

Syrian crisis: Impact on Turkey

From mediation to crisis management

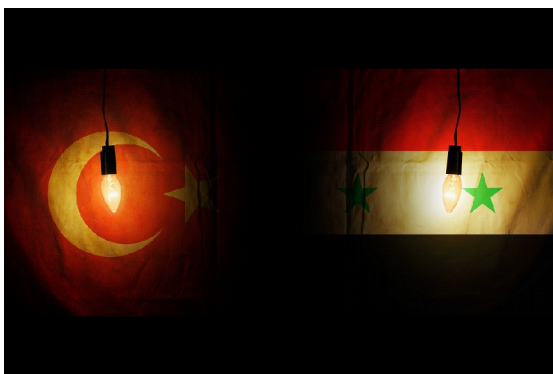
SUMMARY

After decades of mistrust between Ankara and Damascus, a solid partnership emerged in the 2000s. Turkey considered Syria to be the key to its influence in the Middle East. However, when protests started in 2011, the Turkish authorities launched repeated attempts at mediation, without success, leading to clear hostility on the part of the Turkish leadership towards the Syrian president.

The Turkish objectives for Syria are several: settling the conflict, ensuring that the future arrangement excludes President Assad, creating a safe zone along the Turkish border and avoiding autonomy for Kurds in Syria. This led to military intervention to secure the borders in 2015, and a recent partnership with Russia and Iran in order to find a peace settlement, even if the three patrons of the recent Astana talks have diverging views about the future.

For Turkey, Syria is an international problem but also an internal one, as it has been hit by deadly terrorist attacks by the Kurdish PKK and ISIL/Da'esh in the past two years. Another dimension of the Syrian issue for Ankara is the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey: with more than 3 million people making Turkey the country with the largest refugee population in the world. In December 2015, the EU signed a deal with Turkey to stem the flow of refugees heading to Europe, and the EU began to deliver a major €6 billion package to help Turkey cope with the crisis.

See also our briefings on the impact of the Syrian crisis on [Iraq](#), [Jordan](#) and [Lebanon](#).



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From mediation to intervention

Mediation attempts

After decades of mistrust between Damascus and Ankara, the Turkish government increasingly engaged with Syria in the mid-2000s. Ministerial visits took place and business links improved; the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan saw Syria as the means to re-engage with the Arab Middle-East after a century of Kemalist limited interest. When the Assad regime began its systematic policy of [repression](#), the Turkish government offered to provide [mediation](#): Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu travelled to Damascus 15 times between March and August 2011. Since then, civil war has broken out in the region and the violent Salafi-jihadist movement known as the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) has exploited the crisis in Syria to extend its brutal control over large swathes of territory there and in regions of neighbouring Iraq.

Anti-Assad policy

The failure of this mediation made Turkey one of the strongest [opponents](#) of Assad's regime. Turkey supported the rebels and opened its border to welcome displaced people. One key objective of Turkish diplomacy is now to ensure that the political transition in Syria happens without President Assad. An additional aim is to create a [safe zone](#) along the Turkish border to allow Syrians to return and to ensure access for humanitarian aid. While creating this zone, Turkey wants to avoid the development of an autonomous or semi-autonomous Kurdish region along its southern border, as well as any constitutional solution that would provide for such autonomy. During his election campaign, US President Donald Trump [favoured](#) the creation of a [safe zone](#), an idea also supported by the [Gulf States](#), [Jordan](#) and [Lebanon](#). But the idea is also controversial and described as a possible target for both the regime and ISIL/Da'esh, as well as being extremely [difficult](#) to put into practice.

Military intervention

While Turkey has supported various anti-Assad movements, especially the [Turkmens](#), in parallel, Ankara has opposed the US-supported Kurdish forces, a key element of both anti-Assad and anti-ISIL/Da'esh forces. In November 2015, Turkish F-16s [shot down](#) a Russian SU-24 fighter jet that had strayed for a few seconds into Turkish airspace. Thereafter, the Turkish position appeared lonely, opposed both to pro-Assad Russia and to the US-backed Kurds. In August 2016, Turkey launched [Operation Euphrates Shield](#) in order to maintain border security, prevent the creation of a Kurdish-dominated region along its border and to confront ISIL/Da'esh.

Turkey's unexpected Russian partnership

Moscow and Ankara favour very different options for Syria: from the outset they have disagreed on Assad's future. Nevertheless, despite the November 2015 crisis and the killing of the Russian [ambassador](#) to Turkey in December 2016, Presidents Erdoğan and Putin seem to share certain short-term objectives in Syria, chiefly the [destruction](#) of ISIL/Da'esh. In parallel, Russia and Turkey managed to impose a precarious ceasefire on the ground in late December 2016, and have begun to work together.

The internal-external nexus

PKK attacks

For Turkey, the Syrian civil war rapidly became not only another conflict in its neighbourhood (added to those in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, the South Caucasus and

Ukraine), but also an internal issue. Alongside this conflict, the peace process that AKP had started with the PKK in 2009 was [stopped](#) by Ankara in 2015 because of growing [insecurity](#) in the south-eastern region. In 2013 and 2014, the PKK was active mostly outside Turkey against ISIL/Da'esh but in 2016 a series of deadly PKK attacks hit Turkey both in the south-eastern region and in Ankara and Istanbul. By mid-2016, PKK violence and armed-force retaliation reached [levels](#) unprecedented in the last 30 years; and resulted in government [arrests](#) of 12 Kurdish members of parliament, as well as hundreds of party members and 150 journalists accused of having links with the PKK. [Unlike](#) its US and Western allies, Turkey considers that the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units), the most effective ground force against ISIL/Da'esh, is linked to the PKK and smuggles weapons and fighters across the border in both directions. In any case, the [porosity](#) of the border is an obstacle in the way of any renewed peace process with the Turkish Kurds. According to the International Crisis Group, at least [2 623](#) people have been killed in clashes between security forces and the PKK since 20 July 2015.

ISIL/Da'esh attacks

Suicide bombers [began](#) targeting Turkey in 2014 and since then Turkey has remained a key target for ISIL/Da'esh terrorists, because Turkey is a leading member of the global [coalition](#). The most deadly attack so far took place at a Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) rally in Ankara in October 2015, killing more than 100 people. In June 2016, terrorists killed more than 30 people at Istanbul Airport, and in August 2016, at least 53 people were killed by a 14-year-old terrorist at a Kurdish [wedding](#).

Economic and political consequences

The growing insecurity, the coup attempt in July 2016, and the PKK and ISIL/Da'esh attacks in Turkey have resulted in a major downturn in tourism, traditionally an important economic sector in Turkey. Until 2014, Turkey was the sixth most-[visited](#) country in the world, but by mid-2016, the number of tourists had [plummeted](#) by 41 % compared with the previous year. The situation in Syria, as well as the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the purges that followed, have created a widespread feeling of insecurity in Turkey and a favourable context for President Erdoğan's plans to expand his presidential powers by means of constitutional [amendments](#).

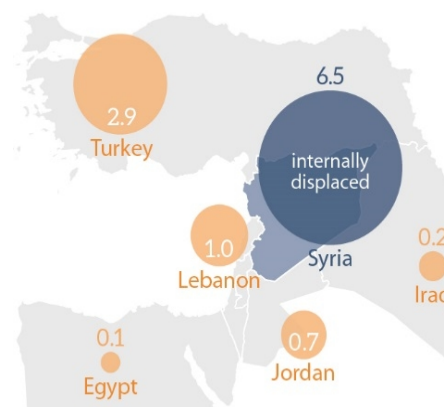
Helping Turkey manage its refugee situation

The situation of refugees in Turkey

In March 2017, the United Nations Refugees Agency ([UNHCR](#)) registered 4.958 million refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries, including more than 2.9 million in Turkey. In 2012, Turkey announced its 'open door policy' for displaced Syrians and since then the country has struggled to provide assistance for Syrian refugees. [Most](#) refugees live in the border regions, in central Turkey (Koyne and Ankara) and in Istanbul.

Turkey applies a geographical [restriction](#) to coverage of the 1951 [Geneva Convention on Refugees](#) and limits its benefits to member states of the Council of Europe, of which Syria is not a member. Nevertheless, a [Temporary Protection](#) (TP) regime was approved in 2014

Figure 1 – Displaced people in the region



Data source: [UNHCR](#), 2017.

and refugees cannot be returned to Syria. Under this scheme, refugees can ask for access to health, education, social assistance, interpreting services and the labour market. International [NGOs](#) have criticised Turkey for limiting the number of registrations in recent months, as well as enforcing illegal returns to Syria. On the Turkish side, the government has [criticised](#) the international community and the EU for failing to deliver rapid and substantive support for Syrian refugees. Turkey has already [spent](#) €11.4 billion on hosting Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, 90 % of refugees remain outside camp settings and have limited access to the services their TP status entitles them to. The government is [contemplating](#) offering Turkish citizenship to at least 300 000 Syrian refugees.

The EU-Turkey deal

In November 2015, a joint action plan included a €3 billion Facility for Refugees in Turkey and accelerated negotiations over a [visa-free regime](#) in exchange for better access for migrants to the Turkish labour market, and enhanced border security and information-sharing. In [March 2016](#), in a series of negotiations, Turkey agreed to take back all migrants that have entered the EU illegally through Turkey if they are not in need of international protection. It also concluded an agreement on a one-to-one scheme in which, for each illegal migrant taken back by Turkey, the EU would welcome a refugee in need of international protection under the rules of the Geneva Convention. The EU Refugee Facility is now operational in Turkey. The total allocated for implementation of humanitarian and non-humanitarian action stands at €2.2 billion. In addition, the EU has set up an [Emergency Social Safety Net \(ESSN\)](#), a single card social assistance scheme that will help up to 1 million refugees cover their basic daily needs.

The European Parliament position

In [January](#) 2015, the European Parliament (EP) expressed concern at the large number of journalists awaiting trial in Turkey and at the pressure being exerted on the media on account of the country's Anti-Terrorism Act (TMK) and penal code articles related to 'terrorist organisations'. In April 2016, a European Parliament [resolution](#) on the 2015 Turkey report acknowledged that the security situation was deteriorating rapidly in the country, both internally and externally, and praised the admirable hospitality of the Turkish population towards the large number of refugees. The EP was deeply concerned, in the light of backsliding on respect for democracy and the rule of law in Turkey, that the overall pace of reform in the country had slowed down considerably in recent years. In [November](#) 2016, the European Parliament called for a halt to accession talks because of the disproportionate scale of repression after the July 2016 failed coup and debates about reintroducing the death penalty.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

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