

KENTUSAM Policy Paper of Geopolitical Fires: Türkiye and the Crisis in Syria-March 12, 2025

The hybrid workshop, a unique format that combined in-person and virtual participation, was titled "Geopolitical Fires: Türkiye and the Crises in Ukraine, Syria, and Palestine". It took place on 12 March 2025 in Kent University's Kağıthane campus under the auspices of Istanbul Kent University International Strategic Research and Application Center (KENTUSAM). Academics and diplomats worldwide gathered and shared insights on threats surrounding Türkiye: Ukraine, Syria, and Palestine under the moderation of Ozan Ormeci of Kent University. The event has been concluded in four sessions, each focusing on a different crisis and the last one as a final assessment. It was kicked off with the Palestine crisis by Hakan Keskin's presentation and continued with Syria as Saffet Akkaya's fruitful contributions. Yasar Onay led the final session regarding the Ukraine crisis. The event concluded with a final assessment and Q&A Session.

Syria; Worries and Hopes, Saffet Akkaya

As policymakers, academics, and diplomats interested in Middle Eastern geopolitics, your understanding of the historical background of socioeconomic impasses in the Middle East is crucial for formulating a coherent and practical approach to the multifaceted Syrian conflict. The region's intricate social structure is characterized by the powerful presence of traditional tribes, clans, sub-clans, and extensive familial networks, which fundamentally shape social dynamics and governance practices. These conventional structures coexist with a historical reliance on agricultural and artisanal production methods, often overshadowing industrialization. Moreover, the prevailing concept of ummah—a community bound by religious and cultural ties—contrasts sharply with modern secular notions of citizenship, complicating the formation of cohesive national identities. The notable absence of a robust nationalism or a well-defined nation-state tradition further exacerbates these challenges.

Since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, the Middle East has metamorphosed into a geopolitical arena marked by the strategic interests of global powers. These entities compete for dominance over the region, which is of significant historical and religious importance to three of the world's major faiths, possesses vast oil reserves, and holds a critical geographical position bridging three continents. The establishment of territorial states following World War I resulted in the emergence of weak state structures that have often proven inoperative. Instead, their economic entities have been subsumed within the capitalist frameworks established by colonial powers, leading to entrenched vulnerability and dependency.

This post-Ottoman legacy has created continuous competition and conflict, characterized by cold and hot wars. The dawn of the 21st century has not only perpetuated this cycle but has also introduced new conflicts, foreign interventions, and a proliferation of extremist groups. The Arab Spring erupted in 2011 and sought to challenge the Middle East's oppressive

economic conditions and dictatorial regimes. However, the expected socioeconomic transformations and administrative reforms were largely unattained.

The upheaval in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Palestine, and, most notably, Syria has failed to stabilize or strengthen the fragile nation-state structures. Instead, these revolutions have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, precipitating economic crises and undermining social cohesion. The relative balance of power between Arab states and Israel has likewise been significantly disrupted, inadvertently facilitating Israel's evolution into a formidable military force. Throughout the tumultuous period of the Arab Spring, non-state actors, including Hamas and Hezbollah, have gained prominence, often engaging in proxy conflicts that have stymied diplomatic efforts toward resolution.

The unraveling of traditional peace accords—such as the Camp David Accords 1980s and the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s—underscores the diminishing role of once-effective mediators like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

The anticipated fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024 has generated renewed hope among many Syrians, who aspire for peace and the opportunity to reconstruct their war-torn society. Nonetheless, the aftermath of the civil war illuminates an unsettling reality: the nation has been dramatically devastated, leaving profound psychological and sociocultural scars. Millions of individuals remain displaced, and the humanitarian situation is increasingly precarious, with the threat of renewed violence persisting.

Contemporary Syria is characterized by chaos and instability as state legitimacy and authority have significantly eroded. This power vacuum has allowed violent non-state actors to assume control, including Iran-backed militias such as the Shabiha and Hezbollah, foreign Shia militias like the Fatimiyyun and Zeynebiyyun brigades, as well as various Russian military units—including naval, air, and special operations forces—operating alongside the notorious Wagner Group. Additionally, entities such as the Türkiye-backed Free Syrian Army, Abu Muhammed Jolani's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Al Qaeda-affiliated factions like the Al Nusra Front, Da'esh (ISIS), and its offshoots, such as Huras al-Din, contribute to the overarching state of disorder. Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces continue to play a critical role in the region.

In this context, Syria stands at a critical crossroads after more than a decade of sustained conflict; it confronts intricate and existential questions:

How can a sustainable and lasting peace be established?

What roles will international actors assume in shaping the future trajectory of Syrian society?

Furthermore, what strategies will be employed to address the psychological and societal wounds inflicted by years of violence, thereby fostering a durable and inclusive national identity?

The answers to these pressing inquiries will indubitably shape the future of Syria and its populace for generations to come. This necessitates your comprehensive academic exploration and policy-oriented discourse, as your insights and actions are crucial in this process.

As Syria navigates its complex and tumultuous future, a critical inquiry emerges: Will the country devolve into a battleground for international power dynamics reminiscent of Afghanistan, or is there potential for Syria to evolve into a zone of stability that offers lasting peace and hope for the broader Middle Eastern region? The latter possibility, while challenging, offers a beacon of hope and a compelling vision for the future.

The current political landscape is significantly influenced by various violent factions, most notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has established control and implemented a governing framework in territories under its influence. This situation invokes serious concerns regarding HTS's capability to govern effectively without established diplomatic competencies, a neutral bureaucracy, and the formal etiquette characteristic of recognized state structures. Given HTS's historical roots and prior affiliations, can the organization genuinely extricate itself from its terrorist credentials and Salafist ideology? While HTS asserts its independence from Al-Qaida and claims a lack of global jihadist ambitions, skepticism abounds about its reliability, particularly in the intricate geopolitical context of the Middle East.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has suggested that drafting a new constitution and organizing national elections may extend over four years. However, such a protracted transition raises pertinent questions: Can Syria sustain public patience and optimism throughout this duration while simultaneously grappling with economic destabilization exacerbated by sanctions imposed by the United States (since 1979), the United Nations Security Council (since 2015), and the European Union (since 2011)? Will there be any movement towards the lifting of these sanctions, potentially enabling a reevaluation of al-Jolani's designation on the International Terrorist List? Furthermore, is there validity to assertions that the United States intends to leverage these sanctions in support of Kurdish groups operating in eastern Syria?

The future authority over various armed groups—such as the PYD (Democratic Union Party), FSA (Free Syrian Army), YPG (People's Defense Forces), ISIS (Da'esh), and other ethnic and sectarian factions—remains uncertain. The critical question arises: Will these factions recognize HTS's authority and al-Jolani's leadership, or will they maintain autonomy and pursue their objectives?

Moreover, the compatibility of American support for the PYD/YPG in northern Syria with the overarching goal of establishing a unified Syrian state poses a significant dilemma. Will the United States prioritize preserving Syria's territorial integrity while fostering the emergence of a peaceful, democratic society, or will it revert to entrenched patterns of intervention that serve its strategic interests?

To address these multifaceted challenges, several key arguments warrant rigorous exploration:

1. Establishment of an "Ideal Speech Situation": The transition to a stable and inclusive government necessitates cultivating an environment conducive to dialogue so-called "ideal speech situation." This entails implementing a comprehensive, Syrian-led dialogue process involving all social, ethnic, and religious factions. Such an approach is essential to restore the trust of the Syrian populace in state institutions.

2. Urgency of Ceasefire and Militia Integration: A crucial immediate step involves enacting a ceasefire alongside integrating disparate militias into a national army. This initiative is fundamental for cultivating nationwide confidence and reconnecting societal institutions, notwithstanding the fragmentation wrought by years of turmoil. Addressing the remaining stockpiles of weapons from the Assad regime and effectively managing paramilitary groups will be integral to this process.

3. Mitigation of Foreign Interference: Syria mustn't once again become a theater for foreign power struggles. The international community, particularly the United Nations, must be vigilant in acknowledging the complexities of the Syrian crisis. Safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity while preempting external interference is of paramount importance; all regional and global actors must demonstrate respect for Syria's sovereignty.

4. Establishment of Credible Jurisdiction: Transitioning towards normalcy necessitates establishing a reputable judicial system and active judicial courts. Such frameworks will facilitate accountability regarding past injustices, thereby fostering confidence and solidarity across the diverse ethnic and religious groups within the nation. This is vital for preventing future conflicts and laying a durable foundation for reconciliation.

5. Activation of Diplomatic Engagement: A robust diplomatic initiative, comprising engagement from regional and international stakeholders, is crucial for ensuring a holistic approach to Syria's reconstruction. A strategic diplomatic framework can cultivate an environment conducive to displaced Syrians' safe, voluntary, and dignified return and encourage international aid and investment. The reconstruction process must be expedited, methodical, and aligned with the societal priorities articulated by the Syrian populace.

In conclusion, while Syria faces many daunting challenges, the pathway toward reconstruction and stability is intrinsically linked to its citizens' collective agency and the international community's deliberate engagement in nurturing a just, inclusive, and peaceful future.