

In this edition, we cover the following topics:

- A comprehensive interview with Ömer Özkızılcık, a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council, discussing Türkiye-Syria relations.
- The issue of stray dogs has resurfaced on Türkiye's agenda, sparking heated debates in parliament this week. Ferhat Polat provides an evaluation of this issue.
- Following the tragic incident in Izmir, where two young people were electrocuted on the street, the CHP's challenges with its own municipalities have come under scrutiny again.

Are Türkiye and Syria on the Brink of a New Dialogue Process? Interview with Ömer Özkızılcık



Ömer Özkızılcık,
Non-resident
fellow at the
Atlantic Council

We interviewed Ömer Özkızılcık, a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council, on the recent diplomatic developments between Türkiye and Syria.

In recent weeks, President Erdoğan has repeatedly stated that Türkiye is open to talks with the Assad regime. While there had been some dialogue attempts previously, this is the first time the issue has reached such a prominent level. What developments triggered this process?

The most influential factor is the shift in Damascus' approach to Türkiye's withdrawing from Syria, which the Assad regime had set as a precondition for negotiations before. Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad's recent statements on this issue were viewed positively by Ankara. The process gained momentum following a meeting between Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and President Putin. Additionally, Iraq's diplomatic involvement has become noteworthy, as it joins Russia in mediating the discussions.

Why does Türkiye want to engage in talks with Damascus?

The primary reason is that the current situation in Syria does not address Türkiye's security needs. Since 2019, Türkiye has faced obstacles in Syria due to the intersection of interests between the US and Russia in this country. Additionally, the YPG's attempt to organise local elections prompted Türkiye to take action. Other significant factors include the issue of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, growing domestic public pressure, and an increase in racist incidents.

Geopolitically, new agendas such as Ukraine and Gaza have emerged. On one hand, there has been new momentum in US-Türkiye relations, while Türkiye hoped the US would develop a new approach regarding Syria. This included the expectation that the US would coordinate with Türkiye in the event of a US withdrawal from Syria. However, the US has continued to support the YPG and has not provided Türkiye with an alternative. Washington's attempt to reconcile the YPG with Türkiye signalled to Ankara that the American option is not viable. Consequently, Ankara is now exploring the option proposed by Russia to engage with Damascus.

How do you evaluate Damascus' approach? Is this process likely to continue?

The diplomatic process is likely to continue, potentially starting with a foreign minister-level meeting. However, the exact path of this process remains uncertain. While a preliminary agreement for a meeting in Baghdad has been announced, there have been reports that Russia prefers the meeting to take place in Moscow.

This process appears to be advancing because Bashar al-Assad is open to the meeting, but the content and outcomes of the meeting are still in question. There are significant risks associated with Damascus' approach.

First, it's important to recall why the Syrian conflict has persisted for 13 years. The Assad regime consistently labels the legitimate Syrian opposition as terrorists and accuses Türkiye of supporting terrorist organizations. This approach is a major barrier to ending the conflict and achieving peace in Syria.

Second, the Assad regime's maximalist demands present another challenge. The Syrian foreign ministry has called for a

return to the pre-2011 situation, envisioning Assad regaining full control over the whole of Syria, excluding the opposition from the political process, and resisting any new power-sharing arrangements. This scenario will not be possible.

Additionally, Damascus has adopted a waiting strategy, believing that if it holds its position long enough, other actors will eventually change theirs. This approach has been successful in normalising relations with Arab states, which is detrimental to peace in Syria. Damascus appears to be applying the same strategy to Türkiye.

If this approach continues, even in the most optimistic scenario, we can foresee a very long process that will take years. My prediction is that such a positive scenario will not materialise, and reconciliation between the two sides may remain elusive.

Do other powers active in Syria, such as Russia and Iran, support or have any reservations about this process?

If Iran was reluctant, the Iraqi government might not have been so proactive. However, Iran's true goal—whether to bring peace to Syria, normalise relations between Ankara and Damascus, or merely buy time—remains unclear. Iran might be feeling pressure from tensions in Gaza, Lebanon, and its conflict with Israel, necessitating a delay in Syria. The potential consequences of a Trump re-election for Iran's regional security structure are also uncertain.

Regarding Russia, it appears to be employing a stalling strategy. Russia did not facilitate talks between Ankara and Damascus when it was relatively stronger. Instead, it initiated this process during its struggles with the invasion of Ukraine, when it couldn't prevent a potential Turkish military operation in Syria while the Ukrainian conflict persists. To avoid escalation, Russia is encouraging dialogue between Ankara and Damascus.

These talks remained subdued until there was new momentum in US-Türkiye relations, coinciding with the approaching US elections. It seems Russia is using the Ankara-Damascus talks to buy time until the US presidential term is clarified. A possible Trump administration could lead to a deal in Ukraine or even a US withdrawal from Syria, significantly strengthening Russia's position. However, Trump's actions remain unpredictable. Should Russia face further difficulties, it will likely prolong the Ankara-Damascus talks to buy more time, ensuring that the costs in Ukraine do not impact its interests in Syria.

How might a potential Trump administration impact the balance in Syria? What does the future hold for Türkiye in this scenario?

It is difficult to predict what kind of policy Trump will pursue. He is known for making sudden decisions, and his campaign promises often do not align with his actions in office. Given his goals from his first term and the stance of his newly announced vice-presidential candidate, the most likely scenario is a US withdrawal from Syria. If this withdrawal is not coordinated with Türkiye, Syria could fall entirely under Iranian influence, as Iran is currently the most prepared to fill the vacuum left by the US.

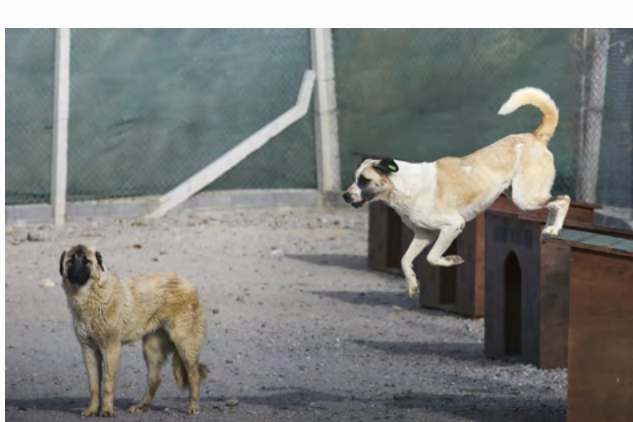
The only way to prevent this outcome is through coordination with Türkiye. If Türkiye steps in to enter the area vacated by the US, it could lead to improved bilateral relations and a positive shift in the Syrian situation. However, if the withdrawal is uncoordinated, as it was in 2019, bilateral relations will likely suffer, and Türkiye will find itself isolated against Iran and Russia in Syria.

Stray Dog Bill Sparks Heated Debate at the Turkish Parliament

Researcher Ferhat Polat reports on the debate on stray dogs in Türkiye, including the opinions of people who have experienced the issue:

“A heated discussion took place in the Turkish parliament as lawmakers debated a proposed legislation aimed at controlling the country's stray dog population, a move that has raised concerns among animal advocates about the potential for mass euthanasia of these animals.

The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) has introduced a 17-article bill in parliament that focuses on addressing issues related to aggressive dogs, pack behaviour, anatomical deformities, and rabies risks. The proposed legislation gives municipalities the power to put down dogs that are sick, believed to have rabies or exhibiting aggressive



(Doğukan Keskinkılıç - Anadolu Agency)

behaviour would be euthanized as well as those that are prohibited from being owned. Municipalities would also be required to build dog shelters or improve conditions in existing shelters by 2028. However, animal rights activists are demanding the withdrawal of the bill. Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Özgür Özel has criticised the AK Party's proposed legislation.

The country is currently divided on the issue of stray animal control. Some individuals, particularly animal rights activists, fear that certain municipalities may choose to conduct mass culling as a quick fix instead of investing resources in shelters. However, others believe that legislation is urgently needed as many people have suffered from attacks by stray dogs, resulting in injuries and even deaths of children. In Bursa, where we conducted interviews to gather opinions, some residents expressed heightened concerns, particularly when sending their children to school in the morning. Numerous incidents in the area have left both children and adults injured, contributing to an overall sense of unease.

Additionally, the presence of stray dogs roaming in packs during the morning hours has increased worries among locals due to their potential aggressiveness. While some acknowledge the validity of concerns regarding animal welfare, they believe euthanasia is not the correct solution. Instead, municipalities should invest more in improving conditions at dog shelters and expanding their reach to various locations. This necessitates a greater allocation of resources for authorities to effectively address these pressing concerns.”

CHP's Challenge with Its Own Municipalism

On July 12, two young people were electrocuted while crossing a road where water had accumulated after a downpour hit Izmir's city centre. Residents had been complaining about the electricity leakage for years, and local media had previously reported on the issue. Following the two deaths, a blame game ensued between the private electricity distribution company and Izmir municipality. The legal process is ongoing, and six people, including employees from the electricity company and the municipality, have been detained. This incident has sparked debates about the Izmir municipality's governance.

Izmir municipality has been governed by the CHP for the last two decades. Before that, parties from the CHP tradition such as DSP and SHP controlled local governments here. Izmir is consistently seen as a CHP stronghold during election periods. However, recent events have led people from all segments of society to voice their criticism of municipal governance in Izmir.

In the local elections held in March, the CHP won mayoral positions in many cities for the first time in many years. Traditionally, the provinces where the CHP succeeded were cities like Izmir, considered party strongholds. During periods of cultural tension, the CHP found success in provinces where secular concerns were high. The biggest gains for the party in the 2024 local elections were votes from electorates with different motivations and the new municipalities it secured.

However, long-term local governments often face issues such as corruption, nepotism, and service failures. The CHP's criticism of the government on these issues undermines its image when similar problems arise in its own municipalities. It is worth noting that the AK Party's rise to power was largely based on the success of its founding cadres in local governments in the 1990s. At that time, local governments run by the political tradition from which the AK Party emerged became a platform for underrepresented segments of the population to demonstrate their competence. This process eventually led to Türkiye's longest period of democratic rule.

Today, the CHP has not mobilised a similar social dynamic. The examples of municipalities under the main opposition party are not particularly impressive. The tragedy in the city centre of Izmir, one of Türkiye's largest metropolitan areas, is a stark reminder of this. Those close to the main opposition view success in local elections as a pathway to power. However, the CHP faces serious structural problems in this context. The emergence of different examples in the newly won municipalities depends on whether the CHP headquarters can break free from the influence of traditional interest groups within the party.

Highlights

- Türkiye continues to enhance its relations with African states. A high-level delegation including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources was in Niger this week.
- Turkish coast guard rescued 35 irregular migrants who were pushed back by Greece.

Recent Publications by TRT World Research Centre

- [Will Reformist Victory After 20 Years Transform Iran?](#)
By Mehmet Kılıç
- [Tale of Two Genocides: Srebrenica and Gaza](#) by Burak Elmalı
- [Navigating Diplomatic Waters: Azerbaijan's Rise and Armenia's Isolation](#) by İhsan Faruk Kılavuz



Send us leads and feedback at:
turkiyeinfofocus@gmail.com