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## Commentary \ **Why is Turkey's Erdogan Rushing to Recalibrate with Syria Ahead of the Elections?**

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**Turkish strongman Erdogan is eyeing a deal with Syria for electoral gains at home as he faces the biggest challenge to his 21-year rule in the elections on 14 May.**

Efforts to recalibrate Turkey–Syria relations are back in the [headlines](#), albeit overshadowed by the devastating earthquakes and the upcoming elections. The Syrian refugee crisis is at the heart of the [election campaign](#). Two recurring questions asked by Turkish voters and political parties revolve around 1) the possibility of a recalibration towards a rapprochement between Erdogan and Assad and, subsequently, 2) whether the Syrian refugees in Turkey will soon be repatriated to Syria. These interrelated questions seem to have little to do with solving Turkey's pressing problems, such as inflation, unemployment, and the devastation caused by the recent earthquakes that killed more than 55,000 people in both countries and left millions homeless and destitute. Yet the issue of Syrian refugees—and in particular, their return—put the country on a pivotal path with implications for Turkish domestic politics and [security in Europe and the Middle East](#).

### **Repatriation of Syrian Refugees: A Cross-cutting Issue for Ruling and Opposition Parties**

Overall, the recent electoral period has witnessed the elevation of the repatriation issue to the centre of domestic politics and the further instrumentalisation of Syrian refugees by the ruling party and the opposition. It is worrying to see that in this process, such a purely anti-immigrant and populist political actor as the Zafer Party could emerge in Turkey. Its slogan is 'The Zafer Party will come, and all asylum seekers in Turkey will go'. Although the party's potential share of the vote is tiny as a far-right party, it dominates the immigration narrative and forces other, more mainstream parties to adopt an anti-refugee discourse.

Turkey, which has long been a country of immigration, emigration and transit for irregular migration to Europe, has also been a country of asylum for refugees. With the arrival of approximately four million displaced Syrians since 2011, Turkey has become the largest refugee-hosting country in the world. Its [response](#) to the Syrian refugee crisis is not characterised by a well-structured and stable policy but rather a series of dynamic and evolving policies in line with shifting geopolitical and domestic considerations. At first, Turkey had granted temporary protection status to Syrians, formally guaranteeing access to health care, education and employment. Later, as anti-Syrian sentiment grew in the public sphere, discriminatory practices and problems accessing basic rights made life difficult for Syrians in Turkey. Since the 2019 local election

campaign, Turkish opposition political parties have been more eager to strongly advocate for the return of Syrians, committing in their campaign speeches to 'repatriate Syrians' or 'agree with Assad on the return of Syrians'. This discourse has gained further impetus in the wake of the 2023 elections. In relation to the opposition parties' insistence on repatriation, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which had embraced Syrians, adopted an 'open-door policy' and used to say that it would not agree with Assad under any circumstances also began to express this stance.

### **A new AKP Policy Objective**

The AKP leaders and President Erdogan have repeatedly said that the Turkish state wants to create 'safe zones' in northern Syria to facilitate the repatriation of up to one million Syrians. This makes it clear that the new policy objective is to recalibrate the relations with Assad and seek a meeting with him after 12 years of hostility.

It seems that *geopolitical* and *domestic necessities* are tightening the noose for Turkey to fix its strained relations with the Assad regime. The Arab uprisings, followed by a violent backlash in Syria, led to a complete reversal in Turkish–Syrian relations, even though the same actors remained in power in both countries. The Turkish capital *Ankara, which had suffered from 'crisis fatigue'* over the last decade as it tried to survive in a chaotic environment, is now facing growing geopolitical concerns over its involvement in the Syrian crisis and domestic economic challenges.

Under these pressures, the ruling party found itself at a critical juncture to seriously pursue rapprochement with the Syrian regime to signal to its constituency that it was proactive in speeding up the repatriation of Syrians. Efforts to recalibrate the relationship towards rapprochement began in December 2022. Eliminating any option for a de facto autonomous Kurdish state on its southern borders and repatriating large numbers of Syrian refugees soon are two priorities for the Turkish side. Both issues could attract the support of most Turks. Turkey's opposition and government parties believe (or at least seem to believe) that repatriation will take place if they agree with the Syrian regime. What they fail to realise is that *historical records* of repatriation operations across the globe show that this is not the case. Not only do refugees not want to return after a decade of living in a new country, but conditions in the post-conflict countries of origin are not safe, secure and stable enough for voluntary and dignified return.

### **Assad's Interests in Recalibrating Relations**

Although the Syrian regime is less enthusiastic about repatriation than Turkish politicians, it does not oppose the issue on a discursive level. The regime believes that repatriation will help to create an internal image of Syria as a 'safe' country. This can be particularly helpful in the aftermath of the earthquakes, when *the European Union* and

other donors began to communicate directly with Damascus to channel humanitarian aid. As a sign of the regime's normalisation of relations with its neighbours, the repatriation of refugees will at least allow Assad and his allies to lobby for the need to rebuild Syria or to address the post-conflict state in which millions of Syrians are suffering and endlessly trying to flee to Europe, a situation that Europe cannot handle at the moment. [Lebanon](#) has already started to cooperate with the Syrian regime on repatriations, although it is very careful about the Syrian regime's sensitivities regarding intelligence. Jordan will not be a tough neighbour, given the normalisation gestures of the Gulf countries towards Syria. Turkey's leap into this 'normalisation' bandwagon is crucial for regional and international dynamics. However, the Syrian regime is in no hurry to reconcile with Turkey or to repatriate Syrian refugees soon, unlike Turkey which is, because of the upcoming elections. The Syrian regime's [priority](#), with Russia's support, is to maintain its grip on power and control most of the country's territory.

Despite conflicting interests and priorities, there are clear signs that both Ankara and Damascus are interested in recalibrating the relationship. However, repairing Turkey–Syria relations is not like mending relations with Egypt or other actors. All the realities on the ground, especially the balance of power in [northern Syria](#), where most of the refugees come from, make the process difficult and, of course, the ongoing conflicts and the further potential for conflict make recalibration very risky. Moreover, given Turkey's current strong support for the Syrian National Army (SNA) and its willingness to encourage the return of Syrian refugees to these areas, any Turkish normalisation or change in relations with the Syrian regime that would entail Turkey's withdrawal from the region—if not entirely—would pose a significant threat to the status of northern Syria. Any Syrian normalisation could open space for increased military escalation in the northern part of Syria—which would be disastrous. The potential for military confrontation between factions of the SNA, between the SNA and other armed groups in Idlib, or an escalation with the Syrian Democratic Forces carries a significant risk of violent clashes and instability. This could lead to further displacement of Syrians living there rather than encouraging refugees to return there voluntarily.

### **The (Electoral) Discourse on Repatriation as an Instrument of Domestic and Regional Politics**

Under these circumstances, neither a smooth rapprochement with the Syrian regime nor the repatriation of Syrians seems feasible in the short term, regardless of the election results. Statements on the repatriation of refugees are then merely part of Turkish politicians' electoral discourse. Nevertheless, such discourses narrow the refugees' protection space and aggravate their precarious situation, provoking local communities to intensify their discriminative attitudes towards Syrians. These communities have already made refugees the scapegoat for all structural problems (such as high rents,

unemployment, etc.) and [the failure of humanitarian agencies](#), include state institutions, to distribute aid, as seen in the case of earthquakes. It is also another sign of how refugees have always been used as a tool for domestic, regional, and international politics. The commodification of refugees paves the way for more human rights violations and becomes an essential resource for internal and regional political power struggles. Ultimately, this inevitably increases domestic political fragility in a country like Turkey, where political polarisation and populist discourse are on an unprecedented rise. Any possible forced repatriation of Syrian refugees will also lead to more and more human rights violations.

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