

Turkey's New Direction

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The Financial Times has published [a rare interview](#) with Hakan Fidan, the former head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), who was appointed foreign minister after Turkey's last elections in May 2023. President Erdogan's chief advisor, Islamic ideologue Ibrahim Kalin, replaced him as head of MIT. Consequently, to all intents and purposes, Turkey is ruled by a triumvirate.

For some reason, the Financial Times has stated 'comments have not been enabled for this article', in which case it would be reasonable to challenge some of the views put forward by Mr Fidan. Fidan has [a formidable track record](#), not only academically but also with regard to foreign policy and security. He was head of MIT for thirteen years, and when [he resigned in 2015](#) to run for election as a parliamentary deputy, [he changed his mind](#), perhaps because Erdogan regarded him as [his 'secret-keeper'](#).

In February 2012 the first cracks in the alliance between the Gülen movement and Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party) government started to emerge, when an attempt was made by public prosecutors to investigate the links between Hakan Fidan and his top officials to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in connection with [the Oslo talks](#), which the Gülen movement opposed. An amendment to the law on MIT personnel was immediately passed, which [protected them from investigation](#) without Prime Minister Erdogan's authorization.

The interview mentions the central role played by Fidan in combating Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime. In August 2012, President Obama [made it clear](#) that the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons would constitute a red line and change his calculus with regard to intervention in Syria. On May 11, 2013 there was [a twin car bombing](#) in the Turkish border town of Reyhanli, killing 52 people and injuring 140, and the blame was placed on Syria. (A Turkish police officer from an anti-terror unit told me they had found a third car with sarin gas).

On May 16 Obama and Erdogan met at the White House, followed by a working dinner with Erdogan, accompanied by his foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan. [According to one account](#), Erdogan tried to demonstrate that Obama's red line had been crossed and drew Fidan into the conversation but Obama refused to bite.

It was also alleged that Erdogan hoped to instigate an event that would force the US to cross the red line, but Obama didn't respond. Doubt was also cast on the provenance of the sarin gas used in the attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, when Obama backed down on launching an allied air strike on Syria in retaliation.

In March 2014 a leaked audio tape of a National Security meeting revealed a plan for [a false flag operation](#), which would justify the Turkish army's intervention in Syria. When the undersecretary of the Turkish foreign ministry asked for justification, Hakan Fidan replied, "I can provide justification if need be".

In the event, Turkey in three cross-border operations in 2016, 2018 and 2019 has gained control of much of northern Syria. The second occupied the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northwestern Syria, and the third, Operation Peace Spring, went into the Kurdish region in northeastern Syria. This was sanctioned by President Trump in his first period of office. He considered the move "[strategically brilliant](#)", whereas Trump's present national security advisor, Mike Waltz, thought it was "[a strategic mistake](#)".

The interview states that Ankara did not directly back the new Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa's Islamist faction, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), but Turkey [stationed a division in Idlib province](#), which allowed HTS to build up its military capabilities without interference from Damascus.

Turkey is undoubtedly the most influential foreign actor in Syria, and has offered military and logistical support in [the creation of a new Syrian army](#).

The interview mentions that chief among Fidan's concerns is the fate of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which the U.S. has armed and trained as its local partner in the fight against ISIS. In fact, it is the role played by the SDF in [Operation Inherent Resolve](#), at a cost of some 11,000 Kurdish lives, that has led to the defeat of the Islamic State.

Fidan concludes by stating that pitting one terrorist organisation i.e. the SDF, against another was not the right idea. But this is what Turkey has done, for example, with its support for the so-called [Syrian National Army](#), a motley crew of various Islamist factions, and [ISIS](#). Fidan is now planning to develop [a regional coalition](#) as an alternative to the U.S.-led mission, but it is uncertain whether Trump will withdraw U.S. forces from Syria.

[An agreement](#) has now been made between SDF commander Mazloum Abdi and Syria's interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa to integrate all military and civilian institutions into the Syrian state, which should serve to de-escalate tension.

Nevertheless, [Syria's new temporary constitution](#), which concentrates power in al-Sharaa's hands, offers no guarantees or protections for Syria's minorities, and with Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation is one step towards Syria's transformation into the Islamic Republic of Syria.

Hakan Fidan has said that a European security architecture that excludes Turkey would be [unrealistic](#), and he has told the Financial Times Turkey would want to be part of any new European security structure if NATO unravels. Hakan attended [the London summit](#) convened by UK prime minister Keir Starmer to form "a coalition of the willing" and was included in the family photo.

NATO's secretary-general Mark Rutte has [also urged](#) the EU and Turkey to improve their relations, where Cyprus is the stumbling block.

But Washington is "[profoundly concerned](#)" about Turkey's role in facilitating Hamas's access to international finance and its re-exportation of dual-use components to Russia. Iran also utilizes Turkey as [a support hub for the Houthi rebels in Yemen](#).

There is not only [the Halkbank case](#), where the Turkish state bank has been indicted for funneling more than \$20 billion to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions, but also where Turkey has [helped Russia subvert sanctions](#) imposed on Russia's central bank.

In short, Turkey, as a NATO member, must stop running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.