

HTS leader Jolani assures Turkey, Israel and the US in *Economist* interview

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Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (Ahmed Hussein al-Shara), the leader of the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which toppled the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, began visiting allied regimes after declaring himself the country's interim head of state at a conference on January 29.

On February 2, Jolani made his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. On February 4, he visited Turkey, where he met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

After the meeting, Erdoğan said that they discussed “joint steps that can be taken to establish security and economic stability” in Syria, adding, “I am pleased to see that we are in full agreement on almost every issue”. Jolani, for his part, said in his speech that he wanted to transform Syria's relations with Turkey into a “deep strategic co-operation”.

As extrajudicial killings of minorities continue, imperialist and regional powers that backed the war for regime change from 2011 to December 2024 are helping the new regime gain international legitimacy by giving the impression that it has put its al-Qaeda past behind it, and they are also endeavouring to gain influence over the country.

In an interview published in *The Economist* last Monday, Jolani expressed his demands to meet directly with the Trump administration to reach an agreement on the US military presence in the country, and to normalise relations with Israel, which is expanding its occupation of the country.

In his interview, Jolani described US sanctions still imposed on Syria as “the gravest risk” to the country, adding, “I believe that President Trump seeks peace in the area, and it is a top priority to lift the sanctions. The United States of America does not have any interest in

maintaining the suffering of the Syrian people.” He also stated that US troops were in Syria without government approval, adding that any such presence should be agreed with the state.

According to US press reports, the Defense Department is developing plans to withdraw all US troops from Syria. Two US defense officials speaking to NBC News on Tuesday said that “President Donald Trump and officials close to him recently expressed interest in pulling US troops out of Syria, the officials said, leading Pentagon officials to begin drawing up plans for a full withdrawal in 30, 60 or 90 days.”

Trump, who was previously asked about the possibility of withdrawing troops from Syria, replied by saying, “We’ll make a determination on that. Syria is its own mess. They got enough messes over there. They don’t need us involved in every one.”

A few days after Jolani praised the US president in his interview, Trump announced his plan for the ethnic cleansing and annexation of Gaza as part of America's plan to assert its dominance in the Middle East together with Israel and to undermine the influence of Iran, Russia and China. Erdoğan, who refers to Trump as “my friend,” has not yet commented on this plan.

The United States has around 2,000 soldiers in Syria under the pretext of fighting against Islamic State. These troops are in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are led by the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG). The Kurdish forces control a third of the country's area, and a significant proportion of its oil resources and granaries.

The SDF controls prisons where ISIS prisoners and their families are held. It says that the US troops leaving will make ISIS stronger. It is thought that more than 50,000 people are being held in the prisons.

Turkey regards the YPG as the same organisation as

the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it has been trying to suppress for 40 years, and is strongly opposed to Kurdish forces gaining official status. Israel, on the other hand, has recognised the Kurdish forces as its "natural ally."

"Turkey was getting ready to start a big war there [against the SDF], but we asked them to wait to make room for talks," Jolani said in an interview before he arrived in Ankara.

On the other hand, Jolani claimed in the interview with *The Economist* that all Syrian militias except the Kurds had agreed to join the new Syrian army. He said that certain "measures" would be taken against "anyone who possesses weapons outside state control."

"I am not that optimistic" about negotiations with the Kurds, Jolani said, adding that "we have committed that Syria will not be a base for the PKK," in reference to Turkey.

Kurdish forces accepted the SDF's participation in the Syrian army in the negotiations, but demanded recognition of its existence as a separate force within the army. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) said on Facebook that it does not recognise the conference at which Jolani declared himself head of state as legitimate.

"We were not present there and we will not comment, the matter was not discussed with us," SDF General Commander Mazlum Abdi told the Associated Press, adding that they wanted to be part of the Syrian defence ministry and "defence strategy."

Ankara has already declared that it will invade Syria to crush Kurdish forces if HTS negotiations with the SDF fail. Given the current US presence and the fact that Israel considers the SDF an ally, such a military operation could put Ankara at odds with Washington and Tel Aviv.

Following the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has destroyed much of Syria's military infrastructure with its air strikes and extended its occupation of Syrian territory to within about 20 kilometres of the capital.

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."

Meanwhile, the new Syrian presidency said on Wednesday that French President Emmanuel Macron had expressed his "full support for the Syrian transition" and invited Jolani to Paris. Macron also said last month that France would not abandon "freedom fighters like the Kurds" who are allies of the West in the "war on terror" in Syria.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, speaking in the National Assembly on Wednesday, described the Kurds as "our main allies and comrades-in-arms" and added: "We will never abandon them." Barrot announced that the Kurds will be a party to a conference in Paris on February 13 to discuss the future of Syria.



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