

Turkey and Syria: A struggle on two fronts

After an ill-received attempt to mediate between the parties, Ankara took sides against Assad's regime. The Turkish government is increasingly involved in the fight against the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' – ISIL/Da'esh, but remains firmly opposed to a role for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the post-war arrangement. The conflict has serious implications for Turkey, home to more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees. Against this backdrop, the EU and Turkey are trying to forge a new partnership in response to the migrant crisis.

Turkish interests in Syria

After the proclamation of the Turkish republic in 1923, Ankara developed an uneasy relationship with Syria. [Three](#) major issues precluded cooperation between the two countries: the disputed province of Alexandretta, under the control of Turkey but [claimed](#) by Syria; close relations between Damascus and the Soviet Union in the Cold War while Turkey was part of NATO; and Syrian support for Kurdish rebels in Turkey. The latter issue was extremely contentious; President Hafez al-Assad [welcomed](#) the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abdullah Öcalan, now imprisoned in Turkey, staying in Damascus for nearly 20 years (1979-1998). In 1998, Ankara [threatened](#) Damascus with invasion if it continued supporting the PKK. After Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan prime minister in 2002, relations between Syria and Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP – *Adalt ve Kalkınma Partisi*), [improved](#) significantly: visas were lifted between the two countries and joint ministerial meetings were held.

With the Arab Spring and the waves of unrest in Syria, Turkey tried to act as a mediator and [model](#) for the post-revolutionary Arab countries, but failed to convince Assad to negotiate the end of emergency rule, the release of prisoners or a new constitution. Ankara eventually decided to [support](#) opposition groups and hosted the first meetings of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul in 2011.

At the same time, with violence between the PKK and Turkish security forces [flaring up](#) in the east of the country, the Turkish government sought to [undermine](#) Kurdish rebels in Syria, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD), by highlighting links between them and the PKK.

Diplomatic involvement

At the Vienna talks on Syria, Turkey has ruled out any [solution](#) which includes Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, it is opposed to any arrangement that would strengthen the hand of Kurdish militias.

The Turkish government has been [criticised](#) for its failure to act against ISIL/Da'esh and to prevent arms being supplied to the group across its porous 950 km-long southern border. In May 2015 [video-footage](#) was released by the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* showing arms trafficking across the border in January 2015, something that the Turkish authorities [deny](#) takes place. At the same time, the Turkish government [accuses](#) Assad of cooperation with ISIL/Da'esh.

Nevertheless, in the past year and especially since the suicide [bombings](#) in Ankara in October 2015, the Turkish government has appeared to be increasingly concerned by the growing strength of ISIL/Da'esh in Syria and Iraq. The continuing threats to Turkey remain at a high level, with further attacks such as the suicide [bombing](#) in Istanbul on 12 January 2016.

In August 2015, the government [approved](#) the use of the Incirlik air-base by American aircraft in support of airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh. Since then, Turkish-American cooperation has been stepped up, including in the field of intelligence, but remains difficult when it comes to the role of Kurdish PYD fighters, one of the main components of the anti-ISIL/Da'esh forces on the ground. Turkey started to conduct [bombings](#) against

ISIL/Da'esh in [July 2015](#) but has also done so against Kurdish forces, at the same time as providing material support, mainly weapons, to Islamist-leaning groups, particularly [Ahrar al-Sham](#).

In parallel, the USA repeatedly asked Turkey to close its border with Syria. Ankara has pointed out the difficulty of doing so; however, it has begun construction of a new border fence [equipped](#) with cameras and radar. At the same time, the Turkish government has called for a [security zone](#) on its border to relocate at least 1.7 million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. The United States agreed that the coalition will try to clear ISIL/Da'esh from this zone, but has ruled out a [no-fly zone](#).

Alongside its complicated relations with the USA, Ankara [opposed](#) Russian intervention to prop up the remnants of Assad's regime in Syria. The two countries disagree on the role of the Syrian President in his country's future; Turkey has also denounced Russia's [bombardment](#) of ethnic Turkish rebels in northern Syria. The rift deepened after Turkey [shot down](#) a Russian plane in November 2015, accusing it of violating Turkish airspace. Russia has retaliated with a series of measures, including suspension of a visa-free agreement, an embargo on Turkish fruit and vegetables, a ban on Russian package tours to Turkey and expulsion of Turkish workers. It also alleges [links](#) between the Turkish President's family and smuggling of ISIL/Da'esh-extracted oil across the Turkish border, something that the Turkish leadership [denies](#).

Humanitarian implications for Turkey

There are [more Syrian refugees](#) in Turkey than in any other country – more than 2.5 million according to the United Nations Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)). [Reportedly](#), by early 2015 the Turkish state had spent US\$6 billion (including international contributions totalling US\$ 300 million) on refugees. However, access by refugees to healthcare, education, employment and housing varies from one region to another. Some 85% of Syrian refugees live [outside](#) refugee camps, without receiving financial support from Turkey. At the same time, Turkish local authorities are struggling with a massive influx of 500 000 Syrian patients in Turkish [hospitals](#).

Most Syrian refugees are currently staying in the poorest south-eastern regions of Turkey; however ongoing fighting between the PKK and Turkish security forces is forcing them to seek refuge in western areas of the country or in the EU.

EU-Turkey negotiations in response to the Syrian migrant crisis

As part of the ongoing negotiations with Turkey, the European Parliament [consented](#) in February 2014 to the 'readmission agreement' between the European Union and the Republic of Turkey on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation. But the worsening of the Syrian conflict pushed the Parliament to address this issue further in the perspective of the Turkey-EU partnership. In March 2015, it [encouraged](#) Turkey to offer a safe haven to Christian minorities persecuted by ISIL/Da'esh. In its June 2015 resolution on the 2014 Commission report on Turkey, the European Parliament [called](#) 'on Turkey to play an active role in the international coalition against terrorist groups such as ISIL, and to use all the resources at its disposal to this end, and to increase measures to prevent so-called foreign fighters, money or equipment from reaching ISIL and other extremist groups via its territory'.

In response to a flood of migrants fleeing violence in Syria, the European Council decided in autumn 2015 to step up cooperation with Turkey, a candidate country, to help it accommodate the Syrian refugees and prevent them from travelling to the EU. In October 2015, the European Council [approved](#) an [EU-Turkey joint action](#) to tackle the migration crisis, for example by facilitating migrant access to education and employment in Turkey. Under this agreement Turkey will readmit irregular migrants who are not in need of international protection. However, some observers [warn](#) that this is only a minority of migrants.

In its 2015 Turkey progress [report](#), the European Commission acknowledged some setbacks in the fields of human rights, freedom of expression and resolving the Kurdish issue. On 12 November, the European Council held an [informal meeting](#), at which the Commission [proposed](#) a €3 billion fund to help Turkey stem the flow of refugees, details of which were outlined in its late November 2015 [proposal](#) for a 'Refugee Facility for Turkey'. On top of €3.6 billion already mobilised for Syria since the start of the conflict, the EU will provide Turkey with €3 billion of assistance, with €0.5 billion coming from the EU budget and the remainder from the Member States. As well as this aid, the [deal](#) between the two sides, concluded at the meeting of EU Heads of State or Government with Turkey on 29 November 2015, offers Turkey the prospect of visa [liberalisation](#) for its citizens, and reactivation of the accession process (Turkey has been a candidate since 1999 and negotiating for accession since 2005). In its 25 November 2015 resolution, the European Parliament also [recommended](#) closer cooperation with Turkey on counter-terrorism efforts.