# Online Workshop: Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for Regional Geopolitics and Türkiye

On 18 December 2024, an Online workshop titled "Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for Regional Geopolitics and Türkiye" was held with the coordination of KENTUSAM/ Istanbul Kent University International Strategic Research and Application Center. The online workshop was conducted under Prof. Dr. Ozan Örmeci's moderation, and academics and retired Turkish diplomat shared their opinion and insights regarding the recent developments in Syria and their possible outcomes for the region and Türkiye. The event concluded with a Q&A session.

**Key Takeaways from each speaker:** (speakers are listed in their speech order)

**Prof Dr. Hasret Çomak, Opening remarks**

* Dr. Çomak stated that the primary objective in light of recent developments is the reconstruction of Syria's political framework, which will enable it to redefine its international identity. He added that Syria’s stability can only be achieved through robust political systems founded on strong institutional structures and legitimacy.
* He explained Türkiye's aims and actions towards Syria throughout the process and Türkiye's emphasis on Syria's territorial integrity. He also mentioned regional actors' activities as recent developments unfolded in Syria regarding military operations and security threats.
* He mentioned that peace and stability in the region were long desired and that reaching sustainable stability in Syria would contribute to regional and global peace.

**Prof. Dr. Mark Meirowitz**

* Dr. Meirowitz stated that the disconnection between Türkiye and the USA on determining YPG and PYD as terrorist organisations remains one of the longstanding crucial elements between bilateral relations. He added that there is fear from the US point of view that Türkiye could launch incursion against Kurds in Syria, and it is a direct conflict of interest.
* The complex situation in Syria was highlighted in the sense that there is the presence of multiple non-state actors, and different countries in Syria and Russia have withdrawn from their military bases.
* He also mentioned Ahmed al-Sharaa's transformation, formerly known as al-Jolani, and likened this to metamorphosis. He stated his change in styling in terms of clothing and physical appearance and compared this situation to the Taliban of Afghanistan.
* Maintenance of stability and peace in Syria was highlighted in the sense that Türkiye desires to return refugees to Syria, and America could withdraw its troops from Syria; hence, society could be built securely.

**Prof. Dr. Herbert Reginbogin**

* Dr. Reginbogin began his insights by likening the recent developments in Syria to a watershed moment. He stated that this was the moment if Türkiye wanted to make a new image of herself. He also explained that this could be Türkiye's reign of influence in the region.
* He highlighted that recent developments could be emancipation for the region. He continued by underscoring the importance of restructuring Syria and including institutions in Syria. He claimed that Türkiye could help the situation through reconstruction and had the ability and capacity to do so.

**Prof. Dr. Hall Gardner**

* Dr. Gardner stated that the national reconciliation process in Syria is essential to rebuilding the new country. Different nations' interests in Syria are conflicted; therefore, a "contact group" should work on rebuilding Syria to reach a peaceful resolution.
* He expressed that rebels' military interest in overthrowing Assad was their common enemy, who has disappeared now. Therefore, better reconciliation could be established in Syria.
* Dr. Gardner explained that the more integrated Syrian Kurds in Syria would lead to lesser security threats for Türkiye, and finding a domestic solution for Syria will serve this goal. Israel's continuous attack will destabilise the region; hence, bringing back Iran’s nuclear deal and finding peace in Palestine will ease the tension.

**(R) Consulate General Gülru Gezer,**

* Ms. Gezer stated that different countries had different agendas in Syria. However, recent developments showed that Russia and Iran were withdrawn, and the US has a presence on the ground. Thus, the current situation is still premature to assess the overall environment.
* She emphasised that the whole process should be Syrian-owned and Syrian-led to make it long-lasting and enduring because any threats stemming from Syria will affect Türkiye. She highlighted the importance of regional ownership as a key to solving the problem.
* She added that international organizations' involvement is crucial for Syria, especially regarding the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. The interim government in Syria was stated to last until 1 March 2025, and there are still unanswered questions concerning the constitution, whether there will be a new constitution or amendment to the existing one.
* She highlighted that “Let them lead the way" and acting as a key player in maintaining a positive role are essential for the future of Syria, and continued reconstruction in Syria is not going to be easy since there are many citizens living as internally displaced people within Syria. Moreover, she shared research conducted in Syria last year that 90% of the irrigation facilities in Syria were destroyed.
* She pointed out the differences between Kurds in Syria and PYD/YPG, as it is essential to differentiate between them, and she continued that Türkiye should focus more on lobbying to explain claims and security threats to Congress and the US.
* Ms Gezer indicated that the reason put forward for the SDF's presence in Syria was the fight against ISIS. However, she mentioned the fact that Türkiye is actively participating in the coalition group to combat ISIS. Furthermore, she touched upon the fact that there are many third-party ISIS nationals held as prisoners, and she suggested that those nations’ countries should cooperate more in this matter.

**(R) Admiral Dr. Alaettin Sevim**

* Dr. Sevim began by asserting that there are many uncertainties on the ground. However, he listed that Assad and the remnants of the Ba'ath regime were gone, and that was the only thing that was certain for now.
* He shared his thoughts that Syria will not remain unitarily with many sects and different actors in the territory. He also said that bringing all these forces into the same new order and government would be challenging.
* He explained that YPG forces' equipment and support by the US remains a challenge for Türkiye and bilateral relations, and the terrorist organisation's embodiment into new forming remains a question left unanswered.

**Prof. Dr. Kıvanç Ulusoy**

* Dr. Ulusoy shared insights by explaining why the Assad regime was “successful” in keeping order in Syria and keeping other players out. He stated that historical events have taken place since the beginning of the regime's reign, such as the end of the Cold War, the Arab Spring, and the refugee crisis. Therefore, there is a fragmented authority in Syria.
* He reminded the situation in Iraq when the intervention started: Saddam's army was disintegrated, and it took two years to draft a constitution.
* He added that Assad’s army was fragmented and disappeared due to recent developments. He stated that there were three armies present in Syria: the first one was the regime's army, whose fragments went to Iran and Lebanon recently. The second army is present in the East of the Euphrates and was founded by Türkiye's ally, the USA, and the third army is the Syrian National Army and HTS (less strict than the first two armies). He stated that the generals of these three armies would negotiate and try to find a key to a peaceful resolution.

**Assoc. Prof. Elsayed Ali AbouFarha**

* Dr. AbouFarha reminded us that due to surrounding conflicts, countries in the region are being negatively affected, which leads to instability.

**Assoc. Prof. Doğan Şafak Polat**

* Dr. Polat explained Türkiye's policy towards Syria, which was shaped by fundamental principles such as preserving Syria's territorial integrity and unity, achieving a peaceful resolution to meet the legitimate demands of the Syrian people, ensuring security by eliminating terrorist elements in the border area, creating support for the voluntary, safe, and dignified returns of Syrians, and maintaining uninterrupted humanitarian assistance.
* He stated that during the 14 years of civilian war, the Assad regime was influenced by Iran and Russia, and when these two powers withdrew support, then Assad wasn’t strong enough to continue its presence in Syria.
* He continued by listing the losers and winners from recent developments, and he assessed that it is still difficult to determine whether Türkiye is a loser or winner due to ambiguity.

**Asst. Prof. Murat Koray**

* Regional developments cannot be achieved without establishing stability; the current situation must be addressed from legal, commercial, and strategic perspectives.
* Türkiye's support for Syria's territorial integrity and unity remains unchanged. The Syrian people should exercise sovereignty over the entirety of the country.
* Developments near Türkiye, such as Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, etc., are interconnected and influenced by the moves of regional and global actors.
* Instability disrupts the ordinary flow of trade, and economic interests should be shared based on the principles of equity and fairness.

**Asst. Prof. Çağlar Özer**

* Dr. Özer summarised Syria's current situation and recent developments regarding military gains, state official visits and external actors’ presence.
* He stated that democratisation and basic principles of law should be taken as the basis for justice, and based on that, it will be established. Also, he mentioned that Russia's military bases in Latakia and Khmeimim will continue to be present in Syria.
* He stated that the situation in Syria created a historic opportunity for Israel, and the objectives of gaining the Golan Heights were valuable due to the water source. He explained that the Israeli army carried out airstrike operations on important military targets such as military facilities, air defence centres, ammunition depots and military airfields; therefore, 85% of the Syrian air defence system and 40% of the air force were destroyed in Syria.
* He shared that Türkiye's main aim is to protect the integrity and unity of Syria, and Türkiye pursues the completion of the peace process and clearance of its border from terrorist organisations. Furthermore, he explained Türkiye’s three stages plan: 1) the non-Syrian terrorist organisations’ departure, 2) the leadership team's departure from the country, and 3) those who remain to lay down their weapons and compromise with the new Syrian government.

**Asst. Prof. Mesut Özel**

* Dr. Özel highlighted that the workshop concluded with a consensus that the Assad regime ended effectively. He noted that there are varying opinions regarding the actions of different actors on the ground. Consequently, he underscored the significance of diplomacy in facilitating a path toward a peaceful resolution.

**Research Assistant Ege Furkan Toker**

* Mr. Toker explained the current situation in Syria in three parts: building Syria’s future politically and economically, a potential power vacuum, and, lastly, the return of Syrians who sought refuge and safety in other countries.

Consequently, the event concluded with a Q&A session, during which participants asked and answered questions correspondingly. The event aimed to shed light on recent developments and their implications for the region and Türkiye.

The online workshop has been useful for subject matter experts to share their views on the Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for Regional Geopolitics and Türkiye and explore key developments in regional dynamics.

Considering its geostrategic importance, Syria's territorial unity and integrity, along with its sovereignty, should be respected. The global and regional powers should mobilise all resources to enhance state-building efforts instead of prioritising their interests.

For the attainment of lasting peace and stability in the Middle East, the establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state with geographic continuity based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital is an absolute necessity.

Achieving sustainable stability in Syria will significantly contribute to regional and global peace.