

In this edition of Türkiye in Focus:

- The strained U.S.-EU relations during the Trump administration have once again underscored Türkiye's strategic significance for Europe, as analysed by researcher Burak Elmali.
- In the wake of İmralı's February 27 call, notable shifts are unfolding in Türkiye's domestic politics and regional landscape.
- Researcher Mehmet Kılıç examined the tensions in Türkiye-Iran relations amid recent developments in Syria.

Europe's Strategic Dilemma in Trump's Second Term: Türkiye's Role

The Trump administration's anticipated ceasefire initiative for the Russia-Ukraine War, coupled with its rhetoric on disengagement from the Transatlantic alliance, have prompted a strategic reassessment among European countries. The recent acceleration in diplomatic engagements reflects growing concerns over the future of Europe's security architecture in the absence of U.S. leadership. Within this context, Türkiye, possessing NATO's second-largest army and demonstrating significant progress in its defence industry, has emerged as a focal point in these discussions. Europe appears to be entering a preparatory phase for reshaping its security and defence policies, which presents challenges and opportunities for Türkiye-Europe relations. As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan aptly stated, "Türkiye is the last exit before the bridge."

First, Türkiye's rapid adaptability in foreign policy and its pursuit of defence autonomy position it as a critical factor for the European security equation. However, fostering a sustainable partnership requires a departure from the historically one-sided and ideologically driven approach that has characterised Europe's stance toward Türkiye, something particularly observed in its thorny membership process with the European Union (EU). This asymmetrical dynamic has contributed to a persistent perception of a civilisational divide, limiting bilateral cooperation to a framework of mutual distrust and political polarisation.

Secondly, Türkiye's contributions to continental security extend beyond its military capacity. Its defence industry, led by key national companies such as BAYKAR, ROKETSAN, HAVELSAN, and TEI, has demonstrated significant innovation and operational success. These capabilities offer Europe a unique opportunity to diversify its security partnerships and strengthen its defence infrastructure. Furthermore, Türkiye's balanced foreign policy approach enables it to engage constructively with multi-

ple actors simultaneously, facilitating a pragmatic and inclusive security dialogue.

For a functional security partnership to emerge, Europe must first recognise Türkiye's evolving strategic role and adjust its policy frameworks accordingly. A shift away from ideologically rigid narratives toward a pragmatic, interest-based approach is essential. This requires institutionalising a new mode of engagement that acknowledges Türkiye's contributions and integrates them into Europe's broader security architecture.

Finally, developing a comprehensive and inclusive security formula necessitates enhanced intergovernmental coordination. However, Europe's ongoing leadership crisis poses a significant obstacle to achieving the level of strategic cohesion required for such an initiative. The absence of a unified political identity and the fragmentation of security priorities among EU member states further complicate efforts to establish a coherent security framework that includes Türkiye. If these factors can be addressed, Türkiye-Europe coordination would benefit all parties significantly and open the doors for further cooperation in defence and security.



Critical Developments Unfold Following İmralı's Call

The statement of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the PKK terrorist organisation on İmralı Island, announced by the DEM Party delegation on February 27, marks the completion of one of the most crucial phases of the process initiated in October under the leadership of Devlet Bahçeli. A day after the statement, President Erdoğan declared, "As of yesterday, a new phase has begun in the efforts for a Terror-Free Türkiye."

The call from İmralı urging the PKK to lay down arms and dissolve itself was directly in line with the expectations voiced by Bahçeli. In response, PKK cadres in the Qandil Mountains of Iraq issued a statement outlining their intention to comply with Öcalan's call through decisions to be made at their upcoming congress.

At this stage, two critical aspects of the process stand out. The first concerns the response of the YPG, the PKK-affiliated group in northeastern Syria, to Öcalan's call and broader issues related to Syria's stability. The second is how the PKK's dissolution within Türkiye will impact the Kurdish dossier.

In the Syrian context, initial statements from the YPG implied that İmralı's call did not apply to them. Moreover, YPG ringleader Mazloum Abdi's remarks asking for Israeli support raised concerns about a renewed conflict that could further destabilise and fragment Syria. Such a scenario would also be detrimental to peace efforts in Türkiye. However, on Monday, March 10, a historic agreement was signed between Syrian

President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi. This agreement stipulates the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), predominantly composed of YPG militants, into the central army. Although questions remain about the specifics of the deal, this development represents a major step forward in resolving one of the most contentious issues in Türkiye's peace process.

The future of Türkiye's Kurdish dossier post-disarmament remains vague. Both sides insist disarmament comes without preconditions, with unresolved issues best addressed through dialogue. This perspective was reinforced by Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a member of the DEM Party delegation, in a televised interview, where he emphasised that disarmament was unconditional. Furthermore, a written statement from Devlet Bahçeli underscored the importance of this approach: "If the DEM Party maintains its prudent, calm, and constructive stance while taking consistent and stable steps, it will pave the way to becoming a truly national party in Türkiye."

Following İmralı's call, the DEM Party delegation has initiated meetings with various political parties this week, highlighting the parliament as the primary venue for resolving national issues. Parliament Speaker Numan Kurtulmuş also stated in his remarks that the parliament is the place for a solution. The DEM Party delegation will continue its meetings with parties represented in parliament next week with visits to the AK Party and MHP.

Türkiye-Iran Tensions: Regional Rivalry and the Balance of Diplomacy

The tension between Türkiye and Iran, which has been simmering behind the scenes since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, became more visible to the public when Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan criticised Iran's support for militia groups in the region. Following Mr. Fidan's statements, both countries summoned their ambassadors to their foreign ministries. This development once again underscored the long-standing tensions between the two countries and their influence on regional dynamics.

Türkiye's Security Concerns

In an interview with Qatar-based Al Jazeera Arabic on February 26, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that Iran's foreign policy in the region, carried out through militias, could lead to instability in the long run. Noting that such strategies could trigger mutual reprisals, Fidan emphasised that relations between states should be transparent and direct. He described Iran's policy of using militias in regional countries as a "risky strategy," saying:

"If you support a group in another country to create discomfort there, another country can support a different group in your country to create discomfort for you. Nothing can be hidden in the world anymore. Don't throw stones at your neighbours if your own windows are glass."



For Türkiye, the deepening instability in the region is seen as a threat not only to Iran's security but also to that of all neighbouring countries. Ankara has long argued that support for militia groups destabilises the region and that these policies are unsustainable. Türkiye believes that developments in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon directly affect its national security. In this context, allegations of Iranian direct contact with the PKK's Syrian offshoots raise Türkiye's concerns. The PKK's disbanding process in Türkiye and the SDF's agreement with the Syrian government signal a shifting balance of power in Syria, favouring Türkiye. This evolving landscape adds new complexities to Iran's strategic considerations in the region.

Ankara's Emphasis on Diplomatic Solution

Türkiye does not seek a direct crisis with Iran or any other regional power; however, it adopts a more transparent and assertive stance on regional issues. Ankara maintains that direct diplomatic engagement between the two countries should precede Iran's public statements. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Öncü Keçeli underscored that critical foreign policy issues should not be instrumentalised for domestic political purposes, emphasising that Türkiye prefers to address sensitive matters through direct dialogue with its counterparts.

Türkiye emphasises that it consistently prioritises peaceful methods in resolving regional conflicts and advocates for addressing issues diplomatically. Ankara argues that regional powers should take joint initiatives and act in cooperation, highlighting the importance of maintaining open dialogue channels on such matters. Recent developments can be seen as a reflection of Türkiye and Iran's efforts to enhance their regional influence. However, both countries prefer a controlled diplomatic process rather than severing relations entirely. The trajectory of the tension between Ankara and Tehran in the coming period will be shaped by developments in Syria and Iraq as well as other regional security dynamics.

Highlights

- Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, during his visit to Ankara, called for Türkiye to take an active role in ending the Russia-Ukraine war. He also stated that Türkiye's EU membership is a "realistic and tangible process."
- Türkiye's state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation has entered into a joint venture with U.S. oil giants Continental Resources and TransAtlantic Petroleum to develop the country's unconventional oil and natural gas resources in Diyarbakır, Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar announced on March 12th.
- Turkish central bank Governor Fatih Karahan reiterated on March 13th the institution's strong stance on meeting the year-end inflation target of 24%, emphasising that all necessary steps would be taken to achieve this goal.

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