



Türkiye's Post-Assad Strategy: An Analysis of its Evolving Geopolitical Posture in Syria

Rayees Yousuf Mir, Mohammad Shahnawaz



Abstract: *The fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024 is widely viewed as a crucial turning point in the Syrian conflict. The fall opened a new period of political alignments and regional contestation. In this context, Türkiye has been seen as one of the most crucial external players shaping Syria. This article examines Türkiye's strategy in post-Assad Syria by analysing the evolution of its geopolitical posture. The article argues that Türkiye has transitioned towards a dual strategy that combines security engagement with political, economic, and institutional mechanisms oriented towards shaping and defining Syria's post-conflict order. Drawing on regional power theory, the article analyses three key dimensions of Türkiye's evolving posture: security and territorial influence, political and institutional engagement, and economic and reconstruction leverage. The article contends that Türkiye's approach reflects a pragmatic recalibration rather than a withdrawal, positioning Ankara as the most important actor in determining Syria's governance and regional alignment in the near future. By moving beyond an intervention-centric analysis, this study contributes to the emerging literature on post-Assad Syria. It offers insights into the changing nature of the influence of the regional powers in the Middle East.*

Keywords: *Regional Power, Arab Spring, SDF, Regional Leadership, Türkiye-Syria Relations, Turkish Foreign Policy, Great Powers.*

Nomenclature:

RMP: Restrained Middle Power

OMP: Over-Ambitious Middle Power

HTS: Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

I. INTRODUCTION

Turkish foreign policy has faced some of its most critical tests in the Syrian context. Until the 2011 Syrian uprising, relations with Damascus were often cited as a leading example of the effectiveness of Türkiye's "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy, advocated by Ahmet Davutoglu (D'Alema, 2017) [1]. After years of tension in the 1990s, relations between Türkiye and Syria fundamentally changed following the 1999 Adana Agreement, leading the way for an unusually close bilateral relationship during the initial years of AKP rule (D'Alema, 2017) [1].

Increasing economic exchanges, maintenance of high-level economic exchanges, sustained high-level diplomatic engagement, and liberalised visa arrangements that enhanced cross-border mobility transformed Türkiye-Syria relations, which were seen as a model of pragmatic regional cooperation. This relationship was well defined by material interdependence and societal lineages rather than by the overt promotion of democratic norms or any ideological alignment. However, due to the commencement of the Arab Uprisings and their eventual spread into Syria, this relationship was negatively impacted, which was pragmatically calibrated. These protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad, over time, turned into widespread unrest, and the government responded with heavy, forceful suppression, which strained Türkiye's engagement-based policy and prompted its recalibration towards wider security issues (Athamneh and Sajej, 2020) [2]. This led to the collapse of Türkiye's previous reliance on instruments of soft power and interdependence, compelling Türkiye's decision-makers to prioritise refugee management, border security, and the containment of extremist groups. Hence, the Syrian crisis became crucial to Türkiye's regional posture, shifting its foreign policy from mediation and connectivity to security-driven pragmatism. By mid-2011, Turkish policymakers had concluded that continued accommodation of Syria would risk associating Türkiye with instability and suppression, contradicting the narrative of Türkiye as a regional soft power. This recalibration marks a decisive departure from Türkiye's past pragmatism, as Ankara gradually shifted from mediation to open political confrontation. In this way, Türkiye aligned itself more closely with the calls for regime change by regional and Western powers. Hence, Türkiye crossed a critical threshold, shifting its role from a facilitator of stability to an active contender in Syria's internal conflict. Thus, the Arab Spring served as a turning point, exposing Türkiye's previous engagement-oriented policy toward Syria. The overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 marks a far deeper rupture compared to past policy reversals, as it inaugurated a qualitatively new stage in the regional and political environment of Syria. Since the earlier period was dominated by the dynamics of regime survival, external intervention, and militarisation, Syria has, after the fall of the Assad regime, emerged as a contested arena of reconstruction, influence-building, and institutional reconfiguration. In this new arena, Türkiye's long-standing military and political entanglements have provided the foundation for a strategic repositioning that extends beyond immediate security issues. Türkiye has increasingly sought to shape Syria's post-Assad trajectory through a multidimensional toolkit that combines military leverage with political engagement, economic integration, and

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soft-power mechanisms to increase its influence within the emerging structures of long-term governance. This article examines Türkiye's post-Assad strategy by tracing the evolution of its geopolitical positioning from intervention to influence. The article argues that Türkiye has reshaped its Syria policy around a hybrid approach that does not ignore core security imperatives while also prioritising sustained leverage over governance arrangements, economic networks, and regional partnerships in the long term. By shifting the analytical focus away from intervention-focused narratives of Türkiye's Syria strategy, the article enhances the emerging literature on geopolitics in the post-Assad era.

II. CONTEXTUALISING EARLIER RESEARCH

The fall of the Assad regime brought crucial changes in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. This development made it necessary to reevaluate academic research on Turkey's role, from a peripheral player "seeking security" to an active player "maintaining regional stability." This section provides a thorough examination of current research on regional power theories, historical developments, and strategic autonomy, to define Türkiye's rising role as a crucial architect of the Syrian order post-Assad.

The analysis of Türkiye's role as a regional power has evolved from an emphasis on "soft power" in the early 2010s to a more assertive "Offensive Realist" framework. Nolte (2010) [3] defines regional powers as those that possess both the capability and the desire to influence their geographic neighbourhoods, to shape regional order in accordance with their own preferences. Flermes (2007) [4] identifies three most important features of regional powers: they have enough material resources, such as military and economic resources, compared to their neighbours; they assert a leadership role in regional issues; and both regional and extra-regional entities acknowledge them as important players. Türkiye's presence in Syria defines the strengths and limitations associated with regional power dynamics. Türkiye's military capabilities, as Yeşiltaş (2020) [5] noted, is an "assertive military and defence strategy." This includes the scope for prolonged cross-border operations, the establishment of territorial control, and the maintenance of proxy forces over an extended period. Hokayem and Momtaz (2024) [6] talk about Türkiye's interventions in Syria and Libya as case studies of "coercive diplomacy," illustrating Ankara's potential to exert influence through a combination of conventional military operations and proxy warfare. Kardaş (2020) [7] discusses Türkiye's "coercive diplomatic" strategies that combine military force with political goals to secure leverage in contested territory. Türkiye has the means to finance military operations and establish basic governance structures in conquered territories, creating parallel administrative and economic systems to sustain a long-term presence.

However, Türkiye cannot influence outcomes in contested regions where several other regional and great powers are also present. Türkiye's autonomy and capacity to fulfil maximalist goals are limited by Syria's complex nature, which involves great-power (such as Russia and the US) and regional-power (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia) rivalries. As Oğuzlu (2023) [8] argues that Türkiye's national interests would be more precisely addressed through a restrained

middle power (RMP) approach than through an over-ambitious middle power (OMP) strategy. Turkish foreign policy ought to focus on preserving territorial integrity, ensuring economic stability, and fostering social cohesion rather than prioritising regional leadership or emulating the great-power Realpolitik models demonstrated by Russia or China. Recent shifts in Türkiye's foreign policy indicate an important trend toward a more restrained orientation.

Early scholarly assessments placed much emphasis on Türkiye's evolution from the principle of "zero problems with neighbours" to a strategy of proactive engagement. During the 2000s, Türkiye began to reshape its policy in line with Ahmet Davutoğlu's principles of "strategic depth" and "zero problems" (Islam, 2015) [9]. It made stronger connections with neighbouring countries, particularly those that were once part of the Ottoman territories. The AKP aimed to position Türkiye as a prominent player, particularly in the wider Middle East, by utilising soft power tools, including finance, trade, cultural initiatives, ethnic and religious connections, and diplomatic efforts.

Another body of research categorises Türkiye's policy in Syria from the post-Arab Spring period until the downfall of Assad as involving securitisation and the application of force. This period of time is defined by Ankara's military interventions, backing of anti-Assad armed factions, and establishment of buffer zones in northern Syria (Okyay, 2017) [10]. The analysis identifies three primary forces: (a) addressing perceived Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) / People's Defence Units (YPG) threats to domestic security; (b) managing uncontrolled refugee returns that may lead to destabilisation of Turkish politics; and (c) using proxies to impact battlefield outcomes. (Kardas, 2025) [11]. Barkey (2014) claims that this policy suggested the AKP government's ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood and its strong commitment to the inevitability of Assad's downfall. In his Survival article "Turkey's Syria Predicament," Barkey examines how Ankara's earlier enthusiasm for supporting the Syrian opposition was influenced by the anticipation that Assad's regime would swiftly collapse, similar to other Arab Spring uprisings, leading to the emergence of a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned government in Damascus that would align with Turkish interests. According to Aydıntaşbaş (2016) [12], Türkiye became an important supporter of Syrian opposition troops, offering shelter, training, and logistical aid after the 2011 uprising. Her analysis of Türkiye-Russia claims that "tensions first began to rise as the one-time friends were sucked into the regional struggle for Syria – while Russia backed Assad, Türkiye agitated for regime change."

Contemporary assessments and reports from various think tanks show that Türkiye has transitioned to a more pragmatic approach in engaging with the successor regime in Syria since the fall of Assad in December 2024. Several studies provide that Türkiye sees the Syrian landscape in the post-Assad era as a chance to (a) enhance the security advancements against some Kurdish entities, (b) preserve economic and energy interests, and (c) increase diplomatic influence in Syria's reconstruction. Several studies highlight that Türkiye makes significant efforts to engage with various actors, including



Gulf countries, Russia, and Western capitals, while maintaining its strategic autonomy (Celik, 2025) [13].

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is extensive literature that concurs that a primary condition for regional “power hood” is the possession of significant and valued material and non-material resources relative to other countries in the given geographical region (Destradi [14]; Nolte and Prys, 2018). These resources are: military capabilities, economic capacity, technological advancement, demographic weight, and political influence, which, in combination, make a state capable of shaping outcomes and agendas in the region (Destradi [14], Nolte and Prys, 2018). The fundamental requirement for achieving regional power status is hard-power capability, but it is not sufficient in itself to ensure effective leadership (Destradi [14]; Nolte and Prys, 2018). Leadership is the capacity to translate material preponderance into sustained influence, which depends on factors such as institutional engagement, diplomatic credibility, normative appeal, and issue-specific expertise. Hence, regional leadership is not the result of power asymmetries but must be actively framed and maintained. At the same time, regional power status does not arise automatically, nor is it confined to strict geographical boundaries. Regional power does not depend only on spatial location but is also shaped by patterns of influence, interaction, and recognition within and across regions. Regional powers, at the same time, may operate across several regional subsystems and have an impact beyond their well-defined regions. Such cross-regional engagement undermines the traditional classifications, which were mainly region-based. One such example is Türkiye, which enjoys significant political, economic, and security influence in certain regions, such as the Black Sea, the Middle East, and the Balkans (Destradi [14]; Nolte and Prys, 2018). This type of multidimensional regional presence shows the relational and context-dependent nature of powerhood in the region. It is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by strategic interests, historical ties, and the capacity to project leverage across overlapping regional spaces. Apart from possessing the valued resources, regional powers are also defined by their ability to affect outcomes within and across neighbouring regions. In the context of Syria, Türkiye’s military incursions, economic clout, and societal ties through refugee networks all contribute to its regional power. Syria is the critical arena where Türkiye’s status as a regional power is discussed and consolidated. This theoretical framing foregrounds the fact that Türkiye’s post-Assad strategy is not only reactive but also part of its broader objective of maintaining regional powerhood across different geopolitical theatres.

The theoretical literature stresses that regional leadership is a context-dependent, relational process. Türkiye’s path in Syria highlights the need to supplement material capabilities with diplomatic credibility, institutional engagement and normative appeal to generate followership. In a region notable by historical rivalries, fluid polarity, and the presence of competing powers, Ankara’s leadership measures have been both enabled and constrained by the willingness of other actors to recognise its role. This case can thus be used as an

example of the broader argument that regional leadership is not an automatic result of power asymmetries but a contested and secured process.

A. Brief Background of Türkiye–Syria Relations (1990s to Early AKP Era)

The nature of relations between Türkiye and Syria in the 90s was security-driven, dominated by hard security concerns, largely zero-sum, and resistant to diplomatic trust-building. Throughout the 1990s, relations were mostly unfriendly and characterized by profound strategic distrust. Bilateral tensions were a result of multiple security and political disputes, foremost among them was Syria’s support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which was one of the most critical sources of bilateral tension, which Türkiye regarded as an existential threat to its territorial integrity (D’Alema, 2017) [1]. Additional sources of friction included discord over the sharing of Euphrates River waters and lingering border sensitivities related to the status of Hatay province (D’Alema, 2017) [1]. As a result, bilateral relations during this period repeatedly escalated to the point of open military confrontation.

The transition in relations from hostility to cooperation between Türkiye and Syria took place only in the late 90s. The turning point in these relations occurred in 1998–99 with the conclusion of the Adana Agreement, through which Syria promised to restrict PKK activities and remove its leadership (Younes, 2019) [15]. Egypt and Iran brokered the mediation; the Adana Agreement addressed Türkiye’s principal security concerns by forcing Damascus to cease its backing of the PKK, recognise the group as a terrorist organisation, and remove Abdullah Öcalan from Syria (Younes, 2019) [15]. This accord laid the foundation for a steady normalization of bilateral ties in the early 2000s. With the crucial and immediate threat resolved, the early 2000s witnessed a gradual recalibration of relations toward cooperation, catalysed by the AKP’s rise to power in 2002 and Ahmet Davutoğlu’s strategic depth doctrine (D’Alema, 2017) [1].

B. Relations up to 2011 Under AKP (Pre-Arab Spring Era)

Under the AKP, Türkiye–Syria relations entered what analysts often called a “golden age.” Syria was instrumental to both the theoretical framing and practical implementation of Türkiye’s “zero problems with neighbours” policy, a hallmark of Ankara’s foreign policy during the early AKP era (Phillips, 2012) [16]. Advanced under Davutoğlu’s strategic vision, the doctrine focused on recalibrating Türkiye’s regional behaviour away from a security-driven approach towards engagement, economic interdependence, and diplomatic assertiveness. Among Türkiye’s regional relationships, Syria represented the finest—and most frequently cited—example of the policy’s apparent efficacy. Regular high-level political contacts, fast-expanding trade, and the introduction of a visa-free regime fostered exceptional flows of people and goods across the border (Islam, 2016, pp. 7-41) [17]. Collaboration stretched beyond economics into cultural and diplomatic arenas, with Ankara presenting itself as a cooperative player rather than a hegemonic regional actor. This approach was rooted in the wider “zero

problems with neighbours” doctrine, which placed great importance on economic interdependence, soft-power influence, and regional integration, while consciously avoiding direct challenges to existing political systems (Murrinson, 2006, pp. 945-964) [18]. The relations between Türkiye and Syria extended beyond elite diplomacy or trade figures, as people-to-people contacts were high, altering the social and economic realities of border regions daily. The increased interaction and mobility slowly gave rise to local constituencies with a direct interest in strengthening and maintaining cordial bilateral relations.

Societal connectivity and economic interdependence improved due to the visa-free regime and open-border policies. There was a sevenfold increase in tourism between Türkiye and Syria between 2002 and 2011, reaching nearly 10 lakh per year (Philips, 2012). This enhanced mobility led to a boom in tourism, particularly in the southern cities of Antakya and Gaziantep, where cross-border transactions resulted in real economic gains. At the cultural level, Turkish television series were dubbed into Arabic, especially by Syrian production companies, thereby penetrating Turkish culture into Arab domestic spaces, enhancing its soft power while subtly reconfiguring regional perceptions (Bilbassy-Charters, 2010) [19] [21]. Hence, Türkiye's engagement strategy was not limited to official circles but also reached the daily lives of Arabs, permeating their popular culture and living rooms. Syria had served as a gateway for Türkiye to the Arab world, and from an economic perspective, it had been crucial to Türkiye's regional outreach. By the late 2000s, Syria had been widely regarded as a cornerstone of Türkiye's regional policy. Türkiye's approach was explicitly pragmatic.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring, however, constituted a crucial turning point in the relationship between the two countries. The Arab Spring, as a trigger event, shattered Türkiye's past diplomatic framework. The escalation of peaceful protests into violent confrontation between the Assad regime and its counterforces in Syria undermined the foundations of Türkiye-Syria relations. It forced Ankara to readjust its foreign policy in response to the regime crisis and civil war. With the intensification of state repression by the Assad regime and the escalation of the Syrian conflict into full-scale militarisation (Hinnebusch, 2012, pp. 95-113) [20], Türkiye's engagement with Syria became highly unsustainable. The Arab Spring compelled Türkiye to quickly shift its policies from cautious diplomatic engagement to explicit opposition and direct involvement in the Syrian conflict.

C. Türkiye's Post-Assad Strategy: From Intervention to Influence

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Türkiye has been a principal supporter of opposition forces. This role has placed it in a central position in the conflict's aftermath. This unforeseen evolution has made Türkiye a decisive actor in shaping Syria's future, bringing considerable strategic opportunities. At the core of this role lie Türkiye's relations with several armed groups operating inside Syria. Most notably, Ankara's engagement with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—which has emerged as the most dominant actor among Syria's armed factions—is of crucial significance (Cevik, 2024) [22]. This relationship is playing an important

role in shaping the contours of a post-Assad Syria and Türkiye's long-term regional influence. Several scholars argue that Türkiye's support has been instrumental in ensuring HTS's organisational survival and facilitating its transformation into a quasi-state actor (Cevik, 2024), a development that has, in turn, reinforced Ankara's contemporary influence in Syria's post-conflict trajectory. The downfall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of Ahmad Al Shara, a figure aligned with Turkish interests, marked a crucial point in the strategic landscape that had previously defined Türkiye's Syria policy. Unlike the Assad era, which forced Ankara to rely on military intervention and securitised policies, Al-Shara's pro-Türkiye orientation opened new opportunities for influence-building. The change in leadership enabled Türkiye to convert wartime investments into long-term geopolitical leverage, thereby embedding Turkish influence in Syria's nascent post-conflict order.

Türkiye adopted a dual-track approach by combining military entrenchment with efforts to revive infrastructure and economic activity in post-Assad Syria (Sharawi, 2025) [23]. Türkiye has become “the most influential external player in post-Assad Syria,” shaping the country's political transition, security architecture and regional orientation, Ahmad Sharawi argues. Unlike previous phases of the conflict in which Iran and Russia were predominant, the post-Assad Syrian order mirrors Ankara's strategic interests, especially in countering Kurdish autonomy, shaping governance, and managing the regional balance (Sharawi, 2025) [23]. This framework clearly delineates between a pre-Assad Syrian phase, where securitised and interventionist policies were characteristic features and influenced influence-building and the acquisition of sustained leverage in the post-Assad phase. The move underscores Türkiye's determination to translate military gains into long-term geopolitical capital. In this changing and transforming post-Assad environment, Türkiye has increasingly framed its role as supporting state-building projects in Syria. The decision-makers of Türkiye have stressed the importance of building national unity in Syria through grassroots institution-building and the promotion of inclusive governance that reflects the country's diverse demography under Syrian leadership (Kardas, 2025 [24], pp. 22-37). Ankara, apart from its emphasis on inclusiveness, wants a unified and centralised Syrian state, in opposition to the demands for regional autonomy by Kurds, Alawites and Druze.

Compounding these tensions are broader challenges of integrating radical groups into legitimate political processes and shifting from fragmented rebel governance to a consolidated nation-state. Türkiye's Syrian policy also aims at long-term strategic goals that extend beyond security entanglements. Salim Cevik defines these aims as the exploitation of economic opportunities through cross-border trade and reconstruction, refugee flow management, which is one of the crucial domestic and regional challenges, and the resolution of the Kurdish issue, which remains the primary focus of Türkiye's security calculus (Cevik, 2024). These goals highlight that Türkiye's interventionist posture is not simply reactive but part of a larger vision of regional





influence and domestic stability. Türkiye accommodates approximately three million refugees, the largest host country for displaced Syrians by the civil war and serves as the primary logistical gateway for humanitarian assistance. Türkiye often, in coordination with allied Syrian forces, has conducted several cross-border operations against Kurdish armed groups in northern Syria since 2016, as Türkiye identifies them as a direct threat to national security. The presence of People's Protection Units (YPG) along its southern border, which Ankara regards as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organisation designated as a terrorist by Türkiye, the United States and the European Union, is central to Türkiye's security concerns (Gurukul, 2025) [25]. The YPG's leading role within the Syrian democratic forces (SDF), which has been in control of very substantial territory in northern Syria and has been supported by the United States in its operations against the Islamic State, has further led to the intensification of Türkiye's perceptions of strategic encirclement. The emergence of an Ahmed Al-Sharaa-led government in the post-Assad Syria carries a potential strategic implication for Türkiye, especially in relation to long-standing security concerns over PKK-linked forces in Northern Syria. Syria's de facto leadership issued statements, rejecting the use of Syrian territory as a platform for PKK attacks, which signals a possible convergence of interests with Türkiye's core security objectives (Gurukul, 2025) [25]. Such alignment reduces Türkiye's reliance on direct military intervention by facilitating the indirect containment of Kurdish armed groups, while reinforcing Türkiye's regional leverage. More broadly, this development may have enabled Türkiye to shift from an interventionist posture to a stabilising, influence-building actor within the post-Assad arena in Syria. U.S. President Donald Trump characterised Türkiye as a central actor in shaping Syria's future, reflecting the perception of Türkiye's growing leverage in Syria (Gurukul, 2025) [25].

Apart from its military posture, Türkiye has sought to entrench itself as a pivotal actor in Syria's reconstruction. Since the decade-long civil war, critical infrastructure has been devastated, and Türkiye has framed reconstruction not only as humanitarian assistance but also as a strategic avenue for consolidating influence. Türkiye is channelling funds and investments through its development agencies to build roads, bridges, and other essential infrastructure, aiming to convert its wartime presence into long-term leverage within Syria's post-Assad order. The agenda of reconstruction reveals a broader game plan by Türkiye in post-Assad Syria, embedding itself in Syria's social and economic fabric to ensure long-term geopolitical influence, thereby projecting its soft power alongside a hard security footprint. The local actors had explicitly articulated the expectations regarding Türkiye's economic role in post-Assad Syria. As Ahmed al-Sharaa noted in an interview with *Yeni Şafak*, "We trust that Türkiye will transfer its experience in economic development to Syria," (Tanis, 2024) [26], highlighting Türkiye's perceived ability to shape economic governance and reconstruction.

The new layers of integration have emerged with the presence of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, as many of them have acquired fluency in Turkish and established social and economic connections within the country (Tanis, 2024) [26].

When these communities return to Syria, they would act as brand ambassadors of Turkish cultural and economic penetration, hence reinforcing Türkiye's long-term objective of shaping Syria's post-Assad order. Mustafa Kibaroglu, Director of Graduate Studies in Political Science and International Relations, argues that the Turkish foreign policy narrative seeks to frame Syria as a strategic extension of Türkiye's domestic security environment, with developments across the border considered to affect national and economic stability directly (Tanis, 2024) [26]. Hakan Fidan, the Turkish foreign affairs minister, has stressed that it envisions a regional order based on balance rather than hegemony, rejecting the complete domination by any single power, whether Iran, Türkiye, or Saudi Arabia (Tanis, 2024) [26]. This narrative highlights that Türkiye is presenting itself as a proponent of balance, rejecting the idea of regional hegemony. It also reveals that Türkiye recognises that unilateral dominance is unrealistic in the divided Middle East. Rather, Türkiye seeks to maximise its leverage through selective alliances, pragmatic balancing, and coordination with other regional powers. From Türkiye's point of view, the optimal resolution involves the disarmament of YPG and the integration of SDF-controlled areas into the emerging Syrian state. In this regard, Türkiye anticipates that the United States, along with regional stakeholders, will encourage the PYD to engage in talks with Damascus (Altun, 2025) [27]. In March 2025, the Syrian transitional government led by Ahmed Al-Sharaa and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) signed a landmark agreement to begin the political and institutional integration of Northeastern Syria into the central state. This agreement, often referred to as the March 10 agreement, was signed in Damascus between President Ahmed Al-Sharaa and the SDF commander Mazloum Abdi (Özkizilcik, 2025) [28]. However, this agreement missed the first deadline, which was 31 December 2025. For Türkiye, the delayed integration was a cause for concern, as there was apprehension that SDF might retain de facto autonomy under the guise of nominal reintegration, thereby justifying Ankara's insistence on centralised control and rapid disarmament. As the March 2025 integration agreement was stalled, the Syrian government moved militarily against the Syrian democratic forces, escalating pressure, which led to the withdrawal of SDF from significant swathes of territory under its control (Porter, 2026) [29], including Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. These vast swathes of territory encompass Syria's strategic assets, including oil and gas reserves, major dams, and extensive agricultural land. As a result of this, the SDF's control decreased sharply, with its remaining forces and leadership largely consolidating within the Kurdish-dominated core of "Rojava," especially around Qamishli and northern Hasakah. The government forces' advance in these regions was facilitated by external support, most notably from Türkiye, whose backing reflected its interest in increasing the dismantling of SDF authority and reshaping the post-Assad territorial order on its own terms. The Kurdish-led SDF's influence weakened because of continuous pressure from the Syrian government and its partners in the region. Erdogan publicly congratulated the Syrian government and its army for their victories against

the SDF (Porter, 2026) [29]. This reveals Türkiye's pragmatic recalibration: while it once sought Assad's removal, its overriding security imperative to counter Kurdish autonomy now shows rhetorical and strategic convergence with Damascus. This shift shows how the Kurdish issue has become central to Türkiye's Syrian strategy after the fall of Assad.

In view of this increasingly fragile security environment, both parties, the SDF and the Syrian government, announced a broad-based agreement on 30th January 2026 aimed at consolidating the ceasefire and initiating a gradual process of reintegration (Genc, 2026) [30]. The agreement is marked as an important step in Syria's incremental reassertion of sovereignty over the northeast by negotiated integration rather than direct military confrontation. This agreement is about to end an armed confrontation, the pullback of security forces from critical lines of confrontation, and the deployment of security personnel of the Syrian interior ministry in Hasakah and Qamishli, alongside the incorporation of local Asayish security personnel into formal state institutions (Genc, 2026) [30]. The other terms of the agreement include that on the military front, some SDF formations are to be restructured under the authority of the Syrian armed forces, while other strategic assets like heavy weaponry, border zones, oil facilities, crossing points and major transportation routes are to be transferred to Damascus's control (Genc, 2026) [30]. On the administrative level, the agreement outlines the absorption of autonomous governance structures while maintaining existing civilian employees. It also includes commitments related to Kurdish cultural and civil rights, facilitating the return of displaced persons, and the cooperative management of border crossings and airports. Overall, this agreement reflects a negotiated attempt to overcome the military and political stalemate through reciprocal compromises, while reaffirming the centrality of Syrian sovereignty.

Since the autonomous institutions are now absorbed into the Syrian state structures, this implies that the Kurdish-led government in northeast Syria may lose its independent character of governance. For Türkiye, this is a win-win situation because Ankara was consistently against any form of institutionalized Kurdish self-rule near its border, because of the apprehension that it could inspire separatism linked to PKK. Apart from this, Türkiye also supports Syria's territorial integration, as it will help Ankara engage diplomatically with the united Syrian state, rather than a Kurdish autonomous state, on border control and governance.

IV. CONCLUSION

The fall of the Syrian Assad regime in December 2024 has fundamentally reshaped Syria's political landscape and changed the balance of power in the broader Middle Eastern region. This change has transformed Türkiye from a security-driven stakeholder on Syria's periphery to a central regional player capable of influencing the emerging post-conflict order. While previous scholarship interpreted Türkiye's Syria policy through the lens of soft power and engagement during the 2000s, the rise of Kurdish autonomous structures, which Ankara perceived as a threat to its sovereignty, and the prolonged civil war forced Ankara to adopt a more securitised

and interventionist strategy. But the post-Assad context has generated new strategic opportunities that allowed Türkiye to recalibrate its strategy beyond the direct military confrontation.

This article has argued that Türkiye's strategy after the fall of the Assad regime reflects a hybrid regional power strategy that combines continued security entrenchment with mechanisms to build and shape institutional, economic, and political influence. In accordance with the regional power theory, Türkiye's capability to sustain and maintain cross-border military operations, to exert territorial influence through allied actors, and to project governance models in northern Syria demonstrates both material capability and strategic intent. Simultaneously, Türkiye's engagement with the actors and structures after the fall of Assad, particularly through its leverage over armed factions which are dominant now and its alignment with Syria's emerging new transitional leadership, shows Türkiye's effort to define and shape Syria's future governance trajectory in ways which are compatible with its own regional security priorities. This is most evident in Türkiye's increasing focus on dismantling the SDF's autonomous authority and on integrating northeastern Syria under centralised state control.

Moreover, Türkiye's overemphasis on economic connectivity and reconstruction demonstrates a shift from short-term battlefield calculations towards long-term structural influence. By positioning itself as a primary actor in revitalising economic life and rebuilding infrastructure in Syria, Türkiye seeks to entrench its presence within the country's post-Assad institutional framework. This policy will enable Türkiye to transform military gains into sustainable geopolitical leverage. This policy will also help address domestic imperatives such as refugee management and border stability. Türkiye's evolving alignment with Damascus, more importantly, on the question of the Kurds does not reflect ideological convergence but rather a pragmatic recalibration, highlighting how shifting regional conditions have redefined Ankara's priorities from regime change to shaping the post-Assad political settlement.

Türkiye's role in post-Assad Syria ultimately highlights the adaptive nature of regional power behaviour in contested post-conflict environments. Türkiye, rather than withdrawing after achieving its immediate security objectives, Türkiye has sought to consolidate its influence through military leverage and institutional engagement. This reinforces the argument that regional powers increasingly function through hybrid strategies. The hybris strategies integrate military presence with governance, economic tools and political mediation. As Syria enters a fragile period of state reconstitution and reconstruction, Türkiye is likely to remain a deciding player influencing not only Syria's internal trajectory but also the broader regional order. Future research should therefore examine how Türkiye's long-term presence in Syria interacts with competing external powers and local political dynamics, and whether Ankara's hybrid strategy can translate into durable influence within Syria's evolving post-conflict governance structures.





DECLARATION STATEMENT

Some of the cited references are outdated and are noted explicitly as [3], [4], [9], [16], [18], [19], [20], and [21]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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