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Can Baghdad, Moscow rekindle Syria-Turkiye ties?

Despite Erdogan's conciliatory rhetorical shift, the critical question remains whether

Ankara is willing to translate words into action that regains Damascus' trust.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has significantly [softened his rhetoric](#) towards Syria, replacing 12 years of aggressive statements with a more conciliatory tone.

Instead of demanding the overthrow of the Syrian state, Erdogan now emphasizes mutual support and the establishment of a new, just, and comprehensive social contract with Damascus. This shift was highlighted in his statements upon returning last week from Astana, Kazakhstan, where Turkiye participated in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit as a dialogue partner of the 10-member Eurasian powerhouse.

“We will always stand by a prosperous, united and inclusive Syria embracing each other on the basis of a new social contract,” Erdogan was [quoted](#) as saying.

Returning from a visit to Germany on 7 July, Erdogan [went further](#):

We will extend our invitation [to Assad]; with this invitation, we want to restore Turkiye-Syria relations to the same level as in the past. Our invitation may be extended at any time.

... We have now arrived at a point where if Bashar Assad takes a step towards improving relations with Turkiye, we will also show that approach towards him.

The key question now is whether Erdogan believes his statements will rebuild years of shattered trust with Damascus – a trust that Turkish policies have systematically eroded since 2011.

Diplomacy to discord

In 2011, as the foreign-backed armed conflict in Syria began unfolding, Turkiye took a series of escalatory steps against Damascus. It was a dramatic shift from what had been

described as a “[honeymoon](#)” period between the two neighboring states following the visit of former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to Damascus in 2000.

That visit had marked the start of a new era of cooperation and understanding, further solidified by the arrival of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the Turkish political scene and the implementation of a new Turkish [foreign policy model](#), “zero problems with neighbors,” formulated by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

But that lull all but disappeared in August 2011 when Davutoglu visited Damascus with a message stacked with demands, which the Syrians rejected. In short shrift, the bilateral relationship began a downward spiral, with Ankara calling for President Assad to step down and arming militants that would form the so-called Free Syrian Army. Turkiye closed its embassy in Damascus in March 2012 and held a [conference](#) for Syrian opposition forces one month later.

From that point, Ankara systematically worked to destroy the Syrian economy, arming militias that targeted and devastated Syria’s infrastructure. This included facilitating the [looting of factories](#) in Aleppo’s Sheikh Najjar Industrial City, leading to widespread destruction and the city’s economic decline.

As political researcher Nader al-Omari recounts to *The Cradle*, Turkiye “used the refugee card to pressure the Syrian state as well as to blackmail the west to obtain funds, and created justifications for interfering in Syria’s internal affairs from a military point of view.”

Today, however, Omari believes the recent Turkish overtures towards Syria stem from a strategic dead end:

The Turkish effort to intervene in regional and international crises with the aim of reviving the Ottoman Sultanate in a new way or proving its presence at the regional and international levels has reached a dead end, and coincided with a significant decline in the Turkish economy, and a big slap suffered by Erdogan and his party. The recent parliamentary elections showed the decline in the popularity of the AKP and the growing influence of the internal opposition.

“The Turkish regime’s fear that Donald Trump may come to power in the United States again are all factors that paved the way for the Turkish regime to retreat from a series of policies it pursued over a decade,” he adds.

The uneasy path to normalization

But Erdogan’s call for normalized relations with Damascus has sparked unrest among Syrian factions loyal to Ankara, who had believed Erdogan’s electoral victory would

secure their interests. Protests and clashes followed in northwestern Syria, although these quickly subsided. As Turkish affairs expert Sarkis Qasrjian tells *The Cradle*:

The reaction of the armed groups is expected, especially since this shock and signs of the start of the normalization path were the strongest compared to their predecessors. But the reaction was not widespread.

Qasrjian notes that Turkiye can manage these reactions, particularly in cities where it has significant influence through Turkish intelligence-controlled groups. The issue of terrorist groups in northern Syria remains a significant [obstacle to rapprochement](#).

Turkiye demands security along its borders but has yet to address the presence of these tens of thousands of militants in areas like Idlib and northern Aleppo. Qasrjian argues that Turkiye's security concerns are not substantiated by on-the-ground realities, as attacks on Turkiye have not originated from areas controlled by the Syrian government or the US-backed Kurdish militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Iraqi and Russian-brokered talks

The potential for [Iraq](#) and Russia to facilitate a reliable normalization process between Syria and Turkiye has generated significant discussion in recent weeks. Analysts are scrutinizing areas of convergence and disagreement that could influence the restoration of relations between the two neighboring states. As Erdogan [told reporters](#) during his flight home from Berlin:

Russian President Vladimir Putin has an approach regarding our meeting [with Assad] in Turkiye, and the Iraqi Prime Minister has an approach. We are talking here about mediation, so why not with our neighbor?

But despite these renewed mediation efforts, Turkish ambitions appear far from being realized. Ankara lacks a mature vision for resolving the Syrian refugee crisis and addressing the presence of terrorists and their armaments in northern Syria. Moreover, Turkiye has not taken responsibility for the demographic changes it has created in northern Syria.

Turkiye's discussions of rapprochement with Damascus continue to lack the concrete measures demanded by Syria, the primary one being the total [withdrawal of Turkish forces](#) from their areas of deployment.

A media source familiar with the talks informs *The Cradle* that Ankara has insisted that details of any meetings between the two sides remain confidential, including the dates and discussion terms at the upcoming Baghdad dialogue table.

Although no date has been set for the Baghdad meeting, an informed source confirms ongoing efforts to reach a mutual understanding based on Syrian conditions for Turkiye's announcement of a troop withdrawal.

Ankara's ambiguous intentions

Erdogan's recent statements have not given clarity on what Ankara will offer in this regard. Qasrjian believes that "Turkiye will not pay anything as compensation for the results of its policies over the past 12 years, and it is economically unable to pay anything. On the contrary, it expects to gain, particularly political gains."

He suggests that Ankara's primary interest may be in fostering a relationship with Syria that could serve as a bridge to improved relations with western countries. This could potentially open a political horizon for normalization between Syria and the west. Alternatively, engagement with Syria could provide the Turkish president with leverage in both the east and west.

One important, common basis for dialogue between Damascus and Ankara could be the threat posed by the SDF and other Kurdish groups under US protection. However, the caveats for both sides are significant.

The desired political and economic gains from this rapprochement remain elusive. There is a prevailing belief among Syrian officials and the public that any path to normalization must include practical steps and real guarantees.

Without these, progress will be slow and cautious. While regional powers' attempts to push positively may succeed in partially restoring relations to the level of negative rivalry that existed in the 1980s and 1990s, a return to the "honeymoon" period of the early 2000s requires sincere intentions and serious steps from Turkiye.

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