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3.1.Türkiye

Türkiye was known to be the most important[474] and 'most steadfast' external supporter of the Syrian opposition during the years of conflict that led up to the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad government.[475] The Turkish government has maintained long-standing ties with HTS,[476] the main armed opposition group.[477] However, unlike with the SNA that is funded, trained and equipped by Türkiye,[478] no patron-client relationship existed between Türkiye and HTS.[479] For more information regarding Türkiye's involvement in Syria prior to November 2024, see section 1.3.2. of the EUAA COI Report Syria – Security Situation (October 2024).

The exact role of Türkiye in the operation that led to the downfall of Assad has been unclear.[480] While Turkish authorities denied any involvement in the operation,[481]observers suggested that the Turkish government, though unlikely to have been involved in the planning and timing of the operation,[482] must have approved the campaign[483] at least tacitly, given that the opposition forces likely could not have consolidated their armed capabilities and prepared the operation without Ankara becoming aware.[484] At the same time, Steven A. Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (USA), noted that Ankara intended the operation to be of limited scope as it primarily pursued the aim of negotiating a normalisation of relations with Damascus. According to this source, it was only after the collapse of Assad's forces that Türkiye revised its policy, embracing the victorious HTS and claiming that Türkiye had long planned to end Assad's rule.[485]

Following the fall of Assad, Türkiye declared its support for the new Syrian Transitional Administration.[486] The demise of Assad's rule and the decline of Russian and Iranian influence was reported to have been perceived by Türkiye as an opportunity to advance its strategic interests and acquire an edge over Iran for regional domination.[487]

The presence of the People's Protection Units (YPG), a force affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and a core component of the US-supported SDF, remained a primary concern within Türkiye's security strategy[488] which has been aiming for a stable state that did not pose a threat.[489] Indeed, simultaneously with the launch of the Syrian opposition's military campaign against the Assad government on 27 November 2024, Turkish-backed armed factions in northern Syria resumed their fight against Kurdish forces.[490] Turkish forces conducted artillery bombardments and airstrikes against SDF positions in areas of Aleppo,[491] Raqqa[492]

and Hasaka[493] while repeated Turkish strikes reportedly targeted civilians,[494] villages[495] and infrastructure[496] in these regions. At the end of February, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan urged the organisation to disarm and dissolve, prompting the militant group to declare an immediate ceasefire. Despite this call, Türkiye continued operations against SDF in Syria[497], albeit at lower levels.[498] The PKK ceasefire does not seem to extend to SDF.[499] YPG on its part 'has said Ocalan's message does not apply to them'.[500]

For information on activities of Turkish-backed armed factions, see section 4.2. of this report.

Another critical issue of concern for Türkiye has been Israel's involvement on Syrian territory, [501] including its escalating airstrikes against Syrian military installations[502] and its seizure of the buffer zone that used to separate the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from Syria.[503] However, it was held that Türkiye had no interest in a military conflict with Israel. Thus, the Turkish authorities have reportedly made initial steps to set up a deconfliction mechanism with the Israeli armed forces. The Middle East Eye (MEE) also pointed to regular engagements between the two countries' intelligence agencies and to sources indicating that the Turkish government encouraged HTS leaders to advocate calm with Israel.[504]

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