up the SNC at an April 2012 meeting of the "Friends of Syria" coalition, working hard to convince its Western allies to support the SNC. Yet, the SNC, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, has experienced too many leadership struggles and difficulties to stick together, as leading non-Brotherhood members have been equivocal about their affiliation with the SNC. Turkey also hosted the Free Syrian Army, although it initially sought to rein in its operations; throughout 2012, however, Ankara's role as a provider of training and weapons to the FSA became clear, hosting the group's headquarters in Turkey until its decision to move inside Syria in September 2012.

By November 2012, the differences between Washington and Ankara led Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to publicly withdraw support from the SNC, noting that the Syrian "opposition must include people from inside Syria and others who have a legitimate voice that needs to be heard." Subsequently, the United States supported the creation in Doha of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a broader coalition that subsumed the SNC.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Turkey has continued to support the Brotherhood, not least by helping strengthen its position in the FSA. In a December 2012 meeting in the Turkish resort of Antalya, a new united command structure was created for the FSA, two-thirds of which is estimated to be under Brotherhood control.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, officials in Jordan have already expressed alarm that Turkey has facilitated the transfer of weapons to extremist groups in Syria, allowing "fanatics to accumulate strength and ammunition at the expense of moderate and secular rebel groups."<sup>44</sup>

As the Syrian crisis continues to unfold, the United States will need to take stock of Turkey's evolving position concerning post-Assad Syria. At present, Washington's concern is for a broad and pluralistic political system that provides adequate voice to Syria's minorities; Ankara's appears to be to help its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood acquire a dominant influence in any new government in Syria. In this, Ankara is not alone, as Turkish leaders appear to be coordinating fruitfully with their colleagues in Cairo. While the Brotherhood's position inside Syria is limited, support from both Ankara and Cairo may help propel it to a position of power it would otherwise not reach on its own.

These competing visions of post-Assad Syria could prove a sticking point for U.S.-Turkish cooperation. They also threaten to delay the downfall of the Assad regime, as opponents of the Brotherhood continue to either support Assad or at least to refrain from actively joining the opposition. But, despite these difficulties, an effort must be made at cooperation. The apparent divergence in U.S. and Turkish interests with regard to the Syrian conflict demonstrates both the challenges for better resolving the Syrian issue and the obstacles to productive U.S.-Turkish relations more generally. The need for cooperation with Ankara in Syria points to the important and beneficial role that Turkey could potentially play in the new Middle East.

# E. Appendix: Glossary

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**Alawi Islam:** An Islamic sect that adheres to many beliefs and traditions of Shia Islam, while also incorporating aspects of Christianity and other religions. Based primarily along Syria's Mediterranean coastline and south-central Turkey, Alawis (also referred to as Alawites) constitute between 10 and 15 percent of Syria's population. The Assad family and many members of the regime's upper echelons originate from tribes following Alawi Islam.

**Adelet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP):** Known in English as the Justice and Development Party, the AKP is the majority party in Turkey led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Officially founded in 2001, the AKP is a center-right party that is often described as having Islamist roots or being Islamic-leaning.

**Druze:** An Islamic sect that follows many aspects of Shia Islam, while also incorporating beliefs from other religions. Based primarily in the mountainous terrain near Syria's border with Jordan, the Druze constitute roughly 2 to 5 percent of Syria's population.

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** The largest informal organization of Syrian rebel paramilitary forces, the FSA receives assistance from Turkey and major Arab supporters of the Syrian opposition. In addition to engaging regime forces, the FSA has fought deadly battles with Syrian Kurdish units.

**Friends of Syria Group:** An ad hoc gathering of Western and other countries formed to coordinate assistance to Syrian opposition forces after China and Russia vetoed a February 2012 U.N. Security Council resolution for a transition of power in Syria.

**Kurdish National Council (KNC):** Formed in February 2012, the Kurdish National Council is a Syrian Kurdish umbrella organization advocating for Kurdish autonomy within Syria. Backed by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, KNC member groups are united largely by their shared dislike for the harder-line and more powerful Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the only other major Syrian Kurdish organization.

**Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG):** The Kurdistan Regional Government is the ruling body of the autonomous Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. It has built diplomatic and economic ties with Turkey under the AKP and has sought to broker a power-sharing agreement among Syrian Kurdish factions to limit the influence of harder-line elements in Kurdish populations in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.

**Kurds:** The Kurdish people are an Iranic people concentrated primarily in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Adherents largely of Sunni Islam, Kurds form an ethnically and linguistically distinct community constituting approximately 18 percent of Turkey's population and roughly 9 percent of Syria's population.



**Muslim Brotherhood:** The Society of the Muslim Brothers is an Islamic organization founded in Egypt in the 1920s as a religious, political, and social movement advocating the use of sharia law and the unity of all Islamic states. Previously outlawed under the Assad regime, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has become one of most prominent opposition groups in the Syrian rebel coalition.

**Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan (PKK):** Known in English as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK is a Kurdish separatist group based in Turkey that advocates for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Designated as a terrorist group by the United States and others, the PKK has waged a decades-long military campaign against Turkey and has strong political and security ties to Syrian Kurdish communities.

**Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD):** Known in English as the Democratic Union Party, the PYD is a Syrian Kurdish nationalist party affiliated with the PKK. Through this affiliation and its influence in key Syrian Kurdish militias, the PYD is the most powerful Syrian Kurdish group.

**Syrian Opposition Coalition:** Officially the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, it is an umbrella coalition of Syrian opposition groups recognized as the sole legitimate Syrian government by the Friends of Syria for its inclusion of Syrian minority groups.

**Syrian National Council (SNC):** An umbrella opposition group of anti-regime Syrian groups based in Turkey and formed in August 2011, the SNC is composed primarily of Sunni Arab parties, including a significant Muslim Brotherhood presence. The SNC's lack of representation of Syrian minority groups convinced the Friends of Syria to recognize the Syrian Opposition Coalition (National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces) as the sole legitimate Syrian government, in which the SNC holds a plurality.

**Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG):** Known in English as Popular Protection Units, the YPG is the largest Syrian Kurdish militia organization. Informally linked to both the KNC and PYD, and dominated by the latter, it controls much of Syria's Kurdish-majority territory evacuated by regime forces since summer 2012.

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