

Challenges and Opportunities for Turkish Foreign Policy amidst the changing landscape in the Middle East

By
Sarah Akram

Research Fellow

Centre For Afghanistan Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), ISSI

Edited by
Ms. Amina Khan

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Turkiye's increasingly significant role in the Middle East is self-evident. From a policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' to formidable challenges and vast new opportunities, developments in the region have substantially shaped Turkiye's active foreign policy profile. Located at a pivotal crossroads, regional conflicts and the consequences arising therefrom have often presented Turkiye with multiple dilemmas -- having to grapple with issues like terrorism, massive influx of refugees, and fear of being affected by pervasive instability.

Over the past several years, Turkiye has experienced constraints vis-a-vis its relationships with some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Since 2021, however, Ankara has pursued reconciliation initiatives aimed at improving relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other countries in the immediate neighbourhood. Ankara's frayed relationship with Egypt has also undergone a positive transformation. Further, attempts were made to improve relations with Syria and Israel; however, the relentless Israeli assault against the Palestinians in Gaza continued a downturn in bilateral relations.¹ The dramatic events in Syria in December 2024, culminating in the fall of the al-Assad regime, have catapulted Turkiye to unprecedented pre-eminence in the Syrian context.

¹ Salim Çevik, Turkey's Reconciliation Efforts in the Middle East, October 14, 2024, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkeys-reconciliation-efforts-in-the-middle-east>

The Israeli aggression in Gaza and the extension of Israel's war beyond Gaza accentuated regional volatility, besides resulting in progressive deterioration of its ties with Türkiye. Evolving dynamics in the present Middle East point towards newer challenges, and for Türkiye, the ever-present threat of dissident Kurds, that too in a region which remains in a tremendous flux. In view of heightened tensions in the region stemming from Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians, Türkiye's role became much more pronounced. Ankara consistently pushed for a ceasefire and an immediate end to Israeli aggression. Ankara's response has been both vigorous and unwavering, evident also in the provision of humanitarian-aid at a large-scale via Egypt. Ankara's close links with Hamas and Fatah also allow it to play a role in pushing for an end to the crisis.

Türkiye also remains a significant actor in the north of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, while maintaining a significantly close working relationship with the authorities in Erbil. Significant economic activity has been a key driver in this context. Not so long ago, the relationship had received a considerable boost due to deliberations on the 'Development Road' project which aims to connect Baghdad, Erbil and Ankara, ultimately binding them via multibillion dollar framework, in terms of infrastructure, thus making Iraq a center for regional trade and commercial activity.² Türkiye's interest has revolved around countering the threat posed by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)'s presence in Iraq, which is viewed as the most important hindrance to the project's projected success. Türkiye's most current security collaboration with Iraq's central government has opened policy pathways for Ankara, as is evident by negotiations of a significant military deployment in Iraq. Though this deployment has yet to take place, it has remained on the cards. Ankara is wary of an imminent Israeli strike aimed at Iran, which could lead to massive destabilization in the region, thus creating problems.³

Prior to the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, Ankara seemed hopeful about mending ties with Damascus. However, the events leading to the fall of the al-Assad regime took many by surprise and the situation still remains uncertain in many ways. Türkiye can likely benefit from this regime change in Syria. In the recent past also, Türkiye made attempts to normalise relations with Syria, but the efforts remained unsuccessful. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had stated in November 2024 that, "I am still hopeful of [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad. I still have hope to come together [with Assad] and put Türkiye-Syria relationship on track. Because we have to demolish terror structures between Türkiye-Syria (border). There is a ground for a fair and lasting peace."⁴ At that

² Türkiye's Struggle Against the PKK Amidst Regional Turmoil, Trends Research and Advisory December 25, 2024 <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/turkiyes-struggle-against-the-pkk-amidst-regional-turmoil/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ There is ground for peace in Syria, says Erdoğan, Hurriyet Daily News, November 13, 2024, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/there-is-ground-for-peace-in-syria-says-erdogan-202585>

time, the Turkish President had also expressed his country's desire to establish a 30-kilometer-deep zone inside Syria to augment efforts directed against terrorist organizations. Moreover, Turkiye also wished the safe return of millions of Syrian refugees. A very large number of Syrian refugees continue to reside in Turkiye. Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler has stated that the new dispensation in Syria must be given a chance and that Turkiye can provide military training if needed.⁵ Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, during his discussions with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, reiterated the need for cooperation with regards to a smooth transition in Syria while also stressing the importance of preventing the spread of terrorism in Turkiye and Syria.⁶

The fall of the al-Assad regime in Syria could possibly test Turkiye-Iran ties. Turkiye's potential support for a land corridor aimed at connecting the land-locked Azerbaijani exclave Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan, which borders both Turkiye and Iran, highlights its strategic role in regional connectivity. Turkiye favours a land corridor that would connect it with Turkic regions; however, Iran has expressed concerns that Azerbaijan could potentially use it to block Iran's access to Armenia.⁷ Therefore, the balancing of interests between Ankara and Tehran has become somewhat challenging, just as a power vacuum has evidently occurred in Syria.

With the entire Middle East region in a flux, the challenges for Ankara are numerous. These include the fragile nature of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire; the possibility of a larger conflagration in the region; and uncertainty about the future of Syria, along with the existing burden of Syrian refugees. On the other hand, the threat of terror groups further taking root in a region embroiled in chaos remain a serious security threat. Any potential escalation between Israel and Iran could further destabilize the region and the ripple effects will impact Turkiye as well. Therefore, Ankara recognizes that it must tackle these interconnected challenges with a balanced approach, leveraging diplomacy while firmly safeguarding its core interests. Its role as a regional power, coupled with its historical ties to the region, places Turkiye in a unique position to influence outcomes and contribute to regional stability. This requires a nuanced approach towards the rapidly evolving dynamics and close collaboration with international and regional partners. How Turkiye manages these pressing issues will not only shape its own future but also impact the broader Middle East region in the years to come. Evidently,

⁵ Turkiye ready to offer military training to Syria if new administration requests, says defence minister, Dawn Newspaper, December 15, 2024 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1878901>

⁶ Turkiye and US discuss need to cooperate with new Syrian administration, Arab News, December 29, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2584583/middle-east>

⁷ Amir Soltanzadeh, Iran-Turkey ties tested by Assad's downfall in Syria, December 12, 2024, DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-turkey-ties-tested-by-assads-downfall-in-syria/a-71037109>

recognizing its historical role and present responsibilities, Turkiye is already making efforts in this direction.