

3.1.Türkiye

Türkiye was known to be the most important⁴⁷⁴ 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 campaign⁴⁸³ 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 strategy⁴⁸⁸ 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 Raqqqa⁴⁹² and Hasaka⁴⁹³ while repeated Turkish strikes reportedly targeted civilians,⁴⁹⁴ villages⁴⁹⁵ and infrastructure⁴⁹⁶ 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 Syria⁴⁹⁷, 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 installations⁵⁰² 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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