The Middle East, Turkish-Style: How Ankara Exploits Post-Assad Syria

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Abstract
Amid the radical transformation of Syria's political landscape following the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 and the weakening of former centers of influence, Turkiye has found itself in a uniquely advantageous position to strengthen its regional standing and pursue long-held foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. This article analyzes the evolution of Turkiye's post-Assad strategy and outlines the key vectors of Turkish foreign policy—ranging from military interventions and humanitarian engagement to diplomatic maneuvering and ideological influence. Special attention is paid to how Ankara seeks to consolidate its presence in Syria and integrate the new circumstances into its broader regional strategy. Through comprehensive analysis, the article explores both the tangible and potential gains for Turkiye, Ankara's positioning in the Sunni world, its competition with other centers of power, and the risks it faces in the process of shaping a new Middle Eastern architecture.

Keywords: Turkiye, foreign policy, Syria, Erdoğan, Assad, Middle East, Kurds, Neo-Ottomanism.

Turkish-Syrian relations, dating back to the Ottoman era, have developed amid deep-rooted contradictions, political crises, and diplomatic shifts. In the 20th century, these relations were complicated by territorial disputes (especially over Hatay Province, annexed by Ankara in 1939 (Volkov, 2020)) and by ideological/geopolitical rivalry. Turkiye aligned with the U.S. and NATO, while Syria bet on the Soviet Union and Arab nationalism. Tensions continued growing as Turkiye became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel, Damascus supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Ankara backed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Yüzbaşıoğlu, 2016), and disputes over distributing the water of the Tigris and Euphrates became chronic, especially during Turkiye's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) (Khouri, 2019). During the Cold War and in a general climate of mutual distrust, even brief rapprochements inevitably gave way to renewed crises.

The end of the more than fifty-year rule of the Assad family, in December 2024, and the former opposition's formation of a new government, marked the beginning of a new era for Syria, posing serious challenges and opportunities for regional and global actors alike. In this new political landscape, Turkiye emerged in an especially advantageous position, with significant influence over the new order in Damascus. However, this has not eliminated post-Assad Syria's structural issues: fragmented state institutions, economic devastation, interethnic and interconfessional tensions, the unresolved Kurdish question, demographic pressures, refugee-related challenges, and dependence on external actors. Under these conditions, Turkiye—empowered by its enhanced influence and motivated to secure its southern borders—seeks to position itself as a key architect of Syria's future and of the broader regional order.

FRIENDS AND FOES

After Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000, and Erdoğan's Islamist conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) was elected in 2002–2003, relations between Syria and Turkiye began to improve after a long period of tension. Turkiye's pro-Western leadership

was replaced by a government pursuing rapprochement with its neighbors, particularly in the Middle East. Instead of distancing itself from the Arab world, Ankara began engaging more actively with the region—seeking to access regional markets, attract Arab investment and tourists, and restore Turkiye's image as a bridge between East and West and a leader in the Muslim world. This regional policy was later conceptualized by one of its architects, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, as "zero problems with neighbors" *(Yeni dönemde sıfır sorun politikası)* (Davutoğlu, 2013).

Turkish-Syrian rapprochement between 2007 and 2010 was reinforced by a personal friendship between Erdoğan and Assad, which included a joint family vacation in the Turkish city of Bodrum in 2008. In 2010, Istanbul hosted the fifth Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum, initiated by the two presidents, during which a free trade area was established between Turkiye, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. At one point, Erdoğan even tried to mediate peace between Syria and Israel (Ciddi, 2024).

Things changed drastically with the Syrian Civil War in 2011. By then, the Arab Spring had already toppled the governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Expecting Assad to meet the same fate, and seeing new opportunities to strengthen Turkish influence in Syria and the region, Erdoğan reversed his position: amid mass protests, he called on Assad to resign. However, instead of stepping down, or at least attempting to reform or negotiate with the opposition, Assad responded with a campaign of violent repression, which Turkiye condemned (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Turkiye was also irritated by Kurdish formations' exploitation of Damascus's weakening to gain strength in Syria's north. To concentrate his forces against the rebellion, Assad withdrew them from Kurdish-populated areas, effectively allowing Kurdish autonomy. Assad's fall would allow Erdoğan to eliminate this autonomy and prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan along Turkiye's borders.

Additionally, Iran's 'Shia Crescent,' including Syria, challenged Turkish interests and hindered Ankara's position in the Sunni world.

Before the war, Syria had served as an important export market for Turkiye and as a transit corridor for trade with Arab countries.

War disrupted this route. Assad's fall, and the establishment of a friendly government in Damascus, has now opened new possibilities for restoring and even expanding Turkiye's economic influence. Post-war reconstruction could also make Ankara a leading investor and contractor for multibillion-dollar projects.

For Erdoğan, national interests have always been the highest priority, and he has not hesitated to sacrifice alliances or principles if they conflict with Turkiye's strategic goals. As early as August 2011, the Syrian National Council was established in Istanbul, uniting various factions of the Syrian opposition, though it was clearly dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and their vision of political Islam. Through this alliance, Erdoğan sought to strengthen his image as a protector of Sunnis, compete (especially against Saudi Arabia) for leadership in the Muslim world, and gain leverage in Syria, Egypt, Libya, and beyond (FDD, 2025).

In the early years of the Syrian conflict, Turkiye's policy was broadly aligned with that of the U.S. and its allies: Assad must go. However, Ankara took a more hardline position, repeatedly calling for international military intervention. Despite some disagreements over which opposition factions to support, U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria continued until early 2015, when the two countries agreed to launch a train-and-equip program for the Syrian armed opposition. But the U.S. later focused (in alliance with the Kurds) on combating radical Islamist groups, and the Arab states sought to maintain regime stability in the face of the Arab Spring. Turkiye, in contrast, pursued a more anti-Assad and anti-Kurdish policy.

In 2012, Turkiye began delivering logistical and material support across the border and training Syrian opposition forces. By 2016, a wide network of secular and jihadist proxies had formed inside Syria. To improve oversight and operational efficiency, these disparate elements were merged in 2017 under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army or SNA (Guneylioglu, 2025). Its key tasks included securing Turkish military bases in northern Syria and assisting Ankara in countering Kurdish forces near the border. Together with the SNA, Turkish troops secured a buffer zone in northern Syria for the

relocation of displaced Syrians—a zone that President Erdoğan hoped could also facilitate the return of Syrian refugees from Turkiye amid growing nationalist sentiment against them.

Starting in 2019, Turkiye took de facto control over part of northwestern Syria, imposing civilian administrators, governmental institutions, and the Turkish lira.

Turkiye's support for the Syrian opposition continued even after the growing influence of extremist groups—including the infamous Jabhat al-Nusra*,[1] the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda*—became evident. Later, under the leadership of Syria's current president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, al-Nusra* severed ties with al-Qaeda* and rebranded as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)*, becoming the most powerful rebel group in Idlib.

Despite Turkiye's substantial support for HTS*, the SNA was Ankara's main ally in Syria (Zelin, Cagaptay, 2025). The SNA was more manageable, accountable, and politically acceptable—allowing Ankara to work through it without serious diplomatic consequences. HTS*—with its international terrorist designation, more radical ideology, and refusal to fully subordinate itself to Turkish command—was considered a less reliable partner. Nevertheless, HTS* remained a key player in the Syrian conflict, and its existence served Turkish interests in the fight against Assad.

Ankara attempted to weaken HTS* dominance and bring it under control by employing a classic 'divide and rule' strategy between radical and more pragmatic Syrian factions (Yüksel, 2019). However, al-Sharaa managed to preserve the combat capabilities and relative autonomy of HTS*, which ultimately took the lead in ousting Assad in December 2024, and al-Sharaa assumed the presidency.

TIME TO ACT

Starting in 2015, Turkiye began facing direct competition inside Syria from Russia (supporting Damascus) and Iran (supporting Damascus and proxy networks). Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) were fighting ISIS* and extending their control

[1] Asterisks denote groups designated as terrorist organizations by Russian law.

over northern Syria. Ankara responded with three operations—*Euphrates Shield* (2016-2017), *Olive Branch* (2018), and *Peace Spring* (2019)—against Kurdish-controlled areas. These actions partially disrupted Kurdish efforts against ISIS* and threatened U.S. forces (Stanicek, 2019).

Erdoğan launched the first operation, *Euphrates Shield* (2016–2017), declaring: "We are there to end the rule of the brutal tyrant Assad..." (RIA Novosti, 2016). The results, however, were more modest, severing the northwestern (Afrin) and northeastern Kurdish enclaves.

By the time of *Olive Branch*, ISIS* had been significantly weakened, and U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement of withdrawal from Syria opened a new window of opportunity. Ankara struck the Afrin canton, forcing more than 150,000 Kurds to flee, and furthering the dismantlement of Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

During the final major offensive, *Peace Spring*, Turkish troops and their SNA allies continued establishing control over Syrian border areas and towns, and cut the strategic M4 highway that runs parallel to the Syrian-Turkish border.

These three operations earned Turkiye approximately 8,000 sq. km of Syrian territory, disrupted consolidation of the Kurdish enclaves, and pushed YPG forces away from Turkiye's border (FDD, 2025).

Turkiye also sought to resettle refugees in the conquered territories. Around 3.2 million Syrian refugees reside in Turkiye (UNHCR, 2024) and have become a problem for the government's popularity. Growing nationalist and anti-immigration sentiment increasingly demands Syrians' immediate repatriation. Opposition parties have accused the government of granting citizenship to Syrians in order to enlarge the AKP's voter base (Levkowitz, 2023). Turkiye shaped the Syrian war, but its domestic politics were themselves significantly shaped by the war.

From the outset, Turkiye's interventionist policy in Syria lacked broad public support, given its economic, security, and political costs, and a general lack of belief in Erdoğan's "liberation mission." The Turkish opposition had long advocated for normalization with Assad and an end to support for the Syrian opposition. A poll conducted by

the independent Turkish research center Metropoll, shortly before the launch of *Peace Spring*, revealed that 68% of Turks disapproved of the government's policy in Syria (Yayan, 2019). The same study showed that 47.5% of Turks considered the SNA an "enemy," and three out of four respondents stated that Syrian refugees should return to Syria "even if the war continues."

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

Russo-Turkish relations in Syria and the broader Middle East have been shaped by a complex dynamics of cooperation and rivalry. By backing Assad, Moscow consolidated its regional military presence and limited Western influence. However, this also led to a direct clash with Ankara, which viewed Assad as a threat to its own security and aspired to expand its influence in the Arab world. Finding themselves on opposing sides, Russia and Turkiye were compelled to navigate a series of conflicts and exhibit considerable diplomatic agility to defuse tensions.

The climax of this tension occurred in November 2015, when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 near the Turkish border. The incident caused a severe deterioration in bilateral relations and prompted Moscow to impose economic sanctions against Turkiye (RIA Novosti, 2020). The normalization of ties began only in mid-2016, after the failed coup in Turkiye and a letter of apology from President Erdoğan to his Russian counterpart regarding the downed aircraft.

During the coup attempt, Western allies adopted a wait-and-see stance and later criticized Ankara for imposing a state of emergency and initiating large-scale crackdowns. In contrast, Moscow swiftly expressed support for Erdoğan and affirmed the legitimacy of the Turkish government. The U.S. also refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the Islamic preacher whom Ankara accused of masterminding the coup. In this context, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated on 25 July 2016: "We received unconditional support from Russia, unlike from other countries" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2016). This moment marked a turning point in Turkiye's foreign policy orientation and paved the way for closer cooperation with Moscow.

Subsequently, Russia, Turkiye, and Iran launched the so-called Astana Process, designed to sideline Western actors while facilitating negotiations and delineating spheres of influence in Syria.

Tensions escalated again in February-March 2020, when Turkish troops in the Idlib province suffered heavy losses during clashes with Syrian government forces and their Russian allies. Ankara publicly accused Moscow of targeting its positions, while Russia claimed that Turkiye was aiding terrorist groups (Roth, 2020). The situation nearly erupted into direct confrontation between a NATO member and Russia. However, recognizing the risks, both sides agreed to another ceasefire in March 2020. Though the agreement did not resolve the root of their disputes, it froze the conflict under compromise terms—the Idlib province was divided between Ankara and Damascus, and joint Russo-Turkish patrols along the M4 highway became a symbol of ongoing cooperation.

The new balance of power in Syria, and assertive diplomacy of Turkiye and Russia, increasingly relegated the U.S. to backing the Kurds and leveraging sanctions.

Russo-Turkish relations exemplify constant bargaining and tactical balancing of interests, a rivalry for regional dominance and cooperation when mutually beneficial. Despite sharp rhetoric, both sides consistently stop short of direct confrontation, relying heavily on informal diplomatic channels. Today, both Moscow and Ankara seek to position themselves as independent centers of power and reduce Western influence; open conflict between them would benefit only their adversaries. Both countries are non-ideological actors primarily driven by national interest. This is not a civilizational clash, like that between the West and Russia, but a classic struggle for resources and spheres of influence, in which today's adversary can become tomorrow's partner (Shah, 2022).

Another key source of restraint is the two countries' deep interdependence in energy, counterterrorism, transport, infrastructure, tourism, trade, investment, and the defense industry.

The personal relationship between Presidents Erdoğan and Putin plays a critical role in managing conflicts. Both understand their

interdependence and the need for pragmatic diplomacy. Despite their differences, they frequently demonstrate political flexibility and a readiness for sudden policy shifts. Erdoğan expressed their personal rapport with the following statement: "There are only two leaders left in the world today. There's me and Vladimir Putin. I don't say this out of ego, but I've been in office for 22 years. Mr. Putin for nearly as long. Everyone else is gone. And we want this dialogue to continue. It is important to continue this policy…" (TASS, 2024a).

NEW HORIZONS

Turkiye's leadership had to overcome 13 years of obstacles and setbacks in Syria, but ultimately achieved its primary objective.

Just as Assad was about to fall, regional actors had begun accepting that his government would survive. In May 2023, Arab states allowed Damascus to return to the Arab League, in an effort to reduce Syria's dependence on Iran. And under growing domestic pressure over the Syrian refugee crisis, Erdoğan publicly expressed willingness to normalize relations through Russian mediation. However, the events of late 2024 quickly changed all calculations. On 27 November, a rebel coalition led by HTS* unexpectedly launched an offensive from Idlib. Meeting little resistance, it rapidly seized Aleppo, Hama, and other key cities, toppling President Assad by 8 December, less than two weeks later (Barkey, 2024).

After 13 years of fighting, the opposition won because of the moral and material exhaustion of Assad's armed forces, corruption within the army and state institutions, widespread poverty and economic hardship, public discontent, and—most significantly—reduced support from Russia and Iran (Golubovich and Orlov, 2024). In contrast, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar continued to effectively coordinate and support the opposition with arms, funding, and intelligence. Assad's grip on power may actually have been untenable since 2011, when mass protests, brutal repression, and rejection of political dialog triggered widespread defections (especially by Sunnis) from the military, and led to civil war. International sanctions, economic collapse, and a lack of institutional reforms further exacerbated the

crisis. And the regime relied on the Alawite minority (10-12% of the population), while the opposition was supported by the Sunni majority.

Many global and regional actors, including Turkiye, had not anticipated Damascus to collapse so swiftly after more than a decade of resistance. Reportedly, six months before the opposition's offensive, Ankara was informed of HTS*'s plans but did not endorse them, fearing a reignited conflict and a renewed influx of refugees (Guneylioglu, 2025). Turkish officials stated that the offensive had "originally been planned as a limited operation," but escalated when "Syrian government troops began retreating from their positions" (Fraser, Wilks, 2024).

Following Assad's fall, Turkiye engaged with the transitional government more intensively than any other country, seeking to stabilize the Syrian state and prevent renewed chaos along its borders. As Erdoğan stated: "Security and peace in Syria may be secondary for others. But we cannot afford such a luxury in a country with which we share a 910-kilometer border" (Celik, 2025). Should Syria descend into further instability, Turkiye would once again face the risk of mass refugee inflows and terrorist attacks.

Given its decisive role in supporting the opposition and facilitating regime change, Turkiye is now the informal leader among Syria's external partners—the "first among equals" in shaping the regional order. Just four days after the transfer of power, Turkish authorities sought to assert their unique position through political channels. İbrahim Kalın, a close Erdoğan ally and head of Turkiye's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), became the first high-ranking foreign official to visit the Syrian capital. On 22 December, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (a former MIT chief) also visited Damascus. Turkiye became the first country to reopen its embassy, and during the opening ceremony, Fidan declared that Turkiye was proud to have been "on the right side of history" in Syria, while emphasizing that Ankara had no desire to "dominate" the country (Interfax, 2024).

Ankara offered to assist Damascus in rebuilding state institutions, bringing back the refugees, and addressing both internal and

external threats. The two countries began discussing a maritime border delimitation agreement modeled after the Turkiye-Libya deal, possibly to the detriment of other coastal states such as Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Israel.

Turkish media reported that Russian military personnel had requested assistance from their Turkish counterparts to exit Syria, while Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that the fate of the Russian bases in Tartus and Hmeimim should be determined by the Syrians themselves (TASS, 2024b). This declaration avoided direct engagement with the controversial issue, leaving room for maneuver and bargaining with Moscow. Although the Russian bases may potentially pose complications for Turkish forces, Ankara can use this issue for hedging between Moscow, Tehran, and Washington, i.e., Russian presence in Syria serves to counterbalance Iran and the U.S. (including the U.S.-supported Kurds). Turkiye may agree to the bases if they are used not to support Kurdish forces, or to obstruct Ankara's economic influence, but to maintain stability in line with the Astana format. So, Moscow's desire to keep its military bases in Syria converges with Ankara's interests.

On 4 February 2025, al-Sharaa officially visited Turkiye. Erdoğan expressed full support for the new Syrian administration and emphasized the importance of joint efforts against terrorist organizations like ISIS* and the YPG. In response, al-Sharaa declared that Syria would never become a platform for threats against Turkiye, and vowed to reject any form of Kurdish self-rule within the country (Lakstygal and Mishutin, 2025).

However, much like during his leadership of HTS*, Syria's new president is determined to avoid complete dependency on Ankara. Seeking to diversify his foreign relations, al-Sharaa began strengthening ties with other states, especially the Gulf monarchies. In December 2024 and January 2025, a stream of Western and Arab officials arrived in Syria, including a representative of the U.S. State Department, and the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Jordan, and Qatar. On 30 January, the Emir of Qatar became the first foreign leader to visit Syria following Assad's ouster, while al-

Sharaa's first official visit abroad was to Riyadh. The Turko-Qatari and Saudi-Emirati alliances are competing for influence in post-Assad Syria. Turkiye and Qatar see an opportunity to promote Islamism, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE would prefer a more secular and controllable regime (Çevik, 2025).

On the other hand, Israel—despite Assad's fall and Iran's weakening in Syria—continues to strike Syrian territory. Israeli and Turkish interests do not always align in Syria, despite periodic efforts to normalize bilateral relations. Israel views any Islamization or expansion of Sunni radicalism (especially when supported by Ankara) as a potential threat. Nevertheless, both approach the Syrian issue pragmatically, as neither is interested in direct confrontation. Israel does not openly oppose Turkiye's presence in Syria, as long as it does not empower radical Islamist elements, while Turkiye avoids aggravating tensions with Israel, instead focusing on strengthening Damascus and weakening the Kurds.

In 2025, the Kurdish question in Turkiye reached a historic turning point. The PKK, which had fought the Turkish state for more than 40 years, officially declared an end to its insurgency and announced its dissolution. Yet the Kurdish issue in Syria remains unresolved. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People's Protection Units (YPG) endure, maintaining control over swathes of northeastern Syria, including oil-rich areas. These groups still receive support from the U.S. and other Western countries, fueling their ambitions for autonomy (Associated Press, 2025). For Turkiye, any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria—particularly under a weak and unstable Damascus—remains entirely unacceptable, a direct threat to territorial integrity and national security. With the end of the PKK in 2025, Ankara now sees new opportunities to exert non-military influence in the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq. Yet the Kurdish issue remains one of the major destabilizing factors in the Middle East.

Turkiye alone cannot provide Syria with the resources needed for reconstruction. Syria must get U.S. and EU sanctions lifted and restore ties with the West. Damascus's pragmatic modernization and demonstrative deradicalization have already begun to yield results. On

14 May 2025, at a Saudi-mediated meeting with al-Sharaa (RBC, 2025), Trump pledged to lift sanctions and "give it a chance at greatness." The Trump administration is interested in a stable new Syria to reduce refugees and Iranian influence.

Ankara is also in cautious dialog with Washington, positioning itself as a guarantor of stability and a counterweight to Iran and Russia, hoping for at least tacit recognition of its influence in Syria and an end to U.S. support for Kurdish forces. However, relations with Washington are complicated by recent conflicts over the Kurds, Turkiye's purchase of Russian air defense systems, and a general climate of distrust.

From the EU and the UK, Ankara seeks financial support for Syria's reconstruction and refugee repatriation, as well as diplomatic recognition of the new government. For Erdoğan, these contacts are primarily a tool for enhancing legitimacy and gaining additional resources to implement his ambitions in Syria.

Russia's regional position is resilient despite the loss of its key ally. Moscow is still viewed by Iran, Egypt, Iraq, and several Gulf states as vital for strategic balance (Borshchevskaya, Wajeeh, Rakov, Sim, 2021). For Syria's new leadership, seeking domestic control and international legitimacy, ignoring Moscow would be a serious foreign policy miscalculation—not only because of Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, but also due to the military infrastructure that it retains in Syria. Russia can facilitate (or obstruct) reconstruction, and can mediate relations with minorities and Iran. Tellingly, Moscow responded accommodatingly to the regime change: Russian rhetoric—including toward HTS*, previously labeled in Russian media as a terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda*—softened. After the group was recognized by several Western states as part of Syria's new government, this label quietly disappeared from official Russian discourse—not an endorsement, but a pragmatic adjustment to realities. Russia is now trying to maintain influence and channels of dialog even in the absence of its former ally.

INTERNATIONAL LEGITIMACY AND LEGAL NORMALIZATION

The international community's approach to post-Assad Syria has

rapidly evolved from isolation to cautious recognition. In early 2025, the UN Security Council lifted individual sanctions on President Ahmed al-Sharaa and several members of the transitional government, maintaining restrictions on certain former regime figures and affiliated militias (Security Council Report, 2025). The U.S. and the UK subsequently removed HTS* from their lists of foreign terrorist organizations, citing the group's "substantial ideological transformation and cooperation with counterterrorism efforts."

On 20 May 2025, the EU also lifted all economic sanctions on Syria, effectively reopening trade and financial channels between Damascus and European partners (Al Jazeera, 2025). This landmark decision—supported by France, Germany, and several southern EU members—was justified as a step towards encouraging reconstruction, facilitating refugees' return, and countering Iranian and Russian influence in the region.

Taken together, these measures marked Syria's gradual reintegration into the international system and the end of its decade-long pariah status. For Turkiye, this legal normalization provides additional legitimacy for its long-term presence and influence in northern Syria under the banner of stabilization and reconstruction.

CONCLUSION: TURKIYE'S NEO-OTTOMANISM STRATEGY AND ITS RESULTS

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that Turkiye's actions in Syria can be best understood through the prism of neo-Ottomanism—not as a mere revivalist ideology, but as a practical framework guiding Ankara's regional strategy. Before the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Turkiye pursued four key objectives in Syria: the return of at least some refugees, border security, the containment of Kurdish armed groups, and concessions from the government to the Ankara-allied opposition.

Following the rise of the opposition to power, Turkiye was able to achieve several significant advantages:

Militarily, Turkiye established a buffer zone in northern Syria, weakening Kurdish armed formations, and—most importantly—

preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity along its border, which could have inspired Turkish Kurds. Deepening its cooperation with Syrian armed groups, including Islamist and moderate Sunni forces, Turkiye also strengthened its presence in Syria and maintained leverage over the country's internal dynamics.

Under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkiye demonstrated that its foreign policy strategy of "active engagement" yields tangible results. The Turkish president has long positioned himself as a regional leader, and the successful conclusion of the Syrian conflict offered another opportunity to emphasize Ankara's growing influence in Middle Eastern politics. Erdoğan framed the fall of Damascus as a personal victory over Turkiye's traditional adversaries—Assad, Iran, and the Kurdish forces—and reinforced his image as a strong and decisive leader. All these developments have had a significant impact on Turkiye's domestic politics—it boosted Erdoğan's support among nationalist and conservative voters, for whom the suppression of Kurdish autonomy and the promise to repatriate millions of Syrian refugees were major political achievements (Turkish Minute, 2024). For opposition-minded voters, particularly supporters of the CHP and HDP, the interventionist policy in Syria has been widely viewed as costly and counterproductive, reinforcing domestic polarization.

Following the fall of Assad, the balance of power in the region shifted: the influence of Ankara's geopolitical competitors—Iran and Russia—declined, while Turkiye strengthened its position. Although Tehran's regional position weakened, the long-standing Turkish-Iranian contradictions persisted, evolving into a form of controlled rivalry. Iran's political leverage in Damascus has weakened, but it still seeks to retain a foothold through affiliated militias and economic networks (Cafiero, 2025).

Economic interdependence and energy projects (e.g., declared plans to bring mutual trade turnover to $30 billion and deepen gas and transit service cooperation) keep the parties from risky moves. At the same time, Ankara is seeking diversification—from liquefied gas purchases to the Development Road corridor (Iraq—Turkiye—Europe) and the Trans-Caspian Transport Route (China—

Central Asia—South Caucasus—Turkiye—Europe), where Iran is almost not involved. Tehran, on the other hand, relies on the North-South corridor between India, Iran, Russia, and neighboring countries, which only emphasizes the multidirectional nature of their strategies (Cafiero, 2025). Thus, Turkiye and Iran remain pragmatic competitors, whose bilateral relations combine elements of cooperation and rivalry: while agreeing on the need to counter Kurdish separatism and containing Israeli activity in the region, they disagree on geoeconomic issues and regional leadership.

Support for the opposition and Syria's transition has brought Turkiye closer to the West, creating an opportunity to revive partially severed ties with the U.S. and the EU, especially in the areas of Syrian reconstruction and migration control.

In the new Syria, Turkish businesses have gained special opportunities and prospects. Turkiye's exports to Damascus rose by 20% in December 2024 and by more than 38% in January 2025 (Caglayan, 2025). Food exports more than tripled. Turkiye has also taken steps to provide electricity and reestablish banking connections. The head of the Turkish-Syrian Business Council, İbrahim Fuat Özkörekçi, stated that Turkiye aims to reach a bilateral trade volume of $10 billion in the medium term (Hürriyet Daily News, 2025). Post-Assad Syria's stabilization would allow Turkiye to participate in future projects transporting energy from the Persian Gulf to Europe via Syria.

Following the establishment of a friendly government in Damascus, Turkiye began the phased repatriation of Syrian refugees, thereby easing social and economic tensions at home. In northern Syria, in areas still under direct Turkish influence, social infrastructure (schools, hospitals, etc.) continues to be built, allowing Ankara to present itself as a responsible humanitarian actor. Some northern Syrian regions are now directly dependent on Turkish supplies of fuel, food, and medicine.

Turkiye's policy in Syria can be viewed as neo-Ottomanism, an attempt to revive the former glory of the Ottoman Empire and regain influence over lost territories. Today, with the exception of Turkiye's buffer zones in northern Syria, this is less a matter of direct conquest,

and more a matter of political, economic, cultural, and religious influence. Ankara's successes in Syria, the South Caucasus, and Libya, and the PKK's dissolution are producing a new geopolitical landscape. Erdoğan seeks a seat at every negotiation table in the region, and to further expand his country's influence amid the U.S.'s retreat from the Middle East, Russia's distraction in Ukraine, and Iran's weakening.

Turkiye's ambitions have long surpassed those of a regular NATO member, a junior U.S. partner, or a perpetual EU candidate. Today, Turkiye openly claims the status of regional leader, dominant force in the Sunni Muslim world, and independent power center. Although a significant part of Turkish society remains skeptical of Ankara's interventionism, Erdoğan continues to enjoy strong backing among nationalist and conservative constituencies that favor an assertive foreign policy. Given this enduring domestic support, Erdoğan's foreign policy legacy is likely to persist even after his political exit.

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