

## 1. TURKEY'S RISING INFLUENCE IN SYRIA AN UNSTATED CONCERN FOR ATHENS

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# Turkey's rising influence in Syria an unstated concern for Athens

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS\*

He has not yet assumed office, but every statement by Donald Trump already holds special news value. It is, therefore, no surprise that the remarks of the future US president on the situation in Syria made headlines: "Nobody knows who will rule in the final," Trump declared at his first press conference after his November election victory, adding, "I believe it's Turkey." His words were followed by flattering comments about Turkey and its vainglorious president. "He's a very smart guy. They've wanted it for thousands of years, and he got it," Trump said in his signature style.

Trump's remarks conveyed what many analysts already believe, albeit with an attention-grabbing bluntness. As the conflict reshuffles Syria's power dynamics following the fall of dictator Bashar al-Assad, and the exclusion of his principal backers – Iran and Russia – the cards are being dealt anew. Leading the pack is Turkey, alongside Syria's southern neighbor, Israel. Both nations share a readiness to intervene militarily without hesitation, often disregarding international law. The Syrian crisis has become a stark symbol of the erosion of the rules-based international order. In this new reality, military might holds sway, also challenging established borders.

The revisionists in Israel and Turkey defend their actions by claiming they are necessary to protect their populations. Yet, both nations' aspirations for regional dominance face the inherent disadvantage of not being Arab. For many in the region, these nations are associated with colonialism and occupation.

The Arab Gulf monarchies also have a stake in Syria's future. Determined to prevent the emergence of an Islamist caliphate on the Mediterranean, the conservative rulers are likely to invest billions to make the



**Greek Prime Minister** Kyriakos Mitsotakis (left) holds talks with his Lebanese counterpart, Najib Mikati, at the government palace in Beirut, during his one-day visit to the Lebanese capital on Monday, December 16. The two leaders discussed how Greece could contribute to regional stability, including vis-a-vis the changing landscape in Syria.

war-torn country livable again. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are expected to bankroll much of the reconstruction effort. Meanwhile, construction firms in Turkey are poised to reap substantial profits in Syria's rebuilding process. Europe, too, will likely contribute significant funds to repair the destruction wrought by a war in which it played no direct role. This pattern is likely to repeat itself in neighboring Lebanon and Gaza.

For Europe, however, the priority is refugees. "It's the refugees, stupid," explained a Western diplomat in Athens, outlining the hierarchy of concerns. When European governments discuss migrants these days, the conversation is usually about strategies to prevent them from reaching Europe. As 10 years ago, Turkey once again plays a key role here. As in 2015/2016, Brussels will again generously reward Ankara to ensure its borders remain closed to

those seeking refuge.

The refugee issue also plays a central role in the Greek government's official communications on Syria. "Greece is at the forefront of the refugee issue," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis recently stated. He went on to describe Greeks as "the natural guardians of Greek-speaking and Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians." Once a thriving community, Syria's Orthodox Christian population, with its rich historical heritage, has dwindled significantly in recent years.

Defending Orthodoxy beyond its borders has long been a cornerstone of Greek diplomacy and therefore features in official statements. However, little to nothing is said officially about the implications of Turkey's emerging political dominance in Syria. Greek analysts, on the other hand, are describing a potential "Libya scenario" as a nightmare for Hellenism. This refers to the possibility of a regime in Damascus, dominated by

Ankara, signing an agreement with Turkey to delineate maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean, similar to what the Libyan government in the west of the North African country did in November 2019 – blatantly disregarding international law in the process.

For now, these concerns remain hypothetical, as Ankara focuses on consolidating its position on the ground. Nevertheless, Athens has proactively built a robust alliance with key regional players such as Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This coalition serves as a concrete counterweight to Turkey's growing influence. Greece stands ready to leverage these partnerships to safeguard its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and to counterbalance Ankara's regional ambitions.

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