

# Syria leader heads to Turkey to discuss rebuilding, Kurds

AFP- Syria's interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa visits Ankara on Tuesday for talks with Turkey's leaders on rebuilding his land and the volatile issue of Kurdish fighters near the countries' border.

Sharaa is scheduled to arrive mid-afternoon, flying in from Saudi Arabia where he made his first international visit since his Islamist-led rebels overthrew Syria's longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad on December 8.

The move left Syria – which shares a 900-kilometre (560-mile) border with Turkey – facing a fragile transition involving multiple territorial and governance challenges.

Working to keep balanced regional ties following his trip to Saudi Arabia, Sharaa will now look to draw on a strategic relationship he has built up with Ankara over the years.

Tuesday's visit, which comes "at the invitation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan", will see Sharaa hosted at the presidential palace, the Turkish leader's office said Monday.

The pair will discuss the "joint steps to be taken for economic recovery, sustainable stability and security," Erdogan's communications chief Fahrettin Altun wrote on X.

Despite being constrained by its own economic crisis, Turkey is offering to help with Syria's recovery after a devastating 13-year civil war.

In return, Turkey is keen to secure Damascus's support against Kurdish militants in northeastern Syria, where the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been battling Ankara-backed forces.

Turkey opposes the SDF on the grounds that its main component, the People's Protection Units (YPG), is aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a separatist group outlawed in Turkey.

The Kurdish-led force controls much of Syria's oil-producing northeast, where it has enjoyed de facto autonomy for more than a decade.

Turkey has threatened to take military action to keep Kurdish forces away from its borders despite US efforts to broker a truce.

– Kurds in Syria –

Ankara had a strong presence in the northwestern enclave of Idlib which from 2017 was run by a coalition headed by Sharaa. It still has military bases in northern Syria.

In the past, Sharaa's former Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rebel movement was "always careful not to engage in fighting with the SDF, despite Turkish pressure," a Western diplomatic source said.

While keeping up pressure on Kurdish fighters in Syria, Ankara has at the same time offered an olive branch to jailed PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan, raising the prospect that he may soon urge his followers to lay down their arms.

That call would likely be aimed at military leaders of the movement in Syria and Iraq.

"Erdogan does not want a Kurdish entity on his doorstep" in Syria, said Hamit Bozarslan, a Paris-based specialist on Kurdish issues.

Meanwhile, however, Sharaa "knows how much he owes to the Kurds who remained neutral (during his rebel advance) and he needs to work with these movements", he told AFP.

For Sharaa, the “first option is to resolve this via diplomacy and talks”, said Gonul Tol, head of the Turkish studies programme at the Washington-based Middle East Institute.

But at some point, he and his administration will have to act “because they cannot afford to have a region that is beyond their control,” she added.

Much will depend on the attitude of the new US administration under President Donald Trump, although for now their policy is “unreadable”, she said.

AFP