

Turkish foreign minister visits Damascus and embraces Jolani

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Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (Ahmed Hussein al-Shara), leader of the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), during a visit to the Syrian capital Damascus Sunday.

Diplomats from the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom have all visited the new leadership in Damascus; Fidan's is the highest-level visit from a NATO member state.

The efforts of the political and media establishment to restore the credibility of the HTS, which is still considered a terrorist organisation in Turkey, and the denunciation of a legal left-wing party as "terrorist" for its constitutional activities are taking place at the same time.

Fidan's visit, which comes in the wake of regime change in Damascus, as the US, Israel and Turkey continue to struggle over the division of the country, is part of Ankara's efforts to increase its influence over the future of Syria and the HTS leadership, and to eliminate the Washington-backed Kurdish forces.

Fidan and Jolani embraced before the meeting and posed warmly. At a joint press conference after the meeting, both Fidan and Jolani said that US-led sanctions against Syria should be lifted.

"We stressed that the first priority is to establish stability in Syria. For this to happen, security must first be established in the country," Fidan said, adding, "It is also necessary to ensure the rule of law and the protection of minorities. It is necessary to establish an inclusive government, led and owned by Syrians, in which no religious or ethnic group is excluded".

On the one hand, Fidan wants a Syria in which "no religious or ethnic group is excluded", while on the other he demands that the Kurds, whom Turkey sees as the main threat in Syria, be prevented from gaining any legal status. Ankara fears that if the "Autonomous

Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria", led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG), becomes permanent, it could lead to the creation of a Kurdish state, which could encourage similar tendencies among Kurds in Turkey.

Fidan stressed Turkey's commitment to Syria's territorial integrity, adding, "The terrorist organisation [PKK/YPG] is occupying the Syrian people's land and stealing its natural resources. Today, as in the past, we will never allow ISIS to take advantage of opportunities. Syria, liberated from the Baathist darkness, will be cleansed of ISIS and PKK. There is no place for the PKK/YPG in Syria. The PKK/YPG should disband itself as soon as possible."

Jolani emphasised Turkey's role in the struggle for regime change, saying, "Turkey, our friend, has stood by the Syrian people since the beginning of the revolution, we will not forget this." When asked about northeastern Syria, Jolani replied, "We cannot accept that any group has weapons in its hands, whether in the areas under our control or in the areas under the control of the YPG". It is unclear what this means for the Islamist militias of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which are also backed by Turkey, particularly against the YPG, and are not controlled by Damascus.

For the time being, HTS is pursuing a policy of non-confrontation with Kurdish forces; at the start of the last operation, it left SDF-held areas of Aleppo untouched and maintained dialogue.

While HTS has announced the elimination of armed groups, it does not appear to be in as much of a hurry as Ankara to take control of areas held by Kurdish forces. HTS is seeking to consolidate its power within the country and abroad by balancing between the US and Israel. However, the areas held by the SDF, which

contain energy resources and granaries vital for the country's future, will sooner or later become an important battleground.

Meanwhile, the US lifted the bounty on Jolani's head and started diplomatic relations with HTS. Washington saw regime change in Syria as part of its global war against Iran, China and Russia.

President-elect Donald Trump, who will take office on January 20, has already admitted that the US conducts wars to plunder natural resources, expressed most bluntly in his demand for the US to "take the oil" from Iraq. The US military has reportedly increased the number of personnel in Syria from 900 to 2,000.

Following the launch of the HTS operation on November 27, the SMO captured Tal Rifaat and Manbij, which had been held by the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey's planned attacks on Kobani, east of the Euphrates, were halted last week by a temporary ceasefire brokered by the United States.

Washington has responded to Ankara's insistence on the physical elimination of the PKK/YPG through a new military operation with a threat. In a joint statement on Friday, US Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham announced that they had introduced a sanctions bill against Turkey in the US Senate called the Countering Turkish Aggression Act of 2024. The joint statement of the two senators included the following statement:

Attacks by Turkish-backed forces on our Syrian Kurdish partners undermine regional security & efforts to prevent an ISIS resurgence. Today Sen Graham & I introduced a bill to impose sanctions on Turkey—which we should enact if they do not accept a ceasefire & demilitarized zone. We seek a united, inclusive, stable Syria for all Syrians — and supporting our Syrian Kurdish partners is essential to accomplishing that goal.

In recent statements, SDF commander Mazlum Abdi has emphasised efforts to reach an agreement with Turkey and HTS. Abdi told the *Sharq* website: "We did not ask for a federal administration in Syria. We want a decentralised administration and self-government. We

advocate the unity of Syria, not its division". Abdi previously told Reuters that all non-Syrian Kurdish fighters in northern and eastern Syria (Rojava) would return home if a full ceasefire was reached with Turkey.

Meanwhile, Ankara is deeply disturbed by Israel's growing invasion and influence in Syria. Fidan told the press conference: "Israel's usurpation of Syrian territory by taking advantage of the current environment cannot be tolerated. Israel should respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and not further endanger regional security. The international community must show a concrete response to Israel's unlawful actions".

This statement is also an example of hypocrisy. In reality, the Turkish ruling class, like the Zionist regime, is an invading force in Syria. In fact, these two states, which are two critical allies of the US imperialism in the region, consider methods that violate the international law as their right while criticising their rival. This includes labelling journalists as terrorists and targeting them.

On Thursday, a vehicle carrying journalists Nazım Dağtan and Cihan Bilgin, who were covering clashes between the SMO and SDF in northern Syria, was reportedly targeted by Turkish drones, leading to their deaths. The police intervened against a group of people who wanted to issue a press statement in Istanbul on Saturday to protest the killing of journalists, detaining 59 people. At least 9 of the detainees, including 6 journalists, were arrested.

Yet at the end of November President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pointed out that the number of members of the press killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023 was 189 and condemned Israel's targeting of journalists, saying, "Hundreds of journalists have been wounded in this process and targeted by bullets and bombs."

Israel claims that the journalists it targets in Gaza are not members of the press but "members of terrorist organisations".



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