

“Turkey has to face its mistakes in Syria.” Interview with Aydin Sezer

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On July 5, **Ozgur Ozel**, the leader of the main opposition party in Turkey, CHP, told the press [he wants to travel to Damascus](#) with a delegation and meet with Syrian **President Bashar al-Assad**.

One of the issues to be discussed will be the repatriation of Syrian refugees from Turkey.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said repeatedly that he wants to meet with Assad and to [restore the diplomatic relationship](#) between the two neighbors, which had been prior to 2011 a very close and beneficial relationship for Turkey. Prior to 2011, Syria was the largest export market for Turkey.

Syria has said repeatedly, they are open to a restored relationship, but Turkey must first cut ties with terrorist groups and radical militias which have been supported by Turkey, and Turkey must withdraw mercenaries and Turkish soldiers from Idlib, north of Aleppo, and all northern Syrian border areas.

Recently, Turkey began the first steps of cutting ties with terrorists in Idlib and north of Aleppo. This resulted in clashes between the terrorists and their civilian supporters who view the Turkish policy change as betrayal to their cause, which was to establish an Islamic State in Idlib, under HTS, formerly Jibhat al-Nusra, formerly the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda.

[Steven Sahiounie of MidEastDiscourse](#) interviewed Aydin Sezer, political scientist, foreign policy analyst, former diplomat, and economic advisor at the Turkish Embassies in Cairo and Moscow for his opinion on these new developments in the Turkish-Syrian file.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): Recently, there have been clashes between the Turkish military and the Syrian opposition in Idlib and north Aleppo. This appears to be a result of a new Turkish foreign policy decision on Syria. In your opinion, are we seeing the beginning of the end of Turkish support for the Syrian opposition?

Aydin Sezer (AS): Yes, this is the beginning of the end of Turkey's support to the Syrian opposition. However, this is not a surprising development. It is an inevitable consequence of Turkey's flawed Syria policy. Turkey has to face the reality and its mistakes, and that process is now underway. If there is to be peace with Assad, if this is really desired, Turkey will have to confront not only the Syrian National Army, which Turkey established, but also the jihadists and extremists in Idlib. Peace in Syria will have a separate cost for Turkey. Since these elements cannot be included in the Assad administration, unfortunately it will be a difficult process.

SS: Turkey had been a major supporter of the Syrian opposition. In your opinion, what has caused this drastic change in Turkey's policy?

AS: There are many different factors and reasons for the change in Turkey's policy. The most important one, in my opinion, is the unbearable economic crisis Turkey is going through. The Syrian costs are now unaffordable, especially in fiscal terms. The tight monetary policy that the finance minister, Mehmet Şimşek, has been implementing for a year now is making it more difficult to pay this bill. Turkey therefore wants to get rid of this burden somehow.

The second important factor is the presence of more than 5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Tensions and clashes between Turks and Syrians for various reasons are taking the country into a serious and irreversible process. Aside from the political cost, given the growing racist sentiments in Turkey, there is the possibility of undesirable problems. Erdoğan is therefore now convinced that this issue must be resolved. I guess so, in fact I hope so, but it is difficult to predict what Erdoğan will do tomorrow.

SS: Media reports show Syrians in Idlib and north of Aleppo attacking Turkish vehicles and citizens. In one case, they attacked a Turkish soldier. In your opinion, how do you see Turkey's response to this violence?

AS: Judging by the public reaction, we can say this. It is terrible. These are unwanted images that provoke reactions among Turks. Unfortunately, they are also likely to increase the public reaction against Syrians in Turkey. Politicians and Erdogan characterize these developments as provocations. The public is urged to be sensitive to provocation. But, provocations are in the nature of things, and this is an expected development. It is a difficult process. If the reaction of the Turkish armed forces is harsh, the violence of the demonstrations will increase.

SS: Recently, as a response to the violence in Idlib and north of Aleppo we are seeing media reports of Syrian refugees in Turkey being mistreated. In your opinion, will there be a move to repatriate the Syrians?

AS: Yes, this step is already being taken. But, it is thought that this will help to reduce the tension in Turkish society towards asylum seekers.

SS: The Prime Minister of Iraq has said that he is hopeful of a meeting soon between

President Erdogan and President Assad. In your opinion, what needs to be done to make this meeting happen?

AS: Russia is already contributing to this process. As you know, Assad has two preconditions. Turkey's withdrawal from Syrian territory and the cessation of Turkey's support to the jihadists. It is very difficult for Erdogan to accept these, we know that, but on the other hand Assad has to be convinced. Maybe Turkey could announce a timetable for withdrawal from Syria. More precisely, Turkey and Erdogan must first convince Assad of Turkey's sincerity. I think, in order to reach a peace agreement, a preliminary agreement is needed to overcome the crisis of trust between the parties.

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