



Turkey (Türkiye) in Syria: Key U.S. Policy Issues

December 19, 2024

Turkey (alt. Türkiye) may be the most influential outside actor in Syria following the December 2024 downfall of Bashar Al Asad's (alt. Assad) regime, given the blow dealt by Asad's defeat to his regime's main foreign protectors, Russia and Iran. Turkey appears to be influential with the group that led the late 2024 campaign that ousted Asad, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO), but the Turkey-HTS relationship is complicated. Additionally, Turkey directly sponsors the Syrian National Army (SNA) umbrella group that has helped Ankara wrest and maintain control of much of northern Syria from—and has continued to battle—Kurdish elements that lead the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey's government opposes U.S. support for the SDF, and seeks to weaken the People's Protection Units (YPG) that lead the SDF, citing the YPG's links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, an FTO that has fought a decades-long insurgency against Turkish authorities).

Turkey and HTS

Turkey has a multifaceted relationship with HTS. Ankara officially lists HTS predecessor group Nusra Front—an Al Qaeda affiliate until 2016—as a terrorist organization. Yet, Turkey's protection of Idlib province, and HTS as its de facto ruler, from Syrian government and allied forces arguably helped HTS develop various military and political capabilities. Some reports suggest Turkey also may have provided HTS with drones and logistical support. A pillar of Turkey's longtime policy in Idlib was to prevent further refugee flows into Turkey, which reportedly hosts over three million out of the nearly five million Syrian refugees in the region. The extent to which HTS may rely on political or material backing from Turkey following the group's empowerment in post-Asad Syria is unclear.

HTS and other actors in the emerging transitional government in Syria state publicly that they seek a stable governing consensus, post-conflict recovery, and the potential return of Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, various factors could contribute to additional civil conflict and turmoil, including tensions based on ethnic, sectarian, and geographic differences; HTS's jihadist roots; continued external involvement in Syria; and some domestic opposition to foreign influence.

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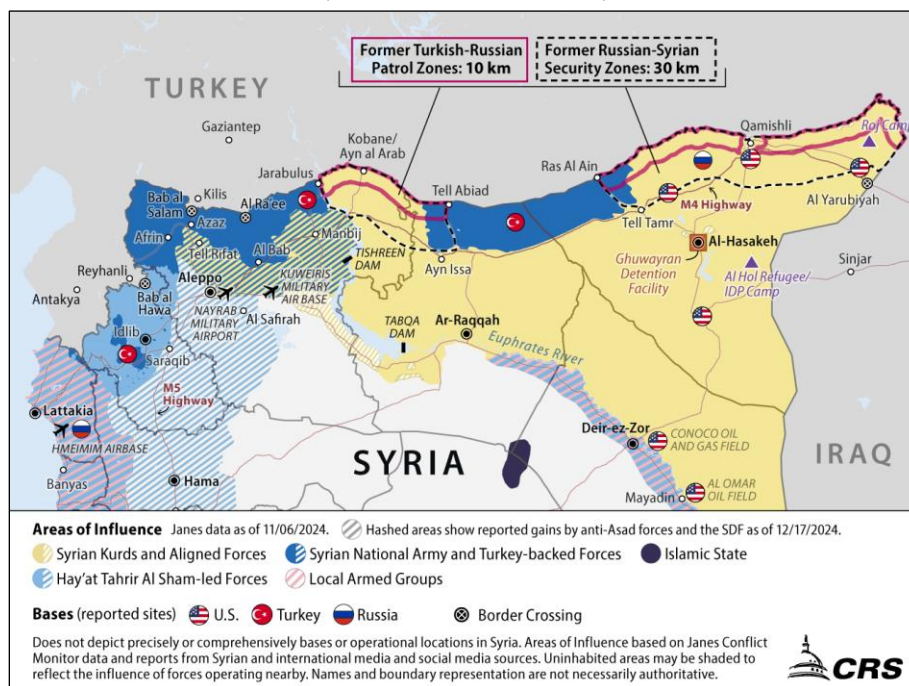
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Renewed Turkey/SNA-SDF Fighting and U.S. Policy Concerns

Renewed SNA advances against the SDF in post-Asad Syria appear to be the most consequential near-term issue for U.S.-Turkey relations. SNA conflict with the SDF has fueled U.S.-Turkey tensions because the SDF has been the [main U.S. ground force partner](#) against the Islamic State (IS/ISIS). Turkey and the SNA conducted three significant military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019) that replaced YPG rule in these areas with Turkish-backed Syrian forces (see [Figure 1](#)), in response to the YPG's consolidation of contiguous control over much of northern Syria's border areas in the mid-2010s.

Figure 1. Northern Syria: Areas of Influence
(as of December 17, 2024)



Source: CRS, using Janes Conflict Monitor data, Lead Inspector General reporting, and selected media reports.

Note: All areas approximate and subject to change.

Top Biden Administration officials have engaged [Turkish](#) and [SDF](#) counterparts in apparent efforts to prevent further conflict that could disrupt [U.S. military support](#) to the SDF in [countering](#) ISIS remnants, and [administering](#) detention facilities and camps holding ISIS-associated persons. The White House has [reiterated](#) its policy of maintaining the counter-ISIS mission with the SDF, and [coordinating with Turkey](#) to avoid diminishing the mission's effectiveness. Administration officials [have acknowledged](#) "very legitimate" Turkish concerns about foreign fighters in Syria and the PKK terrorist threat, while also [stating support](#) for an "inclusive and non-sectarian" Syria that protects minority rights.

In [December 2024 fighting](#), the SNA—with [Turkish air support](#)—has taken two towns (Tell Rifat and Manbij) from the SDF along key transit routes. While a [U.S. official has referred](#) to a Turkey/SNA-SDF cease-fire for the area around Manbij, a [Turkish official denied](#) talk of a deal. Open sources report worsening tensions between the parties [over the Kobane area](#) (which has a large Kurdish population), SNA-SDF [skirmishes](#), and an [apparent buildup](#) of Turkey-backed forces over the border. [Two Senators](#)

have threatened to introduce sanctions legislation against Turkey unless it accepts a sustained cease-fire and a demilitarized zone that the SDF [may seek](#) to have “supervised” by U.S. troops.

The October 2019 Case: Turkey-Led Incursion and U.S. Sanctions

In October 2019, Turkey led a ground incursion into an area then held by U.S.-backed SDF/YPG units after then-President Trump [ordered](#) a U.S. military withdrawal from northern Syria ([modified later that month](#) to a reduction and redeployment of forces). Several congressional bills would have authorized sanctions on Turkey, including one that [the House passed](#). Within this context, the Trump Administration [imposed some sanctions](#) on Turkish government officials and ministries (under [Executive Order 13894](#)) for nine days, [removing the sanctions](#) in accordance with a [U.S.-Turkey cease-fire agreement](#) that included what the Trump Administration described as a Turkey-backed “safe zone” in the conflict area. Turkey reached a [parallel agreement](#) with pro-Asad Russia that envisioned the further removal of the YPG from other areas along the Turkey-Syria border, including Kobane. Asad’s fall and the reported consolidation of Russian forces to bases in western Syria (see [Figure 1](#)) appears to have removed a possible check on potential conflict between Turkey/SNA and SDF/YPG forces.

Potential Congressional Considerations Regarding Sanctions or Other Measures

Members of Congress may assess options regarding sanctions and other possible measures—including [arms transfers to Turkey](#), foreign assistance, and authorizations or appropriations related to U.S. military action—based on considerations that may include

- Turkish officials’ [possible anticipation](#) that President-elect Donald Trump (upon becoming President) could order a drawdown or withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.
- [HTS’s acknowledgment](#) of Syrian Kurds’ rights, alongside its possible opposition to continued Kurdish-led [regional rule](#) or [military autonomy](#). Sunni Arab groups with the support of those leading Syria’s transitional government have [assumed control in some key eastern Syrian areas](#).
- Possible efforts by [Turkey](#) or other actors to make a case that they can viably share or assume the counter-ISIS responsibilities of the U.S.-supported SDF.
- [Broader U.S. priorities in Syria](#), potentially including governance, post-conflict recovery, and refugee returns; measures to reduce or end Iranian and Russian influence in Syria; and [the elimination of potential threats](#) from residual Syrian chemical weapons stocks.
- The impact of various other factors on U.S.-Turkey ties—including Turkey’s status as a [North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally](#), and its prominent influence on conflicts that erupted after 2019 (particularly in [Ukraine](#) and [Gaza](#)).

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