

The Turkoman Factor in Ankara's Syrian Policy ARVAK Center comment, 10.03.2025¹

One of the main instruments of Turkey's interference in Syria's internal affairs is considered to be the "Turkoman factor", used by Ankara to legitimize the actual expansion in relation to the Arab Republic. From the very beginning of the so-called "*Arab Spring*" in Syria, which very quickly turned into a civil war of "all against all", the Syrian Turkomans, with the direct support of Turkey, were transformed from a fairly passive ethnic group that had no influence during the years of the "*al-Assad regime*" rule, into a military-political factor that put forward its demands for the future structure of the Syrian Arab Republic².

The number of this Turkic-speaking ethnic group, which has settled in the Arab countries since the time of the Seljuk sultans, is currently estimated at between 1.5 and 3.5 million people, according to various estimates. According to some experts, the circulating figures are significantly inflated by the efforts of the official Turkish propaganda, which seeks to strengthen the political position of this minority and legitimize its claims to full participation in Syria's internal affairs.

Nevertheless, even taking into account the manipulations of Turkish propaganda, the Turkomans are indeed the third largest ethnic group in Syria after Arabs and Kurds, respectively. The main problem for the political consolidation of the Turkomans lies in the dispersion of their settlement. The main areas of their compact residence are in Latakia and Aleppo, while a significant part lives in scattered groups in Hama, Idlib, Damascus, and the Kurdish controlled territories. Given this factor, during the outbreak of the civil confrontation with the Syrian Arab Republic, dozens of parties and political organizations were created by the Turkomans on the ground, whose course and ideology were determined by the prevailing realities in each specific region. A striking example of this are the Turkoman leaders from the predominantly Kurdish-populated province of Kobani, who actively cooperated with the Kurdish SDF movement and pursued their own policy towards the Syrian Kurds, which was diametrically opposed to the Turkish directives³.

In order to consolidate the disparate Turkoman parties in Syria, Ankara initiated the creation of the "*Syrian-Turkoman Platform*" (now the "*Syrian-Turkoman Assembly*"), whose leaders were hiding from the Bashar al-Assad regime in Turkey. Officially, the organization was established in March 2012, but it did not have any real success in consolidating the Turkoman groups of Syria, repeatedly changed its leadership, and could not develop a unified agenda that reflected the sentiments and problems of the Turkoman communities of Syria.

The most significant evidence of the difficulties in unifying the Turkomans of Syria is the fact that during the years of the civil war in the SAR, dozens of armed formations were created on the basis of this ethnic group, not all of which acted in line with Turkish policy in

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 07.03.2025.

² "The role and place of Turkmen minorities in Turkey's policy in the Syrian and Iraqi directions". МГИМО, dissertation (in Rus.), <https://mgimo.ru/science/diss/sejidli-s-a.php> (download date: 03.03.2022).

³ "Who are the Syrian Turkomans?". BBC NEWS (in Rus.), 24.11.2015, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/11/151124_who_are_turkmen/ (download date: 03.03.2025).

Syria. For example, under the pretext of fighting ISIS, Turkoman detachments in Kobani formed an alliance with the Kurdish SDF under the auspices of the United States, while many settlements of this ethnic group from the vicinity of Damascus and other Assad-controlled areas sought, if not to send their fighters to help the Syrian government army, then not to oppose it. The position of Syria's Shiite Turkomans and Arabized Turkomans was also ambiguous, as they poorly perceived Ankara's plans to create a unified ethnic platform for more active participation in Syrian affairs. Given this political and ideological fragmentation, Turkey had to focus primarily on the militarized formations of the Turkomans of Aleppo and Latakia, including their divisions in the ranks of the Syrian National Army (SNA) that opposed al-Assad, and also affiliating their actions with *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*. However, according to some experts, in reality the combat capability of the Turkoman formations of Syria, which are overseen by Ankara, has been maintained mainly due to the embedded military personnel of the Turkish Armed Forces and representatives of the Turkish Special Services, who acted and continue to act under the cover of fictitious Syrian citizenship⁴.

In any case, Turkey has managed to construct a military-political structure from the main fragments of the Turkic identity of Syria, which, if necessary, can be used by it as an instrument for further interference in the Syrian agenda. And that, as events show, can be quite eventful.

ARVAK Center has written in previous publications about Turkey's attempts to maintain the integrity of Syria after the overthrow of the B. al-Assad government, under the leadership of the forces it controls, mainly from *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). However, these plans are hindered by the U.S. and Israel, who are not interested in preserving the SAR as a centralized state within its former borders⁵. A confederal structure of Syria, which is increasingly discussed in Washington and Tel Aviv, means for Ankara a guaranteed continuation of destabilization; issues of intra-Syrian territorial demarcation, which will stimulate an incessant influx of refugees into Turkey; socio-economic problems, and, finally, the legitimization of Kurdish autonomy, which will become an intermediate link on the way to the full independence of Rojava, with all the ensuing consequences. Since the end of 2024, Ankara has been broadcasting a demonstrative confidence that there is no alternative to the unity of Syria and that the forces on which it has relied in the fight against B. al-Assad are able to revive the unitary structure of the state lost by the previous regime. However, the course of events shows that the potential of Ahmed al-Sharaa (Mohammed al-Julani) and the force he leads is not enough to unify Syria, and a “*platform of unity*” for a multinational and multi-confessional Syria is not taking shape due to a number of external and internal reasons.

The main external factor is the reluctance of both the U.S. and Israel to see Syria as a whole. Tel Aviv fears the consolidation of the SAR under the leadership of Islamist elements, whose attitude towards Israel in the future is unpredictable. Washington, for its part, shares

⁴ “The ‘Turkoman factor’ in Turkish foreign policy on the Syrian track”. *Международная жизнь* (in Rus.), 01.06.2023, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/40638/> (download date: 02.03.2025).

⁵ On the USA and Israel's “Kurdish Project” within the “Syrian Case, ARVAK Center comment, 14.12.2024, <https://arvak.am/en/kurdish-project-of-usa-and-israel/> (download date: 02.03.2025).

the concerns of its ally and also has plans to form a full-fledged Kurdish factor in the region, which will allow the U.S. to influence political processes in the Middle East in the future and control the ambitions of regional powers.

Speaking about the internal factors hindering Syrian consolidation on Turkish terms, it is worth noting the problem of the collapse of the coalition of forces that once united to fight against B. al-Assad. If the idea of removing the former government consolidated a wide range of Syrian groups from radical Arab Islamists to social nationalists from among the Kurdish rebels, then the new realities that have emerged after the fall of Damascus do not provide for the possibility of further maintaining unity. In the absence of a strong centralized power, the contradictions and hidden hostility that have accumulated in Syria over the decades of French rule, the al-Assads period, and a decade and a half of civil war make it impossible for political parties, ideological movements, ethnic groups, and confessional segments to unite around a single agenda and a program of unification that is beneficial to all and respects the interests of all.

Turkey, which is experiencing an acute political and economic crisis of its own, is clearly not in a position to maintain the balance of Syrian sovereignty. The chances of the HTS, which enjoys its support, satisfying everyone are extremely small, and the threat of using force is fraught with a new civil strife and the loss of the nominal sovereignty of the SAR. The interim government of Syria, despite threats to destroy the SDF and disband the Kurdish administration of Rojava, was forced to negotiate with its representatives and make a compromise with them⁶. Ankara failed to provide political cover to Damascus for a full-scale operation against Rojava and also failed to convince the U.S. to withdraw its contingent from the Kurdish-controlled territories. On the other hand, the fighting between the SNA and the SDF in December–January 2024–2025 contributed to the activation of the Syrian Druze, many of their settlements announced their decision to choose the “lesser of two evils” and join Israel, as they do not believe that the HTS jihadists who came to power in Damascus will stop the persecution of the Druze community⁷. The same applies to the Alawites, who actually rebelled against the new Syrian administration on March 6, 2025, in a number of regions of the country. Ankara cannot ignore these warnings, obviously fearing that protracted battles between Damascus and the Kurds will only contribute to the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies in Syria, and provide a convenient excuse for Israel and the U.S. to refuse to participate in the “*National Unity Platform*” under the guise of helping the Kurds, Druze, Alawites⁸, and other oppressed ethno-confessional communities. .

In the context of Ankara’s current strategy to preserve Syria’s unity, the Turkoman factor plays a special role. The Turkoman communities of Aleppo and Latakia, which are fully controlled by Turkey, as well as other communities of this ethnic group (including in Damascus and Kobani) that swore allegiance to the new Syrian government after the

⁶ "Kurdish Response: US Considers Exit from Syria". Известия (in Rus.), 21.02.2025, <https://iz.ru/1842373/kseniia-loginova/kurdskii-otvet-ssha-zadumalis-nad-vykhodom-iz-sirii/> (download date: 03.03.2025).

⁷ “Residents of Druze villages in Syria have expressed their support for joining Israel”. РИА НОВОСТИ (in Rus.), 13.12.2024, <https://ria.ru/20241213/zhiteli-1989047831.html/> (download date: 04.03.2025).

⁸ "Alawites expressed fear for their future after the change of power in Syria". ПБК (in Rus.), 12.01.2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/01/2025/67838bdf9a7947448439a774> (download date: 04.03.2025).

overthrow of al-Assad, advocate for the integrity of the SAR. Their detachments have already joined the ranks of the “*New Syrian Army*”. Ankara is currently very interested in using the example of the Turkic ethnic minority to show all other ethnic and confessional groups that equal and peaceful coexistence with the Sunni Arab majority in Syria is absolutely real and that there is no alternative. On the other hand, Ankara, through the Turkoman factor, gains additional leverage over Ahmed al-Sharaa and his teams, who understand that without the support of the Syrian Turkomans, their chances of maintaining control over significant territories in the country are noticeably reduced. A. al-Sharaa needs the loyalty of the Turkomans, and is therefore forced to demonstrate his own loyalty to Turkey. This is a significant element of the Turkish strategy in the Syrian direction, which, among other things, allows Ankara to dictate its will to post-Assad Damascus. In this regard, the Turkomans play a key role in the Turkish program for the unification and formation of a “pro-Turkish Syria”.

Today, it can be assumed that the Turkoman factor may be used by Ankara for the diametrically opposite purpose if it fails to achieve its current goals of preserving “*full Syrian sovereignty*”. Given the emerging new realities in the Middle East, the likelihood of the final disintegration of Syria is quite high. The doctrine of Israel and the U.S. to create a “New Middle East”, the escalation around the Iranian nuclear program, the stalemate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and a number of other regional problems create challenges to Ankara’s attempts to maintain the balance of Syrian sovereignty. If we add to this the obvious inability of Turkey, which is experiencing an acute economic crisis, to support its “Syrian project” with large financial investments, it becomes clear that Ankara at a certain stage may be forced to abandon the strategy of a “*united Syria*” and assert its rights to a part of its disintegrating heritage. In this case, it is through the Turkoman factor that Turkey will try to legitimize its claims to Syrian territories. Moreover, we are talking not only about the areas inhabited by this Turkic ethnic group before the civil conflict in Syria, but also about the regions that Ankara annexed during operations “*Euphrates Shield*” (2016–2017), “*Olive Branch*” (2018), and “*Peace Spring*” (2019). During these operations, carried out under the pretext of fighting the “*Kurdish terrorism*”, the vast majority of the peaceful Kurdish population in the governorates of Aleppo and Jerablus, as well as in Azaz, al-Bab, and Afrin, were expelled from their homes. Following that, Ankara initiated the mass resettlement of Sunni Arabs and Turkomans in these areas, providing them with the homes and arable land of the expelled Kurds. These areas were hurriedly staffed with new administrations operating within Turkish law, and Turkish schools were opened. The Turkish lira was put into circulation, and trade and economic ties were established exclusively with companies registered in Turkey⁹.

Thus, Turkey has consistently and artificially expanded the Turkomans habitat in Syria, presenting this ethnic group, related to the Turks, as victims of the “*authoritarian al-Assad*”

⁹ "Like at Home: Turkey Seizes Foreign Territories". SPUTNIK (in Rus.) 08.06.2021, <https://am.sputniknews.ru/20210608/Kak-u-sebya-doma-Turtsiya-zakhvatyvaet-chuzhie-territorii-27849153.html/> (download date: 04.03.2025).

regime” and “*Kurdish terrorism*”, who were forced to seek refuge in the territories controlled by Ankara.

By comparing the areas of residence of the Syrian Turkomans, both conditionally indigenous and resettled in recent years, it is possible to approximately outline the territories to which Turkey may actually lay claim under the pretext of protecting the security, rights, and freedoms of the related ethnic group. This could be either about autonomy (if Syria manages to avoid disintegration by establishing a confederation) or a direct Turkish invasion if Damascus is unable to maintain sovereignty in any format. In the second option, Ankara may include in the sphere of its territorial claims vast areas where Turkomans do not constitute the majority of the population (Aleppo, Latakia), but may become so in the event of a repetition of the experience already gained by Turkey during the aforementioned three military operations.

Summarizing the results of this analysis, it should be concluded that since the beginning of the so-called “*Arab Spring*”, which destabilized Syria, Turkey has actively developed the Turkoman factor. It has become a cover for Ankara’s more active interference in the internal political processes in Syria and for legitimizing territorial claims against this country. At this stage, Ankara is using this factor to preserve Syrian sovereignty on the terms of Damascus’ subordination to Turkish interests. However, if this plan fails, Turkey may demand autonomy for the Turkomans or resort to a new occupation of Syrian territories under the pretext of ensuring the security of the Turkic-speaking minority.

It can be assumed that the government of Ahmed al-Sharaa itself, in an attempt to gain more independence from Turkey, is trying to downplay the role of the Turkomans in the internal political life of Syria. This is evidenced by the fact that the “*Preparatory Committee for Holding a Nationwide Dialogue*”, established by the interim authorities in Damascus, did not invite representatives of the “*Syrian-Turkoman Assembly*” (STM) to the “*National Dialogue Conference*”. On February 25, 2025, STM published an official appeal to Damascus, reproaching that the Turkomans of Syria from the very beginning of the civil confrontation with the SAR stood on the side of the fighters against the “al-Assad regime” and made their important contribution to the victory over it. And, therefore, ignoring the Turkomans goes against the very philosophy of establishing “*comprehensive peace and equality in a democratic Syria*”¹⁰.

It is obvious that the Turkoman factor used by Turkey can become a serious problem for the SAR. There are signs of misunderstanding between Ankara and the new Syrian authorities in Damascus, at least regarding the role and place of the Turkoman ethnic group in the intra-Syrian configuration of forces. And it is unlikely that Ahmed al-Sharaa could have resorted to such a bold step without the support and certain guarantees of external forces, who are also dissatisfied with Turkish policy in Syria.

The “*Syrian-Turkoman Assembly*” in its address, despite the reproaches, stressed that it remains committed to the unity of all forces and groups around the new authorities of

¹⁰ “The Syrian Turkmen Assembly Reacted to the Lack of Invitation to the National Dialogue Conference”. Anadolu Ajansi (in Rus.), 25.02.2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/ассамблея-туркман-сирии-отреагиро-вала-на-отсутствие-приглашения-на-конференцию-по-нацдиалогу-_/3492884/ (download date: 04.03.2025).

Damascus. However, it should be considered that the demonstrative confirmation of loyalty to Damascus may, depending on the political situation, also be a preparation for breaking off relations. In any case, the decision will be made by Ankara.