

1. SYRIA'S IMPACT ON REGIONAL RIVALRIES

Μέσο: INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES_KATHIMERINI

Ημ. Έκδοσης: . . .23/01/2025 Ημ. Αποδελτίωσης: . . .23/01/2025

Σελίδα: 3



Syria's impact on regional rivalries

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS*

After years of diplomatic isolation, Damascus is witnessing a surge of high-ranking visitors with clear political missions. The fall of the Assad regime has created a vacuum that draws those eager to stake their claim in shaping the future of this strategically vital country under new conditions.

Currently, Turkey seems best positioned to play a decisive role in shaping Syria's future. The flurry of political travel between Ankara and Damascus underscores this dominance. It is no coincidence that Ibrahim Kalin, the head of Turkish intelligence, was the first high-ranking foreign official to visit Syria's interim government. Shortly after, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan followed suit. It seems only a matter of time before Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan makes a personal appearance to court the new leadership in Damascus.

Last week, Syria's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaybani returned the gesture with a visit to Turkey, accompanied by the country's defense minister and intelligence chief. "Turkey has never abandoned the Syrian people in recent years," Shaybani stated in flawless Turkish, which he learned during his university studies in Istanbul. This biographical detail is emblematic of the robust communication networks Ankara has established with Syrian opposition figures during the years of civil war, including the Islamist rebels of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. These networks now serve as a foundation for Ankara's efforts to cement its influence in Syria.

Turkey's pursuit of power and dominance in its southern neighbor is provoking unease in many quarters, including Israel. Since the Gaza war, relations between Erdogan's Turkey and Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel have been openly hostile. Recently, Israeli security experts warned that Turkey's growing influence in Syria could pose a greater threat to Israel than Iran. The presence of Turkish troops in Syrian territories bordering Israel raises the risk of direct military confrontation between the two nations, according to a report by the Nagel Commission, named after its chairman.

The return of post-revolutionary



Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (r) and Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaybani attend a press conference after their meeting in Ankara, Turkey, on January 15, 2025.

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Syria to the international community is not a one-way street leading solely to Ankara. Late December saw the Syrian foreign minister's first official visit abroad, heading to Saudi Arabia. Stops in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan followed. Having lost the competition for influence in neighboring Iraq to Iran after Saddam Hussein's fall, Saudi Arabia is determined not to repeat that setback in Syria. With Tehran currently sidelined in the struggle for leadership in Syria, Turkey has emerged as Riyadh's primary regional rival.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey has deep historical roots, reaching a peak during the Arab Spring when Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood alienated the conservative Gulf monarchies. Now, in the wake of Syria's upheaval, this Turkish-Arab antagonism is being revived.

For Syria's new leadership, the challenge lies in striking a balance between Turkey's overtures and

those of the Gulf monarchies. Central to this effort is securing aid for reconstruction, which Syria cannot initiate without substantial financial support from abroad. In this phase, European nations play a secondary, cautious role in Syria. Their hesitancy stems largely from the conditional nature of their cooperation offers, which are tied to political stipulations.

The Greek government is also taking a wait-and-see approach. Days after the power shift in Damascus, Greek Prime Minister Kyrillakos Mitsotakis outlined Athens' policy: "We have a voice and a role regarding what is happening in Syria today. First, because we are geographically close. Second, because we are the natural protectors of the Greek-speaking and Arabophone Orthodox Christians. We can talk to everyone."

Greek press commentary has focused on concerns about Ankara's growing influence and its potentially adverse effects on Greek interests. There is particular fear that Turkey might seize the moment to forge an agreement with Syria's interim government similar to the controversial Turkish-Libyan maritime boundary deal of 2019, bypassing international maritime law. The Greek government has largely avoided joining these sometimes heated debates, prioritizing instead the welfare of Orthodox communities in Syria. The

once sizable Christian population in Syria, which boasts a storied history, has dwindled significantly in recent years, with estimates in Greek media citing around 300,000 adherents today.

In mid-December, Mitsotakis visited Beirut to meet John X, the Greek Orthodox "patriarch of Antioch and All the East." The high-ranking religious figure, representing one of the world's oldest Christian communities, traveled from his Damascus headquarters for the meeting. Greek media report that the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul has also been involved in efforts to protect the religious minority.

Alongside this ecclesiastical diplomacy, Greece has been carving out an increasingly active role in the geopolitical landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Beyond EU-coordinated initiatives, Athens has pursued multilateral and bilateral partnerships with key regional players. These include trilateral alliances with Israel and Cyprus and with Cyprus and Egypt. More recently, a "strategic partnership" with Saudi Arabia has emerged, encompassing economic, energy and military cooperation.

At the start of the year, developments in Syria featured prominently in discussions at summits in Cairo with the leaders of Egypt, Cyprus and Greece, as well as at a Greek-Saudi summit in al-Ula. "Greece and Saudi Arabia share the same vision regarding security and peace in the region," Mitsotakis stated. The regional alliances serving Greece's foreign policy interests are united by their shared concern over Turkey's growing influence and their determination to counter it.

How developments in Syria will shape the trajectory of Greek-Turkish relations – the traditional focal point of Athens' foreign policy – remains unclear. For now, the historically fraught relationship is in a phase of detente. Ankara's focus on Syria could, for the time being, help preserve stability along Europe's southeastern flank.

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