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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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28.04.2025

Return of the Ikhwan:

Erdogan reboots the Muslim Brotherhood in West Asia

With Damascus fallen and Sanaa under bombardment, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seizing a renewed opportunity to reassert Muslim Brotherhood influence across the Arab world – from Syria and Lebanon to Jordan and Yemen.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

During the so-called Arab Spring, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan envisioned reviving [Neo-Ottoman](#) ambitions through ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood. But as Brotherhood-linked movements faltered, especially after Egypt's 2013 coup, those plans were shelved.

Now, 14 years later, with Damascus fallen and regional dynamics shifting, Erdogan sees an opening to rekindle the Brotherhood's influence.

That influence now extends far beyond Syria and Egypt, with Brotherhood-affiliated movements [resurging](#) across Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen – regions where Erdogan has maintained deep, often unofficial, networks of support.

Turkiye's Islamist turn and Brotherhood networks

Erdogan never truly abandoned his broader regional agenda. Over the years, he gradually shifted Türkiye's secular foreign policy to a more aggressive, Islamist-aligned approach – reaching out not only to states but also to ideologically aligned organizations and individuals.

That included offering state support to controversial figures like [Tariq al-Hashimi](#), the former Iraqi vice president sentenced to death in Iraq, who received both a vehicle and driver from Istanbul's municipal government under Erdogan's rule.

Most notably, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood found refuge in Istanbul after being designated a terrorist organization by Cairo. Some members even aired broadcasts calling for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's assassination – beaming their message from Turkish soil. Erdogan's strategic alliance with Qatar further solidified his patronage of the Brotherhood, creating friction with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

A legacy of Brotherhood ties

Erdogan's ideological affinity with the Brotherhood is rooted in decades of Turkish-Islamist history. As noted by Professor Behlul Ozkan of Ozyegin University, Brotherhood figures such as Said Ramadan – the son-in-law of founder Hassan al-Banna – were [forging ties](#) with Turkish Islamists as early as the 1950s. In this context, Erdogan became both a product of and a model for Brotherhood-aligned movements.

His open backing of Egypt's late former President Mohamed Morsi included dispatching the Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) chief propagandist, Erol Olcok, to assist in Morsi's campaign. Yet the Brotherhood's defeats – from Cairo to Tunisia – necessitated a tactical recalibration.

When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt blockaded Qatar, Erdogan firmly sided with Doha, triggering years of strained ties with the Arab trio.

Eventually, rapprochements with these regional powers forced Erdogan to tone down overt Brotherhood ties. But behind the scenes, the groundwork for renewed cooperation persisted – especially through Syria, where Erdogan has actively supported groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the successor to Al-Qaeda affiliate the Nusra Front, which now forms the [backbone](#) of the new Syrian government.

A violent Brotherhood in Syria

In the Syrian Arab Republic, the group's legacy is marked by organized violence between 1979 and 1982, which culminated in the [1982 Hama incident](#), when a Brotherhood-led uprising prompted a brutal crackdown by Hafez al-Assad's forces, leaving thousands dead.

In Syria the first major action of the Muslim Brotherhood was the Hama shutdown in 1964 against the expropriation practices of the Baathist government. This uprising was also the first bloodshed of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syrian history. That revolt, which first started as civil disobedience, later turned into hit-and-run actions against the state. However, the Baathist government's response to these actions was very harsh, and the revolt was ended.

The organization became much bloodier after 1973. Said Hawwa, one of the leaders of the Brotherhood, issued a secret declaration calling for the fall of the "Alawite sultanate," and after this call, a military structure was established by Abdel Sattar al-Zaim in 1975 to fight against the government. This structure later pledged allegiance to Marwan Hadid, one of the leading figures of radical Islam in Syria. It was this military structure that carried out the bloody attack on the artillery school in Aleppo in 1979, which resulted in the massacre of dozens of young cadets, one of the most important stops in the war between the Baathist government and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to acts of violence in many parts of the country, the organization attempted to assassinate the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad.

At the time, articles appearing in the underground newspaper *Al Nadhir* by the "Mujahidin" group, which was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, referred to the Alawite sect as "un-Islamic" and 'infidel', while the government was characterized as "Alawite atheism."

In 1982, calls for an all-out war against the Syrian government began to be made, centered on the city of Hama. However, the harsh and bloody official response to the uprising led the Muslim Brotherhood to virtually disappear from the Syrian political arena for decades.

Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is more often associated with moderate Islamism, especially in the western world. During the so-called Arab Spring uprisings, the Brotherhood line was the political line supported by the West.

HTS and the Brotherhood's Syrian return

Fast-forward to events today, with the fall of Damascus and the rise of HTS's reach across the country, Erdogan sees an opportunity to reshape Syria's post-Assad political order. Though the Brotherhood maintains a lower profile, it remains a foundational force in the anti-Assad movement. Syria's Brotherhood faction – historically more inclined toward violence – could soon be reintegrated to moderate HTS's militant image.

The groundwork is already visible in the re-emergence of groups like the Kubaysiyat (female-led Da'wah organisations) and meetings held by Brotherhood-linked figures in Istanbul. One such event hosted by the [International Organization to Protect and Support Our Prophet \(IOSPI\)](#) brought together leaders like Egypt's Sheikh Muhammad al-Saghir and Sudan's Abdulhayy Yousuf to coordinate resources for political Islam's revival.

In parallel, Erdogan-backed humanitarian fronts – such as the Yunus Emre Foundation, IHH, and Turkish Red Crescent – continue operations that blur the lines between aid and ideological outreach across West Asia.

Wider ripples: Lebanon and Jordan

Lebanon and Jordan are also witnessing renewed Brotherhood-linked mobilization. In Jordan, a recent raid dismantled what authorities called a [Brotherhood-linked rocket cell](#), with several suspects allegedly trained in Lebanon. As expected, the organization denied any militancy, painting its actions as “peaceful resistance” – a claim that history contradicts.

The Brotherhood, true to form, issued a familiar response: “We are peaceful.” Their past activities – bombings in Egypt and Syria, assassinations of political figures, and attacks on civilians – are all, in their rhetoric, acts of “peace.”

Even the fact that some of the militants arrested in Jordan had reportedly been trained in Lebanon is described as part of their so-called “peaceful” outreach.

A well-informed Jordanian source told The Cradle, “The Brotherhood movement in Jordan is very strong, given that a large portion of Jordanian society is of Palestinian origin and supports the Palestinian cause, particularly Hamas. This is why some Arab countries and Turkey are infiltrating Jordan's domestic arena to destabilize the country. The recent operation uncovered in Jordan is not new, and the authorities were already working on it. There are other operations that have not been announced.” The Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has operated under the name “Islamic Action Front” since 1942. In the parliamentary elections last September, it emerged as the largest political bloc, and has in recent years become particularly prominent in anti-Israel mobilizations.

Following the recent crackdown, however, the future of the Jordanian Brotherhood is uncertain, and the monarchy – long committed to a delicate balancing act – may finally be preparing to confront the group. In Lebanon, the Brotherhood's roots go back to 1964, when it began operating under the name Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya. While the group never attained the same clout as Hezbollah or Saudi-backed factions, it has secured parliamentary representation – typically through an

alliance with the Saad Hariri-led Future Movement. Its media arm, aimed at drawing support from the Sunni community, even shares the name of the Brotherhood's historical armed wing, [Al-Fajr](#).

Being primarily a social movement, the Brotherhood's strategic toolbox has remained consistent since its founding in 1920s Egypt: religious schools, charity networks, Quran classes, disaster relief, and Da'wah.

Founder Hassan al-Banna detailed these tactics in his own memoirs. Whether in Turkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, or elsewhere, these civilian-facing efforts remain active in peacetime – and can shift rapidly into armed struggle when the moment demands it.

In Yemen, Erdogan's Turkiye has also quietly maintained relations with the Muslim Brotherhood's local incarnation, the [Al-Islah Party](#) – though the group's alliances have fluctuated between Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara depending on battlefield dynamics and regional pressures.

Meanwhile, the [World Union of Muslim Scholars](#), headquartered in Qatar and led by Erdogan allies, issued a call for jihad under the guise of defending Gaza – though the [true scope](#) of the call is clearly broader.

Erdogan's calculated patience

With friction cooling between Ankara and Arab capitals, Erdogan is playing the long game. The Brotherhood remains his ideological twin and political instrument, both domestically and throughout the Muslim world.

As [reports](#) confirm, Erdogan has continued providing behind-the-scenes assurances to the movement, even as he publicly moderates his tone.

As the region undergoes seismic shifts – from the collapse of old regimes to the decimation of Gaza – Erdogan is ready to pounce. For now, the Muslim Brotherhood has found its most secure base not in Doha or Cairo, but in [Erdogan's Turkiye](#).

Whether it's negotiating maritime boundaries with Egypt in the Mediterranean, competing with Saudi Arabia for influence across West Asia, or simply expanding his reach in the broader Islamic world, Erdogan will continue seeking partners to bolster his position. And no movement aligns more closely – ideologically or politically – than the Muslim Brotherhood.

As long as Erdogan remains in power, this alliance looks set to endure.

APR 24, 2025