

Turkey [intends](#) to position itself as the most influential foreign actor in Syria. Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey [built close ties](#) with jihadist militias fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) — the group that led the final offensive against the dictator. Following Assad's downfall in December 2024, Ahmad al-Sharaa, the leader of HTS until its recent dissolution, assumed the transitional presidency. To further Turkish goals of using Syria to regionally project power, Ankara is [promoting](#) the new Syrian government as moderate. However, both al-Sharaa and HTS appropriately remain on U.S. and UN terrorism blacklists because of their deep [historic](#) ties to al-Qaeda.

1. Erdogan and Assad were once friends.

Under the rule of Assad's father in the 1990s, Hafez al-Assad, Syria actively sought to [destabilize](#) Turkey. Hafez al-Assad oversaw hosting and training members of the Kurdish separatist organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both Ankara and Washington have designated a terrorist organization. In 1998, Turkey almost invaded Syria for hosting PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, resulting in his expulsion. But after Bashar took power in 2000, relations improved with Damascus when Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as part of Ankara's regional policy of "Zero Problems with Neighbors," [strengthened](#) both political and economic ties. This rapprochement between 2007 and 2011 was underpinned by a personal friendship between Erdogan and Assad, which included a luxury [vacation](#) together with their families in the Turkish town of Bodrum in 2009.

2. Erdogan turned on Assad to install a Sunni Islamist regime in Syria.

Immediately following the outbreak of Syria's Civil War in 2011, Erdogan [abandoned](#) Assad after assessing that the existing Syrian regime was on the verge of collapse amid the wave of successful Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. As the situation in Syria deteriorated, Turkey saw an opportunity to help install a Sunni Islamist regime — one that would be loyal to Ankara and might even be influenced by the same [Muslim Brotherhood doctrine](#). The Turkish regime found a natural kinship with the largely Sunni Syrian opposition, which resented how Assad and other members of the country's Alawite minority dominated the government. In August 2011, Turkey facilitated the [establishment](#) of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul, which purported to bring together several factions of the Syrian opposition but was clearly dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

3. Turkey provided material support to Syrian opposition and jihadist organizations.

Starting in early 2012, the head of Turkey's intelligence organization (MIT) [directed](#) efforts to bolster elements of the Syrian opposition by [providing](#) weapons, money, and logistical support. This support continued even as extremist groups became [discernible](#) by mid-2012, notably Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). These rebel groups, many of which were designated by the United States and United Nations as [terrorist organizations](#), came to [depend](#) on Ankara's [provision](#) of military and communications equipment, as well as the ability to [cross](#) into Turkey. Reports at the time indicated that ISIS and other jihadist groups were [heavily exploiting](#) Turkey's porous borders, which become a key conduit for the flow of terrorist [finances](#), [weapons](#), [illegal oil sales](#), and the [movement of foreign fighters](#) into Syria.

4. Turkey has dominated northern Syria since 2017.

Turkey oversaw the creation and [funding](#) of a [proxy](#) rebel force in 2017 that brought together a number of armed secular and jihadist opposition groups under the umbrella name of the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA was tasked with providing security for Turkish military bases in northern Syria and helping Ankara fight Kurdish forces near the Turkish border. Turkish troops worked alongside the SNA to secure a [buffer zone](#) inside of northern Syria to house displaced Syrians, which Erdogan also hoped could act as a safe-zone for the eventual return of Syrian refugees from Turkey amid a rise [in anti-refugee nationalism](#). From 2019 onwards, Ankara's direct ties and support of the SNA resulted in parts of northwest Syria falling under Turkish government [administration](#). Ankara [appointed](#) civilian administrators, set up government institutions such as post offices, and introduced Turkey's national currency, the [lira](#), as the local currency.

5. Turkey had pivoted to fighting Syrian Kurdish forces.

Turkey's immediate threat to Damascus was blocked by Russia's 2015 military intervention on behalf of Assad, combined with Iran's ongoing support. At the same time, the U.S.-backed Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) expanded its control of northern Syria along with a U.S.-led coalition in order to push back against the Islamic State (ISIS). Fearing the establishment of a Kurdish entity spanning the breadth of northern Syria, Ankara redirected its efforts to [preventing](#) this development. Erdogan insisted the YPG posed a [terrorist](#) threat to Turkey, owing to its organizational ties to the PKK, yet U.S. support for the YPG only deepened, with the group forming the core of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Between 2016 and 2019, Ankara conducted three [military operations](#) against areas under Syrian Kurdish control, disrupting SDF operations against ISIS and threatening the [safety](#) of U.S. forces.

6. Turkey embraced Syrian groups accused of grave human rights abuses.

While benefiting from Ankara's support, SNA fighters have been [accused](#) of repeatedly committing serious human rights abuses against Kurdish communities in Turkish-occupied northern Syria. In August 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed [sanctions](#) on two prominent SNA militias, the Suleiman Shah Brigade and the Hamza Brigade, for serious abuses against civilians including abduction, extortion, torture, and sexual violence. The State Department's human rights reports have repeatedly [implicated](#) Turkish authorities in abuses perpetrated by the SNA, [citing](#) UN [reporting](#) on "the frequent presence of Turkish officials in SNA detention facilities ... where torture was used."

7. Turkey had established itself as the main interlocutor with HTS.

Although Turkey [designated](#) HTS a terrorist organization — as did the United States, the United Nations, and many European governments — Ankara [maintained](#) communication and collaboration with the group. Until its dissolution on January 29, 2025, Turkey had provided it with [indirect assistance](#), including maintaining Turkish troops in HTS-controlled Idlib province to shield HTS from Syrian government attacks and channeling humanitarian aid and trade into northern Syria, which helped HTS gain legitimacy among the population.

8. Turkey moved swiftly to build ties with Syria's transitional government.

Within a few days of the Assad regime's overthrow, [Ankara re-established](#) diplomatic representation in Syria, with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and the head of Turkish intelligence, Ibrahim Kalin, paying personal visits to HTS leadership in Damascus. In early February 2025, transitional President al-Sharaa [met](#) with Erdogan at the Presidential Palace in Ankara. Erdogan [reiterated](#) Turkey's full support for the new administration and praised al-Sharaa for his commitment to fighting "terror groups," including both ISIS and the U.S.-backed SDF. In return, the new Syrian leader said he would never allow Syrian territory to be used as a staging ground for threats against Turkey and [promised](#) to reject any form of Kurdish self-rule.

9. Erdogan attempts to benefit from portraying Syria's new president as a moderate.

Al-Sharaa has [pledged](#) to govern in an inclusive and tolerant manner, a claim Turkey has sought to validate through speeches by its foreign minister that [emphasize](#) the importance of creating a Syrian state where "no religion or ethnic group is excluded." Turkey is well-positioned to [lead](#) Syria's reconstruction if the international community deems the new regime as moderate and thereby eases Assad-era economic sanctions on Syria. However, in practice, al-Sharaa has empowered HTS loyalists who share his Islamist ideology, as well as appointed [relatives](#) to key positions. While fighting Assad, al-Sharaa — then known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolani — sought to allay Western concerns by [ending](#) HTS's affiliation with al-Qaeda, although the group remained committed to its Salafi-jihadi ideology.

10. Erdogan hopes Syria will become a launchpad for regionally projecting Turkish power.

Ankara is keen to increase its regional power projection by exploiting al-Sharaa's transitional government. Erdogan desires a [pliable](#) regime in Damascus that he can use to help position Turkey as the dominant state in the Levant, despite Iranian setbacks. Turkey says it is prepared to offer [military aid](#), training, and reconstruction support to Syria, along with lucrative [contracts](#) for Turkish firms participating in reconstruction. Syria and Turkey [reportedly began](#) talks in February 2025 to establish a joint defense pact that would result in new Turkish airbases in central Syria and training for Syria's new army. Erdogan also wants Damascus to assist in [eliminating](#) the SDF, [alluding](#) to a full-scale Turkish military incursion against Kurdish forces, which would reinforce his tough-on-terrorism image domestically.