



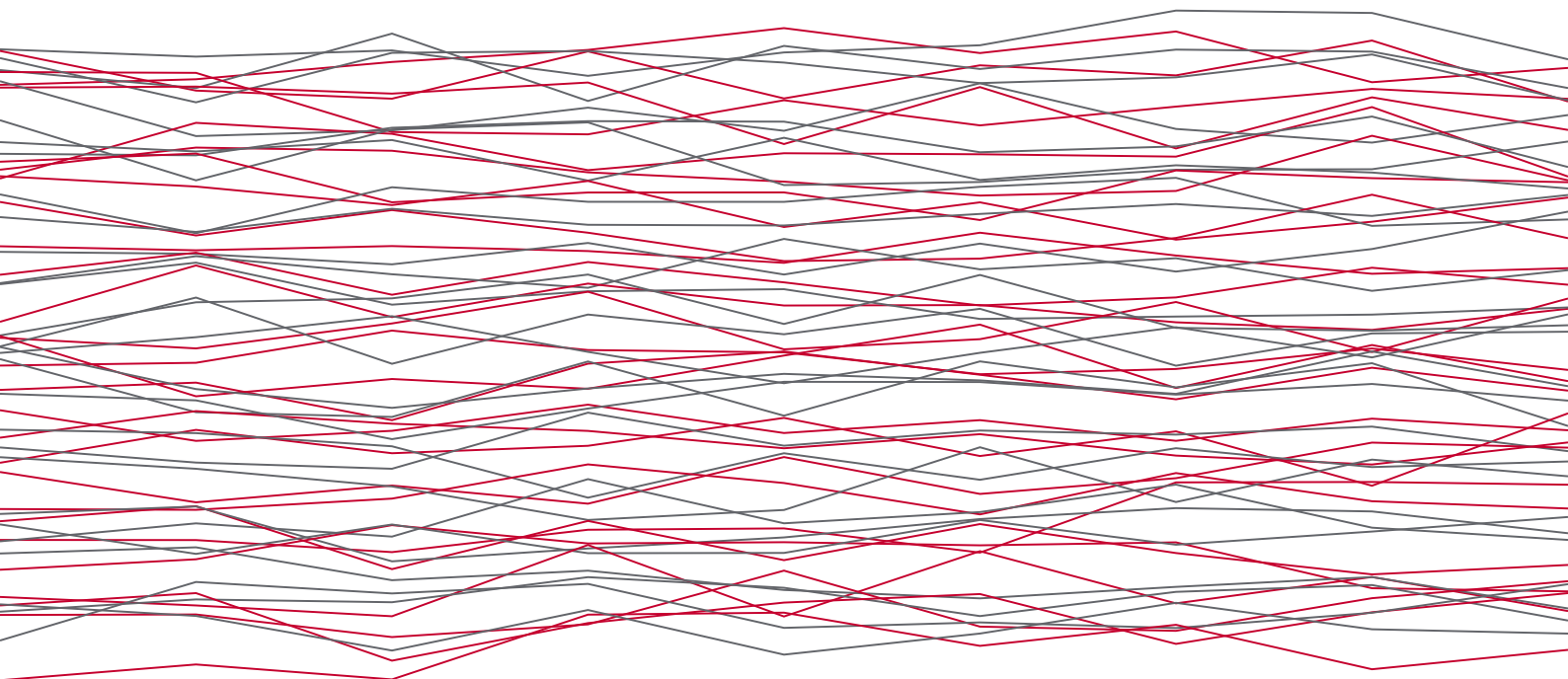
**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# Syrian-Turkish Normalization

Scenarios and Impacts on the Humanitarian  
Landscape

**Ad Hoc Report**

December 01, 2022



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# GLOSSARY

<b>AKP</b>	JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY
<b>CHP</b>	REPUBLICAN PEOPLE'S PARTY
<b>DAA</b>	DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION
<b>EU</b>	EUROPEAN UNION
<b>FSA</b>	FREE SYRIAN ARMY
<b>GOS</b>	GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
<b>HTS</b>	HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM
<b>ISIS</b>	ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA
<b>IYI</b>	GOOD PARTY
<b>IDP</b>	INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON
<b>JAN</b>	JABHAT AL-NUSRA
<b>KM</b>	KILOMETER
<b>MIT</b>	TURKISH NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION
<b>MHP</b>	NATIONALIST MOVEMENT PARTY
<b>NATO</b>	NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION
<b>NES</b>	NORTHEAST SYRIA
<b>NWS</b>	NORTHWEST SYRIA
<b>NFL</b>	NATIONAL FRONT FOR LIBERATION
<b>OES</b>	OPERATION EUPHRATES SHIELD
<b>OOB</b>	OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH
<b>OPS</b>	OPERATION PEACE SPRING
<b>PYD</b>	DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY
<b>PKK</b>	KURDISTAN WORKS' PARTY
<b>SANES</b>	SELF-ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA
<b>SDC</b>	SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL
<b>SDF</b>	SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
<b>SNA</b>	SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY
<b>SNC</b>	SYRIAN NATIONAL COALITION
<b>SAA</b>	SYRIAN ARAB ARMY
<b>TAF</b>	TURKISH ARMED FORCES
<b>TSO</b>	TURKISH-SUPPORTED OPPOSITION
<b>USD</b>	UNITED STATES DOLLAR
<b>UNHCR</b>	UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES
<b>YPG</b>	PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mounting speculation over a potential normalization between Ankara and Damascus has required actors to consider the consequences for humanitarian operations in Syria. This report outlines four plausible scenarios for normalization pathways over the next eight months leading up to the 2023 Turkish election. iMMAP assessed the implications of each scenario for humanitarian actors in Northeast and Northwest Syria (NES and NWS) and the contingencies affecting their likelihood. A chain of plausibility approach is used to build out these scenarios from a nexus of baseline indicators outlining the likely steps each party takes towards achieving normalization, underpinned by informed assumptions about their incentives.

Scenario I is predicated on both sides viewing the optics of a prolonged normalization process as politically beneficial regardless of outcomes. The result of this scenario is a continuation of the status quo, although the possibility of unilateral action to meet security needs without direct cooperation or coordination remains open. The likelihood of this scenario is extremely high in the near-term.

Scenario II assumes that a comprehensive normalization agreement will be reached between Ankara and Damascus in the next eight months, involving significant change in areas of control and the creation of safe zones. While Turkey will prioritize diplomatic channels and negotiations as a first option, it continues to reserve the option of kinetic action. This scenario is extremely unlikely in the near-term.

Scenario III is predicated on both parties isolating their disagreements and choosing to cooperate on discrete political, economic, and/or security issues of mutual concerns. This scenario is oriented towards the security question since this aspect of a potential understanding carries the most significant impact for humanitarian operations as a reciprocal recognition of security interests will result in territorial trades and/or mutually agreed-upon joint efforts. The likelihood of this occurring in the near term is moderately likely.

Scenario IV is predicated on one or both parties transgressing on each other's redlines or reneging on promises. This results in a breakdown of the normalization process. The likelihood of this scenario is moderate in the near-term.

iMMAP finds that a scenario of prolonged normalization talks will be most likely over the period assessed and will have limited impact on actors in terms of disruption to existing programs. A limited normalization scenario also has a relatively high degree of likelihood and impact, whereby a mutual recognition of Ankara and Damascus' security concerns leads to an agreement of non-interference in the unilateral action of each party. Although full or collapsed normalization scenarios would have more negative impacts on humanitarian operations in NES and NWS, these are significantly less likely to occur. The most probable of these scenarios are unlikely to present novel challenges to humanitarian operations, but rather result in varying degrees of exaggeration of the current status quo. Even the most disruptive of these will likely include similar modalities for cross-border aid in the near to medium term.

# INTRODUCTION

After over a decade of fraught relations marked by hostilities, recrimination, and military confrontation, speculations over a potential normalization between Ankara and Damascus have been mounting in recent months. Since August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and numerous senior officials have sounded conciliatory notes towards the Government of Syria (GoS) largely abandoning their usual bellicose rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Although these statements have not yet been translated into substantive actions, it remains significant that high-ranking officials in Ankara are openly discussing restoring ties with Damascus.

Prospects of Ankara-Damascus rapprochement could have some implications for humanitarian operations and needs in Syria; although this will hinge, to a great extent, on normalization trajectories and the corresponding reactions and responses of key actors. Accounting for a range of drivers that might determine normalization pathways, this report uses a scenario planning framework to provide a spectrum of possible outcomes and their predicted impact on the humanitarian landscape. This, in turn, will serve to inform contingency planning and preparedness measures among entities operating in Syria to adapt to future developments, while also ensuring that programming activities remain adequately robust and dynamic in response to changes in the operational environment.

This report explores four probable scenarios for normalization pathways over the coming eight months, although they may remain applicable months after. These scenarios, while not exhaustive, consider key differences in the political, economic, social, and security environment. This report assesses their relative likelihood in respect of key contingencies, as well as the potential impact on humanitarian operations in Northeast and Northwest Syria (NES and NWS).

This report begins with a contextual overview of the current situation, supplemented by Annex A to provide an extended in-depth analysis. Annex B presents a synopsis of key actors' priorities and interests in Syria. Annex C includes a table of scenario drivers used to generate normalization scenarios, divided by political, economic, social, and security considerations.

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<sup>1</sup> Middle East Eye, "[Erdogan says Turkey does not seek removal of Assad in Syria](#)," August 19, 2022.

# METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This scenario building activity employs the chain of plausibility approach and follows five key steps: (i) identifies a research question along with a time frame and geographical scope; (ii) collects data to develop a robust understanding of the current situation, key actors, and the humanitarian landscape; (iii) assesses the most significant current and future drivers of change; and (iv) makes informed assumptions on a nexus of drivers to develop a set of distinct, yet plausible scenarios along with an analysis of their respective contingencies that account for potential spoilers, including the disposition of key actors.

The final step (v) in this scenario planning process gauges each scenario's impact on humanitarian operations and needs. To do so, iMAP consulted with key humanitarian partners on the ground to develop a series of indicators that look at potential changes to the operational environment, including access and security, displacements, and returns, as well as needs. The impact of each scenario is assessed in terms of its implications for the geographic area(s) in focus. For instance, some scenarios may have a higher impact in NWS than in NES, and vice versa.

Consideration of the likelihood of each scenario accounts for both the drivers and motivations of involved parties and the possible factors that might contribute to breakdown of each scenario. Impact of each scenario, regardless of likelihood, evaluates implications on the ground in the occurrence of each distinct scenario and the significance of these for humanitarian programming and relevant stakeholders.

It is worth noting that there are some limitations to this scenario development exercise. Firstly, the scenarios developed herein are neither forecasts nor do they represent desired outcomes. Rather, these scenarios construct a range of likely future possibilities from baseline indicators and assess their associated impact on the humanitarian landscape to inform strategic planning and operational decision-making. Secondly, these scenarios span a spectrum of possible outcomes and may overlap or flow into one another. Thirdly, and more generally, scenarios may appear to simplify a very complex reality, as analysis seeks to balance contextual details with broader assumptions about the incentives of actors. Lastly, the likelihood of scenario occurrence is based on subjective estimations of the influence of contingencies and should only be viewed as indicative.

# TIMELINE

## 2022

### 21 FEBRUARY

Head of the Turkish Republican People's Party (CHP) indicates intent to normalize relations with Damascus and return Syrian refugees if his party wins the election.

### 7 APRIL

Turkish Hurriyet Newspaper claims that Ankara is searching for opportunities to start dialogue with Damascus.

### 11 MAY

Turkish nationalist Good Party (İYİ) leader expresses desire to 'shake hands with Bashar al-Assad' and send back Turkish-based Syrians home.

### 23 MAY

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatens a new cross-border military operation in northern Syria.

### 2 JUNE

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander Mazloun Abdi denounces Turkish plans for an offensive, warning of ISIS resurgence and deterioration of humanitarian conditions.

### 29 JUNE

During the NATO Summit, President Joe Biden meets with his Turkish counterpart and expresses strong opposition to a new incursion into northern Syria.

### 18 JULY

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan faces stern opposition to a fresh offensive from Russia and Iran, softens stance on a military operation in northern Syria.

### 20 JULY

Turkey's president calls on the US to remove forces from northeast Syria, claims that withdrawal could weaken 'terror groups' supported by Washington.

### 5 AUGUST

During the Sochi bilateral summit held between Turkish president and his Russian counterpart, Moscow urges Ankara to coordinate its security concerns with Damascus.

### 6 AUGUST

Turkish president reveals cooperation between Turkish and Syrian intelligence services on terrorism issues.

### 11 AUGUST

Turkish foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu calls for reconciliation between the opposition and the regime, expressing support for Syria's territorial integrity and peace process.

### 11 AUGUST

Turkish foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu reveals brief conversation with his Syrian counterpart on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement in October 2021 in Belgrade.

### 12 AUGUST

Hundreds stage protests in Turkish-backed opposition-held areas in northern Syria to voice their objection to reconciliation statements.

### 14 AUGUST

Head of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Devlet Bahçeli describes steps taken towards normalization as 'valuable and fortuitous.'

### 15 AUGUST

Planned visit by members of the Turkish Homeland Party to Damascus is postponed, reportedly at the request of the Syrian regime.

### 16 AUGUST

Deputy chairman of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) says dialogue with Damascus could start and then be raised to higher levels later.

### 18 AUGUST

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu accuses media outlets of distorting his reconciliation statements, clarifying that he had called for a 'compromise' rather than 'peace.'

### 19 AUGUST

Turkey's president says Ankara does not seek Bashar al-Assad's removal, suggests need for 'higher steps' with Damascus.

### 22 AUGUST

Heads of Turkish and Syrian intelligence services Hakan Fidan and Ali Mamlouk meet in Moscow.

### 23 AUGUST

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu says Turkey does not have preconditions for dialogue, but talks must be goal oriented.

### 23 AUGUST

Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad says that his government wants to see an end to Turkish presence on Syrian soil, end to support for opposition groups, and end to interference in Syrian affairs.

### 24 AUGUST

Turkish Foreign Minister hosts Syrian opposition officials in Ankara to express continued support and the importance of the peace process.

### 5 SEPTEMBER

Syrian state-run media express skepticism of Turkey's change of tone:

- *Al-Watan Newspaper: "Erdogan seeks to restore relations with Damascus to block his opponents; Ankara's speech is still media and in the context of words, not actions."*
- *Al-Thawra Newspaper: "Erdogan's policy is 'pragmatism,' he came to soften the atmosphere after the Tehran summit."*

### 7 SEPTEMBER

Heads of Turkish and Syrian intelligence services Hakan Fidan and Ali Mamlouk meet under Russian auspices.

### 15 SEPTEMBER

According to Turkish sources, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wished to meet his Syrian counterpart had he been invited to the Shanghai Cooperation Summit.



# TIMELINE

## 15 SEPTEMBER

Heads of Turkish and Syrian intelligence services Hakan Fidan and Ali Mamlouk meet again in Damascus.

## 16 SEPTEMBER

Turkish Foreign Minister Melvut Cavusoglu describes regime demands for removal of Turkish forces from Syrian soil as 'unrealistic.'

## 19 SEPTEMBER

Riad Darar, co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), raises fears that a potential normalization will increase pressure on the northeast region.

## 20 SEPTEMBER

Foreign Ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran meet with UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pederson on the margins of the 77th UN General Assembly in New York to discuss the situation in Syria.

## 22 SEPTEMBER

Turkish military officials hold meetings with Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, stress they have no plans to withdraw.

## 23 SEPTEMBER

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, says that Moscow is ready to host meeting between Turkish and Syrian foreign ministers.

## 26 SEPTEMBER

Syrian Foreign Minister calls for 'ending the occupation of Syrian territories and stopping support for illegal armed groups,' describing this as a 'natural prelude to returning Syrian-Turkish relations to the way they were before 2011.'

## 6 OCTOBER

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says that he will meet his Syrian counterpart 'when the time is right;' reveals lower-level talks taking place.

## 11 OCTOBER

Syria's al-Watan Newspaper claims that three top diplomats in charge of the Syrian file have been promoted to other positions, claims the move is a 'goodwill gesture' to facilitate Ankara-Damascus reconciliation.

## 12 OCTOBER

Turkey's foreign minister says only reconciliation between the Syrian regime and the opposition can bring stability to the country.

## 18 OCTOBER

Turkey's Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin says no plans are in place for direct contact with Damascus.

## 14 NOVEMBER

An explosion in Istanbul kills six people and injures over 80, with the quickly apprehended Syrian suspect claimed to have conducted the attack on behalf of the PKK/YPG.

## 19 NOVEMBER

Turkey launches airstrikes in Kurdish-held areas of Syria and Iraq in retaliation for Istanbul bombing. This is followed by significant escalations in shelling and counter shelling.

# CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Since their emergence as modern nation states, bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria have cycled between periods of cooperation and confrontation: tensions and mistrust (1930s–1999); détente and trust-building (1999–2002); strategic partnership (2002–2011); and finally, outright hostilities (2011–present).

Already embittered by Turkey's annexation of the disputed border region of Hatay in the late 1930s, relations between the two countries rapidly deteriorated during the 1960s as a result of Ankara's unilateral water policies.<sup>2</sup> In an effort to strengthen its position, Syria resorted to aggressive countermeasures, linking issues of water security to Kurdish separatism by extending support and shelter to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).<sup>3</sup> Relations reached a boiling point in 1998 when the two countries came to the brink of war after Ankara accused Damascus of harboring PKK fighters.<sup>4</sup> While tensions abated with the signing of the Adana security agreement and the expulsion of PKK elements from Syria, relations remained frosty until the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002.

In the period that followed, Turkey and Syria managed to turn their interdependencies, which had traditionally been a source of conflict, into opportunities for cooperation. Bilateral trade and investment boomed, mutual tourism flourished, border security measures were relaxed, and joint water management bodies were formed to oversee distribution.<sup>5</sup> Numerous regional developments also played a key role in further deepening relations. Most notably, Turkish-Syrian opposition to the 2003 Iraq invasion transformed relations into a strategic partnership. In many ways, ties with Syria represented the AKP's 'zero problems with neighbors' model. In early 2011, Turkey's *Hurriyet* newspaper described Turkish-Syrian relations as a 'model partnership' in the region. However, following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkish-Syrian relations rapidly deteriorated and became increasingly hostile.

## TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN POST-ARAB SPRING SYRIA

Turkey's recent policy positions in Syria have evolved over four stages: urging political reforms (March 2011–September 2011); regime change and support for opposition groups (fall 2011–summer 2013); isolation amid growing Kurdish threat (summer 2013–summer 2015); and finally, direct military intervention (summer 2015–2020).

In the early stages of the 2011 popular uprising and during his tenure as then-Prime Minister, Erdogan urged Damascus to institute meaningful political reforms and refrain from violently suppressing dissent.<sup>6</sup> As Bashar al-Assad refused to concede, Turkish officials became increasingly outspoken in their condemnation of the GoS and, in September, Ankara officially severed ties with Damascus and sided with the opposition.<sup>7</sup> From late 2011 onwards, the AKP adopted an interventionist, regime change policy in Syria. It joined global and regional multilateral efforts, such as the UN and the Arab League, against the GoS while also pursuing unilateral action through direct diplomatic, military, and financial support to an array of anti-GoS forces. As the uprising disintegrated into a protracted civil war with the onset of armed insurgency, Turkey became increasingly frustrated by the resilience and tenacity of the GoS, backed by its

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<sup>2</sup> Guner, Serdar, "[Signaling in the Turkish-Syrian Water Conflict](#)," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1998, pp. 185–206. JSTOR.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Policy, "[A Short History of Turkish Threats to Invade Syria](#)," July 31, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Islam, Thowhidul, "[Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring](#)," *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2016, pp. 7–34, Gale Academic OneFile.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, "[Turkish PM Advises Reforms in Syria](#)," April 26, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The National News, "[Erdogan Set to Cut all Turkey's Ties with Syria](#)," September 27, 2011.

Russian and Iranian patrons, as well as the fragmentation of opposition groups and the reluctance of the international community to commit to regime change in Syria. Domestically, Turkey's regime change policy and its political and military assistance to opposition groups was becoming highly controversial. Pointing to AKP's 'zero problems with neighbors' policy and its stance against the 2003 US intervention in Iraq, rivaling Turkish parties criticized Erdogan's duplicity.<sup>8</sup>

By 2013, hardline factions began to assert themselves in Syria, establishing a foothold throughout the country, as moderate forces faltered due to exhaustion, fragmentation, and infighting.<sup>9</sup> During this period, the US and partners began to reconsider support for anti-GoS forces in the absence of a viable opposition.<sup>10</sup> With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and particularly following its capture of Mosul in the summer of 2014, both the US and the EU downgraded regime change objectives in Syria and shifted their attention to defeating ISIS.<sup>11</sup> Turkey, however, was less interested in waging a war against the militant group and consequently found itself increasingly alienated in its regime change pursuits.<sup>12</sup> In 2014, during the siege of Kobani, the US struck an effective tactical anti-ISIS partnership with the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, a move that antagonized Turkey. From Turkey's perspective, the SDF is an umbrella group dominated by the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers to be the Syrian wing of the outlawed PKK, its decades-long foe and top national security concern. Moreover, Turkey felt betrayed since the US had elected to work with Kurdish forces to defeat ISIS instead of Syrian opposition groups it had backed throughout the conflict.<sup>13</sup>

By 2015, the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK had fell apart, as the PYD-YPG's battlefield successes translated into territorial gains and consolidation.<sup>14</sup> Turkey's calculus in Syria therefore became predominantly, perhaps exclusively, indexed to the Kurdish issue rather than Assad's removal. Preventing the formation of a viable Kurdish entity along its southern border run by affiliates of the PKK became Turkey's paramount objective. During this period, Turkey's pursuits of its objectives in Syria became increasingly unilateral and aggressive. Since 2016, Turkey and Turkish-aligned opposition groups launched four major military incursions into northern Syria. The first cross-border operation in northern Aleppo, 'Euphrates Shield,' was conducted in August 2016 to dislodge ISIS elements from the border area and prevent the SDF from connecting its cantons to the east with those to the west by capturing the strategic al-Bab area.<sup>15</sup> This was followed by a second incursion in January 2018, dubbed 'Olive Branch,' which expanded Turkish territorial control by capturing the entire Kurdish-held Afrin District and ending Kurdish aspirations of linking Afrin to territories in the east.<sup>16</sup> In late 2019, Turkey launched a third offensive, codenamed 'Peace Spring,' capturing the sub-districts of Ras al-Ain, Tal Abyad, and Suluk along the Syrian-Turkish border.<sup>17</sup> Finally, in February 2020, Turkey conducted a fourth operation known as 'Spring Shield' to stem advances by the Government of Syria (GoS) in Idlib and prevent a fresh exodus of refugees into its territories.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kibaroglu, Mustafa, "What Went Wrong with the 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' Doctrine," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2013, pp. 85-93.

<sup>9</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror," March 17, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Totten, Michael, "The Trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds," *World Affairs*, vol. 178, no. 3, 2015, pp. 5-12. JSTOR.

<sup>13</sup> The Jerusalem Post, "Turkey's Goal is Endless Uncertainty in Syria," November 3, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Monitor, "Who Killed Turkey-PKK Peace Process," August 4, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Reuters, "Turkey's Military Operations in Iraq and Syria," November 21, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## THREATS OF A FRESH TURKISH INCURSION

While the Russian-Turkish facilitated Idlib ceasefire of March 2020 saw Syria enter a phase of low-intensity conflict characterized by small-scale engagements of limited duration along conflict lines, recurring threats of a new Turkish offensive since late 2021 have triggered fears of renewed violence and displacement. The first of these threats was made by Erdogan in October 2021 in response to PKK-attributed attacks, which was followed by increased Turkish military presence in areas of Tel Rifaat and Idlib.<sup>19</sup> The second threat came in May 2022 and was similarly marked by a tense period of intensified shelling along conflict lines.<sup>20</sup> The areas of Tal Rifaat and Manbij were widely cited as prime targets for Turkey, as Ankara aims to purge 'terrorist' elements from its border and establish a 30 kilometer (km) safe zone for refugee returns. However, Erdogan was denied a green light from Washington, Moscow, and Tehran, failing to capitalize on Russia's relative diversion in Ukraine and Turkey's veto power on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to illicit endorsement.<sup>21</sup> Without international backing, Ankara appeared unwilling to weather the economic and diplomatic blowback of attempting to shift the conflict lines again.

## STEPS TOWARDS NORMALIZATION

In recent months, Turkey's hostile attitude towards Damascus has softened, with Ankara signaling policy shift from regime change to re-engagement – a pivot motivated by domestic political calculations ahead of the 2023 election.<sup>22</sup> For the first time since severing diplomatic ties in September 2011, Turkish officials are openly expressing willingness to re-engage the GoS.<sup>23</sup> On August 19, Erdogan claimed that Turkey does not seek Assad's removal, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and diplomacy at the political level with Damascus while denying Turkey's territorial ambitions in Syria.<sup>24</sup> The following month, Erdogan hinted that a roadmap was being drawn between Ankara and Damascus to establish a common framework to resolve disputes.<sup>25</sup> More recently, in early October, Erdogan informed reporters that a meeting with his Syrian counterpart is possible 'when the time is right,' while also revealing that lower-level talks are ongoing.<sup>26</sup> Reports have also emerged claiming that Ankara has initiated a diplomatic reshuffle, replacing three diplomats previously in charge of the Syrian file.<sup>27</sup>

There is no consensus among public perceptions towards a potential Ankara-Damascus reproachment, but rather an array of interests, motivations, and concerns. Many within the self-administration of north and east Syria (SANES)-held areas have been wary of normalization and the potential near- and long-term security threats posed by a transfer to GoS control. Several high-ranking SANES officials already expressed varying concerns about Turkey's maneuvers, fearing that a potential rapprochement and the revival of the Adana Accord could create a unified front between the GoS, Turkey, Russia, and Iran against the SDF.<sup>28</sup> Compounding this uneasiness is SDF's concern that they have not received the necessary assurances or clear positions from the US supporting the territorial integrity and longevity of the SANES. In NWS, while some openly condemned Ankara's statement, fearing that Ankara could abandon them, others opted to denounce the prospects of reconciliation with the GoS. In Idlib, the Salvation Government

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Erdogan Threatens Fresh Military Campaign in Syria](#)," October 15, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Reuters, "[Erdogan Says Turkey to Launch Military Operations on its Southern Borders](#)," May 23, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Arab News, "[Turkey Shelves Syrian Offensive After Russian Objection](#)," July 2, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> The Jerusalem Post, "[Turkey's Erdogan Softening Syria Rhetoric with Eye Toward Upcoming Election](#)," August 23, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Normalization with Assad is the New Normal in Turkey](#)," August 16, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Middle East Eye, "[Erdogan says Turkey does not seek removal of Assad in Syria](#)," August 19, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[Erdogan: Turkish Intelligence Contacts with Damascus will Determine 'Ties Roadmap'](#)," September 30, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Reuters, "[Turkey's Erdogan Can Meet Syria's Assad 'When Right Time Comes'](#)," October 6, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Watan, "[Experts Claim that Turkey has Initiated a Reshuffle of Diplomats in Charge of the Syrian File](#)," October 12, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi to Asharq Al-Awsat: Our Forces Cannot Be Dismantled](#)," October 25, 2022.

described a potential rapprochement as insulting to the Syrian revolution and its aspirations. Many in NWS fear that if opposition-held areas were to be handed over to the GoS as part of a compromise, significant atrocities would occur, prompting large-scale displacements to Turkey and SDF-controlled areas.

Indications of softened posturing and easing tensions have come while Turkey and Turkish-backed groups have escalated shelling in SDF-controlled areas of NES. On November 13, 2022, a blast in a busy area of Istanbul killed six and wounded dozens more, with a Syrian suspect quickly apprehended.<sup>29</sup> Ankara swiftly attributed the attack to the PKK and the YPG (although both have denied any involvement),<sup>30</sup> with widespread arrests extending to Turkish-controlled areas of Syria where the suspect had reportedly crossed into Turkey with the aid of smugglers. In retaliation, Turkey launched large-scale airstrike campaigns in NES, as well as the Kurdistan region of Iraq, killing SDF fighters, GoS soldiers, and civilians and destroying key infrastructure in multiple locations.<sup>31</sup> These were followed by rockets launched from the Kobani area into Turkish territory and an ongoing intensification of mutual shelling and attacks between Turkey and the SNA on one side, and the SDF and the GoS on the other.<sup>32</sup>

Even as Turkey targets GoS positions in NES while the SDF meets with Russian military leadership to discuss cooperation, Erdogan reiterated interest in high-level negotiations with the GoS in late November, telling press that a meeting with Assad is a 'possibility'.<sup>33</sup> The most recent wave of Turkish escalation can be interpreted as opportunism from Turkey to neutralize SDF targets, as well as a demonstration to other actors of the seriousness of its security concerns. Responses of all actors to the conflict, including the GoS, Russia, and US will determine the trajectory of normalization talks and humanitarian access in NWS and NES.

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<sup>29</sup> BBC News, "[Istanbul: Six Dead, Dozens Wounded in Turkey Explosion](#)," November 14, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian, "[Kurdish Militants Deny Turkish Claims They Carried out Istanbul Attack](#)," November 14, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, "[Turkish Airstrikes Target Kurdish Militants in Syria, Iraq After Bomb Attack](#)," November 20, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> AP News, "[Kurdish Militants Fire at Turkish Border Town, 2 Killed](#)," November 21, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> The New Arab, "[Turkish President Erdogan says meeting with Syria's Assad is a 'possibility'](#)," November 23, 2022.

# NORMALIZATION SCENARIOS

A well-orchestrated rapprochement with Damascus is attractive to Erdogan due to multiple political factors. Concrete, or even rhetorical steps towards normalization could help reverse his party's eroding electoral fortunes amid Turkey's growing anti-refugee sentiment and economic deterioration.<sup>34</sup> Erdogan's domestic rivals have scapegoated Turkey's worsening economy and service infrastructure on the continued presence of refugees<sup>35</sup> and driving re-engagement with Damascus could advantage the AKP and Erdogan to outmaneuver the broad popular support rival parties have achieved from their own pro-normalization rhetoric. Erdogan may also view that improved diplomatic relations with Damascus could help Turkey reduce the social and economic burden of hosting Syrian refugees, with an agreed framework to repatriate millions of Turkish-based Syrian refugees serving him well ahead of the election. Substantive steps or mere rhetorical posturing towards normalization and suggestions that his re-election would lead to refugee returns might sway wavering voters, particularly among nationalist and ultranationalist voters.

For Damascus, the optics of a rapprochement with Ankara could significantly enhance its legitimacy on the international stage, and possibly encourage other states to pursue normalization with Syria. Further, potential changes of areas of control resulting from a normalization agreement could be beneficial to both Damascus and Moscow, with the latter seeking to further secure its key interests in Syria.

However, despite these incentives, there is a vast chasm between Ankara and Damascus, making the path towards normalization complex and challenging. In addition to preventing a Kurdish autonomy south of its borders, Turkey seeks to (i) neutralize security threats to its soil emanating from the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the YPG; (ii) repatriate Turkey-based Syrian refugees while preventing a fresh exodus into its territories; (iii) and carve out a political resolution that involves power-sharing arrangements between the Syrian opposition and the GoS. Not only is Damascus unlikely to concede to any of these demands, it also does not have the capacity to meet them. Moreover, Damascus has reiterated several times that it wants (i) the complete withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian soil; (ii) an end to support for opposition groups; (iii) and non-intervention in its internal affairs. These diverging expectations and limited mutual capacity to deliver on expectations are likely to present significant obstacles to achieving normalization.

These evolving incentives underly the conjunction of drivers that build four probable normalization scenarios and their contingencies over the coming eight months, as outlined in the following section:

- (i) *Protracted Negotiations:* Both parties to the conflict view the optics of protracted normalization negotiations as politically advantageous regardless of outcomes. This results in a continuation of the status quo, in which Ankara and Damascus can also unilaterally pursue some strategic security interests without direct coordination or confrontation. The GoS continues to derive political benefits, specifically perceptions of international legitimacy, from ongoing negotiations with Turkey.
- (ii) *Full-Scale Normalization:* Ankara and Damascus reach an agreement on outstanding issues and develop a comprehensive normalization plan that involves significant change of area of control and the establishment of safe zones. Turkey will prioritize negotiations as a first option, while reserving the option of direct military confrontation. The result is a break from the trajectory of current conflict dynamics. However, practical implementation remains significantly constrained by US and SDF dispositions.
- (iii) *Limited Normalization:* Negotiating parties compartmentalize their differences and cooperate on discrete political, economic, and security issues of mutual interest. This

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<sup>34</sup> The Washington Post, "[With Nationalism Rising, Turkey Turns Against Refugees It Once Welcomed](#)," August 21, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[Turkish Opposition Leader Plans to Return Syrian Refugees](#)," July 24, 2022.

scenario focuses on the security file since it has the most impact on the humanitarian landscape. A mutual recognition of security interests will result in territorial trades and/or mutually beneficial and agreed-upon joint efforts.

- (iv) *Failed Normalization:* The progress achieved from ongoing normalization talks is undermined by transgressions of one party's redlines or through the subsequent reneging on agreement terms by one party or another. This results in a breakdown of the normalization process.

These scenarios highlight four plausible normalization pathways across a fluid spectrum of possible events. Such events are conceptualized in this report as scenario drivers, taken from actors' statements of intent or historical reactions regarding the political, security, social, and economic priorities in their bilateral relations. Collectively, they can be seen as the building blocks that drive each process of change in Ankara-Damascus relations. The trajectory each normalization scenario will take across this spectrum will be determined by inter-related factors and the consequences of potential actions. There may well be overlap of scenarios across this spectrum, or the development of one scenario flowing from the events of another. Annex C provides a table of the drivers this report has used to build the four normalization pathways, which will assist the reader in parsing these changes.

## I: PROTRACTED NEGOTIATIONS

Both parties to the conflict view the optics of protracted normalization negotiations as politically advantageous regardless of outcomes. This results in a continuation of the status quo, in which Ankara and Damascus can also unilaterally pursue some strategic security interests without direct coordination or confrontation. The GoS continues to derive political benefits, specifically perceptions of international legitimacy, from ongoing negotiations with Turkey.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Both parties see tangible political value in prolonged normalization negotiations, regardless of outcomes. For Erdogan, the optics of fence-mending with Damascus will ease some domestic pressures, particularly those concerning the contentious issue of Syrian refugees, boosting his electoral fortunes ahead of the June 2023 election. For Assad, on the other hand, the optics of high-level normalization talks confer added regional and international legitimacy.

Turkey can undertake unilateral action, to a limited degree, to achieve its security interests while ensuring that the GoS will not withdraw from the normalization process. With a limited deterrence capacity to stop a Turkish incursion, combined with the lack of a broader mutual security agreement between the two sides, the GoS has little option but to remain engaged in normalization dialogue to seek some political gains from continued talks. The direct impact of a Turkish incursion on GoS interests is outweighed by the political benefits, as well as the optics of legitimacy derived from remaining engaged in the normalization process. Damascus can also pursue unilateral action through talks with the SDF, using the threat of a Turkish incursion to pull the SDF to the negotiation table and increase its presence and influence in Manbij and Kobani.

The likelihood of protracted normalization negotiations is extremely high and the implications of this will either be a continuation of the status quo with no major changes to the humanitarian landscape or a Turkish military intervention in Tal Rifaat.<sup>36</sup> In the event of the latter, the humanitarian fallout will be significant, triggering long-term displacements from the area. Further, the mid-term possibility of Turkey-based Syrian refugee returns to the area will complicate the humanitarian response.

This scenario serves as an enhanced baseline projection – more or less a continuation of the status quo – from which subsequent scenarios in this report follow. There are a number of developments and/or redlines that could signify a shift in the trajectory of this scenario.

### SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Driven by differing motives, both parties perceive value to engaging in and maintaining the normalization process, irrespective of outcomes. Amid mounting domestic discontent and anti-refugee sentiments, Erdogan will seek to accrue political capital ahead of the June 2023 election by undermining his main rival's pro-normalization rhetoric. He believes that going through the motions of re-engagement with Damascus will be beneficial to countering opposition criticism and enhancing his electoral appeal. Simultaneously, Erdogan can show that he has pursued diplomatic pathways while taking decisive steps towards addressing Turkey's acute security concerns. The GoS, on the other hand, views normalization talks as providing positive momentum and added legitimacy on the international stage. At the same time, the GoS has little incentive prior to the Turkish election to make key concessions.

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<sup>36</sup> While this scenario becomes the most likely in the near-term, it should be revisited in the long-term to reconsider the implications of other scenarios. However, this is beyond the scope of this report and should be reconsidered in the future as these scenarios become closer to reality.



Negotiations between the two countries' intelligence bodies ascend to the level of senior diplomats and foreign ministers, creating useful optics for both parties for internal and external consumption. Damascus is unwilling to legitimize or concede to Ankara's buffer zones, pushing for an unconditional Turkish exit from its occupied territories, in addition to suspending material and logistical support to its SNA allied partners. Further, the GoS will reject any form of reconciliation with opposition factions. Turkey, meanwhile, insists on the necessity of its security buffers to eliminate threats to its territories and ensure safe return spaces for refugees.

Consequently, both parties exploit talks either for political gains or to find a positive bargaining zone, while leaving open the possibility of alternative courses of action. These include the unilateral pursuit of limited security interests by both sides. While Turkey will seek Tal Rifaat in the near-term, the GoS will use the threat of a Turkish offensive to pursue a rapprochement with the SDF to enhance its position.

Negotiations will continue to move at a glacial pace, with one or both sides deliberately protracting discussions to avoid significant concessions towards actualizing an agreement. This will continue until exogenous factors or changing realities on the ground necessitate more conclusive action, either through more substantive steps towards normalization and/or unilateral action that is not necessarily mutually beneficial.

For example, in the event that Damascus and Moscow are successful in precluding the possibility of a fresh Turkish incursion by negotiating a change in areas of control with the establishment of safe zones in NES, then Scenario II becomes highly likely. In this scenario, extensive negotiations between all conflicting parties over Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani will precede any Turkish unilateral action. Ankara will agree to continued negotiations until a consensus is reached over these areas. On the other hand, if Turkey decides to follow a unilateral course of action, with Damascus and Moscow denouncing Ankara's moves and deciding to respond decisively while suspending normalization talks, then the likelihood of Scenario IV becomes high. In the absence of these possible reactions and responses and, in the face of inaction by the GoS and Russia, a continuation of Scenario I is more probable.

## CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

In the absence of a security framework and shared recognition of security concerns, the possibility of non-mutually beneficial military action remains open, therefore increasing the likelihood of a fresh Turkish operation in northern Syria. This is particularly true after Turkey's existential threat was brought to its front door with the 13 November Istanbul bombing. Any pre-election change in conflict dynamics is likely to occur in the very near-term as Turkey will seek to capitalize on sympathy stirred by the attack to launch an offensive. In the event of similar bombings or other events in the ensuing months, a post-election incursion is more likely. The recent security sector reform in Turkish-held areas, specifically the reshuffling of the SNA, could signal a renewed intent for an offensive. In either case, outside of an agreed-upon framework, this will trigger condemnation from Damascus, although the GoS will continue to see value in continuing normalization negotiations. Should Turkey continue to act unilaterally in pursuit of its security goals beyond Tal Rifaat, this will drive a shift in scenarios to III or IV depending on the pre-emptive action of the GoS, Russia, the US and the SDF.

In NES, the possibility of unilateral action, likely through a new offensive in Tal Rifaat, in the near-to-medium term is high, especially following the recent alleged PKK attacks within Turkish territory. In NWS, current conflict dynamics are unlikely to change in the near-term. While the possibility for unilateral action on Idlib's M4 corridor remains open despite normalization talks, Russia is unlikely to support a GoS operation without Turkish concurrence. Further, the GoS and its Iranian-supported militia lack the resources to take and sustain control of southern Idlib.

Turkey will continue to attempt to expand unilaterally in NES; however, it will be significantly constrained by US position. Since Tal Rifaat is less strategically important for the GoS and Russia, a Turkish incursion in the area will not trigger a significant response. But Turkey's appetite for unilateral action will necessarily be limited to Tal Rifaat, given that any unilateral invasion or threat of invasion of Manbij or Kobani will provoke a significant reaction from key actors. Notably, the GoS' tolerance for unilateral action is constrained by its strategic interests in these areas, as well as its long-term pursuits to bring the SDF into the fold. The GoS will unilaterally pursue a strengthened partnership with the SDF to increase its bargaining power at the table with Turkey, as well as to safeguard its long-term interests of regaining territorial control over the whole of Syria.

In general, Scenario I is constrained by any significant driver of change that may cause a shift in the normalization pathway before the 2023 Turkish election. Given the constraints outlined above of the concurrent pursuit of unilateral strategies, each party's diverging interests, priorities, and general trajectories throughout this conflict will likely eventually collide, necessitating either strategic agreement or abandonment of the normalization process. There is, therefore, little significant longevity to this scenario, although it remains the most likely in the mid-term.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

### NORTHEAST SYRIA

Without unilateral action by one party, most likely Turkey, as an element of this scenario, this scenario will not result in major changes for humanitarian need and actors in NES in the near-term. However, in the case of a Turkish incursion into Tal Rifaat, significant long-term displacements from these areas would ensue, worsening the scale, severity, and complexity of the humanitarian situation in NES. Sustaining and expanding the EU and US aid modality is ever more critical to responding to these challenges and ensuring that humanitarian needs are met.

In the event of such a takeover, impact for humanitarian programming would not differ dramatically than in the case of Turkish takeover of Tal Rifaat through agreement with the GoS (see *Scenario II*). However, the Impact would be further exaggerated in the near term, as the takeover in this scenario will occur more swiftly and with less coordination between Involved parties.

### NORTHWEST SYRIA

Although cross border aid is unlikely to be directly impacted in the immediate term, humanitarian need in NWS remains immense and will continue to deteriorate across all sectors, including health, education, WASH, shelter, protection, and food security. The increased legitimacy of a regime that lacks any tangible capacity and willingness to address worsening humanitarian conditions will only detract from alleviating the suffering of millions in need.

Increased international legitimacy for Damascus, combined with continuation of mixed messaging from the UN on aid mechanisms, will cast further doubt on the long-term continuation of cross border operations, rendering planning and fundraising increasingly challenging for humanitarian actors. Meeting these pressing needs amid a Cholera outbreak is more vital than ever, with the US- and EU-supported INGO modality remaining the most appropriate and effective aid mechanism.

Further, a change in control of Tal Rifaat increases the possibility of refugee returns from Turkey in the mid-term, highlighting the need for additional resources and planning. This would further facilitate returns of those displaced from the Tal Rifaat area into areas of NWS. Such returns would necessitate aid to facilitate and in the initial period of settlement into places of origin but would likely need less long-term support than is necessitated for the same populations in their areas of displacement.

## II: FULL-SCALE NORMALIZATION

Ankara and Damascus reach an agreement on outstanding issues and develop a comprehensive normalization plan that involves significant change of area of control and the establishment of safe zones. Turkey will prioritize negotiations as a first option, while reserving the option of direct military confrontation. The result is a break from the trajectory of current conflict dynamics. However, practical implementation remains significantly constrained by US and SDF dispositions.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Scenario II is an extension of Scenario I and is predicated on a non-confrontational approach, as a first option, to resolving key issues, while reserving the possibility of direct military action. This involves significant changes in areas of control, the scope and nature of which will depend on mutual security interests in each territory, as well as the establishment of safe zones.

Facing acute domestic pressures ahead of the June 2023 election, Erdogan demonstrates strong political willingness and greater appetite for concessions in order to achieve normalization with Damascus, rather than mere negotiations or posturing. Assad recognizes that Erdogan needs a positive outcome in the lead up to the election and feels he can extract more given the latter's pursuit to secure quick win, short-term gains to enhance his electoral appeal.

Given the constraints in NWS, Turkey acquiesces to the GoS' near-term strategic target of the M4 corridor south of the province. In NES, Turkey's decreasing domestic appetite for further incursion in northern Syria prompts it to support the establishment of GoS-facilitated safe zones, allowing Damascus to negotiate back territories from the SDF north of the M4 Highway. Rhetorically, Turkey also indicates support to shifting cross border aid provision to Damascus, although this is unlikely to materialize in the immediate term.

In return, Damascus acknowledges Turkey's cross-border safe zones and endorses the creation of additional ones in central/northern Idlib, Tal Rifaat, and Manbij, with the GoS negotiating population movements from the latter two. Any Turkish ground action in NES will be preceded by extensive deliberations with the GoS, Russia, and SDF, with Ankara allowing negotiations over the fate of Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani. However, in the event that these negotiations do not usher in an agreement, Turkey will resort to alternative means to secure its interests, including direct military action.

However, the practical implementation of any negotiated territorial shift of control in NES and the establishment of Turkish-administered safe zones in the region will be significantly constrained by US and SDF dispositions. Due to these constraints, this scenario's likelihood is extremely low, although it could have profound consequences on the humanitarian landscape in NES and NWS. Therefore, humanitarian actors should be aware of this possibility and its potential impacts since it involves a break from the trajectory of current conflict dynamics. A comprehensive agreement will likely entail changes in areas of control, inciting long-term displacements and necessitating reassessments of access constraints and negotiations. However, the process will likely be protracted and within an established framework, increasing the stability and predictability of conditions in the near-to-mid-term. Given material constraints within the GoS and Turkey's economic interest in facilitating aid and reconstruction, some form of cross-border aid continues.

### SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Ongoing negotiations between Turkish and Syrian heads of intelligence achieve a breakthrough, establishing a structured agenda and common framework to guide discussions. Talks advance to the level

of foreign ministers and heads of state, with the frequency and intensity of diplomatic intercourse increasing. Within the agreed upon agenda, both parties re-open their respective embassies and reappoint ambassadors.

State-run media outlets and spokespeople soften hostile discourse and sound conciliatory tones to condition and warm public perceptions. At home, Turkey proposes normalization as part of its multidimensional policy to ameliorate its domestic problems, including the refugee crisis and security threats, by demonstrating its soft power as well as its flexibility and pragmatism in pursuing its interest. Damascus, on the other hand, peddles Ankara's shift as the latest episode in its spate of victories, highlighting Turkey's U-turn as admission of its policy failure in Syria. Although maintaining financial and logistical support to the SNA, Turkey censors Syrian opposition media outlets operating within its territories as a sign of good will, giving Damascus some confidence in its commitment to the normalization process. Disagreements over Turkey's occupation of northern Syria are addressed through a recognition of Syria's territorial integrity and a conditional timetable for Turkish withdrawal contingent upon GoS-opposition reconciliation.

Divisions will emerge among SNA factions; while some reject reconciliation with the GoS, others succumb to Turkey's carrot-and-stick approach to come to the negotiation table. Those SNA factions irreconcilable with the GoS will join HTS, especially those that maintain pragmatic and ideological ties with the group, while others either dissolve or continue to operate as decentralized cells. Turkey reforms remaining SNA factions into internal security forces and facilitates settlement talks with the GoS. With a Russian nudge, the GoS offers some concessions to the opposition, although these fall short of a national political settlement involving power-sharing arrangements. However, the GoS issues an extensive general amnesty as a sign of good faith.

Both sides acknowledge their respective security concerns and agree to revive a more comprehensive Adana Accord by re-establishing security cooperation inclusive of intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and a mutually agreed-upon definition of terrorist groups. Within the security framework, negotiating parties also arrive at a non-unilateral agreement on transfer of areas of control. In NWS, the GoS secures Russian support and mobilizes its forces in preparation for a new campaign on Idlib with the primary near-term goal of retaking the M4 corridor. Turkey proactively repositions observation posts to northern Idlib and attempts to negotiate an HTS withdrawal from the area – a major concession that is contingent on securing significant gains from the GoS.

Further, Turkey's lack of domestic appetite for a new incursion prompts it to back the creation of GoS-administered safe zones in NES, allowing Damascus to negotiate back SDF-held territories north of the M4 Highway. While Turkey will allow for the GoS to administer these safe zones in some territories, it will insist on controlling and administering those in more sensitive areas. This will depend on the makeup and geographic breakdown of negotiated safe zones. The result of this is multiple administrative zones with a plurality of security actors, with some likely to be Turkish guaranteed with GoS and Russian elements in them.

In return, the GoS recognizes Turkey's cross-border buffer zones, cementing its long-term presence on Syrian soil and legitimizing future military operations and safe zones. To facilitate the return of Turkey-based Syrian refugees, Ankara and Damascus agree on establishing return spaces and safe zones in northern Idlib and northern Aleppo with the GoS negotiating population movements and facilitating humanitarian corridors where necessary. This will be preceded by extensive negotiations between Turkey on the one hand, and the GoS, Russia, and SDF on the other. Turkey will allow for negotiations over Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani, while reserving the right to intervene directly. In addition, Damascus and Ankara develop a repatriation plan, creating pathways for refugee returns, with Turkey financing reconstruction and humanitarian aid in the agreed-upon safe zones.

Concurrently, crossing points between Turkish-backed opposition-held areas and GoS territory are re-opened, resulting in some mutual trade and revenue streams. Both parties also move to re-open their respective airspaces to each other, with Turkey verbally softening its tone on aid through Damascus in place of the current cross border mechanism.

## CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

To varying degrees, both Damascus and Ankara are incapacitated to absorb the humanitarian fallout of shifting conflict lines again. This, together with Damascus' limited material capacity and Russia's aversion to a protracted campaign in Syria amid its ongoing war in Ukraine, will likely prompt the GoS to pursue narrower and immediately beneficial goals such as the M4 and its environs. However, there remain numerous challenges that pose significant obstacles to the fruition of this scenario. Intentions aside, an effective implementation of a negotiated plan of action between Ankara and Damascus will face, to varying degrees, spoilers in both NES and NWS. In the latter, HTS could spoil a takeover agreement of the M4 corridor by refusing to withdraw from southern Idlib. Turkey's ability to negotiate a HTS withdrawal or liquidate the group will be placed to the test. Further, with Russia's entanglements in Ukraine, the GoS presently has neither the military nor the economic means for a renewed campaign on Idlib without Moscow's support. Because Idlib is irreconcilable with the GoS, the ensuing violence and the humanitarian crisis will have negative optics and precipitate a fresh wave of refugees into Turkey and Turkish-held territory, possibly with fleeing extremist elements mixed in, which could bring Erdogan under further criticism.

Turkey has long been the most prominent actor consistently supporting UN cross-border operations through its territory.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, although support for aid through Damascus would likely remain rhetorical in the foreseeable period, the threat of decreased Turkish support for cross-border aid is a critical challenge to humanitarian operations. While Turkey may nominally support a Damascus aid modality, Idlib city and northern Idlib will continue to rely on humanitarian aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing either as a safe zone or under the current modality.

In NES, the practical applicability of any mutual agreement will be decisively hampered by the US presence in the region. With US disengagement highly unlikely, the establishment of additional Turkish-administered safe zones across the NES border will be highly constrained. The extent to which the GoS can fill this role by creating safe zones will also be dependent on US disposition and/or a potential GoS-SDF rapprochement. While the likelihood of GoS-administered safe zones is more likely in Manbij and Kobani, it is highly unlikely in Hasakah.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

### NORTHEAST SYRIA

Any change in control in northern Syria would have significant consequences for humanitarian need and actors. The severity of this is dependent on exact areas changing hands, the speed at which this is facilitated, and the negotiated versus military nature of this action. A negotiated change of control in Tal Rifaat or elsewhere will result in significant population movements. This would displace the entire Tal Rifaat population, estimated to be between 55,000 and 110,000 individuals long-term.<sup>38</sup> Figures are less certain other areas, where changes in control may not encompass entire regions. Temporary movements from Manbij, for instance, are less likely to result in protracted displacements, given the largely Arab composition of the area<sup>39</sup> and nuances in stances of local populations and fighters in the area on Turkey and the GoS. While Tal Rifaat will create a new operating environment for humanitarian actors, likely with

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<sup>37</sup> KII with NWS NGO Forum Member, November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> iMMAP, "[Thematic Report 6: Operation Peace Spring and Potential Turkish Intervention Scenarios](#)," October 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

significant IDP and refugee returns, access to Manbij or Kobani could be contingent upon GoS-SANES negotiations, and refugee returns are likely to be less significant given proportionally lower long-term displacements.

Damascus' recognition of safe zones legitimizes Turkish presence in OPS territory with those uprooted from the region, many of whom residing in various last resort sites in NES, displaced indefinitely. Moreover, the implications of GoS- and Turkish-established and administered safe zones and the multitude of administrative and security actors present in these areas will complicate humanitarian actors attempting programming in these areas. A recognition of mutual security concerns and intelligence sharing between Turkey, GoS, and Russia in NES will also likely increase the frequency and geographic scope of Ankara's anti-PKK action, potentially disrupting counter-ISIS operations, and testing US resolve.

Challenges of population movement will be complicated by SANES plans to close collective centers (CCs) and informal settlements, which poses significant obstacles to humanitarian response. Increasing advocacy and/or developing alternative shelter modalities will be pivotal to overcoming these barriers. Mass displacements would likely initially be forced towards CCs and transit centers (TCs), while Kurdish long-term displacements would likely be directed to and expanded Serekaniye Camp in NES.<sup>40</sup> While avenues for non-Kurdish IDPs are less clear, as the SANES is likely to seek to prevent lasting demographic changes, they would likely also be directed towards already overcrowded camps, despite planned additions and new constructions in the region being insufficiently funded.<sup>41</sup> Recent shelter programming has focused on rehabilitation of existing housing and empty properties, but this is extremely limited and relies on IDPs having made initial arrangements prior to interventions. Humanitarian responses to displacement are further restricted by actors' inability to build new structures.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Turkish assumption of control of upstream water resources and key water infrastructure in Manbij would allow Turkey and affiliated factions to expand politicization of water resources—a tactic frequently employed in the disabling of Alouk water station in NES.

Existing facilities and modalities are inadequate to meet the need generated by normalization-induced displacements, regardless of the scale. As UN aid provision to NES through Damascus becomes less tenable in the face of rifts between the GoS and SDF, EU and US aid modalities will be ever more critical to ensuring the continuity of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations.

## NORTHWEST SYRIA

Changes in territorial control in NWS would be inherently disruptive to humanitarian aid provision in the region. The level of this impact is contingent upon the speed and the level of coordination of such a change by relevant actors.

A full-scale normalization would have significant consequences for humanitarian programming in the NWS context. Currently, the most operationally significant (and most discussed) threat to the provision of humanitarian aid in NWS is the uncertainty around the continuation of cross-border aid in light of its routine re-evaluation at UN-levels. UN agencies' messaging regarding contingency planning has been unclear, and there is no existing capacity to mitigate losses in access that might occur as a result of normalization and ensuing threats to the cross-border mechanism.<sup>43</sup> In the context of full-scale normalization under Scenario II, this uncertainty will likely increase as Turkey softens its tone around the Damascus aid modality, exacerbating already inhibitive contingencies in humanitarian programming.

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<sup>40</sup> KII with NES NGO Partner, November 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> KII with NWS NGO Forum Member, November 2022.

However, in the short-term under consideration in this report, there will likely be no change in the channels of aid provision in NWS as there is no established alternative to the cross-border aid modality.

The potential recapture of the M4 corridor could result in displacement from environs in its proximity, although these are likely to be small-scale movements given the low population density in surrounding areas. However, as previous changes in control in the area suggest, such as Operation Idlib Dawn, most residents that are displaced from these areas are unlikely to return to newly captured GoS territories. Consequently, displacement from areas near the M4 are likely to be long-term and oriented to northern Idlib. Further, sporadic low-intensity conflict along new lines of control, asymmetrical opposition operations, and iterative displacement patterns are likely to continue. In parallel, in the scenario that Damascus legitimates a Turkish safe zone in Idlib, and all parties accept new front lines, humanitarian entities would need time and significant increases in funding to adapt current emergency modalities for shelter and WASH to more long-term solutions since displaced populations are highly unlikely to return to GoS-acquired areas of origin.

Beyond these dynamics, given historical precedents and understandings of HTS' opportunist and expansionist aspirations, the group is unlikely to easily accept territorial and economic losses in southern Idlib. It will be motivated to recoup its losses by expanding its presence in Afrin and Northern Aleppo, either in opposition to or through Turkish facilitation. In either case, HTS will assume a more pronounced presence in these areas, whether directly or through sympathetic elements within the SNA. Any HTS takeover of new areas in Afrin and northern Aleppo is likely to pose operational constraints. Humanitarian organizations will need to renegotiate access and establish vetting protocols based on new armed actor control or influence.

Cross border operations would continue in areas not recaptured by the GoS, although those limited populations that might remain in southern Idlib rather than displacing will be left to rely on support channeled through Damascus. There is currently minimal donor provision of funding for emergency response.<sup>44</sup> Humanitarian actors do not have the capacity to strengthen preparedness and emergency response mechanisms to mobilize resources to address increased IDP needs, with existing camps already overpopulated and resources insufficient to deal with existing displacement. They would further be overwhelmed by Turkish repatriations that are likely to further escalate to Idlib's safe zone in the event of normalization.

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<sup>44</sup> KII with NWS NGO Partner, November 2022.



### III. LIMITED RAPPROCHEMENT

Negotiating parties compartmentalize their differences and cooperate on discrete political, economic, and security issues of mutual interest. This scenario focuses on the security file since it has the most impact on the humanitarian landscape. A mutual recognition of security interests will result in territorial trades and/or mutually agreed-upon joint efforts.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

While a formal, full-fledged normalization plan fails to materialize, Ankara and Damascus compartmentalize their disagreements to avoid a full breakdown of talks, thereby opting to cooperate on discrete topics of mutual interest. While an agreement on any number of political and economic issues is likely, a recognition of mutual security interests between the two sides has the greatest implications for the humanitarian landscape since it involves territorial exchanges and/or mutually agreed-upon joint efforts. This scenario, therefore, is focused on the security dimension.

Negotiations result in mutually identified security interests, with both sides pursuing immediate strategic security gains through unilateral and/or cooperative action outside a broader normalization action plan that takes into consideration buffer zones, reconciliation, humanitarian access, and returns. This results in reviving the conflict lines, as well as a piecemeal change of areas of control.

An increasingly bellicose Turkish position and a pragmatic attempt by the GoS to optimize the threat of an inevitable incursion to extricate some benefits lead to territorial trades. Turkey preempts a GoS-SDF reconciliation (see *Scenario I*) by offering major concessions in the form of the M4 corridor in southern Idlib. The GoS will secure Russian air cover and mobilize its forces in preparation for a takeover of the M4 corridor, with Turkey maintaining neutral posturing. Considerable asymmetrical warfare will ensue, with conflict lines approaching tent settlements and population centers. Similarly, Turkey will pursue unilateral action to invade Tal Rifaat in the near-term, with a stated intention of future operations targeting Manbij and other areas in NES.

Limited rapprochement in the form of a compartmentalized agreement is a highly likely outcome from the normalization process, resulting from each party's incentives to diplomatically achieve gains mitigating the challenges of reaching full-scale normalization. However, the version of limited rapprochement involving a tacit agreement of territorial swaps as outlined here in Scenario III is only moderately likely to occur, due to its susceptibility to spoilers and the involvement of third-party incentives. The scope and severity of its impact on the humanitarian landscape will be conditional on the nature of these negotiated territorial trades.

#### SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Ongoing negotiations at the intelligence level fail to advance higher due to a lack of a comprehensive agreement on contentious topics such as Turkish withdrawal from its buffer zones, as well as support for anti-GoS forces. However, state officials and media break the pattern of hostile rhetoric and continue to display conciliatory overtures.

Although a lack of consensus on reviving the defunct Adana Accord impedes mutual security cooperation and intelligence sharing, both parties recognize their security threats and pursue territorial swaps. Turkey will seek to prevent a GoS-SDF collaboration that could undermine its territorial pursuits, thereby making a key concession to Damascus in the form of the M4 strip and its environs in southern Idlib.



At present, the GoS is content with SDF control in NES, as Damascus views them as reasonable long-term negotiating partners, especially given the considerable time spent in developing ties that will serve as a foundation of some future reconciliation. This, coupled with mistrust of Turkish intentions, means that there must be considerable concessions for territorial swaps (likely the M4) for GoS to distance itself from the SDF.

The GoS will secure Moscow's backing for a renewed operation in the area. Turkey will maintain neutral posturing as the GoS reinforces its positions along the conflict lines to retake the M4 corridor. HTS cannot resist the intensity of Russian bombardment, with the volume of crossline asymmetrical conflict significantly increasing. The GoS will be committed to ensuring the security and functionality of the M4 strip. In NES, Turkey will move for Tal Rifaat in the near-term and possibly areas of or even the entirety of Manbij. Despite blanket de-escalation statements by both sides, a piecemeal chipping away at areas of control will continue.

## CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

In NWS, Turkey will need to be significantly pressed for a considerable win ahead of the election to consider conceding the M4, especially since it can make gains towards its immediate security needs in Tal Rifaat without having to offer concessions. Further, the possibility of a protracted campaign in southern Idlib targeting the M4 will likely discourage a Russian involvement given its conflict with Ukraine. More importantly, in the event of a violent HTS dislocation from southern Idlib, the group will be motivated to expand its presence in Afrin and Northern Aleppo, whether invited or by force. Turkey is unlikely to sacrifice the relative stability of those areas.

In NES, GoS actions are constrained by the longevity of the SDF as a negotiating partner, which is derived from continued US support. The prospects of a fresh incursion will serve to push the SDF more towards the US and make it compliant with its goals. Further, the GoS recognizes that as long the SDF is underpinned by US support, the long-term value of its Kurdish partner is too high to dismiss.

While the M4 remains valuable to Damascus, the benefits of a takeover are outweighed by considerations of a possible GoS-SDF rapprochement. Given the trajectory of Turkish actions in northern Syria and the lack of parity in positions, the GoS is unlikely to commit or be perceived as committing to any action that makes its fate increasingly tied to Turkey's dictate, particularly when it comes to solidifying Turkey's long-term presence or working against the SDF or even negotiating on Ankara's behalf with the SDF. The GoS, therefore, is unlikely to pursue actions that would undermine its relationship with the SDF and hamper potential future negotiations with the Kurds. More importantly, conceding additional territories to Turkey such as Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani will preclude the possibility of GoS retrieving these and other Turkish-held areas, especially as it leaves Damascus without bargaining power.

Additionally, amid heightened mistrust and imbalance in positions, the costs of failed territorial swaps are high. The GoS is unlikely to tolerate this risk by burning bridges with the SDF.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

### NORTHEAST SYRIA

This scenario would pose challenges to humanitarian access and is likely to cause both short- and long-term displacements, straining already limited humanitarian aid and funding in NES (to a similar extent as in Scenario II). As in the case of full-scale normalization, Turkey is likely to invade areas of northern Syria under SDF control, likely resulting in losses of civilian life, infrastructure, and agricultural land, as well as disrupting livelihoods and placing additional burden on already-strained responses for IDPs in NES. In areas under threat, partial or entire displacements are expected, with no Kurdish returns and limited Arab returns in the event of a full Turkish takeover or Turkish-facilitated transfer of control to GoS. Access in

other areas of NES will continue unimpeded, although with increased security threats, including Turkish drone attacks.

#### NORTHWEST SYRIA

There are no immediate changes or direct impacts on the cross-border UN operations via Bab al-Hawa, as Turkey has little incentive to advocate for change in existing modalities. However, a GoS offensive in southern Idlib results in displacements and limits humanitarian access. In contrast to full normalization (see *Scenario II*), this displacement would likely be unified and swift, leaving humanitarian partners with little time for contingency planning or adequate fundraising efforts to prepare to accommodate new displacements. Initial responses would be limited to Syrian NGOs, as cross-border action will be slower to mobilize<sup>45</sup> and is likely to be insufficient to respond to the severity of need. Slow responses will be further exacerbated by the lack of significant funds available for emergency response in NWS.<sup>46</sup>

Aid would be unlikely to reach areas newly returned to GoS control in full, given the challenges seen with trials of crossline delivery modalities, leaving any populations who do not displace in similarly dire circumstances. Further, those remaining in areas along conflict lines on either side will continue to be threatened by conflict events. Continued operations would further require significant increases in funding, which are unlikely to be easily secured in the difficult funding environment of Syria and particularly NWS.<sup>47</sup>

In the event of HTS' forced removal from southern Idlib, a renewed incursion into Afrin and Northern Aleppo by the group is highly likely. Depending on its capacity, HTS will be sufficiently motivated to pursue additional valuable targets by force, such as Azaz and the Bab al-Salama crossing, prompting significant fighting. This will create security challenges, in addition to operational challenges for humanitarian entities, necessitating access renegotiations and thorough vetting procedures based on new armed actor control. Turkish action in areas of NES may further threaten civilians in neighboring areas of NWS and cause displacements. These may further facilitate returns in Tal Rifaat from some areas of NWS, as well as returns of refugees from Turkey into areas newly under Turkish or Turkish-backed control.

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<sup>45</sup> KII with NWS NGO Partner.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

## IV: FAILED NORMALIZATION

The progress achieved from ongoing normalization talks is undermined by transgressions of one party's redlines or through the subsequent reneging on agreement terms by one party or another. This results in a breakdown of the normalization process.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Any Ankara-Damascus normalization pathway operates within a climate of competing interests and priorities, diverging threat perceptions, exogenous constraints, and a recognition of limited mutual capacities to deliver on expectations. The limited likelihood of scenarios that manage to overcome such differences to reach an agreement (namely, *Scenario II & III*) is reflected in the correspondingly high likelihood of failed normalization. There is a multitude of events that would push either party to leave the negotiating table.

Under the previous three scenarios, there are instances in which each party would decide to either cross a given redline during the negotiating process prior to reaching an agreement, or a party would decide to renege on a term set within the agreed (full-scale or limited) normalization framework. As is reflected in the scenario constraints outlined so far, these drivers of change would push a normalization pathway into one of failed normalization, as it becomes untenable for either Damascus or Turkey to seek resolution through negotiation. Scenario IV includes multiple pathways to an ultimate end of the full termination of negotiations, with their respective impacts dependent on the way in which talks fall apart.

Although Scenario IV is constrained by the great cost of abandoning normalization talks with a sharp recalculation of negotiators' incentives, the significant lack of bargaining parity, heightened mistrust, and existence of redlines still makes this scenario the most likely in this report. However, despite actors' diverging and uncompromising positions and the scenario's high likelihood, the failure of the normalization process does not necessarily mean worse humanitarian conditions. Although the collapse of normalization talks or an Ankara-Damascus agreement would increase the likelihood of incursion and clashes in areas of territorial swaps, in most cases failed normalization would remove any further doubt of the Turkish position on cross-border aid.

### SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Despite reaching an agreement that will have, in theory, cost both sides considerable concessions, the execution of such a framework is highly susceptible to spoilers on both sides that leads to a substantive break of key terms. In Scenario II, full-scale normalization collapses in the event of Turkish anti-SDF intervention into GoS safe zones regardless of their demonstrated capacity to assure Turkish security concerns, rendering Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani under unilateral Turkish control. A sharp reaction from Russia and the SDF would push GoS to abandon normalization with Turkey. In both Scenarios II & III, Turkey could also renege from its commitment to exchange the removal of the SDF from these territories for the M4 by refusing to withdraw from its defensive positions in Idlib. This driver is more likely in Scenario III where there is no expansive agreed framework. HTS acts as a key spoiler in the handover of M4 control, refusing to withdraw from southern Idlib with Turkey unable or unwilling to negotiate a withdrawal or liquidate the group.

Alternatively, GoS reneges on the agreement reached in Scenario III (acquiescence to a Turkish incursion into Manbij and Kobani in exchange for the M4) as the SDF approaches the GoS with greater long-term concessions if the GoS retains its positions in these territories. In Scenario II, the GoS rolls back the scale of an extensive normalization agreement following subsequent outrage by the SDF in response. Abandonment of talks by the GoS in both scenarios is underpinned by a long-term need to retain the SDF as a partner if it wishes to ultimately regain control of the whole of Syria.

Failed normalization derives from Scenario I, where an agreement has not yet been reached, if one party crosses another's redline amid ongoing talks or deems that its opposite is fundamentally no longer in a position to deliver on a negotiated agreement. As no common security framework or recognition of each other's security concerns has been established, there remains the possibility of unilateral military action. In the context of a Turkish incursion, Turkey fails to notify or collaborate with GoS or Russian forces in acting unilaterally, violating a redline by diverging from standard procedure. Particularly if this was to lead to severe casualties or that of Russian forces around their bases in Manbij or Kobani, the GoS would be driven to abandon ongoing negotiations due to Turkey's demonstrated contempt of its security position. This would outweigh any advantage for GoS from the positive political optics of normalization talks with Turkey. Alternatively, a domestic event occurs in Turkey that drastically alters Erdogan's chances of re-election, substantially diminishing his value as a negotiating partner for Assad. As Damascus does not want to reveal the concessions they would be willing to make without a guarantee that a deal agreed upon prior to the election would be enforced by the subsequent President, they decide to terminate normalization talks.

For Turkey, the GoS crosses a redline by any action that is deemed to consolidate or strengthen the position or operational capacity of the PKK. As a result of developing negotiations with the SDF, GoS commitment to the removal of foreign forces from Syrian soil, and an inherent mistrust of Turkish commitments amid increasing resolve for future incursions, the GoS establishes stronger defensive positions along the NES border north of the M4 without removing SDF forces. This power play would be seen by Turkey as fundamentally antagonistic with GoS demonstrating contempt for its security concerns, therefore pushing Ankara to abandon ongoing negotiations.

## CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Failed normalization will inevitably come at cost for either actor, given they will have not only made significant concessions to reach an Ankara-Damascus agreement, but any gains they will have made through the agreement would also be lost. Particularly for Scenario II of a comprehensive normalization agreement, there will have been such progress made in attitudes of compromise (along with corresponding incentives for such cooperation) that it is unlikely for either party to decide that a normalization process in any form is no longer valuable. In the case of Scenario I, the normalization process itself offers benefits of political legitimacy and domestic wins in addition to the rewards of an agreement, all of which would be lost should the talks fail. In addition, pragmatically, it is unlikely that both parties will be able to reach an extensive agreement, begin its implementation, and see significant enough incentive to abandon the process as a whole under the timeframe in consideration. Without a high-stakes driver of change, therefore, both parties will assess there to be greater benefit by staying at the table, mitigating the likelihood of this scenario.

The GoS, specifically, has limited options aside from seeking diplomatic avenues to increase its bargaining strength to achieve its long-term goal of regaining territorial control over Syria. Unless it can make a definitive calculation that any process of negotiation would damage these prospects, it is unlikely to jeopardize these avenues through a complete collapse of talks. For Turkey, there are considerable international constraints on unilateral military action in Syria, that has so far kept Erdogan from invasion. With its current strong negotiating position on the global stage as a mediator between Europe and Russia, Turkey is well-placed to extract gains diplomatically in the Syrian arena to protect its security concerns.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

### NORTHEAST SYRIA

In NES, a failed normalization process will likely amplify Turkish drone attacks on the region and increase the probability of a new offensive, with Tal Rifaat being the primary target, although an invasion of other areas is also possible. This will likely nudge SDF/SANES closer to the GoS, however, this will not translate in reduced US backing or oblique messaging of declining support. The manifestation of a Turkish ground incursion is not inevitable in this scenario, as changes in Turkish domestic politics might drive failure. However, failure is likely to correspond with antagonistic posturing between Ankara and Damascus, increasing the possibility of an incursion. Such an incursion or other Turkish escalation would have negative impacts on humanitarian conditions in NES.

A possible escalation of Turkish attacks in NES and the corresponding uncertainties arising from increased threat of a fresh incursion and the associated humanitarian costs, will further worsen the humanitarian situation in the region. The implications for changing control as a result of such an incursion (or incursions) are similar to those outlined in Scenario II, although these would not be agreed upon by multiple parties and would thus likely be more rapid and less coordinated. This would negatively impact humanitarian planning, rendering relevant actors' ability to respond less swift and less effective. The SANES' plans to close CCs and informal sites will likely further complicate the situation. With the cholera outbreak, environmental, and water pressures heavily impacting health and livelihoods in NES, maintaining and expanding the INGO modality is ever more critical to address need gaps.

### NORTHWEST SYRIA

In NWS, an unsuccessful normalization reduces the probability of a renewed Russian campaign on Idlib, especially in the absence of Turkish consent. Without Moscow's aerial support, the GoS and its Iranian-backed militias are incapable of capturing and maintaining control of the area. As a result, current conflict lines will likely remain intact with intermittent cross fighting continuing. While the status quo will remain largely unchanged in NWS, apart from spillover from any ensuing aggression by Turkey in SDF areas adjacent to NWS (as outlined in Scenario II), humanitarian needs and conditions will further deteriorate as communities continue to cope with spiraling food and fuel costs, dwindling water resources and droughts, and the spread of the cholera epidemic. These persistent challenges cannot be addressed through a Damascus-based aid modality; therefore, the continuation of the US/EU INGO modality, which is unlikely to be directly impacted by the results of this scenario, remains both critical and most effective in non-GoS-held areas. Aid access through the Bab al-Hawa crossing will also remain unimpeded.

# ANNEX A: EXTENDED CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

## SYRIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS PRE-2011

Prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict, Turkish-Syrian relations underwent a series of fundamental transformations: from hostilities over territorial and water disputes, as well as security issues (1930s-late 1990s), to détente following the Adana Accords (2000-2002), and finally, to a strategic partnership with the meteoric rise of AKP to power (2002).

**Border Disputes and Cold War Politics.** Despite sharing geographic borders, historic and cultural ties, as well as mutual security concerns, Turkey and Syria emerged antipathetically from the Ottoman Empire. Turkey was politically and strategically oriented towards Europe and the West rather than its former colonies, while Syria defined itself as the heart of Arab nationalism in opposition to Ottoman Turkey. The Cold War augmented pre-existing antagonisms as Turkey and Syria found themselves in opposite camps with relations largely influenced by the bipolarity context. This culminated in the Syrian Crisis of 1957, when a government reshuffle in Damascus instigated fears of a Soviet satellite state formation, prompting Turkey to mobilize troops along the Syrian border.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the Cold War, Turkey and Syria redefined their geostrategic priorities and consolidated their positions in the regional subsystem, as Turkey turned to the Middle East to project its hegemony and influence on the region.

**1998 Crisis.** During the 1960s, unilateral water policies and uncoordinated damming systems developed by Turkey and Syria for energy and irrigation purposes severely strained relations.<sup>49</sup> Turkey's multi-dam Southeastern Anatolia Project threatened to further reduce water flow into Syria and endanger its agriculture-dependent regions. Syria resorted to balancing acts by providing sanctuary to the PKK, with Turkey imposing martial law in its southeast in 1987 to counter PKK activities.<sup>50</sup>

Several border skirmishes in 1996, along with a series of bombings in Damascus and other Syrian cities attributed to Turkish intelligence, further damaged relations.<sup>51</sup> After intensifying last-ditch efforts to find a diplomatic resolution, Turkey resorted to deterrence and the threat of invasion in 1998, deploying tanks and amassing some 10,000 troops along its 910 km border with Syria.<sup>52</sup> Syria ultimately acquiesced and expelled the PKK's founder and leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who was later extradited to Turkey where he was imprisoned for life. Heeding calls of its leader for a 'peace initiative,' the PKK declared a ceasefire and committed to non-violent solutions in that same month. Violence largely subsided and most PKK fighters subsequently withdrew into northern Iraq.

**Adana Accords.** The 1998 Crisis concluded with the signing of the Adana Accords in late October, under Egyptian and Iranian mediation efforts.<sup>53</sup> The accords included Damascus' recognition of Ankara's security

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<sup>48</sup> Foreign Policy, "[A Short History of Turkish Threats to Invade Syria](#)," July 31, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Guner, Serdar, "[Signaling in the Turkish-Syrian Water Conflict](#)," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1998, pp. 185-206. JSTOR.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (TWI), "[Turkish-Syrian Rapprochement: Causes and Consequences](#)," June 21, 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

concerns, including the designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization, closure of the group's facilities, and prohibition of its activities on Syrian soil. Additionally, the accords articulated a framework under which Ankara could legally conduct cross-border security operations 5 km deep inside Syrian soil if Damascus fails to neutralize threats to Turkey.<sup>54</sup>

**Era of Improved Relations.** The Adana Accords and the joint security agreements thawed Turkish-Syrian relations, laying the foundation for a full rapprochement. In June 2000, then-Turkish President Ahmed Necdet Sezer attended Hafiz al-Assad's funeral in Damascus, gesturing a new chapter in bilateral relations.<sup>55</sup> However, it was not until Bashar al-Assad's and the AKP's ascendance to power in 2000 and 2002, respectively, that rapprochement gained significant momentum and ushered in fully-fledged political, economic, and cultural ties.

A shifting regional context played a key role in transforming relations into a strategic alliance. Turkey and Syria's opposition to the 2003 US intervention in Iraq saw the two countries draw closer to each other. In addition, shared threat perceptions of rising Kurdish nationalism and separatism within their respective territories, also played a key role in solidifying relations.<sup>56</sup> Syria feared that it could be the next target of regime change in the Middle East, and that the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could embolden Syrian Kurds. Similarly, Turkey also viewed the rise of Kurdish nationalism south of its border as a destabilizing threat that could inspire the PKK to resume operations. This fear came to fruition in 2004 when the group abandoned the ceasefire and resumed its insurgency.<sup>57</sup>

Turkish-Syrian relations further deepened with the prolongation of the Iraq war. In January 2004, Assad became the first ever head of state to visit Ankara,<sup>58</sup> with Erdogan reciprocating the visit that December.<sup>59</sup> That year, Turkey and Syria signed the Free Trade Agreement and a strategic partnership treaty while security cooperation further increased, including joint military exercises.<sup>60</sup> Damascus openly condemned the PKK as a terrorist organization in 2005 and endorsed Turkey's 2007 military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq.<sup>61</sup>

The implementation of the Free Trade Agreement in 2007 led to burgeoning economic and trade relations, with Syrian exports growing from approximately \$187 million in 2006 to \$662 million in 2010, while Turkish exports almost doubled from \$609 million to \$1.85 billion over the same period.<sup>62</sup> Turkish direct investment surged, with companies relocating production lines to northern Syria, while the visa waiver agreement, introduced in 2009, contributed to a reciprocal boost in tourism.<sup>63</sup> For Turkey, Syria's untapped markets offered significant growth prospects. Its strategic location represented a gateway to Ankara's political and economic penetration of the wider Arab world, opening new markets and expanding reach in the Middle East for key AKP voters through reduced tariffs, namely, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs.

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<sup>54</sup> The Syria Report, "[Adana Agreement of October 20, 1996](#)," November 18, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[Exclusive: 20 Years After Hafez Assad's Death, Syria is an Open Arena for Foreign Players](#)," June 10, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies, "[The Role of Syria in the Post-Iraq War Middle East](#)," March 18, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Al-Jazeera, "[Timeline: PKK Conflict with Turkey](#)," March 21, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Jazeera, "[Al-Asad in Landmark Visit to Turkey](#)," January 6, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Islam, Thowhidul, "[Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring](#)," *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2016, pp. 7-34, *Gale Academic OneFile*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Istituto Affari Internazionali, "[The Evolution of Turkey's Syria Policy](#)," November 18, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Los Angeles Times, "[Turkey, Syria: Nations Sign Historic Accord, End Visa Requirements](#)," September 17, 2009.



Politically, both countries began to hold inter-ministerial meetings beginning in 2009 with the establishment of the Turkish-Syrian High Level Strategic Cooperation Council.<sup>64</sup> Some progress was made on water issues as Turkey modestly increased Syria's water share and the pair developed joint-management mechanisms to regulate water flows.<sup>65</sup> Notably, in 2009, the two countries announced plans for the construction of the 'Friendship Dam' on the Orontes River on the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>66</sup> This agreement became emblematic of deepening bilateral relations. However, it also had territorial implications for the disputed status of Turkey-annexed Hatay, which had largely been sidelined, since it meant Syria's recognition of Turkish sovereignty over the province.

Assad's anti-West image offered Erdogan an opportunity to improve his reputation in the Arab world by cultivating close personal ties with Assad and enhancing his domestic popularity in surrounding countries. For Syria, on the other hand, improved relations with Turkey represented a bridge to the West and way out of its post-2003 diplomatic isolation, particularly following Damascus' alleged involvement in Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination in 2005.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Turkey's mediating role in the 2008 Syria-Israel peace talks also served to break Syria's diplomatic isolation, despite faltering late in that same year.<sup>68</sup>

## EVOLUTION OF TURKISH INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA POST-2011

Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkish-Syrian relations rapidly deteriorated before reverting to enmity. Turkey's policy positions in Syria have evolved over four stages: urging political reforms (March 2011-September 2011); regime change and support for opposition groups (fall 2011-summer 2013); isolation amid growing Kurdish threat (summer 2013-summer 2015); and finally, direct military intervention (summer 2015-2020).

**First Stage.** Early in the Syrian uprising, Erdogan attempted to leverage his growing regional stature and personal friendship with Assad to encourage Damascus to relax its political controls. Between March and August 2011, several top Turkish officials visited Syria, including Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, to convince the embattled Assad to initiate political reforms and abstain from deploying violence against civilians.<sup>69</sup> Damascus nevertheless attempted to placate angry protesters through a combination of coercive measures and limited concessions.<sup>70</sup> While announcing a cosmetic cabinet reshuffle, lifting a decades-long emergency law, granting some Kurds Syrian nationality, and promising higher salaries, greater press freedom, amnesty guaranties, and release of detainees, Assad simultaneously resorted to heavy-handed tactics to suppress dissent.<sup>71</sup>

As it became increasingly evident that Damascus showed no appetite for Ankara's advice, Turkey's claims to regional leadership were undermined and, on a personal level, resulted in diplomatic humiliation for Erdogan. However, even while urging reforms, Turkey was simultaneously involved in tacitly organizing the

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<sup>64</sup> Mahfudh, Aqeel, "[Syria and Turkey: A Turning Point or a Historical Bet?](#)" *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, April 12, 2012. *JSTOR*.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Dohrmann, Mark, and Robert Hatem, "[The Impact of Hydro-Politics on the Relations of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria](#)," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2014, pp. 567-83. *JSTOR*.

<sup>67</sup> The Guardian, "[Syrian Isolation Grows as France and US Demand Lebanon Pullout](#)," March 2, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> The New York Times, "[Israel and Syria Negotiate as Turkey Mediates](#)," May 21, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> France 24, "[Turkish FM Meets Syria's Assad](#)," August 9, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Reuters, "[Analysis: Syria's Assad Torn Between Repression and Reform](#)," April 22, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Los Angeles Times, "[Under Pressure, Syria's Assad Pledges Reforms](#)," June 20, 2011.



opposition – a move that Ankara viewed beneficial irrespective of Damascus’ reform. As early as April 2011, the Syrian opposition began to convene in Turkey and, under the supervision of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Ankara provided training to defected officers and soldiers of the Syrian Army.<sup>72</sup> In July this coalesced into the Free Syrian Army (FSA), with the Syrian National Council (SNC) established in August to serve as the civil authority of the exiled political opposition.<sup>73</sup>

This first stage ended in September 2011 when Ankara formally severed ties with Damascus after Erdogan publicly criticized Assad’s stubbornness and deplored the Hama massacre that took place on the eve of Ramadan in July 2011.<sup>74</sup>

**Second Stage.** The fall of 2011 saw a radical departure from Turkey’s principle of nonintervention, as it explicitly pursued regime change in Syria, providing training, logistical, and material support to various anti-GoS elements. The FSA established its command headquarters in Hatay, Turkey, and by the summer of 2012, the MIT had intensified training and arms assistance to the group.<sup>75</sup> Further, to increase economic pressure on Damascus, Turkey froze Syria’s financial assets and followed the Arab League’s decision to impose sanctions in November 2011.<sup>76</sup>

Relations grew increasingly tense due to cross-border violence over the summer and fall of 2012. Following the November 2011 bus attack on Turkish *haji* pilgrims near Homs,<sup>77</sup> the GoS shot down a Turkish warplane in June 2012.<sup>78</sup> Turkey retaliated in October, forcing the landing of a Syrian Air jetliner over its airspace suspected of carrying arms from Moscow to Damascus, resulting in both states closing their respective airspaces to each other.<sup>79</sup> The Turkish parliament also approved cross-border operations that same month after Syrian shells targeted the border town of Ackcakale<sup>80</sup> and, in May 2013, Turkey held GoS accountable for the twin car bombings that targeted the town of Reyhanli in Hatay province.<sup>81</sup>

Unifying the highly fragmented Syrian opposition proved a major hurdle for Turkey between 2011-2013. Turkish backing of the SNC alienated certain opposition forces, as it was seen as dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Moderate forces feared that the Islamists would seize the popular uprising, as their counterparts had done in Egypt. Further, Kurdish opposition groups rejected growing Turkish influence in the organization, with only one Kurdish movement joining the council (The Future Movement).<sup>82</sup> Although the Syrian National Coalition, which succeeded the Syrian National Council, was formed in November 2012 to unite opposition elements, it was unable to provide substantial diplomatic and material assistance to opposition groups and was accorded with little legitimacy by many anti-GoS elements within Syria.

Consequently, defections proliferated, and rival coalitions with uneasy alliances began to emerge with many fighters drifting to Islamist factions owing to their greater battlefield successes. This fragmentation not only undermined Ankara’s position vis-a-vis Damascus but also demonstrated its limitation in influencing and consolidating opposition forces.

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<sup>72</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [“Turkey’s Relations with the Syrian Opposition,”](#) April 14, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> The Guardian, [“Turkey Imposes Sanctions on Syria in Protest Over Deaths,”](#) October 4, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [“Turkey’s Relations with the Syrian Opposition,”](#) April 14, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> The Guardian, [“Turkey Imposes Sanctions on Syria in Protest Over Deaths,”](#) October 4, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Daily Sabah, [“Turkish Haji Pilgrims Under Fire in Syria,”](#) November 22, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> The New York Times, [“Syria Shoots Down Turkish Warplane, Fraying Ties Further,”](#) June 22, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> The New York Times, [“Turkey, Seeking Weapons, Forces Syrian Jet to Land,”](#) October 10, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> The New York Times, [“Turkey’s Parliament Backs Military Measures on Syria,”](#) October 4, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Reuters, [“Car Bomb Kills 40 in Turkey Near Syrian Border,”](#) May 11, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> The Reporters, [“No Fans of Assad, Syria’s Kurds Distrust Uprising,”](#) April 18, 2012.

At the same time, Turkey became the center of a flurry of regional and international diplomatic efforts, including peace plans introduced by the Arab League and the UN. Although Turkey backed these initiatives, it was also quick to acknowledge their limitations in preventing violence and finding a negotiated settlement to the Syrian crisis. Consequently, Turkey began advocating for international coalition-led direct intervention in Syria, in addition to the creation of a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors.<sup>83</sup> Turkey also began to gradually feel the spillover effect of the Syrian conflict. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Turkey had hosted 280,000 Syrian refugees by late 2012, establishing 13 shelter camps across seven border provinces.<sup>84</sup>

**Third Stage.** From summer 2013, extremist and Islamist factions eclipsed the more moderate opposition forces in Syria and emerged as a potent anti-GoS force. The conflict assumed an increasingly sectarian character as the distinction between radical, Islamist, and moderate opposition forces became increasingly blurry. Opposition forces also became more fractious, plagued with infighting and rivalries, which significantly damaged their credibility. This fragmentation and radicalization, and the absence of a viable opposition, prompted Turkey's allies to reconsider their support for anti-GoS forces. In late 2013, following the Islamic Front's attack on an FSA warehouse, both the US and the UK temporarily halted 'non-lethal' assistance to opposition groups.<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, the rise of ISIS and its occupation of large swathes of territory across Syria internationalized the conflict and changed the nature of Turkish involvement. GoS collapse, which appeared imminent, was now seen as increasingly problematic, with a corresponding shift of tone seeing actors signal regime transition rather than change. As part of then-President Barack Obama's 'surrogate warfare,' the US began to rely on the Kurdish SDF in the fight against ISIS. The SDF is an umbrella group dominated by the military wing of the PYD, the YPG. The group emerged as an effective local partner for the US, particularly after breaking ISIS' siege of Kobani in 2014, a strategic Kurdish town of great symbolic importance near the Turkish border.<sup>86</sup> US forces provided the SDF with critical support in ousting ISIS from Kobani and have since continued to provide arms and air cover to the group.

As the US prioritized defeating ISIS, Turkey found itself increasingly isolated in its pursuit of regime change in Syria. For Ankara, the radicalization of the opposition was a natural progression of the GoS's brutality and ISIS was seen as a symptom rather than a cause of the problem. Consequently, Turkey showed less appetite for defeating ISIS and, in fact, found the group to be a useful enemy in the fight against the GoS. To this end, Ankara continued to support a cohort of opposition groups, relying on funding from a host of Gulf states. In March 2015, the trio of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia began supporting the Army of Conquest, which included Islamist factions, as well as al-Qaida-affiliates such as al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey became increasingly concerned with the growing US-Kurdish partnership and SDF/YPG territorial gains south of its border. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian extension of the outlawed PKK, its decades-long foe and top national security concern. Further, with Russia and Iran also ardently backing the regime it has been striving to overthrow, Turkey grew increasingly frustrated.

During this period, the number of refugees in Turkey soared significantly, reaching over two million, creating strains on an already suffering economy and service infrastructure.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The Guardian, "[Turkey Calls on Major Powers to Intervene in Syria](#)," October 19, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> UNHCR Briefing Notes, "[Registered Syrian Refugees in Surrounding States Triple in Three Months](#)," October 2, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> BBC News, "[US and UK Suspend Non-Lethal Aid for Syria Rebels](#)," December 11, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> CFR, "[Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror](#)," March 17, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Brookings Institution, "[As EU-Turkey Migration Agreement Reaches the Five-Year Mark, Add a Job Creation Element](#)," March 17, 2021.

**Fourth Stage.** From summer 2015, Ankara's priorities in Syria shifted following the breakdown of the Turkey-PKK peace process and the SDF/YPG's territorial gains and consolidation of its quasi-autonomous Kurdish cantons south of its border. Turkey vehemently opposed an autonomous Kurdish region near its borders, viewing it as a threat to its territorial unity and security amid concerns of proliferation of PKK bases and training camps. Neutralizing the Kurdish threat along and within its borders, therefore, became its chief objective while regime change largely receded. Turkey became increasingly perturbed with Washington's support for the SDF, and its distinction between the SDF and the PKK did little to assuage Ankara's concerns. Unable to reconcile its growing divergent policy preferences with that of the US, Turkey decided to act unilaterally, launching a series of major offensives since 2016 to force the PKK away from its border and establish a buffer zone.<sup>89</sup>

**Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016–March 2017).** Codenamed 'Operation Euphrates Shield (OES),' Turkey launched its first military incursion into northern Syria in August 2016 in cooperation with Turkish-Supported Opposition (TSO) groups.<sup>90</sup> The offensive forced ISIS away from the border and, by capturing the strategic town of al-Bab in northern Aleppo, prevented the SDF from carving a corridor to unite their cantons to the east (Manbij) with those further west (Afrin). Turkey also captured the districts of Azaz and Jarablus.

OES territory had fallen under opposition control as early as 2012. The Azaz corridor, which connects the eastern parts of Aleppo with Turkey, served as a crucial economic lifeline and staging ground for anti-GoS forces, with the Bab al-Salam border post becoming a conduit for humanitarian aid and logistical support. However, opposition control over the region was interrupted in October 2013 when, after a series of offensives, ISIS gained control of parts of Azaz, al-Raee, al-Bab, and Jarablus. Although ISIS was expelled from Azaz in February 2014 by the FSA, the group continued to maintain presence in key areas within OES.

To the west of the Euphrates, the SDF had captured Manbij city during its anti-ISIS campaign in late August 2016 after several other territorial gains. Turkey became acutely concerned that the SDF would continue to push westward towards Afrin, establishing presence along the full stretch of the Turkish-Syrian border. Consequently, Turkey launched an offensive, taking the territories of al-Raee, al-Bab, and Jarablus from ISIS and halting SDF advances to Afrin. Although Turkey stated it intended to advance further towards Manbij, it ended its offensive in late March 2017.<sup>91</sup>

**Operation Olive Branch (January 2018–March 2018).** Less than year later, Turkey launched a second operation in northern Aleppo in January 2018, dubbed 'Olive Branch.' Following ISIS' territorial defeat in late 2017, Turkey had hoped that the US would halt support for the YPG. However, in January 2018, the US indicated intentions to remain in NES to prevent an ISIS resurgence and counter Iran's growing influence in Syria. Frustrated by its inability to address the YPG issue in NES due to US presence, Turkey launched Olive Branch days after the US announcement. Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and TSO groups captured the Kurdish-held Afrin district in March 2018, including the sub-districts of Afrin, Jandaryas, Sheikh al-Hadid, Mabtali, Bulbul, Sharan, and Raju.<sup>92</sup>

Afrin had been a Kurdish stronghold since late 2012. In January 2014, the area was incorporated into the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) governance structure, along with the Jazira and Kobani cantons in NES. The DAA was later restructured into the SANES in September 2018.

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<sup>89</sup> Reuters, "[Turkey's Military Operations in Iraq and Syria](#)," November 21, 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Considered relatively stable, Afrin served as a major receptor for internally displaced persons (IDPs), with a population estimated to be over 300,000 in November 2017, just under half of which were IDPs. Turkey launched Olive Branch to clear SDF/YPG forces from its border and end any hope of uniting Kurdish areas west and east of the Euphrates. Although the offensive amounted to ethnic cleansing, Turkey did not face any significant international backlash. Moreover, despite strongly backing the SDF/YPG in Afrin, Russia evidently gave Turkey the green light to conduct the operation in exchange for southeastern Idlib and northern Hama – which the GoS had seized few weeks earlier amid Turkish silence.<sup>93</sup>

**Operation Peace Spring (October 2019–November 2019).** In October 2019, Turkey launched its third military operation, dubbed as ‘Operation Peace Spring (OPS)’ to expel the SDF/YPG from the border region and establish a 30 km safe zone for the return of Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>94</sup> Ahead of the ground offensive, Turkish forces conducted air strikes and intensively shelled several border areas, including Ras al-Ain, Tal Abyad, Suluk, Derbasiyah, Amuda, Qamishli, Malikiyah, Kobani, and Manbij. In the following days, TAF and TSO units advanced rapidly, capturing the sub-districts of Ras al-Ain, Tal Abyad, and Suluk along the NES Syrian-Turkish border.

What is today referred to as OPS territory fell to opposition factions and al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN) in the fall of 2012. But by July 2013, following the splintering of JAN, the rise of ISIS, and GoS retreat, the SDF consolidated its presence in Ras al-Ain. By mid-2015, the SDF had wrestled control over Tal Abyad and Suluk from ISIS and other opposition factions, effectively controlling the entire OPS territory.

In the months that preceded the offensive, Turkey had negotiated with the US to establish a joint-controlled safe zone along its borders. However, Turkey grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress and began amassing troops along the border. Days before the offensive, in a surprising move, then-President Donald Trump ordered the partial withdrawal of US forces from northern Syria, paving the way for a Turkish operation.<sup>95</sup>

The SDF became increasingly concerned that Turkey would advance around Manbij, Kobani, and the M4 highway. On October 13, the SDF reached an emergency agreement with Russia and GoS allowing them to deploy forces along frontlines, discouraging further escalation.<sup>96</sup> On October 17, Turkey and the US agreed on a five-day ceasefire in return for the complete withdrawal of the SDF from the besieged Ras al-Ain.<sup>97</sup> The US agreed to refrain from imposing additional sanctions on Turkey, while tacitly recognizing Turkish control over the OPS region.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, on October 22, Turkey and Russia reached an extended ceasefire deal, which saw Ankara suspend operations and Moscow recognize its territorial authority over OPS area.<sup>99</sup> The agreement also stipulated the withdrawal of all SDF forces from areas along the M4, Manbij, and Tal Rifaat. By November, hostilities largely subsided, with Russia and Turkey initiating joint patrols along the frontlines.

Turkey came under harsh international criticism, particularly from its NATO allies. Canada and several European countries moved to impose an arms embargo on Turkey,<sup>100</sup> while the US sanctioned Turkish

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<sup>93</sup> Middle East Eye, “[Idlib Offensive: Turkey’s Tradeoffs with Russia Put it on the Losing Side](#),” February 19, 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Reuters, “[Turkey’s Military Operations in Iraq and Syria](#),” November 21, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> The New York Times, “[Trump Orders Withdrawal of US Troops From Northern Syria](#),” October 16, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> The Washington Post, “[Russia and Turkey Reach Deal to Push Kurdish Forces Out of Zone in Northern Syria](#),” October 22, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Vox, “[The US and Turkey Reached a Syrian Ceasefire. But What Does that Mean?](#)” October 17, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Al-Jazeera, “[Turkey, Russia Reach Deal for YPG Move Out of Syria Border Area](#),” October 23, 2019.

<sup>100</sup> The Globe and Mail, “[Canada Suspends New Weapons Sales to Turkey Amid Incursion in Syria](#),” October 15, 2019.

ministries and senior government officials.<sup>101</sup> In response, Erdogan threatened to flood Europe with Syrian refugees if they continue to criticize the operation or brand it as an invasion.<sup>102</sup>

**Operation Spring Shield (February 2020-March 2020).** Codenamed 'Operation Spring Shield,' Turkey launched its fourth cross-border offensive in February 2020 targeting the GoS and its allied militias in Idlib province.<sup>103</sup> Turkey claimed that the operation was meant to ensure the ceasefire agreement and prevent an influx of IDPs from Idlib into its territories.

In late 2018, the trio of Turkey, Russia, and Iran had brokered a demilitarization agreement in Idlib, establishing a belt-like zone within opposition-held territory which encompassed contact lines between the GoS and opposition groups. The deal stipulated that HTS and other Islamist factions withdraw from the zone entirely, re-open and ensure civilian access to the M4 and M5 highways and dissolve the Syrian Salvation Government. Only the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation (NFL) was allowed to have presence within the demilitarized zone, although it was required to clear the area of all heavy weapons. The agreement also permitted Turkey to establish observation posts on the opposition side of the demilitarized zone, while Russia and Iran do the same on the GoS side. However, the deal fell through when HTS refused to comply. In January 2019, HTS launched an offensive against the NFL, taking control over nearly all the Greater Idlib region.<sup>104</sup>

In April 2019, the GoS and Russia launched a large-scale aerial campaign within the demilitarized zone in Idlib before the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) initiated a ground offensive the following month on HTS and NFL-held areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib. In August a unilateral ceasefire was announced by the GoS and Russia, although sporadic clashes and airstrikes continued. Towards the end of the year, the GoS and its allies launched a second offensive in Idlib and surrounding areas. Early in 2020, the GoS captured the strategic Saraqib city, as well as the entire M5 highway connecting Aleppo to Damascus.<sup>105</sup>

By February 2020, Turkey increased its direct involvement in Idlib to halt GoS advances and later in the month launched Operation Spring Shield after Turkish Army positions in Balyun, Idlib, were targeted by GoS and Russian airstrikes resulting in the death of 34 soldiers.<sup>106</sup> The operation was intended to drive back pro-GoS forces back to pre-offensive conflict lines. As tensions mounted between Turkey and Russia, a ceasefire was negotiated to halt fighting in March 2020, which included establishing a secure six km corridor on either side of the M4 Highway patrolled jointly by Turkey and Russia.<sup>107</sup>

## FROZEN CONFLICT LINES

Four de-facto zones of control have emerged in Syria: GoS-controlled areas comprising roughly 70 percent of all territory; the NES region governed by the SANES; NWS or Idlib ruled by HTS and the Syrian Salvation Government; and finally, northern Aleppo controlled by Turkey and its allied SNA factions and governed by the Syrian Interim Government. Four foreign actors (Turkey, US, Russia, and Iran) and a multitude of domestic and foreign militias have presence on the ground. Since 2020, major military operations have largely subsided as most of Syria appears to be moving towards low-intensity conflict. Although limited, small-scale tit-for-tat skirmishes and mutual shelling have continued across the north, lines of control between rivals have largely been frozen through a series of ceasefires and stalemates.

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<sup>101</sup> CBS News, "[US Imposes New Sanctions on Turkey Over Syria Offensive](#)," October 14, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> CNN, "[Turkey's President Threatens to Flood Europe with Refugees as Syria Offensive Ramps Up](#)," v October 11, 2019.

<sup>103</sup> Reuters, "[Turkey's Military Operations in Iraq and Syria](#)," November 21, 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over Idlib After Ceasefire Deal](#)," January 10, 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Anadolu Agency, "[Syria: Assad Regime Captures Key City in Idlib](#)," February 7, 2020.

<sup>106</sup> Reuters, "[At Least 34 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Airstrikes in Syria's Idlib](#)," February 27, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> The Guardian, "[Russia and Turkey Agree Ceasefire in Syria's Idlib Province](#)," March 5, 2020.

## THREAT OF NEW OFFENSIVE IN NORTHERN SYRIA

In late May 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to launch a fresh military incursion in NES to push the SDF 30 km away from Turkey's southern borders and establish a buffer zone.<sup>108</sup> Following the announcement, Turkey expanded its military reinforcements to the city of al-Bab in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, prompting the GoS, SDF, Russia, and Iran to reinforce their positions in several key areas, including Tal Rifaat and Manbij. Mutual shelling intensified along the conflict lines in subsequent weeks, with some small-scale, preemptive displacements reported. However, though military preparation appeared to be in full swing, Erdogan's plans were met with stiff resistance from all sides, including the US, Russia, and Iran. While the US opposed on the ground that another incursion could destabilize conditions and detract from the fight against ISIS,<sup>109</sup> Russia and Iran emphasized the importance of Syria's territorial integrity.

## PROSPECTS OF A TURKISH-SYRIAN RAPPROCHMENT

Though preparations for a fresh Turkish offensive in northern Syria seemed to be in full swing, prospects of a military operation have receded in recent months, with conciliatory statements largely made by Turkish officials taking the center stage. Although these statements have not been translated into substantive conciliatory acts yet, it remains significant that high-ranking officials in Ankara and opposition parties are openly discussing a potential rapprochement with Damascus.

As early as April, pro-government Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet* reported that Ankara was searching for opportunities to open dialogue channels with Damascus.<sup>110</sup> This was followed by a series of controversial statements in July and August by Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Cavusoglu, expressing his country's willingness to support Damascus against the SDF and emphasizing the importance of reconciliation between opposition forces and the GoS.<sup>111</sup> New details also emerged confirming previous reports on Cavusoglu's meeting with his Syrian counterpart in October 2021 on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Belgrade.<sup>112</sup>

This apparent shift in policy instigated spontaneous large-scale rallies in Turkish-backed opposition-held areas, with some protesters pulling down Turkish flags from administrative buildings.<sup>113</sup> Although Cavusoglu accused media outlets of distorting his statements, clarifying that he had called for a 'compromise' rather than 'peace,' these messages failed to assuage fears of a potential normalization and prompted the foreign minister to meet heads of Syrian opposition to reaffirm Turkey's continued support.<sup>114</sup>

Despite these assurances, concerns were heightened following the late August bilateral Sochi Summit held between President Erdogan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. Having failed to secure a green light for a fresh offensive and encouraged by Moscow to open dialogue channels with Damascus, Erdogan claimed that his country does not seek regime change in Syria while emphasizing the importance of dialogue.<sup>115</sup> Erdogan also revealed that intermittent cooperation between the two countries' respective intelligence agencies have been ongoing, with several meetings held between the heads of the Syrian and

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<sup>108</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Erdogan Says Turkey to Launch Military Operations on its Southern Borders](#)," May 23, 2022.

<sup>109</sup> North Press Agency, "[Biden Talks with Erdogan About Importance of Maintaining Stability in Syria](#)," June 29, 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Arab News, "[Ankara Considering Opportunities to Start Talks with Syria](#)," April 7, 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Turkey Grapples with Policy Change on Syria](#)," August 18, 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Reuters, "[Assad Opponents in Syria Protest Turkish 'Reconciliation' Call](#)," August 12, 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Turkey Grapples with Policy Change on Syria](#)," August 18, 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Middle East Eye, "[Erdogan says Turkey does not seek removal of Assad in Syria](#)," August 19, 2022.



Turkish national security bureaus.<sup>116</sup> In late September, Erdogan stated that these contacts will be key to determining a 'ties roadmap'.<sup>117</sup>

**Turkey's Shifting Calculus.** Previously, the possibility of normalizing relations with Damascus was inconceivable, especially given Turkey's occupation of large swathes of territory in the north, its direct support to opposition groups, as well as its administrative, economic, and service infrastructure involvement in territories under its control. However, with an ailing economy and rising anti-refugee sentiments as public opinion mounts against the \$2 billion annual cost of Turkey's occupation of northern Syria, Erdogan's AKP is seeking to shore up its sagging electoral support ahead of the high-stakes 2023 Turkish elections.<sup>118</sup>

**Electoral Considerations.** AKP's domestic popularity has been gradually eroding since 2015. The party briefly lost its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, before regaining its status in a snap election held five months later after failing to form a coalition government.<sup>119</sup> While this allowed the AKP to unilaterally form a government, Erdogan was left frustrated since his party's seats fell nominally short of the threshold needed for constitutional amendments to trigger a switch from a parliamentary to a presidential system. This prompted Erdogan to seek alliances with ultranationalists, particularly the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which together with the AKP managed to muster the votes needed to hold a referendum on the constitution.<sup>120</sup>

An alliance between the two parties was formalized ahead of the June 2018 election, as Erdogan looked to expand his predominately Islamist and social conservative base.<sup>121</sup> The June 2018 election marked the first parliamentary majority loss for the AKP since 2002, with the party having to rely on MHP to pass legislation.<sup>122</sup> In addition, the AKP lost five of Turkey's six largest cities in the local elections, including its strongholds in megapolises such as Ankara and Istanbul, to its main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP).<sup>123</sup> The electoral successes of the main opposition parties, which have long called for normalization with Damascus and the return of Syrian refugees, likely played a key role in Erdogan's shifting priorities in Syria.

**Refugee Crisis.** Although the AKP's electoral setbacks are driven by a range of issues, including Erdogan's mismanagement of the economic crisis and authoritarian backsliding, the Syrian refugee crisis has become a contentious election issue. Amid soaring inflation, the continuing presence of Syrian refugees is widely viewed as a burden and is often associated with deteriorating public services, as well as increasing competition over housing and labor which has inflated rent prices and diminished job wages. These challenges are exacerbated by cultural differences, as the host-society complains about the 'Arabization' of Turkish culture. For years, the main Turkish opposition parties have peddled the idea of re-establishing diplomatic channels with Damascus to resolve the refugee crisis. While Erdogan's administration has long rejected re-engaging Damascus, rhetorical posturing or an actual rapprochement that would presumably stipulate the repatriation of Syrian refugees could serve Erdogan favorably ahead of next year's election, particularly in drumming up nationalist support and undermining the main opposition's political ammunition.

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<sup>116</sup> Rudaw, "[Meetings Between Turkish, Syrian Intelligences Continue: Erdogan](#)," August 6, 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, "[Erdogan: Turkish Intelligence Contacts with Damascus will Determine 'Ties Roadmap'](#)," September 30, 2022.

<sup>118</sup> Al-Monitor, "[Normalization with Assad is the New Normal in Turkey](#)," August 16, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> BBC News, "[Turkey Election: Ruling AKP Regains Majority](#)," November 2, 2015.

<sup>120</sup> Middle East Eye, "[Turkey's Right-Wing Alliance Bolsters Ruling Party and Divides MHP](#)," March 7, 2017.

<sup>121</sup> The Economist, "[President Erdogan's Alliance with the Far Right Pays Off](#)," July 19, 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Insight Turkey, "[Change and Continuity in Turkey's June 2018 Elections](#)," October 1, 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Al-Jazeera, "[Erdogan's AK Party Loses Major Turkey Cities in Local Elections](#)," April 2, 2019.

## CONDUCTIVE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

After over a decade of conflict and punitive international isolation, Syria is experiencing limited rapprochement, which has gained steam over the last few years. The UAE, Bahrain, Algeria, and Jordan have all taken initial steps toward normalizing relations with Assad, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt appear open to the possibility.<sup>124</sup>

As early as 2018, the UAE and Bahrain moved to reopen their embassies in Damascus. Assad visited the UAE in March 2022, while Jordan resumed flights and reopened its borders with Syria.<sup>125</sup> Prospects of Syria's readmission into the Arab League is also gathering pace, with Algeria pushing for Syria's reintegration.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in June 2022, Syria along with Lebanon and Egypt signed a gas import agreement that will see an Egyptian pipeline extended to Lebanon via Syria, despite potentially exposing Cairo and Beirut to US sanctions for violating the Caesar's Act.<sup>127</sup> The pipeline has been presented as a purely humanitarian project, with the hopes of pressing Washington to permit its construction.

Described as a 'step-for-step' transactional normalization, Arab states have advanced several justifications for re-engaging Damascus, including curbing Iran's influence; ameliorating the economic hardship of civilians; and ensuring conducive conditions for refugee returns while preventing a fresh exodus. The most common justification, however, is that Damascus' re-engagement and promises of reconstruction funds could incentivize Assad to initiate reforms and begin a process of political transition.<sup>128</sup>

More broadly, regional dynamics have seen a palpable shift in recent years, ushering in a new geopolitical setting characterized by normalization and realignment, making diplomatic and economic normalization of feuding countries more conducive now than before. The region has seen a trend of swift fence-mending efforts. Egypt and its Gulf allies have lifted the blockade on Qatar,<sup>129</sup> while Iran-UAE relations have thawed after years of frosty relations.<sup>130</sup> Bitter rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran have also taken preliminary steps towards rapprochement.<sup>131</sup>

Further, Ankara has recalibrated its foreign policy and turned over a new leaf in its relations with several neighbors, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, and Israel.<sup>132</sup> These bilateral relations have been, to a great extent, encouraged by the Biden Administration's de-prioritization of the Middle East, although there are regional- and country-specific reasons as well. The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged regional actors to adopt a more pragmatic foreign policy agendas, prioritizing trade, investment, and security. Further, the Russian-Ukraine conflict and its implications, particularly on food and energy security, has highlighted the importance of the Middle East and its oil and gas resources.

Although Washington continues to maintain a non-engagement policy with Assad, even discouraging normalization while continuing to enforce the Caesar's Act, it has not taken serious action against normalizing states. There are several probable explanations for this. On the one hand, no concrete steps have been taken by these normalizing countries that would undermine US foreign policy objectives in Syria,

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<sup>124</sup> Brookings Institution, "[Assad's Normalization and the Politics of Erasure in Syria](#)," January 13, 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Daily Sabah, "[Syria Chooses to Remain Out of Arab League Amid Mixed Reactions](#)," September 10, 2022.

<sup>127</sup> Brookings Institution, "[Assad's Normalization and the Politics of Erasure in Syria](#)," January 13, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> The Washington Post, "[Saudi Arabia Just Lifted Qatar's 43-Month Blockade. How Did This Rift End?](#)" January 8, 2021.

<sup>130</sup> The National News, "[The UAE-Iran Diplomatic Reset is Part of a Greater Focus on Regional Stability](#)," August 24, 2022.

<sup>131</sup> Middle East Institute, "[Where to Now for Saudi-Iranian Dialogue?](#)" October 21, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> CFR, "[Why Turkey is Resetting Relations with Saudi Arabia](#)," May 4, 2022.



as re-engagement with Damascus to date has been limited to diplomatic overtures devoid of economic cooperation or direct investment. On the other, the Biden Administration does not view re-engagement with Assad in isolation, but rather as part of regional reconciliation diplomacy. From Washington's perspective this is both positive and timely for regional stability as it continues to shift its foreign policy framework to great power competition, namely with China and Russia. The Biden Administration will seek to strengthen these reconciliation dialogue mechanisms, while at the same time continuing to oppose normalization with Assad.

# ANNEX B: OVERVIEW OF KEY ACTORS

Objectives by Order of Priority	
<b>US</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevent ISIS resurgence</li> <li>2. Maintain existing ceasefires</li> <li>3. Ensure continuation and expansion of humanitarian aid</li> <li>4. Enforce the Caesar Act</li> <li>5. Curb Iran's influence</li> <li>6. Demand GoS accountability</li> <li>7. Push for a political resolution to the Syrian conflict</li> </ol>
<b>Turkey</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Erdogan's domestic standing ahead of 2023 election</li> <li>2. Eliminate extremist threats</li> <li>3. Prevent Kurdish autonomy</li> <li>4. Prevent new refugee exodus to its borders</li> <li>5. Repatriate Turkey-based Syrian refugees</li> <li>6. Push for power-sharing arrangements between GoS and opposition groups</li> </ol>
<b>Russia</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthen GoS resilience in Damascus</li> <li>2. Maintain economic and security interests</li> <li>3. Secure air and naval bases</li> <li>4. Secure access to the M4 Highway</li> <li>5. Curb Iran's growing influence</li> </ol>
<b>Government of Syria (GoS)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reclaim territories under SNA and HTS control</li> <li>2. Centralize and monopolize humanitarian aid</li> <li>3. Expel Turkish and US forces</li> <li>4. Enhance GoS legitimacy</li> </ol>
<b>Iran</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maintain network of militia influence and bottom-up approach</li> <li>2. Expel Turkish and US forces from Syria</li> <li>3. Maintain economic assets and interests</li> <li>4. Continue to threaten Israel</li> <li>5. Defeat opposition forces in NWS</li> </ol>
<b>Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SANES)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure survival</li> <li>2. Maintain US support</li> <li>3. Consolidate control over its territories.</li> </ol>
<b>Syrian National Army (SNA)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure survival</li> <li>2. Maintain Turkish/international patronage</li> <li>3. Weaken competition to consolidate control (HTS)</li> </ol>
<b>Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maintain current status-quo</li> <li>2. Enhance international image</li> <li>3. Bring opposition groups(SNA) under its umbrella</li> </ol>

# ANNEX C: SCENARIO DRIVERS

SCENARIO DRIVERS				
Scenario drivers that are italicized can be used by the reader as visible indicators to signpost the progression of events along normalization pathways. This can be used to inform programming by indicating likely evolutions and consequences of Ankara-Damascus relations.				
Political	S1	S2	S3	S4
Both parties perceive the optics of a normalization process as politically beneficial	1	2		
Domestic political pressures prompt Erdogan to pursue normalization	1	2	3	
<i>Negotiations between Ankara and Damascus' heads of intelligence make progress, move a step higher to involve ministers and senior diplomats</i>	1	2		
<i>Ongoing talks at the intelligence level fail to arrive at a mutually acceptable roadmap to elevate talks to higher levels</i>			3	4
<i>Both parties re-establish consular relations, re-open their embassies, and exchange ambassadors</i>		2		
<i>A meeting between Erdogan and Assad is facilitated</i>		2		
<i>Negotiations between all conflicting parties intensify preceding any unilateral action</i>		2	3	
<i>GoS-SDF advance their own negotiations to discuss long-term partnership</i>			3	4
<i>Russia continues to advocate for Turkish security interests</i>		2	3	
<i>State officials and socialization agents (media) continue to soften tone, adopt a conciliatory attitude</i>	1	2	3	
<i>Turkey suspends operations of Syrian opposition media outlets within its territory, but continues to provide military and financial assistance</i>		2		
<i>Ankara and Damascus develop a comprehensive normalization plan</i>		2		
<i>Ankara and Damascus agree to cooperate through compartmentalizing on discrete topics of mutual concern</i>			3	
<i>Transgressions of one party's redline lead to a collapse of the normalization process</i>				4
<i>Reneging on agreement promises by one party results in a breakdown of normalization</i>				4
<i>A significant domestic event in Turkey that drastically changes Erdogan's value as a negotiating partner for Assad</i>				4
<i>Damascus demands Turkey withdraws from northern Syria and ends support to opposition groups</i>	1			4
<i>Turkey recognizes Syria's territorial sovereignty over areas under its control</i>		2		
<i>Parties agree to the establishment of safe zones, some of which are administered by GoS</i>		2		
<i>A conditional timetable is set for Turkish withdrawal from northern Syria contingent on GoS reconciliation with Turkish-backed opposition groups</i>		2		

No concessions are made prior to the Turkish 2023 election	1			4
<i>Negotiations are suspended</i>				4
<i>Opposition factions reject reconciliation with the GoS; Turkey uses carrot-and-stick approach to coerce the opposition to come to the negotiation table</i>	2			
Damascus refuses power-sharing arrangements with the opposition	1		3	4
<i>GoS issues a general amnesty decree extensive in scope</i>	2			
<i>Turkey expresses support for Damascus aid modality</i>	2			
<b>Security</b>				
Both parties arrive at a mutual recognition of their respective security concerns	2		3	
Parties pursue strategic security gains through cooperative action through negotiation, resulting in changes in areas of control	2		3	
<i>The Adana Accord is re-activated and broadened, resulting in re-established security coordination, intelligence sharing, and joint patrols</i>	2			
Turkey acquiesces to Damascus demands to remove its observational posts from Idlib	2			
<i>Turkey draws down its military presence in southern Idlib and repositions north of the M4 strip</i>			3	
Parties retain option of unilateral action within normalization agreement	1	2	3	4
Turkey moves to unilaterally take control of Tal Rifaat	1	2	3	
Turkey attempts to drive an HTS withdrawal from southern Idlib	2		3	
Turkey moves to unilaterally take control of Manbij and Kobani			3	4
Ankara initiates a process of rebranding for SNA factions	2			
An increase in PKK threats drives Turkey to pursue unilateral action	1		3	4
<i>Ankara-Damascus rapprochement divides the SNA, pushing some towards HTS</i>	2			
<b>Social</b>				
A repatriation protocol is created for the return of refugees to established safe zones	2			
GoS facilitates population movements from Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobani	2			
Turkey foots reconstruction and humanitarian aid for safe zones	2			
Damascus refuses Turkish plans for protected zones	1			4
<b>Economics</b>				
<i>Both parties re-open their airspace to each other</i>	2			
<i>Crossings between Turkish-held opposition areas and GoS territories are re-opened</i>	2			