

“New Middle East” vs. “Ottoman Caliphate”

ARVAK Center comment, 10.01.2025

After the fall of the Bashar Assad regime, the contradictions between Turkey and Israel in Syria have intensified, revealing a fundamental divergence in their views on the future of the Middle East and, accordingly, their roles in its reorganization. Judging by Ankara’s rhetoric and actions, Turkey aims to maintain Syria as a centralized, unitary state, with no prospects for federalization. Meanwhile, Tel Aviv, at the level of high-ranking officials, states the necessity of decentralizing Syria, and the Israeli expert community speaks practically directly of the “*convenient moment*” for legitimizing the subjectivity of Syrian Kurds, implying their subsequent unification with Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian counterparts.

From Israel’s point of view, Syrian sovereignty within the 1946 borders has outlived itself, as the new reactionary government in Damascus cannot ensure the security and equality of the Kurds, Syrian Druze, Alawites, and Christian communities. Consequently, despite the assurances of the Ankara-backed al-Julani government, destabilization in Syria is inevitable, posing a permanent threat to the security of Israel’s borders.

Tel Aviv has already taken practical steps to prevent Turkish plans. IDF units have seized the northern and northeastern foothills of the Golan Heights, taken control of Druze-populated areas of Syria, established their strongholds on Mount Hermon, and advanced to the suburbs of Damascus. At the same time, since the beginning of December, the Israeli army has been methodically destroying the weapon arsenals, military factories, airfields, naval bases, and ships of the Syrian Navy inherited by the new government from Assad’s army. According to Middle Eastern sources, Tel Aviv, in cooperation with Washington, is delivering weapons to the Kurdish formations of the “Syrian Democratic Army” (SDA) in order to organize their defense against the anticipated attacks from the new Syrian government army consisting of “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” (HTS) and the “Syrian National Army” (SNA), as well as Turkish units.

Turkey understands that Israel is deliberately creating obstacles to its plans for centralizing Syria and destroying both the military potential of the radicals in Damascus and their income from the oil fields located in the territories controlled by the Syrian Kurds. Without a well-equipped army and stable oil revenues, the unification of Syria is an almost impossible task. Turkey has little time left to prove that the new Syrian authorities under its *patronage* can achieve what Assad failed to do with the support of Iran and Russia. On 04.01.2025, R. Erdogan stated: “*The PKK [also referring to the allegedly affiliated SDA] has no choice but to lay down arms... Either the militants will bury their weapons in the ground, or they will be buried with them. There is no third way*”. Few days later, he threatened that if disobedience continued, the Turkish Army would also participate in the operation to conquer the Syrian Kurdistan.

According to the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet*, following two secret meetings, the new government in Damascus issued an ultimatum to the SDA and the Kurdish administration, demanding that they immediately lay down their arms and submit to the new authority. In response, the Kurds demanded an equal share of oil revenues with Damascus and the reformation of their national armed units into a separate army corps or division within the

new Syrian Army. Damascus rejected these counter conditions, and it is expected that the fighting between the “new Syrian Army” (HTS and SNA) and Kurdish formations in northern and northeastern Syria could begin in the near future. The numerical advantage lies with Turkish proxies (according to international sources, HTS and SNA forces together total count about 100,000 fighters), but with active support from the USA and Israel, highly motivated Kurdish units may organize effective resistance. According to Middle Eastern sources, the USA is already sending military cargo planes with unspecified weapons for the SDA to Syrian Kurdistan and transferring special forces and armored vehicles to Kobani via Iraq.

According to the *STMEGI* source, the Kurdish issue is increasingly worsening the situation in Syria and threatens to cause a final split among the pro-Turkish forces that have come to power in Damascus. According to the source, the Kurds in Manbij are “*strengthening their positions*” and maintaining control over the eastern part of the city. Amid this, uncertainty is growing within the ranks of the SNA. Meanwhile, HTS leader al-Julani, the nominal head of the new Syrian administration, is allegedly showing signs of distancing himself from the pro-Turkish vector and seeking patronage from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Egypt. The reasons cited are “*the Arab memory of the centuries-long harsh period of Turkish domination in Syria*” and “*Erdogan’s aggressive rhetoric*”. His recent statement about “*the historical belonging of Syria to the Ottomans*” allegedly shocked and greatly alarmed the new Syrian government.

Thus, Ankara’s hope to maintain the semblance of consolidated forces that overthrew Assad and their unquestioning subordination to the Turkish will seems to be failing. Without the intervention of Israel and the USA, the process of disorganization among the reactionaries would not have started so quickly. Maybe this is the reason why Ankara is urgently mobilizing HTS, SNA, and other radical formations within the new Syrian army to wage war against their “*common enemy*” – the Kurds. This would allow Turkey to reunite the disparate Syrian groups once again under its leadership and neutralize the “*Kurdish threat*” on its southern borders. Presumably, this is currently Ankara’s only chance to pre-emptively prevent a split in the Syrian coalition government and among the most notorious field commanders, to whom Turkey has promised the indivisibility of Syria and financial prosperity.

The current events in Syria have essentially marked the beginning of a global confrontation phase between Turkey and Israel, which according to experts, was inevitable. Ankara could not ignore the fact that Israel has had established close ties with Iraqi and Turkish Kurds since the 1960s, which have never been interrupted, unlike the US-Kurdish or Russian [Soviet]-Kurdish relations.

A marker of this “*warm friendship and mutual assistance*” were the words of gratitude once articulated by an Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani towards Israel: “*There is no other country to which we, the Kurds, owe so much*”. As the *Middle East Monitor* publication recalls, for about 60 years, the “*Jewish state has openly provided the Kurds with military and humanitarian assistance... and the relationship became more noticeable after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003*”. It was then that analysts believe Turkey first dared to refuse its NATO allies the provision of its territory for an existentially important

military campaign, prompting Washington and Tel Aviv to reconsider the need for a strategic focus on the Kurds in the Middle East region. The creation of an independent Kurdistan became the central element of the US-Israeli “New Middle East” plan, which envisages the global reorganization of the region, its borders, geopolitical structure, and transportation-energy communications. Despite Israelis presenting their plan as a purely economic initiative proposed by Shimon Peres back in the 1990s, Turkey could not overlook the geopolitical context of the project. The Israeli idea of creating free trade zones in the Near East could not be realized without the geopolitical reorganization of the region. Essentially, it implied total Israeli control over the region’s resource base and transforming it into a vast market for Israeli products, as Shimon Peres wrote, unambiguously hinting that Israel should live and constantly strengthen at the expense of exploiting dozens of neighboring countries. Later, this program was refined by Zbigniew Brzezinski from the US side, who believed that the “*Great Plan*” could not be implemented without redrawing the political-geographical and demographic map of the Greater Middle East.

The start of the “New Middle East” project can be considered as the “Arab Spring”, which initiated destabilization, civil wars, interstate conflicts, regime changes, and the emergence of new state or quasi-state formations. The establishment of Kurdish Autonomy in Iraq, as an intermediate stage on the path to sovereignty, became an important component of the US-Israeli plan aimed at fragmenting the Arab world, dismantling the “*Shiite axis*” operating under Iran’s auspices, and curbing Turkey, which was already showing signs of excessive independence and historical revisionism.

Simultaneously, in contrast to the development of the US-Israeli “New Middle East” doctrine, Turkey sought to build its own regional organization concept, in which its role was fundamentally different from the functions assigned to it by Washington and Tel Aviv. Erdogan’s Turkey attempted to compile all vectors of expansionist aspirations, harbored by representatives of various ideological streams within its military-political elite. This includes the “Blue Homeland” doctrine of the military top brass, which prioritizes Turkey’s hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also encompasses the neo-Ottomanism doctrine promoted by Islamist forces within Erdogan’s AKP, aiming for Turkish expansion in the Arab world. Additionally, it involves the ultranationalist circles’ intensively lobbied strategy of pan-Turanism and pan-Turkism, paving the way for “Greater Turkey” in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Thus, Turkey entered the 21st century with the ambitious task of preserving and harmonizing all directions of its geostrategic growth, each of which, from Ankara’s perspective, remains relevant in the face of new polarization and turbulence in the world.

It is evident that Turkish and Israeli plans are fundamentally incompatible, as their mutual implementation not only leads to conflicts of interests in the vast region but also affects their direct security. The Kurdish statehood project promoted by Israel in Iraq and Syria poses a potential threat of separatism, chaos, and the disintegration of Turkey, given the potential for the Kurdish national liberation movement to unfold. Similarly, the revival of the “Ottoman Caliphate”, a topic increasingly discussed in the Turkish political and expert circles following the recent events in Syria, poses an existential threat to Israel’s security. Currently, the mutual approach of the parties towards each other’s borders through proxy

groups is underway. However, given the situation, there are few guarantees that Ankara and Tel Aviv will not engage in direct confrontation on Syrian territory at a certain point.

Notably, both sides, aware of the danger of engaging in proxy wars against each other, are employing nearly identical methods to neutralize these threats. According to *STMEGI*, the al-Julani government is attempting to distance itself from Turkey, aided by Israel. Conversely, Ankara aims to address a similar issue concerning the Kurds. In October 2024, Erdogan's ally from the Republican Alliance, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, proposed allowing Abdullah Öcalan, the long-time leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) isolated on İmralı Island in the Sea of Marmara, to address the Turkish parliament and call on his PKK and SDF comrades to lay down their arms. Thus, according to Bahçeli, Öcalan, with his undisputed authority among the Kurdish insurgents in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, could establish a new "*peace milestone*" in Turkish-Kurdish relations, thereby rehabilitating himself.

According to *CNN Turk*, Bahçeli could not have initiated such a controversial proposal, and it actually came from Erdogan, concerned about the extent of Kurdish support from Israel and the USA. Notably, Bahçeli's statement occurred a month before the HTS and SNA march on Aleppo. In Ankara, it was understood that Assad's overthrow would kick-start long-standing US-Israeli plans to activate the Kurdish factor in the context of the global "New Middle East" project. The only thing Turkey could do in the given situation was to actively participate in the inevitable anti-Assad military campaign, aiming to neutralize the Kurdish factor. On one hand, this was supposed to ensure Syria's territorial integrity, while on the other, to turn Öcalan into Ankara's ally. However, as events show, both Turkish initiatives are challenging to implement. The practically decade-long collapse of Syrian statehood is too complex for Turkey to solve alone, and Öcalan's authority may prove to be an outdated factor with zero functionality in the face of the significant changes for Kurds in the Middle East.

As a result, Turkey is left with the option of promising Damascus significant investments in exchange for an HTS and SNA offensive on Kurdish Rojava, while concentrating its own forces along its southern borders and simultaneously threatening Israel with severing all relations and "*occupying Jerusalem*". However, such a show of force is still largely ineffective. Damascus is evidently cautious and in no hurry to start a new war, while Israel shows no signs of backpedaling due to the Turkish threats. Following the general logic of changes in the region, an attack on the "*Kurdish separatists*" may not occur, especially considering the high likelihood of D. Trump's intervention in the Middle Eastern processes from a distinctly pro-Israeli stance.