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Syria/Turkey

Erdogan and the Syrian opposition: Failing the Syrian people once again

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Widespread demonstrations recently took place in the North West of Syria, both in the areas controlled by jihadist group Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS) and the Turkish army, following a [statement](#) made by the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu calling for the reconciliation between the Syrian government and opposition. Syrian demonstrators' main slogan was "no reconciliation with the butcher". Two protestors were [detained](#) and handed over to Turkish custody for burning the Turkish flag.

The main Syrian opposition, recognised by international and regional states, as well as armed opposition groups in the North West have [defended](#) Turkey's policy and condemned all attacks on Turkish symbols, including the flag.

This position, reflective of a more general reactionary policy by opposition groups, has contributed to the defeat of the Syrian uprising as the Turkish AKP government scrambles to remain in power.

Turkish interests before anything else

The Syrian National Army (SNA), which acts as an armed proxy for Ankara in Syria and is [guilty of many human rights violations](#), the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (Etilaf) and the Syrian Interim Government's Defence Ministry welcomed Turkey's support and [denounced](#) the flag burning perpetrators as "prejudiced and ignorant people who do not represent the values of the revolution."

These statements demonstrate the continued dependency on the Turkish government, and reinforces that the opposition's existence is more linked to Turkish interests, than the Syrian people. The SNA and armed opposition groups have already participated in multiple Turkish military interventions, particularly against areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). It is dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is labelled a terrorist organisation by Ankara.

These SNA has also assisted in the Turkish occupation of conquered lands in the country, while Syrian opposition bodies have supported these actions. This includes the [invasion and occupation](#) of the Afrin region since the beginning of 2018, which led to massive violation of human rights and the forced displacement of approximately 137,000 people, predominantly Kurdish residents.

Under Ankara's command, the exiled opposition and armed opposition groups justified their involvement by claiming that the Kurds were actually allies of the Syrian regime and that it was important to keep Syria united against separatist groups such as the PKK/PYD. Videos of Syrian fighters emerged during this period showing [racist and hateful rhetoric](#) against the Kurds, as well as slogans in favour of Saddam Hussein and Erdogan.

Civilian homes, agricultural lands and stores in Afrin are continuously looted by these same armed opposition groups.

In recent months, as Erdogan increased his threats about a new military invasion in Northern Syria, in the cities of Tel Rifaat and Manbij – the Aleppo governorate controlled by the Syrian Democratic forces – [opposition groups also stated their readiness to participate in it](#).

Erdogan's strategy

In reality, the actions of these opposition groups reflect their long-standing inability to formulate a credible, democratic, and inclusive alternative or act as representatives of the protest movement's initial objectives.

Moreover, Ankara has no intention of challenging the Syrian regime. Erdogan's [declaration](#) on 19 August reflected this. He stated that, "Ankara is not eyeing Syria and that Syria's territorial integrity is important to Turkey", while adding that their "main contention is the fight against terrorism in northern Syria". In other words, Erdogan has no desire to oppose, let alone threaten the Syrian regime.

A few days later, the foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, [stated](#) that, "Turkey has no preconditions for dialogue with Syria but any talks should focus on security on their border".

Ankara's move towards normalisation with Damascus is motivated by two main objectives. Firstly, Erdogan seeks to gain votes ahead of the Presidential elections in 2023, notably by accelerating the forced return of Syrian refugees to Syria.

Over the past two years, there have been signs of a rise in racist and xenophobic attacks against Syrians in Turkey. Thousands of Syrians have already been deported, while Erdogan announced in May that the government was working to return one million Syrian refugees to the areas under Turkish security control in northern Syria.

Turkish willingness to attract foreign funding in the areas under its control in the North West Syria also serves this objective. Furthermore, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), as well as the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, have played a key role in assisting the consolidation of Turkish control and occupation of Syria's territories, not to mention providing services to fighters of the SNA.

Secondly, Erdogan hopes to undermine Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in Syria through military interventions, while continuing its repression at home. His recent, declarations that "it is necessary to finish what has been started," refers to an extension of the thirty kilometres wide "security zone" repeatedly conquered by the Turkish army and its Syrian armed proxies in 2016, 2018, and 2019.

In this context, Ankara's nationalist overtones and the threat of a new military operation in Syria allow it to position itself as a unifying leader and to revive the nationalist sentiment of the electorate. A card that has already been brandished in the past, especially during previous military incursions into northern Syria.

While it is important to always remember that the violent crushing of the Syrian uprising lies at the feet of the Syrian regime and its allies - Russia and Iran, the opposition also authored many of its own failures. Similarly, there should be no illusion about Ankara's policies; they have constantly served Turkey's political interests which run against those the Syrian uprisings.

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Source [The New Arab](#).

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