

Clashes in Northern Syria: The Triumph of Interests Over the Language of "Brotherhood"?

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Brief Analysis

With no prospects for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, the Turkish government's insistence on maintaining its previous policies in northern Syria and its usurpation of the Syrian people's decision-making warns of dire consequences for an already fragile relationship.

Soon after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) allowed over three million Syrians asylum within Turkey. Erdogan portrayed this decision as an expression of the Turkish people's hospitality, empathy, and solidarity with their neighbors. Yet in the years since, refugees—particularly Syrian refugees—have been a focal point of Turkish media and politics, and the goodwill and charity extended to Syrian refugees in the past is now replaced with intense suspicion and vilification as Turkish citizens deal with rising inflation and other economic hardships.

Political parties from across the ideological spectrum now attempt to [ratchet up \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-refugees-turkey\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-refugees-turkey) anti-immigration rhetoric and endorse the departure and deportation of Syrians from Turkey. Consequently, these refugees have been placed under a microscope, and the misbehavior or criminal activity of individual Syrians is prime political fodder [to paint \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-anti-syrian-sentiment-turkey\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-anti-syrian-sentiment-turkey) all Syrians as a scourge to Turkish society. For Syrians in Turkey, Syria proper, and elsewhere, a series of inflammatory incidents have fueled anti-Turkish attitudes and threaten to disrupt President Erdogan's recent attempts to normalize relations with the Assad regime in Damascus.

The events in the Turkish city of Kayseri were the latest episode in a terrible series of events based on falsifying information to commit [acts of violence \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/20/syrian-refugees-attacked-in-turkey-the-crisis-makes-us-perfect-scapegoats_6691629_4.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/20/syrian-refugees-attacked-in-turkey-the-crisis-makes-us-perfect-scapegoats_6691629_4.html) against Syrian refugees. On the evening of Sunday, May 30, a Turkish citizen posted a video claiming that a young Syrian man harassed a Turkish girl. Hundreds of Turkish youths responded by smashing and burning Syrian-owned shops and cars. For days on end, Syrians barred themselves inside their homes, only leaving to buy essential supplies. After hours of chaos and violence, the police arrived, and their director announced to the Turkish youths that they could return home as the girl was not Turkish, as [reported \(https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=963042372238386\)](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=963042372238386) by Syrian TV on July 1.

Across the border in areas controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA)—backed by Turkey—videos of these incidents spread like wildfire. For Syrians still in Syria, scenes of violence against Syrian refugees are not new. However, the scale of harassment and destruction sparked an unprecedented outburst of anger. As the violence in Kayseri spread on social media, groups of Syrians [took to the streets \(https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/07/02/protesters-turkish-troops-and-militias-clash-in-northern-syria/\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/07/02/protesters-turkish-troops-and-militias-clash-in-northern-syria/) on Monday afternoon, July 1 to express their frustration. The demonstrations quickly escalated from merely blocking Turkish trucks to attacking some drivers and employees, smashing their vehicles, and shouting anti-Turkish slogans. The peak of these events came with the death and injury of several people in attacks on the Turkish governor's offices in Afrin and Jarabulus, and large groups of demonstrators heading to the Turkish side of the Bab al-Salam border crossing with Turkey, where Turkish flags were sometimes removed or burned.

Notably, no faction of the SNA or the Turkish-backed civilian or military police intervened to suppress the demonstrators or prevent them from reaching Turkish sites in the fiercest confrontation to date between the Syrian people and Turkish forces in Syria. The violence subsided by evening, accompanied by a complete internet blackout after the demonstrators seemed to feel they had achieved their goal of sending a clear message to Turkey that it should reconsider its policy towards Syrians, whether refugees in Turkey or those in northern Syria.

Many observers tend to believe that the primary motive behind the events in northern Syria goes beyond responding to the Kayseri incidents and protests against the official Turkish stance. They point to similar incidents in various Turkish cities that did not elicit the same reaction from Syrians in the liberated north. The past week alone saw several similar events, each of which could have caused the same level of tension and even confrontation. For example, a large number of demonstrators gathered at the [Abu al-Zendin \(https://awp.net/en/stories/crossing-opening-between-syria-and-aleppo-triggers-protests/\)](https://awp.net/en/stories/crossing-opening-between-syria-and-aleppo-triggers-protests/) crossing between the liberated areas and Assad regime-controlled areas in the Syrian city of al-Bab following reports that Turkish forces intended to bring Russian officers into the liberated areas through this crossing. The demonstrators then inspected Turkish vehicles to ensure no Russian officers were inside.

These reports were confirmed when the local council in al-Bab, appointed by Turkey, announced that the crossing would officially open in the coming days for commercial movement in both directions under the pretext of supplying the city with water from regime areas. Shocked, demonstrators protested this decision, with some storming the crossing and smashing parts of it. Tensions were further heightened by unprecedented Turkish official statements about the possibility of [restoring official relations with the Assad regime \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-invite-assad-talks-restore-turkey-syria-ties-2024-07-07/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-invite-assad-talks-restore-turkey-syria-ties-2024-07-07/), considering that the Turkish and Syrian regimes are "one family," as President Erdogan said, [quoted \(https://www.zamanarabic.com/2024/07/16/%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2591-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2589-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B9%25D9%2588%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A8%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2584\)](https://www.zamanarabic.com/2024/07/16/%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2591-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2589-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B9%25D9%2588%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A8%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2584) by the Turkish newspaper Zaman on July 16. Just hours after the Abu al-Zendin crossing incidents, Syrian activists in the Turkish city of Gaziantep—home to many Syrian refugees—reported that Turkish security forces raided and arrested dozens of unregistered Syrians, seemingly in response to Syrians' rejection of opening the Abu al-Zendin crossing. These dramatic events

left a bad impression among Syrians in the north, with longstanding feelings of abandonment turning into a new sense of betrayal by Turkey.

For their part, Turkish authorities blamed Turkish nationalists for attacks on Syrian refugees. Turkish authorities cited road camera footage showing a truck carrying dozens of those who participated in the attacks on Syrian refugees in Kayseri. After arresting many of them, it was revealed that 468 had criminal records,

Notably, opposition parties to the ruling AKP have made the Syrian refugee issue and their repatriation—through understandings with the Assad regime—a priority in their election campaigns over the past two years, prompting the Turkish president to announce a [housing project \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230525-turkey-kicks-off-syria-housing-project-for-refugee-returns\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230525-turkey-kicks-off-syria-housing-project-for-refugee-returns) in northern Syria to repatriate one million refugees. All of this has given the impression that the Syrian refugee issue has become a public opinion matter in Turkey.

While Turkish authorities are pointing the finger at unruly mobs and opposition parties, many Syrian entities and elites (such as the Syrian Trade Union Federation and some newly formed parties) considered the recent riots in northern Syria a result of "accumulations" related to Turkey's handling of the Syrian file. In their view, the shortcomings of Turkish government in northern Syria has steadily increased resentment among the local population, and the videos from Kayseri were merely the boiling point.

The Turkish government's management of northern Syria in all fields has played a fundamental role in developing negative feelings among Syrians towards Turkey. Many Syrians hold the Turkish government responsible for the deteriorating economic situation in northern Syria, with salaries for employees, SNA members, and teachers being less than \$100 per month, for example. Additionally, United Nations and NGO programs have seen significant reductions in projects, staff, and aid provided to hundreds of thousands of internally displaced families. Additionally, the exclusive use of PTT (Turkey's national post directorate) for distributing Syrian employees' salaries in major northern cities has caused severe congestion due to the limited number of PTT staff. The PTT centers in Azaz and Afrin (the largest cities in northern Syria, each with about half a million people) have only two Turkish employees each distributing salaries.

The Turkish government has not responded to repeated calls to solve the PTT issue, which has become a near-daily source of tension. Furthermore, many details about the Turkish government's negative performance in agriculture, trade, industry, and education have all contributed to the growing negative sentiment towards Turkey among the people of northern Syria recently.

In any case, many Syrian entities and elites see Turkey's insertion into the governance of northern Syria as a major cause of resentment against the Turkish government. With Turkey's direct [military intervention \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/turkey-launches-major-operation-against-isis-in-key-border-town\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/turkey-launches-major-operation-against-isis-in-key-border-town) in northern Syria starting in late 2016 to help defeat ISIS, its ability to turn back Assad regime forces backed by Russia and Iran, and campaigns to end the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in various areas, Turkey became the strongest and perhaps the sole player in northern and northwestern Syria. Turkey gradually began [intervening in the formation of Syrian opposition institutions \(https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/04/turkeys-relations-with-the-syrian-opposition?lang=en\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/04/turkeys-relations-with-the-syrian-opposition?lang=en), starting with the coalition, then the Syrian interim government, and finally the local councils in northern Syrian cities and towns. As a result, any decision by these entities no longer reflects the will and interests of Syrians but rather the interests of the Turkish government.

Later, Turkey began directly appointing council heads, seemingly based on loyalty to Turkey, regardless of the heads' and council members' capabilities, qualifications, or social acceptance, or what they could offer to alleviate the hardships of war and displacement. This control reached the point of imposing some council heads by force. Turkey's near-total control over the coalition and government has paralyzed an organic and open furthering of revolution. This control was a first step towards Turkey's involvement as a guarantor of the Syrian opposition in [Astana negotiations \(https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-syria-turkey-iran-hold-talks-astana-june-21-ria-2023-06-14/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-syria-turkey-iran-hold-talks-astana-june-21-ria-2023-06-14/) with Russia and Iran, leading to understandings that later redrew the lines of engagement and ceasefires between regime and opposition forces, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians from their cities in preparation for regime and allies' control. Therefore, Syrians' sense of shock and betrayal was as great as their expectations and hopes built on the Turkish guarantor position.

Even weeks after the dust has settled in Kayseri and in northern Syria, it is still unclear whether the Turkish government will reform its approach or try to maintain the status quo. Immediately following the riots in northern Syria, Turkish officials met with SNA factions to discuss a path forward, emphasizing the need to ensure Turkish control in the region. On the other hand, Al Jazeera [With no prospects for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, the Turkish government's insistence on maintaining its previous policies in northern Syria and its usurpation of the Syrian people's decision-making warns of dire consequences for an already fragile relationship. One warning sign appears in the recent article of defector Colonel Abdul Jabbar al-Aqidi in an \[article \\(https://www.syria.tv/%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D9%2582%25D9%258A%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A5%25D9%2584%25D9%2589-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D9%2586-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-\]\(https://www.syria.tv/%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D9%2582%25D9%258A%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A5%25D9%2584%25D9%2589-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D9%2586-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/7/5/%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AD%25D8%25AA%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B9%25D9%2588%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AF-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9) on July 5 that President Erdogan might invite Bashar al-Assad to a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. While some observers interpret this move by the Turkish leadership as a political tactic within a complex game that fits the geopolitical reality, large segments of the Syrian people see it as a betrayal of their rights and a commodification of their sacrifices fighting the Assad regime.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

[%25D9%2588%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A1-%25D8%25A3%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D9%2589\)](#) where he argues that the Syrian people, who sacrificed hundreds of thousands in their revolution for freedom, appear ready to sacrifice for their dignity and other things in response to the events in northern Syria. Any new racist attacks on Syrian refugees remain a ticking time bomb that could cause things to spiral out of control at any moment. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Aug 9, 2024



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/only-credible-offensive-threat-can-deter-iran-climbing-escalation-ladder\)](#)



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