

Türkiye's Path to Reconciliation with the Syrian Regime: The Role of Russian Mediation and Regional Implications

In recent years, Türkiye's foreign policy has experienced a pronounced shift regarding its relationship with Syria, marking a significant departure from Ankara's previously adversarial stance toward Bashar al-Assad's regime. This change in approach has been driven by a confluence of domestic, regional, and international pressures. Among the most notable influences is Russia's involvement, revealing a complex interplay of alliances and rivalries that underscore the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The motivations for Türkiye's realignment with Syria reflect a pragmatic response to the evolving dynamics in the region, where Moscow's mediation has provided a platform for dialogue between Ankara and Damascus.

Russia's Relationship with Syria since Hafez al-Assad: Foundations of a Strategic Alliance

The relationship between Russia and Syria has its roots in the late 1960s when Hafez al-Assad, a prominent figure in the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, rose to power in Syria. This period coincided with the Cold War, during which the Soviet Union sought to expand its influence in the Middle East as a counterbalance to Western alliances. Recognizing the strategic importance of the region, the Soviet Union pursued partnerships with countries that shared its opposition to Western imperialism, among them Syria. Al-Assad, eager to bolster his regime's security and assert Syria's position in the regional order, found a reliable ally in Moscow.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union became Syria's primary source of military equipment, providing the Assad regime with the tools needed to fortify its defenses and project power within the region. The depth of this military cooperation was underscored by Syria's reliance on Soviet arms during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, where Soviet support enabled Syria to engage Israel with advanced weaponry. This period solidified the Assad regime's perception of Moscow as a steadfast partner capable of aiding Syria in maintaining its sovereignty and regional influence.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's relationship with Syria endured, albeit in a modified form. Russia retained its naval presence at Tartus, underscoring its interest in maintaining a foothold in the Mediterranean. This post-Soviet period saw Russia transition from a superpower to a nation focused on reasserting its regional influence. Syria became a focal point for Russia's renewed ambitions, with military cooperation resuming in the 2000s. By 2011, as the Syrian Civil War erupted, Russia's strategic interests in Syria were revitalized, culminating in its 2015 military intervention. Moscow's involvement not only stabilized the Assad regime but also marked Russia's return as a decisive power broker in Middle Eastern affairs.

Russia's Military and Economic Support: Securing Strategic Influence

Russia's support for Syria throughout the civil war has been instrumental in securing its geopolitical ambitions. By 2015, Russia's direct military intervention, including air strikes and ground operations, prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, thereby protecting its interests in the region. Russia's intervention was accompanied by economic support, particularly through

infrastructure investments and arms sales. Moscow's provision of advanced military equipment bolstered Assad's defenses and helped reestablish control over significant portions of Syrian territory. The deployment of Russian forces also safeguarded Russia's naval base in Tartus and allowed it to secure air bases that serve as strategic assets for projecting military power across the Middle East.

The Broader Geopolitical Impact of Russia's Syrian Intervention

The effects of Russia's intervention in Syria extend beyond the Assad regime's survival. By establishing itself as an indispensable actor in Syria's future, Russia has positioned itself as a key player in the regional balance of power. The military and economic support Russia has provided underscore its commitment to countering Western influence and consolidating its sphere of influence. For Türkiye, Russia's entrenched position in Syria presents both opportunities for collaboration and challenges due to conflicting strategic objectives, particularly regarding Kurdish forces near Türkiye's southern border.

Russia's Relationship with Türkiye: Historical Context and Evolving Diplomacy

Türkiye's relationship with Russia is characterized by a complex history of rivalry and rapprochement. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Türkiye emerged as a newly independent republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who sought to secure Türkiye's sovereignty in a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment. The Soviet Union, newly formed after the Bolshevik Revolution, viewed Türkiye as a potential ally against Western imperialism. Despite these shared interests, the two countries' relationship was marked by tensions over territorial disputes and ideological differences. The early 20th century was punctuated by both diplomatic outreach and mutual suspicion, as each nation navigated its own path in the emerging global order.

Mid-20th Century Tensions and the Cold War

During the Cold War, Türkiye's alliance with NATO placed it squarely in opposition to the Soviet Union, reinforcing the divide between Ankara and Moscow. The Soviet Union's expansionist ambitions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East exacerbated Turkish concerns over Soviet encroachment. As a result, Türkiye solidified its alliances with the United States and other Western powers, a stance that further complicated its relationship with Russia. Despite these ideological rifts, Türkiye and the Soviet Union maintained a pragmatic level of engagement, recognizing the mutual benefits of trade and regional stability.

The Warming of Turkish-Russian Relations in the 21st Century

The end of the Cold War and the rise of multipolar geopolitics allowed Türkiye and Russia to explore new avenues for cooperation. In recent decades, shared economic interests have driven a rapprochement, with the two countries engaging in energy projects, trade agreements, and defense cooperation. The TurkStream gas pipeline and Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia exemplify this trend. These partnerships underscore a mutual willingness to pursue pragmatic alliances despite underlying geopolitical differences. However,

the Syrian conflict has highlighted the limits of this cooperation, as Türkiye and Russia have supported opposing sides in the civil war.

The Strategic Balancing Act in Syria: Astana Process and Collaborative Efforts

Despite these conflicting interests, Türkiye and Russia have found common ground in initiatives like the Astana Process, which seeks to facilitate peace negotiations in Syria. This collaboration reflects both countries' desire to stabilize Syria, albeit for different reasons. For Türkiye, securing a buffer zone along its border is essential for countering the influence of Kurdish forces associated with the PKK. For Russia, a stable Assad regime aligns with its broader objectives in the region. The Astana Process exemplifies the delicate balancing act that defines Turkish-Russian relations, as both nations navigate their shared and divergent interests in Syria.

Türkiye's Relationship with Syria: Border Disputes and Security Concerns

The history of Turkish-Syrian relations is fraught with territorial disputes and security concerns. Following World War I, the delineation of modern borders left Türkiye and Syria with unresolved tensions, particularly regarding the Hatay Province. Syria's refusal to recognize Hatay as Turkish territory created a diplomatic rift that endured for decades. In subsequent years, Syria's support for Kurdish groups and the PKK exacerbated tensions, prompting Türkiye to adopt a cautious approach toward its southern neighbor. These concerns have shaped Turkish policy, particularly in response to the challenges posed by Kurdish autonomy movements within Syria.

Türkiye's Shifting Approach in the Syrian Civil War

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 marked a turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations. Initially, Türkiye pursued a policy of supporting opposition forces against Assad, driven by both humanitarian concerns and a desire to prevent violence from spilling over into Turkish territory. As the conflict persisted, Türkiye's objectives evolved. Its interventions in northern Syria were aimed at countering Kurdish forces affiliated with the PKK and establishing a safe zone along the border. The prolonged nature of the conflict and the influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye have heightened Ankara's concerns, prompting a reevaluation of its approach toward Assad.

The Rationale for Türkiye's Rapprochement with Assad

Türkiye's recent shift toward reconciling with the Assad regime reflects a pragmatic response to the ongoing challenges posed by the Syrian conflict. The prospect of stabilizing its southern border and addressing the refugee crisis has led Türkiye to reconsider its stance on Assad. Russia's role as a mediator has facilitated this process, providing Ankara with a platform to engage in dialogue with Damascus. For Türkiye, the primary motivations behind this rapprochement include mitigating security threats, reducing the economic strain of hosting refugees, and reestablishing diplomatic ties that could support regional stability.

The Domestic Repercussions of Türkiye's Rapprochement with Assad

One of the most important and potentially destabilizing issues arising from Türkiye's rapprochement with the Assad regime is the presence of Syrian refugees, particularly those who are part of the opposition to Assad. The reactions to this diplomatic shift have already led to domestic unrest, as seen in recent incidents in Gaziantep and Kayseri. Upon learning of Türkiye's intent to engage with Assad's regime, some Syrian refugees in these cities took to burning the Turkish flag—a deeply sacred symbol for Turkish citizens. Such actions could spark significant social and political tensions within Türkiye, where the presence of Syrian opposition and refugees has become a sensitive issue. This underscores the delicate balance Türkiye must navigate between its foreign policy ambitions and the realities of its internal dynamics. In these instances, as much as Türkiye seeks stability and long-term solutions, internal pressures and patriotic sentiments could heavily influence public opinion and domestic policy regarding refugees. For the United States, which monitors these shifts closely, this adds a layer of complexity to regional stability and refugee policies, particularly in relation to American allies in the region.

Russian Mediation and Türkiye-Syria Reconciliation Efforts

Russia's role as a mediator between Türkiye and Syria underscores Moscow's influence in the Middle East. By facilitating dialogue, Russia has positioned itself as a key broker in the reconciliation process, leveraging its alliances to advance its interests. The mediation efforts highlight Russia's ability to navigate complex alliances and foster negotiations between parties with competing interests. Türkiye's engagement with Syria, mediated by Russia, illustrates the shifting alliances and pragmatic diplomacy shaping the future of the region.

Conclusion: The Future of Türkiye-Syria Relations and the Implications for Regional Stability

The ongoing reconciliation efforts between Türkiye and Syria signal a potential shift in the regional balance of power. Türkiye's pragmatic approach reflects recognition of the limitations of military intervention and a desire to stabilize its border regions. The role of Russia as a mediator highlights the broader geopolitical implications of this rapprochement, as Moscow continues to assert its influence in the Middle East. As Türkiye and Syria navigate this delicate process, the outcome will have far-reaching consequences for regional stability, refugee dynamics, and the future of Turkish-Russian relations.