Opinion – Beyond Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey's Syria Strategy

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ANIL CAN ÖZGüN, JUN 29 2025

When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fell in late 2024 analysts quickly revived old tropes about Turkish Neo-Ottomanism. But these labels do not reflect reality: Turkey is not pursuing the restoration of a Neo-Ottoman Empire, it is acting on strategic interests. While President Erdoğan frequently employs rhetoric that frames Turkey as a protector of innocent people, particularly Muslims, foreign policy analysis must move beyond rhetoric and focus on actual drivers. It is not ideals that shape Turkey's behavior, but Realpolitik.

The concept of Neo-Ottomanism gained prominence internationally through the writings of former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, particularly his book *Strategic Depth*. While Davutoğlu advocated for a more value-driven foreign policy and greater regional engagement, the term "Neo-Ottomanism" was applied more often by outside observers than by Turkish policymakers themselves. In Western discourse, the term has increasingly been used to describe virtually any Turkish policy that appears to contradict Western norms or interests—especially in the past decade. Yet in Turkey, the term is rarely applied to current foreign policy. This reflects one of the core analytical challenges: there is no clear, shared definition of what Neo-Ottomanism actually means.

Some analysts argue that Turkey is consciously seeking to become a modern-day Ottoman power. Others invoke the term loosely and polemically, using it to describe Turkish actions they perceive as assertive or revisionist. This ambiguity has clouded objective analysis. A useful case in point is Syria. After the fall of the Assad regime, many commentators overestimated Turkey's ambitions and role in the country's final battles. Although Ankara and the HTS acknowledged limited communication ahead of the Aleppo offensive, the rapid collapse of the regime took both parties by surprise.

The new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has pursued cooperative relations with Turkey, but not as a client state. He faces the constraints of a country shattered by civil war and surrounded by fragile neighbors. Al-Sharaa has adopted Muslim nationalist rhetoric while operating within a pragmatic, Realpolitik framework. He has signaled openness to diverse partnerships: meeting with Turkish leaders, but also with German and French officials, and traveling to Qatar. Crucially, he has made clear that he does not intend to export Syria's revolution, alleviating fears among neighboring states.

Turkey's growing involvement in Syria's security institutions is likewise rooted in pragmatism. Damascus requested Turkish assistance in training new officers. An arrangement that undeniably expands Ankara's influence but reflects limited alternatives. U.S., Russian, Iranian, or Israeli personnel would have been politically unacceptable in Damascus. Other Gulf actors lack the military experience and expertise to support such efforts. Turkey was the most feasible option under the circumstances. Israel's immediate air campaign following Assad's fall severely damaged Syria's military infrastructure and further deepened Damascus's reliance on Turkish support.

This may appear to support claims of Neo-Ottomanism, but that interpretation is misleading. Turkey is relevant for Syria, but its leverage over Damascus is limited. Syria may rely on Turkey, but the dependency is not one-sided. The Turkish economy has been struggling for a decade, especially in the last few years, and Syria can be an important economic partner.

Furthermore, the strategic location of Syria makes it indispensable for any Middle East strategy. It borders Turkey, Israel, and the Mediterranean. If Turkey wants to reach Egypt or Saudi Arabia, the only land route passes through Syria. If Iran wants to reach the Mediterranean, the only land route, again, passes through Syria. Damascus lacks agency as long as the new government does not control all of Syria's territories. An answer to the Kurdish question is also essential. Otherwise, foreign powers can leverage separatism. But in the same way Ankara is working between Great Powers to gain autonomy, Syria can work between regional powers with the same objective.

The Kurdish question in northern Syria is often cited as a prime example of Turkish Neo-Ottomanism. However, closer examination suggests it is driven more by nationalist security concerns. The PYD identifies ideologically with PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, and sources claim that PKK-linked fighters operate within the SDF. While Ankara's approach is open to criticism, the strategic rationale behind its actions is grounded in long-standing security threats, not imperial ambition. Ankara's willingness to support a political solution involving the SDF/PYD – provided they exclude all PKK-affiliated personnel and fully integrate into Syrian state security structures – reflects a realist approach, not an ideological.

A final example is Turkey's relationship with Russia. While Ankara has faced criticism for maintaining ties with Moscow and not joining Western sanctions, it has simultaneously worked to contain Russian influence in Syria, Libya, the Caucasus, and Ukraine. This nuanced approach illustrates a hallmark of realpolitik: cooperation where interests align, resistance where they do not. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Turkey's foreign policy is not guided by an ideological vision of Ottoman revival but by pragmatic calculations. Mislabeling its strategy as "Neo-Ottomanism" risks misunderstanding both its motives and its role in the regional order.

Turkey's role as a pragmatic player between East and West is not new. In fact, the Cold War alignment with the West was the exception. Turkey's historical default has been strategic balancing. Its current turn toward a realist foreign policy aimed at increasing autonomy by engaging with all sides marks a return to older patterns.

The Byzantine Empire maintained diplomatic ties with both the Vatican and various Turkish, Mongol, and Persian powers, all while asserting its own geopolitical independence. The Ottoman Empire inherited the same geography and therefore the same geopolitical imperatives: it established relations across ideological lines. For instance, Sultan Suleiman I (r. 1520–1566) forged an alliance with France against the Habsburgs, despite presenting himself as the leader of the Muslim world. In the late Ottoman period, balancing between European powers became critical for survival. The alliance with Germany in the early 20th century, however, ultimately contributed to the empire's disintegration. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk restored a strategy of cautious balancing to the young Republic. During the Cold War, Turkey's geostrategic location constrained its foreign policy, effectively anchoring it to the Western bloc. That era is now over. In the emerging multipolar order, Turkey is once again pursuing autonomy by leveraging relations across multiple poles of power.

Ankara will cooperate with Western powers when its interests are respected. But Ankara will also act independently when they are not, even at the expense of alignment with the EU or the United States. This is the new reality of international politics: multipolar, transactional, and defined less by ideological alliances than by national interests. Western policymakers should move beyond ideological framings and recognize Turkey's role as a transactional actor. Stability in Syria and wider regional cooperation depend on pragmatic engagement with Ankara, not outdated assumptions about empire.

About the author:

Anil Can Özgün (he/him) is a PhD student in Germany researching the historical roots of contemporary Turkish foreign policy. His work explores how the decline and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire continues to shape Turkey's approach to Syria. His research sits at the intersection of history and political science. He is a fellow of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.