

Syria's new foreign minister visits Ankara as tensions between Turkey and Israel and France escalate

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16 January 2025

Foreign Minister Asaad Al-Shaibani, Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra and intelligence chief Anas Khattab of the new Syrian government—which is rooted in al-Qaeda—paid an official visit to Ankara on Wednesday. The delegation met first with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then with their counterparts.

In a joint press conference, Fidan and Al-Shaibani stressed their defence of Syria's "territorial integrity." Fidan expressed his government's intention to support the new Syrian government in dismantling the US-backed Kurdish forces and said, "There is no place for terrorist organisations in the new Syria. We have experience in cooperation with third countries in the fight against terrorist organisations. We are ready to use all our means."

"We commit to ensuring that Syria does not pose a threat to any country, especially our neighbouring country." Shaibani said, backing Ankara's claim.

The new administration's first visit to Ankara comes amid an intensifying struggle for the partition of Syria between the states behind the overthrow of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, by jihadists led by the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Turkey directly supports its proxy force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), against Kurdish forces (YPG/SDF) in the north of the country. On the other hand, Ankara has considerable influence over the HTS, which has seized power in Damascus.

The US and European imperialist powers, Israel, which is expanding its occupation in the south of the country, as well as the Gulf countries have taken different initiatives in the last few days to advance their interests and to increase their influence on the new government.

The US last week eased restrictions on emergency humanitarian aid and some energy supplies for six months, while Europe is likely to take similar steps later this month. Following a visit to Damascus by the German and French

foreign ministers representing the EU, the foreign ministers of the US, UK, France, Germany and Italy met in Rome on January 9 to try to define a common position on Syria.

Qatar, which along with Turkey is considered the most influential power over HTS, quickly sent a naval tanker full of gas to Syria after the US decision to ease sanctions and offered to support the salaries of public sector employees.

On January 12, Riyadh hosted a meeting on Syria attended by 11 Arab League member states, including Syria, as well as Turkey and Western states. While nothing concrete came out of the meeting, Arab and Western media commented that by hosting the event, Saudi Arabia demonstrated Riyadh's willingness to play a leading role in the reconstruction of Syria, along with Turkey and Qatar. In the past, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have supported various groups opposed to Assad.

At the meeting in Riyadh, Annalena Baerbock, the German foreign minister, said, "Syrians now need a quick dividend from the transition of power, and we continue to help those in Syria who have nothing, as we have done all the years of civil war, we will provide another €50m for food, emergency shelters and medical care."

The struggle for influence over Syria continues on the ground. Israel has destroyed most of Syria's military infrastructure after the fall of the Assad regime and is expanding its occupation of Syrian territory. The Israeli army, which advanced its occupation to the Beddua region near the Mezzeh Military Airport on the outskirts of Damascus, came within about 20 kilometres of the capital.

The London-based, anti-Assad Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported on Wednesday that Israel struck an HTS military convoy for the first time, killing three people, including a civilian. Ankara is uncomfortable with Israel's growing power in Syria, while Tel Aviv has made no secret of its displeasure with Turkey's influence over HTS.

On January 6, the Nagel Commission's report, which was presented to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,

Defence Minister Israel Katz and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, stated that “Turkey has become the most influential power in Damascus and that the Sunni-Turkish axis has replaced Iran’s Shiite axis.”

“Turkey’s interests in turning Syria into a client state and thereby increasing its regional influence are clear. It should be prepared for actions on the ground and potential threats that could escalate rapidly,” the report said, arguing that military capabilities should be strengthened in preparation for a possible conflict with Turkey.

In July, Turkish President Erdoğan announced that Turkey might intervene militarily against Israel in order to “protect the Palestinians”, and in early October, in his speech at the opening of the Turkish parliament, he warned of a war between Israel and Turkey, saying, “The Israeli leadership, acting with the delirium of ‘the promised land’ and with a purely religious fanaticism, will set its sights on our homeland after Palestine and Lebanon.”

Israel has declared the SDF, which controls most of the energy resources and granaries in north-eastern Syria, its ally. Turkey, on the other hand, has announced that the SDF, which it sees as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which it has been trying to suppress for 40 years, must dissolve itself in subordination to the Damascus administration or it will launch a military operation.

The position of Kurdish forces in Syria has also increased tensions between Turkey and France.

Last week, French President Emmanuel Macron said that France would not abandon “freedom fighters like the Kurds” who are allies of the West in the “war on terror” in Syria, while SDF foreign affairs officer Ilham Ahmed called for France to send troops to the region, saying, “The US and France can indeed secure the entire border. We are ready for this military coalition to assume such a responsibility.”

Journalist Fehim Ta?ekin said that France has a small number of troops in the Kurdish-dominated areas of Syria and in US bases; he reported through the Al-Mayadeen channel that the SDF has acquired French-made UCAVs for the first time.

On January 10, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, without mentioning any names, reacted with contempt to NATO ally France. Fidan said, “I don’t believe the policies developed by some small European countries, who participate in certain operations under America’s umbrella and then speak out from there, contribute either to themselves or to the region.”

Legitimising the presence of US imperialism in the region, which has been destroying the Middle East for almost 35 years, Fidan said, “If they can come to the region and carry out operations and deploy military forces without US’s involvement, let’s see. But we know that’s not the case.”

He also added that “Our interlocutor on this matter [on Syria] is the US. We are talking to the US, not the countries trailing behind it.”

Ankara believes that the overthrow of the Assad regime has tipped the balance in its favour and is trying to oblige the Kurdish forces to liquidate the de facto autonomous administration without obtaining any legal status. To this end, through PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned in Turkey for a quarter of a century, it wishes to force the PKK and its sister organisations in Syria to lay down their arms.

Deputy S?rr? Süreyya Önder, a member of the Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) delegation that met with Öcalan, made a statement on the negotiations on Tuesday, revealing that the talks carried out with the claim of “peace” are part of the imperialist struggle for carving up the Middle East.

Önder asked, “Will the power put its ‘state mind’ into action in the sense we attribute to it and make peace with the Kurds in the face of uncertainty and try to become the main actor in the Middle East in this way, or will it engage in a fierce conflict with the Kurds in Syria with an ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’? The main point to be reached at the moment is to decide between these two options.”

If negotiations with the United States, whom Fidan sees as “the only interlocutor”, fail to produce results and Turkey launches a military operation against Kurdish forces in the region, where 2,000 American troops are stationed, the two NATO allies could come into dangerous confrontation in Syria.



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