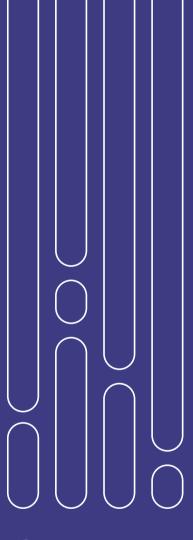
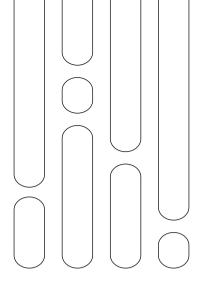
REPORT

THE EMERGING RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN ANKARA AND DAMASCUS: MOTIVES AND CHALLENGES

July 17, 2024







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Türkiye-Syria relations are entering a new notable political phase, marked by signs of rapprochement between the two governments. Both Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have made statements expressing support for bilateral initiatives aimed at improving ties. President Erdoğan, in a departure from his previous stance, recalled the cordial relations with Damascus prior to the 2011 uprising in Syria. This shift is significant when weighed against Erdoğan's past unequivocal rejection of any engagement with Assad and his warnings to the world against the Assad regime. Therefore, this shift in the Turkish position indicates an openness toward dialogue and even the potential for resorting diplomatic relations.

As for President Assad, his recent statements showed subtle indications of a shift from his previous positions. Notably, he stopped short of mentioning the condition of Türkiye withdrawing its forces from Syria. Instead, he emphasized Syria's openness to initiatives aimed at restoring relations with Ankara, based on respect for Syrian sovereignty. In a similar vein, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad's statements implied a softened position, even as he underscored the need to address Turkish armed groups operating within Syria. Mekdad's previous insistence on immediate concrete steps as a precondition for any rapprochement turned into emphasis on Syria's pursuit of tangible commitments from Türkiye regarding withdrawal before any diplomatic dealings.

A few days have passed since these statements from both sides, but Damascus has now placed the ball back in Ankara's court. Damascus considers progress conditioned on Türkiye taking steps to withdraw from Syrian territory and addressing the terrorism threats that have endangered it.

These shifting positions raise questions about the possibility of Ankara and Damascus overcoming or easing their mutual preconditions. This also elicits the possibility that Ankara and Damascus may reassess their stances based on strategic and security metrics in the evolving regional and international environment. Such a potential embodies the famous political adage attributed to former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, "There are no lasting friends, no lasting enemies, only lasting interests."

Based on these questions and lingering possibilities, the report discusses the underlying motivations or developments that have led both Ankara and Damascus to exhibit some flexibility and sheds light on a path that was nearly completely stalled over the past two years. The report further analyzes desired outcomes — what gains do the conflicting parties hope to achieve through the anticipated reconciliation? It also asks, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Ankara and Damascus? And what are the key regional and international positions regarding their resumption of dialogue? Lastly, what are the chances of success for this new round of talks and the main challenges?

The Background of the Rapprochement Path Between Ankara and Damascus

The issue of restoring relations between Türkiye and Syria is not recent; it has been ongoing for a long while. The trajectory has been dynamic, starting with discreet security channels and Russian mediation that maintained a connection between the two countries. Subsequently, it expanded to broader interactions, including intelligence communication. A noteworthy example is the meeting of the defense ministers and intelligence chiefs from Russia, Türkiye and Syria in Moscow in December 2022, which was followed by a trilateral meeting in May 2023. Later, conciliatory statements were made by politicians and diplomats, leading to the meeting between foreign ministers Mekdad and Mevlut Cavusoglu in May 2023. At that time, it appeared that this path had not fundamentally altered the divergent positions between the two sides. The Syrian government held firm to its demands for the withdrawal of Turkish forces before engaging in any serious talks or cooperation to combat the armed factions supported by Türkiye in Syria. Ankara, in return, rejected the idea of a premature withdrawal without tangible political progress, the resolution of issues related to the return of refugees and the withdrawal of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) forces in eastern Euphrates. These conflicting stances, therefore, posed a challenge to identifying solutions in the process of restoring bilateral relations.

After more than a year of stalemate since the meeting that brought together the foreign ministers of the two countries, Ankara returned to infuse new momentum into its rapprochement with Damascus through statements. On June 24, 2024, Turkish Foreign Minister <u>Hakan Fidan</u> emphasized the necessity of unifying Syrian political components — both the regime and the opposition — in the fight against terrorism. Fidan also expressed Türkiye's hope that the regime would benefit from the cessation of hostilities to reconcile with the opposition, address constitutional issues, facilitate the return of millions of refugees and revitalize the Syrian economy. Within a few days, President Erdoğan stated that there was <u>no reason</u> preventing the establishment of relations with Syria. He also alluded to the close ties he had previously shared with President Assad, including familial meetings, hinting at the possibility of a renewed relationship. Erdoğan further expressed his intention to invite his Syrian counterpart to visit Türkiye, alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin, considering it a potential starting point for a new engagement process.

The Syrian president made comparable statements, a U-turn from his regime's previous unwavering stance that no discussions could occur before a complete Turkish withdrawal from Syria. This is evident in his foreign minister's conciliatory tone, as he noted Syria's need for tangible commitments from Türkiye regarding withdrawal before engaging in any diplomatic dialogue. This shift stands in contrast to earlier statements that demanded immediate concrete steps from Türkiye as a precondition for progress toward rapprochement between the two nations. The recent statements of President Assad and the Syrian Foreign Ministry conveyed a desire to mend relations with Türkiye, only focusing on Syria's openness to initiatives aimed at reestablishing connections with Ankara. The core negotiation points were reaffirmed: safeguarding territorial integrity without compromise, insisting on Türkiye's withdrawal of forces from Syrian soil to revert to the pre-2011 status quo, discontinuing support for anti-Assad armed opposition factions and renewing efforts to enhance bilateral relations. This approach is seen by the Syrian side as a means to ensure that the negotiation process remains active, evolving, and unimpeded.

The Underlying Motivations Driving Both Parties to Exhibit Flexibility

The latest signs of rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria have emerged amid significant internal shifts within both governments amid rapid regional and international developments. Notable among these motivations are:

Shared Concerns About the Growing Autonomous Kurdish Administration in Northeastern Syria

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has indirectly but significantly influenced Türkiye-Syria relations. During <u>Hafez al-Assad's</u> rule, Syria leveraged its support for the PKK, providing training camps for its members to use as a pressure tool against Türkiye. This move antagonized Türkiye, which views the PKK as a dangerous organization threatening its security and stability. Tensions between Ankara and Damascus escalated to the brink of war in 1998, culminating in the Adana Security Agreement and the expulsion of the PKK leader from Syria. Despite the agreement, the Kurdish issue continued to shape Turkish-Syrian relations. The conflict that began in 2011 <u>further complicated matters</u>, as Bashar al-Assad capitalized on Kurdish support to counter Türkiye, encouraging the expansion of Kurdish entities in northeastern Syria to pressure the Turkish government amid the ensuing chaos. Damascus saw the Kurds as potential allies against Turkish threats and opposition factions backed by Türkiye. However, this cooperation fluctuated between negotiation and conflict, influenced by US support for Kurdish fighters against ISIS. This support strengthened Kurdish military capabilities and their autonomous administration in northeastern Syria, challenging Damascus. In response, the Syrian government — <u>via rhetoric</u> <u>and posturing</u> — expressed willingness to engage in dialogue with Kurdish parties to seek peaceful resolutions.

The Kurdish show of strength, bolstered by US support, also posed a significant challenge for Ankara. In response, Türkiye repeatedly intervened militarily and established a political presence in the Aleppo and Idlib regions, working with Syrian opposition factions to counter Kurdish threats to its borders. However, despite supporting political opposition and launching attacks on the PKK and its affiliated groups, Türkiye's efforts did not effectively diminish the Kurdish threat or curb Kurdish aspirations for autonomous rule.

As the influence of the Kurds in northern Syria grew and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) prepared for <u>local elections</u>, both Syria and Türkiye recognized a shared interest in addressing the Kurdish threat. Türkiye used these preparations as an opportunity to improve relations with the Assad government, finding common ground in their cooperation against the AANES. The Turkish collaboration aimed to combat the AANES, hinder its development, and block any attempts by Damascus to engage in dialogue or exchange messages with the Kurdish administration.

Türkiye's recent move to improve relations with Syria was followed by a similar effort with Iraq. Ankara expanded its relations with the Iraqi government, capitalizing on Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani's desire for regional engagement and economic development. By strengthening cooperation in the energy sector and concluding security agreements, including potential collaboration against the PKK, Ankara successfully won over Baghdad. Now, Türkiye hopes to replicate this success with the Syrian government by promoting political openness and facilitating trade through border crossings. Through these initiatives, Ankara aims to secure Syria's agreement to sign a security pact that would allow the return and resettlement of Syrian refugees in a proposed "safe zone" along the Syrian-Turkish border, creating a buffer zone to enhance Turkish national security.

Easing the Burdens on the Turkish and Syrian Economies

Both countries face internal pressures due to deteriorating economic conditions. The Syrian government seeks to revive its economy by circumventing US sanctions, while Türkiye views the Syrian refugee crisis as a significant economic and social burden. Consequently, Türkiye sees coordination with Damascus as a means to facilitate the return of some refugees and mitigate its economic downturn. Additionally, Ankara believes that restoring relations with Damascus could help reduce economic losses caused by the closure of Syrian routes to Turkish transport heading to Jordan and the Arabian Gulf countries. Reestablishing ties also presents opportunities for Turkish trade within Syrian government-controlled areas, potentially reducing Türkiye's unemployment and inflation. An example of this approach is Ankara's recent reopening of the Abu al-Zandein crossing between the city of al-Bab and regime-controlled areas. Observers see this move as a direct implementation of Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan's statement on the importance of using the current period of calm to foster rapprochement between the Syrian government and the opposition.

Turkish motivations also include Erdoğan's efforts to assert Türkiye's presence in the race for international corridors. In recent months, Erdoğan succeeded in signing a four-way memorandum of understanding with Iraq, Türkiye, Qatar and the UAE to cooperate on the Development Road Project. The project's progress and success hinges on Ankara's ability to establish security stability along this route and reduce the threats posed by the PKK in northern Iraq and its Syrian branch, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Consequently, advancing its relationship with Syria remains essential for Ankara.

Participating in the Wave of Regional Reconciliation

The ripple effects of internal Arab conflicts, the US inclination toward military withdrawal from the Middle East and the pressing repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war and the Gaza war on political systems have created motivating contexts for many countries to pursue rapprochement with former adversaries. This shift is exemplified by Türkiye's recent reconciliations with the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as its reconciliation with Egypt. These moves have opened new horizons in Türkiye's relations with these regionally influential countries, aligning with Türkiye's strategic interests.

Syria, with its intricate security and economic challenges, therefore remained a crucial missing link in Ankara's recent efforts toward reconciliation. However, the dynamics of power in the Middle East have entered a new phase amidst the crises in Ukraine and Gaza, prompting Türkiye to revisit its approach toward Syria and seek common ground to advance its interests in this evolving regional landscape.

Syria, in response, seeks to signal a shift in its stance toward Türkiye, aiming to complete reconciliations and restore relations that have gained momentum in recent years. Recently, Damascus successfully restored relations with several Arab and Gulf countries and reclaimed its seat in the Arab League. For Syria, the potential rapprochement with Ankara would further legitimize its government. This would mark Türkiye as the first NATO country to reconcile with Syria after years of estrangement, economic sanctions and political isolation imposed on Damascus by many NATO members.

Preparing for a New Era of the US Policy

With the US presidential elections scheduled for November 2024 drawing closer, regional players are considering the potential return of former US President Donald Trump to office. Leaders of various countries, including Türkiye and Syria, are assessing their strategies in light of possible changes in Washington. For Türkiye and Syria, Trump's return could reintroduce discussions about withdrawing US forces from Syria and potentially vacating an area extending east of the Euphrates River, from southeastern Syria near the al-Tanf border crossing to the northeast. Ankara, Damascus, Moscow and Tehran are all closely evaluating their options and approaches to such a scenario.

Turkish Political Parties Employing the Syrian Issue

Erdoğan perceives an internal threat to his party's upcoming electoral prospects, particularly following the setback in its popularity during the April 2024 local elections where the Republican People's Party surpassed the ruling Justice and Development Party. This shift was partly due to the rival party's exploitation of the Syrian refugee crisis and the deterioration of the local economy, both <u>outcomes</u> of Erdoğan's foreign policy. Despite attempts by Erdoğan to initiate dialogue between the two parties, no lasting agreements were reached. The Republican People's Party is openly advocating for talks with Assad to address the Syrian refugee issue on Turkish soil, using the refugee crisis to rally public support. Therefore, Erdoğan's recent gestures toward easing tensions with Assad may be aimed at preempting this move and taking the initiative through high-level official statements.

Regional and International Positions on the Ankara-Damascus Rapprochement

Announcing readiness to restore relations between Ankara and Damascus does not imply that the path to reconciliation is straightforward or unobstructed. Several regional and international actors are closely monitoring this rapprochement, as follows:

Iran's Posture

During previous rounds of rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria under Russian sponsorship, Iran expressed apprehension. Tehran feared that Moscow might increase its Syrian influence at the expense of Iran's security, military and economic interests in Syria. Iran is aware that any Syrian reconciliation could lead to new arrangements in various Syrian regions, impacting areas where it maintains a military presence and economic investments. Consequently, Iran has actively worked to thwart Russian efforts aimed at facilitating Syrian-Turkish reconciliation.

The current Iraqi role in facilitating closer ties between Damascus and Ankara appears more acceptable to Iran than mediation under Russian supervision. This role is viewed favorably by Tehran as it prevents Russia from monopolizing influence over Syrian-Turkish relations during this sensitive period. Iranian officials remain apprehensive about Assad's political maneuvering, particularly his growing Arab engagement, amplified by Saudi Arabia's recent decision to return its ambassador to Damascus.

Iran's apprehensions are exacerbated by indications of Assad's desire to reengage with international forums, as highlighted by his statements in April 2024 regarding <u>periodic meetings</u> between Syria and the United States. Leaked reports about Assad's willingness to negotiate with the AANES further contribute to Tehran's concerns. The United States has encouraged this path, with its representative to the United Nations <u>Linda Thomas-Green</u>- field indicating readiness to consider lifting sanctions on Syria contingent upon progress in resolving the conflict. Moreover, the trust deficit in Syria-Iran relations amidst ongoing security tensions, with both countries indirectly accusing each other of targeting their respective loyalist commanders in Syria. These dynamics may have prompted Iran to consider forging its own political path, potentially taking a leading role in facilitating reconciliation between Damascus and Ankara through Baghdad. This approach aims to preempt any unforeseen developments that could undermine Iran's regional influence, particularly in Syria.

Russia's Posture

Moscow has exerted significant pressure to advance Syria-Türkiye relations and broker a deal between the two countries. However, these efforts have often faced resistance from the Syrian government and sometimes from Iran. Today, Russia finds itself increasingly reliant on the Syrian regime, particularly amidst the complexities arising from the Russia-Ukraine war and the resulting geopolitical challenges. Rehabilitating the Assad government and stabilizing Syria's territories are now crucial for Moscow's international standing. From Moscow's perspective, achieving stability in Syria requires Ankara's involvement. Türkiye's presence in northern Syria and its potential economic role in rehabilitating the local economy are pivotal factors in this equation.

Thus, making progress on the rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus, in case Moscow exerts pressure on both countries, will achieve a number of objectives. These include a Russian shift in its Eurasian policy. This is in addition to achieving Russian interests by distancing Türkiye from the Western camp. Therefore, Moscow seeks to prove that Ankara's interests in Syria as well as its national security could be achieved via Moscow rather than Washington. Another Russian objective is the desire that the reconciliation process between Damascus and Ankara be conducted under Kremlin supervision to safeguard its strategic interests in Syria and the broader Middle East. Despite earlier statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March 2024 suggesting that reconciliation efforts between Ankara and Damascus were impractical due to regional tensions, Russia later reaffirmed its commitment to the initiative. This turnaround came after Baghdad announced its mediation efforts.

Russia's special envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev, conveyed Moscow's renewed support for mediation, emphasizing that current circumstances

are conducive to successful negotiations between Ankara and Damascus. These statements underscore Russia's strategic intent to maintain control over the reconciliation process.

The United States' Posture

The Turkish-Syrian rapprochement holds significant implications for US interests in the region. Closer ties between Türkiye and Syria could potentially undermine Washington's support for the SDF and increase pressure on the US military presence in Syria. Moreover, Türkiye's increasing engagement with Russia and Iran diminishes US influence in the region and weakens its ability to shape the course of the Syrian crisis. In response to reports indicating potential pathways for Turkish-Syrian reconciliation, the United States has conditioned any restoration of relations with Assad on tangible progress toward a political solution, specifically emphasizing humanitarian aspects while refraining from endorsing reconstruction efforts or lifting US sanctions on Syria. This cautious stance mirrors previous US approaches toward Arab countries' reengagement with Syria, where Washington initially voiced objection but ultimately did not take substantive action to hinder diplomatic normalization.

The Syrian Opposition's Posture

There are significant concerns within the Syrian opposition and the AANES, which control extensive territories in northern Syria. Türkiye is viewed as the primary external supporter of the Syrian opposition, playing a pivotal role in its political and military leadership. Many members of the Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces reside in Türkiye, alongside various opposition actors, political entities and media outlets that are based in Istanbul and Gaziantep. Additionally, Turkish support extends to military factions operating within Syria, providing them with logistical and financial assistance. In the event of a reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus, leading to mutual understandings between their leaderships, the Syrian opposition could face mounting pressure to align with Turkish positions and engage in political settlements. This prospect has been met with resistance by some factions in northern Syria, expressing dissatisfaction with President Erdoğan's statements, particularly amid incidents such as the opening of the Abu al-Zandein crossing with Syrian government-controlled areas. Tensions escalated further with attacks on Syrians in Kayseri, Türkiye, exacerbating friction between Türkiye and the Syrian opposition.

The Gulf Countries' Posture

Over the past years, the Gulf countries have pursued a path aimed at quelling regional conflicts to foster regional security and stability. This approach has successfully bridged regional divides, fostering communication with nations that were diplomatically estranged for years. As a result, there have been notable strides toward resolving the Yemeni crisis and restoring Gulf relations with Türkiye, Iran and Syria. The renewed discussions on Syrian-Turkish reconciliation can be seen as part of this broader Arab thaw toward Syria. This trend commenced with Syria's readmission to the Arab League, President Assad's participation in the Arab Summit in Jeddah and the return of ambassadors from various Arab nations to Damascus. These developments reflect a gradual normalization of diplomatic ties and regional engagement, signaling a shift toward stability and cooperation in the Middle East.

Therefore, the Gulf countries are hopeful for any pathway toward understanding between Syria and Türkiye that includes the voluntary return of displaced refugees, establishment of security in Syrian regions, cessation of external interventions in Syria and pursuit of a political solution to the crisis. These elements are crucial for consolidating regional stability, a primary goal for the Gulf countries. However, the actual situation between Türkiye and Syria remains ambiguous, and there are uncertainties regarding how each side will address the other's concerns beyond positive statements issued sporadically. Moreover, Turkish and Syrian policies often display contradictions between their declared intentions and ultimate motives. As such, the Gulf countries need to cautiously monitor and follow up on the outcomes of any rapprochement efforts between Türkiye and Syria to assess whether they align with their regional stability strategy.

Prospects of Success and the Challenges to the New Round of Rapprochement

The potential rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria is not unfolding as smoothly or easily as reflected in official statements issued by both sides. The Syrian situation is complex and intertwined with multiple countries (Russia, Iran, the United States and the Gulf countries). Therefore, prospects for success or the obstruction of Turkish-Syrian rapprochement depend on various factors. These include bilateral relations, such as the ability of both parties to overcome deep-seated differences and establish common ground for cooperation. Additionally, the positions of influential countries involved in this file will also play a crucial role.

Despite mediation efforts led by Iraq and potentially Russia to foster rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria, the prospects for restoring full relations between them in the near term remain limited. Doubts persist regarding Assad's willingness to cooperate on issues raised by Türkiye, compounded by his constrained ability to make significant concessions under pressure from allies like Iran, to maintain a delicate regional balance. This dynamic complicates expectations for a major diplomatic breakthrough. Moreover, both Türkiye and Syria have a history of displaying contradictions between their stated and ultimate motives. Amidst the turbulent regional dynamics, it can be argued that Ankara is making strategic maneuvers to expand the scope of its broader regional strategy. This suggests that Ankara's efforts may not genuinely address the deepening crises in the region. As a result, uncertainties surround the ability of both parties to advance their political relations beyond current constraints.

As for Türkiye, the prospect of withdrawing its forces and effecting change in northern Syria — whether in SDF-controlled areas or those held by Syrian opposition factions — appears fraught with challenges. Ankara has heavily invested in these regions and withdrawal would potentially lead to significant complications. Chief among these is the risk of ceding ground to the SDF, whom Ankara aims to counter through potential rapprochement with the Syrian regime.

The path toward rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria will continue to be constrained by the involvement of other stakeholders in the Syrian conflict and broader regional dynamics, particularly concerning northern Syria. Recent events in Kayseri and northern Syria, juxtaposed with positive statements from both countries about resuming relations and mutual openness, suggest the existence of parties opposed to the normalization of Ankara-Damascus relations at this juncture.

In the context of potential rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria, the flexibility exhibited by Assad's supporters, particularly Iran, will be pivotal. Iran, considering itself a crucial player in stabilizing the Syrian regime, may influence Assad to delay the resumption of dialogue with Ankara. Iran has historically sought to assert its influence in Syrian-Turkish negotiations, positioning itself at the negotiating table during previous rounds of talks facilitated by Russia. Iran insists that any security arrangements between Damascus and Ankara must include its participation, given its military presence alongside the Syrian army in critical areas such as Aleppo and Idlib. Consequently, Iran is determined to utilize all available means to impede potential progress toward rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria. It aims to obstruct Türkiye's efforts to engage with Assad directly, or at the very least, ensure that any meetings do not result in outcomes that harm its strategic interests in Syria.

The US stance toward potential political and economic reconciliation between Damascus and Ankara remains cautious and strategic. President Joe Biden is likely to tread carefully to avoid actions that could impact his reelection prospects, especially amidst ongoing international crises such as the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. The possibility of former President Donald Trump returning to office could bring about shifts in Washington's foreign policy, particularly concerning Syria, including its military presence and relations with both Türkiye and the SDF.

Conclusion

The potential revival of Syrian-Turkish relations is undoubtedly of mutual interest and necessity, yet the complexities stemming from over a decade of Syrian conflict impose significant challenges and obstacles to this path. Both parties express a mutual desire for reconciliation, but the journey ahead remains long and fraught with difficulties. Syria's approach to negotiations with external parties, including Türkiye, is characterized by a cautious and long-term strategy shaped by its experiences in managing international relations throughout the conflict. Meanwhile, Türkiye aims to expand its geostrategic influence through diplomatic initiatives and agreements with Syria, leveraging its experience in balancing its military presence with political engagement to secure its interests across its spheres of influence. This dual approach has been evident in Türkiye's strategies in Libya, Azerbaijan and more recently in Iraq, where it seeks to establish durable arrangements before contemplating any withdrawal of military bases.

In addition, the progress of reconciliation talks between Türkiye and Syria will be significantly influenced by the interests and strategies of key players such as Iran, Russia and the United States. Each of these countries holds specific positions and considerations regarding the potential rapprochement. Furthermore, any developments in this regard could exacerbate internal tensions within Syria itself, reflecting the complexities and implications involved in such diplomatic maneuvers. If both the Turkish and Syrian

parties, along with their mediators, demonstrate genuine commitment to reconciliation, it might lead to the partial restoration of economic relations. However, a comprehensive restoration of Turkish-Syrian relations in the foreseeable future remains uncertain and dependent on various geopolitical dynamics and negotiations.



🔀 info@rasanahiiis.com

🎔 🖸 f @rasanahiiis

www.rasanah-iiis.org

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