

A New Age for Turkish Relations with Syria

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Brief Analysis

Ankara and Washington should offer incentives to the new leadership in Damascus to encourage an inclusive governance process and make Syria work.

When Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched the military campaign that collapsed Bashar al-Assad's regime in under two weeks, it did so with Turkey's approval (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-backstory-behind-the-fall-of-aleppo>). This cataclysmic development has placed the Ankara-Damascus relationship at the core of Syria's stabilization prospects post-Assad. Although the United States and Turkey still formally regard HTS as a designated terrorist entity, Turkey seems to be embracing the daunting prospect of nation building next door in Syria, and doing so via the HTS-led transitional government. The Trump administration has a strong interest in shaping post-Assad Syria as well, given the stated U.S. aims of degrading Iranian influence in the region, countering terrorism, and eventually withdrawing U.S. forces from the country. To achieve these goals, however, Washington will need to fully understand—and leverage—the new Syrian government's relationship with NATO ally Turkey.

Evolution of the Turkish-HTS Relationship

The February 4 meeting in Ankara between Syria's new president Ahmed al-Sharaa and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan—Sharaa's second visit abroad since taking office—signaled the changing fortunes of both with regard to Syria's future. In recent years, Turkey had been attempting to normalize relations with the Assad regime, which it despised, while Sharaa's HTS was running a statelet in northwest Syria, abutting Turkey, seemingly in a

frozen conflict purgatory. Recent events indicate that the Ankara-Damascus relationship is now strong, having come a long way since 2012, when Sharaa first took command of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the predecessor of HTS.

The focus of Sharaa's critique of Turkish policy in general and Ankara in particular shifted over the years. While initially it was purely ideological, it later became a disagreement over geopolitics and interests. For example, Sharaa's first propaganda message as JN leader in January 2012 [criticized \(https://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-front-of-victory/\)](https://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-front-of-victory/) Turkey for its role as a U.S. ally and "its false pretenses to serve the Muslim community as a whole." This traditional jihadist ideological statement indicates a belief that Turkey's leaders are not, in fact, Islamist, but are actually doing the bidding of Washington and not benefiting Muslims globally.

This differs starkly from Sharaa's statements in 2023, for example, when he criticized countries for beginning to normalize relations with the Assad regime, [stating \(https://jihadology.net/2023/01/13/new-video-message-from-hayat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-sham-meeting-of-the-commander-in-chief-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-and-the-presidency-of-the-salvation-government-with-the-notables-of-th/\)](https://jihadology.net/2023/01/13/new-video-message-from-hayat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-sham-meeting-of-the-commander-in-chief-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-and-the-presidency-of-the-salvation-government-with-the-notables-of-th/) that Turkey had changed its strategy from "supporting the revolution until the regime falls" to pursuing two interests: "returning refugees to Syria and keeping the PKK from becoming a state that borders Turkey." (Turkey regards the Kurdish-led groups that control northeast Syria as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, Ankara's domestic nemesis.) This is why Sharaa believed it was necessary for HTS to initiate actions that would bring about the fall of the regime rather than relying on external actions, highlighting his acknowledgement that the change in Turkey's policies was based on its national interest, even if he disagreed.

Notably, Turkey designated both JN and HTS as terrorist organizations in the past, since the government follows the UN designations list. Indeed, Turkish officials previously wanted nothing to do with HTS or JN, at least politically or diplomatically.

Yet in the years after the Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement in March 2020, Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT)—which had been involved in Syria's civil war for nearly a decade—apparently showed signs of shifting gears and cultivating deeper ties with HTS. According to author conversations with various analysts, this entailed providing the group with weapons, training, and intelligence leading up to the offensive that ousted the Assad regime. Private communications with Turkish sources also indicate that by summer 2024, Ankara had concluded Assad was not interested in accepting its terms for ending the war, which included repatriating the nearly 4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Accordingly, Ankara started to work on an HTS offensive to either bring the regime back to the negotiating table from a position of weakness or simply oust Assad.

Ankara's Post-Assad Engagement

Since the regime fell on December 8, Turkey has engaged with the transitional government in Damascus more than any other country. This is because Ankara now faces the gargantuan task of nation building next door, starting with stabilization. If Syria descends back into chaos, Turkey's greatest concerns will include the return of instability, fresh refugee flows, and terrorist attacks.

As a result, Turkish government agencies and NGOs—political, diplomatic, business, and humanitarian—have already met with the new government ninety-three times as of this writing. In comparison, Saudi Arabia, the second most active country, held thirty-four such meetings. Furthermore, while most countries have focused on the capital, Turkish officials have been traveling throughout Syria—Aleppo, Daraya, Deir al-Zour, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Latakia—to meet with local officials and get a better sense of what is needed to assist and rebuild Syria. Ankara seems determined to do whatever it takes to make the new Syria work.

Turkey's deeply experienced institutions will be an asset to this effort, while its diversified economy and businesses have demonstrated an ability to thrive in weak or failed states, such as Iraq at the height of its internal sectarian conflict and South Sudan. Today, Turkish firms are best positioned to deliver goods and services to Syria, which will be crucial if the new government is to succeed.

Policy Recommendations

The budding relationship with Damascus gives Turkey great influence over the new government, but how will Syria's new leaders react to this influence as time goes on? Damascus is not subservient to Turkey, but it will listen to Ankara's advice—especially if accompanied by carrots like sending electricity from the Turkish grid or lobbying Washington and the EU to eliminate sanctions against Damascus. The new leadership is aware that if reconstruction does not start expeditiously, and if it fails to provide basic services soon, it will face opposition from radical elements within, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Accordingly, Sharaa will listen to Ankara's advice if it comes with international support and construction money.

The Trump administration likewise has major interests in seeing Syria work, from avoiding further refugee flows to preventing Iranian influence. Yet it prefers to avoid committing substantial U.S. resources to make that happen. To balance these goals, Washington should leverage the new Turkey-Syria relationship. Working together, Ankara and Washington can bundle carrots that help transform Damascus, stabilize Syria, and bring an end to threats emanating from there. Three carrots in particular would be most useful:

- Removing sanctions related to the Assad-era state apparatus, particularly in sectors such as electricity and banking, which could provide initial relief to the populace.
- Providing resources for reconstruction, mainly from European countries worried about refugee flows and wealthy Gulf states worried about potential regional instability and loss of clout.
- Supporting international recognition of the HTS-led transitional government, so long as it shows greater signs of inclusivity.

In return, President Trump and President Erdogan should demand that Damascus do the following:

- Establish a truly inclusive approach toward drafting the new constitution and governing.
- Continue to prevent jihadists from using Syrian territory to plan external attacks.
- Continue to go after remnants of the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iranian networks involved in smuggling Captagon and weapons.
- Work with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to destroy the remainder of the Assad regime's chemical weapons infrastructure.

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