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# "The Great Game in Syria: The Future of the Kurdish Issue in the Middle East"

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## Authors

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**Summary :** Most likely, the countries' "Great Game" in present-day Syria will have a significant impact on reshaping the power balances in West Asia. Syria in the era of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani is the intersection point of three major regional geopolitical projects: the dream of Greater Turkey that Erdogan has been talking about for years, the Iranian-Shiite Resistance Axis, and the Israeli project! This runs parallel with the global power game that has now spread across Asia-Pacific, the North Pole, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Similar to the years following World War I, everyone is struggling to find their place in these great games. Regarding the Kurds, unlike before when they were left out of the games, there are now more opportunities available for the Kurds than before, and perhaps Assad's fall might open the door to a Kurdish spring, although the risks of history repeating itself are not small.

## Introduction

Most likely, the countries' "Great Game" in present-day Syria will have a significant impact on reshaping the power balances in West Asia. Syria in the era of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani is the intersection point of three major regional geopolitical projects: the dream of Greater Turkey that Erdogan has been talking about for years, the Iranian-Shiite Resistance Axis, and the Israeli project! This runs parallel with the global power game that has now spread across Asia-Pacific, the North Pole, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Similar to the years following World War I, everyone is struggling to find their place in these great games. Regarding the Kurds, unlike before when they were left out of the games, there are now more opportunities available for the Kurds than before, and perhaps Assad's fall might open the door to a Kurdish spring, although the risks of history repeating itself are not small.

### Syria under Jolani and the Kurdish Issue

According to some sources, Jolani is currently awaiting a response from Mazloum Abdi, the General Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, regarding the demands discussed in their meeting, which appear to have these main points: Syria's unity, cultural rights, and equal citizenship, and the integration of SDF into the new army in a way that it would not remain as a distinct entity. Additionally, purging the foreign fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). A series of demands that seemingly don't offer much for Kurds as an ethnic component. However, what happens if these demands are not met? Will Jolani, with Turkey's support, first attempt to separate Arab-majority areas like Al-Tabqa and Raqqa, and then wage war against the SDF? This is a possibility, but for now, it appears that Jolani is not in a hurry and as eager as Turkey to resolve these issues because:

Turkey may be supportive and successful in attracting some of the SDF-allied tribes to its side, but this could deprive him of the international support he desperately needs. Jolani faces a dual struggle: on one hand, he is striving to erase the shadow of his and HTS's past, while on the other, he grapples with the urgent need for significant funds to [rebuild](#) a nation ravaged by over 13 years of civil war, now left in the ruins of a shattered economy. It is estimated that rebuilding Syria would require between \$250 billion and \$1 trillion. According to the UN, over 12 million Syrians face food insecurity, with more than 3 million [living](#) in famine-like conditions. This immense challenge is compounded by political uncertainty and the complexity of managing dozens of armed groups operating in the region. Meanwhile, the support of Western nations and recent efforts to unite Kurdish parties—backed by the International Coalition against ISIS and the Kurdistan Region—have bolstered the Autonomous Administration's position in the post-Assad era. Also, Mazloum Abdi is in no rush to resolve this issue, recognizing the larger struggle at hand. He is also closely monitoring discussions between Öcalan and the Turkish state, hoping that a potential breakthrough in those talks could ease Ankara's pressure on him. In reality, regardless of Jolani and Abdi's calculations, a larger game is unfolding over Syria—one that is likely to shape the country's fate.

### Israel's Strategy for Future Syria

The fall of Assad presents a double-edged sword for Israel: on one hand, it has reduced the Iranian threat, but on the other, it has brought a Sunni authority to its doorstep and heightened the perceived threat from Turkey. For Turkey, Assad's fall and Jolani's rise are akin to rolling double sixes, providing a chance to expand regional influence through Islamic movements. However, for the Kurdish, it remains a complex puzzle. Meanwhile, Iran and Iraq, though weakened by Assad's fall, view the situation as unfinished, potentially lying in wait for another opportunity to regain influence

Israel has gained a rare opportunity, but its uncertainties about Iran's ability to rebuild smuggling routes and deliver

weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas in the long term, as well as uncertainties about the future political regime in Damascus and Turkey's expanding regional role, have increased its concerns. Although Israel's advances into its military buffer zones with Syria are not enough to close the land corridor that Iran previously used to deliver weapons to Hezbollah, it can be useful for installing radar and missile/drone surveillance systems, as well as strengthening intelligence systems. In October of last year, Israel announced it had destroyed a 3.5km tunnel near the [Al-Masna](#) border crossing on the Damascus border, which was used to deliver weapons to Hezbollah. This is at least 30km away from the heights of Mount Hermon that Israel currently holds. Israel has conducted [14,638](#) strikes against Hezbollah over the past year, significantly degrading its military capabilities, and since their ceasefire on December 27, 2024, it has conducted more than [180](#) additional strikes, which could indicate that Hezbollah's restrengthening is a strategic concern for Israel. In this matter, the Syria-Lebanon border is extremely important for both sides. The border is 394km long, but the decisive factor in securing the border against Iran and the Resistance Axis is not only Israel but also the stance of post-Assad Syria, which at least for now appears to have closed that corridor. Israel has degraded Hamas's military capabilities since October 7, but the West Bank is a strategically important location where if Hamas gains access to its mountains overlooking Israel's coastal cities in the long term, it would create a greater threat to Israel. This issue has a direct connection with the Jordan-Syria border; the possibility of opening a route from the Jordanian border for smuggling weapons to the West Bank. Therefore, Israel, along with advancing into the north and Damascus borders, has also moved towards Sweida and the Syria-Jordan borders.

From Israel's perspective, a centralized ideological regime (radical Sunni), if not today then tomorrow, will create military threats, which is why in the 48 hours after Assad's fall, it [destroyed](#) about 80% of military capabilities and infrastructure, and wants a weak government and a decentralized system to come to power. Here, it aligns with Turkey in wanting future Syria to be weak, but they differ on what type of political regime it should be. The Israeli Foreign Minister has mentioned several times their connections with Kurds and Syrian minorities. This is exactly the point that concerns Turkey.

## Turkey and Jolani's Syria

For Turkey, Assad's fall wasn't the first choice, but when it happened, it created a great opportunity to increase its regional influence through Islamic movements; this was something that was seen as a step towards achieving "Greater Turkey - a neo-Ottoman era" during the Arab Spring and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt, but it didn't succeed then. The dream of Greater Turkey in Turkish geopolitical ideology envisions a country that would have influence across a vast geography from Central Asia to Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus, and from there through the Zangezur corridor. From the southern neck, it would open towards Arab and Gulf countries, have influence in Africa, and extend its influence from the Mediterranean maritime borders to Libya. Among the world's major power poles, it would have its own say, possess a strong economy, and lead the Sunni-Islamic world.

With Jolani's arrival as Syria's de facto ruler, Turkey gained a direct gateway to the Arab world, and its hopes for expanding regional influence increased. However, Turkey's main obstacle here is that the idea of "Greater Turkey" conflicts with Iran's Resistance Axis project in many places, just as they oppose each other on Syria and the Zangezur corridor in the South Caucasus, and they may face each other in future Iraq as well. Iran's Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has accused Turkey of collaborating with America and Israel more than 3 times since Assad's fall, saying that a revolution of Syrian youth will [overturn](#) the situation, hinting at the possibility of civil war breaking out in Syria. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's former Prime Minister, in his latest interview, indicated that after Syria, they fear a potential Turkish expansionism in Iraq as well. Egypt, Jordan, and some Gulf countries are also worried that Turkey's strengthening might lead to another wave of Muslim Brotherhood empowerment. As for Israel, it doesn't want to deal with a second Iran, so it sees the expansion of Turkish influence as a threat to itself. In short, Turkey's friends don't want their ally to become so big that it gets out of their control, and its enemies don't want that either.

Another questionable point is whether Jolani will remain close to Turkey forever or not. Certainly, Jolani's current situation is different from when he was in Idlib. He now has more power and opportunities at his disposal, and considering the bitter experience of the Taliban and Pakistan - how tensions arose between them after the Taliban's return to power - there is no guarantee that the situation in Syria will remain as it is now for Turkey. Perhaps this is why Turkey hasn't yet given the green light to dismantle those armed groups that it directly supports.

Turkey can play a role in rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, which could serve as a remedy for Turkey's current economy. It can also return some of the [3,112,683](#) Syrian refugees whose presence was one of the factors that reduced the AKP Party's votes in the previous elections. This is an opportunity for Turkey, but a crucial point in the Syrian events for Ankara was changing the political regime that had consistently supported the PKK for more than 4 decades before 2024, except for the years 1999-2003. From 1984 until 2017, out of 54 instances of significant external support for the PKK in its wars with Turkey, Assad's Syria (both father and son) was at the forefront with 15 instances, [leading](#) all other parties who had backed the PKK. Israel had also provided strong support to Turkey during that time.

Now with Assad gone, Turkey wants to resolve the PKK-YPG issue by using a combination of military pressure and parallel negotiations, drawing from Israel's experience in the war with Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as Iran's experience in pushing away the People's Mujahidin and eastern Kurdish parties from its borders.

Turkey's President has said that no country supports the PKK like before - some are caught up in their own problems, and others genuinely don't want to [do it](#) anymore. This might be a reference to Iran and Iraq, America-Europe, and Israel!

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, regarding the phone call between Israel's Foreign Minister and Ilham Ahmed from the Autonomous Administration of North Syria, said they are aware of everything but that this hasn't yet become a practical threat to Turkey. Most likely, Turkey is hoping its relations with Israel will improve with Trump's return, especially now that a ceasefire has been declared in Gaza. Trump had previously mentioned expanding the Abraham Accords, which might have meant reconciling Turkey and Israel. It seems that American pressure to consider Turkey's demands regarding "foreign fighters" in the SDF and emphasizing that they are only there to fight ISIS might be a reason for Erdogan's statement that countries no longer support the PKK like before.

The Turkish Foreign Minister made a statement about Iraq during a press conference with his Jordanian counterpart that the media didn't highlight much. On the 6th of the month, Fidan said they didn't understand why their friends in Iraq turned a blind eye to PKK's [presence](#) in Sinjar. 8 days later, Iraq's Interior Ministry announced in a statement that they had expelled some SDF forces who had mistakenly [positioned](#) themselves in Iraqi territory. Perhaps another meaning behind Erdogan's statements targets Iran when he says "They're now dealing with their own problems." Iran has indirectly supported the PKK for more than 3 decades, but it seems Turkey believes this shouldn't continue. Hakan Fidan, responding to a question about the Esmail Qaani -Abdi meeting, said they believe Iran will abandon this policy, and [they haven't supported](#) Iran's opponents. A statement containing both hope and threat!

In short, we can say that most likely there won't be a state that would openly antagonize Turkey over the PKK and publicly support it, but it's expected that they might do so covertly. In fact, one of the main reasons for starting a dialogue with Öcalan is Turkey's concern about preventing more external support from reaching the PKK.

## Iran and Post-Assad Syria

Since October 7th until now, there has been a noticeable decline in Shiite authorities in the region: in Lebanon, after two years of crisis, a president distant from Hezbollah was elected, Hezbollah's military capabilities were significantly damaged, and the Resistance Axis groups withdrew from Syria. There is a visible strengthening of Sunni and Kurdish politics in Iraq,

and some Shiite politicians in Baghdad are both afraid of Trump and the possibility of Turkey's strengthening role in Iraq, even reaching Kirkuk's oil resources. In Iran, there are concerns about a potential US-Israeli attack on nuclear facilities, the possibility of internal unrest, and the resurgence of ISIS along the Diyala-Kermanshah borders.

From Ali Khamenei's statements, it's clear that the desire to revive the Resistance Axis is still present in the [Shiite geopolitical imagination](#). However, most likely, at least in the short term, Iran won't attempt this and is using it more as a threat to strengthen its hand at the negotiating table. Most likely, the leaked audio recording of an IRGC commander in Syria discussing Iran's capability to activate the resistance network in Syria was also meant for this purpose.

Iran has recently conducted several military exercises and showcased new types of weapons to demonstrate its military control capabilities. In Iraq, various news about integrating armed groups into the Iraqi army is spreading, which could be preparation for what's coming, as some unofficial sources warn Baghdad not only about armed groups but also about oil exports to Iran and the possibility of SOMO sanctions. Another shared fear of Iran and Iraq is the potential revival of ISIS. Iraq has begun building a wall on its borders with Syria and has returned [191](#) ISIS families from Al-Hol camp, concerned about the potential deterioration of conditions there, at least to keep them under their control. A few days ago, the Iraqi army conducted operations against ISIS in Hamrin, and Iran also conducted military exercises on the other side of the Diyala border in Kermanshah province.

The parallel approach between Iran and Iraq is evident in their diplomatic relations as well. While Sudani visited Britain, Iran's Foreign Minister negotiated with European countries about his country's nuclear program, indicating Tehran's efforts towards a more defensive position rather than its previous stance of superiority and offense.

Perhaps unlike Turkey and similar to Israel, Iran, and Iraq consider a federal or decentralized Syria better for their interests. However, it seems that rumors about providing Iranian drones to the SDF remain more as a pressure tool to prevent potential Turkish expansion in Iraq and the Zangezur corridor. Most likely, both Iran and Iraq, although they dislike Turkey's strengthening and see Israel's advance in Syria as a threat, are currently avoiding direct confrontation.

## Conclusion

The countdown for Trump's taking office has begun, with both Israel and Arab countries watching his stance on Syria, but America is not that unlimited power that can resolve everything. Syria's fate will be shaped by the internal dynamics of relations between different armed groups, as well as the desires of Europe, the Gulf States, Turkey, and Europe. Despite the Turkish Foreign Minister's rhetoric about the Arab nature of the Syrian Republic, the Kurdish position in post-Assad Syria will likely be stronger than before. This comes after there is now a more serious effort to unify Kurdish discourse in Syria. The situation in Syria has implications for the Kurdish issue in the Middle East far beyond its borders. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Region has gained another opportunity for strengthening. In Turkey, despite uncertainties in the "Öcalan dialogue" about how disarmament and a limited solution to the Kurdish issue will be reconciled, the existence of dialogue strengthens the Kurdish position in that country's politics. Finally, all of this will force Iran to take steps regarding the Kurdish issue, as even [Sergei Lavrov](#) from Russia, which is close to Tehran, has mentioned. After World War I, the entire Kurdish population in the Middle East was around 4 million, and there wasn't even a strong political organization to formulate their demands. Now that population is tens of millions, and dozens of political organizations compete in Kurdish politics. Therefore, they cannot be left out of the great games like before!