

Syria's Kurdish Crisis: An Overview of Escalation

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Escalating attacks this month by the Syrian army against the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a long-time U.S. ally to counter the Islamic State (ISIS), have resulted in deteriorated relations between the interim government and the Kurds and significant territorial losses for the SDF. The Syrian government has offered a ceasefire agreement that, while offering the Kurds some rights and role in the new Syria, falls short of what they had been seeking in earlier negotiations. Tensions remain as Damascus, and Washington, have issued an ultimatum to the Kurds to accept the deal by January 24.

In the coming days, one of three outcomes seems likely: a deal that increasingly resembles capitulation for the SDF will be signed; the SDF will return with a counter-proposal demanding meaningful autonomy for Hasakah and Kobani; or the fighting will continue, with the Kurds forced into what could become a final stand.

Syria's Kurds and the SDF

Syria's Kurds make up [approximately 10 percent](#) of the country's pre-war population of 23 million and have long faced marginalization and persecution under successive Syrian governments. When the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, the Kurds seized the opportunity to establish a semi-autonomous region that at its height controlled nearly a quarter of Syria's territory, spanning roughly 19,000 square miles.

The SDF was formed in 2015 primarily by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian wing of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist group, but comprising a multiethnic coalition, numbering 80,000-100,000 fighters. The SDF partnered with U.S. forces and played a decisive role in defeating ISIS, losing [11,000 fighters](#) in the process, and then assumed responsibility for managing detention facilities holding some [9,000 ISIS members](#) and camps housing tens of thousands of ISIS-affiliated civilians—a mission critical to preventing the group's resurgence.

The Aleppo Crisis

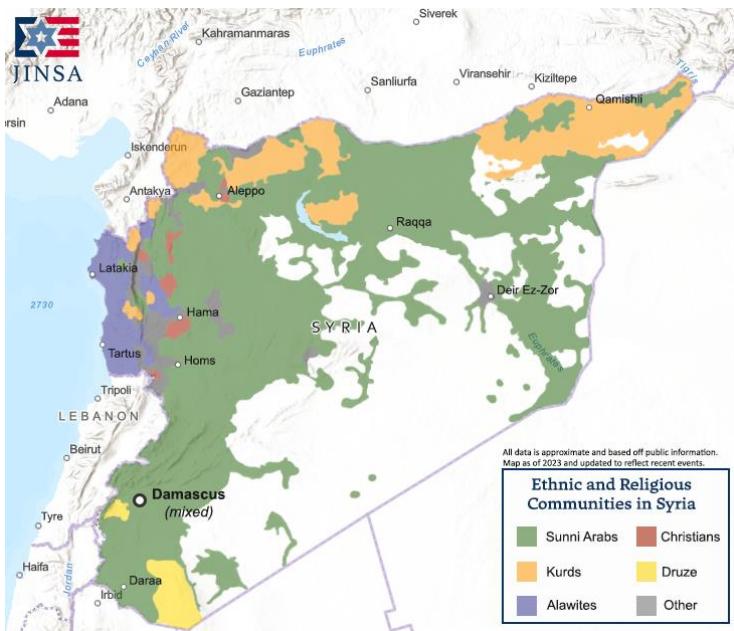
Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the SDF and Syria's new transitional government signed an [agreement on March 10, 2025](#), establishing a roadmap for integrating northeast Syria and the SDF into the new Syrian state.

Fittful negotiations throughout 2025 made some progress on implementing the March 10 agreement. Damascus made the key concession to integrate the SDF as [three units](#), instead of distributing its fighters as individuals across the Syrian army, allowing the SDF to remain a distinct force. However, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa was unwilling to make any meaningful progress on the SDF's demands for reforms to the constitution to grant Kurds political, civil, and linguistic rights.

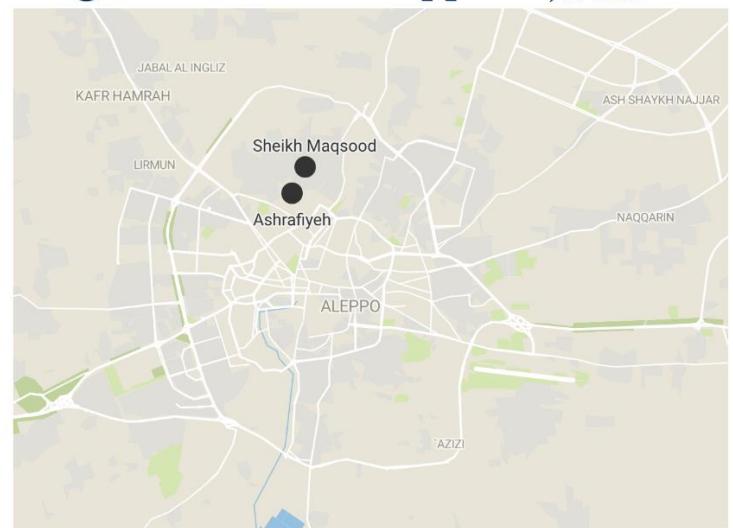
Aleppo

With this stalemate on implementation of the March 10 agreement, Aleppo was the only place in Syria where a power-sharing formula between Damascus and the Kurdish administration was being implemented. Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and once its industrial and financial center, is located in the northwest near the Turkish border and has [long been divided](#) along sectarian lines—with a pre-war population of 2.3 million that was predominantly Sunni Arab, but included significant Kurdish (20-25 percent) and Christian (10 percent) minorities.

However, Aleppo was far from a success story. An [April 2025 ceasefire](#) had demilitarized the city's two Kurdish-held neighborhoods—Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud—with SDF fighters withdrawing heavy weapons while Kurdish internal security forces remained. Yet tensions persisted throughout the year: Damascus periodically cut off electricity, water, and fuel as political leverage, while escalations frequently followed Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's engagements with Syrian officials. In October 2025, Syrian redeployments near Aleppo triggered clashes that required [direct U.S. mediation](#) to broker a temporary ceasefire. The fragile arrangement resolved none of the underlying disputes over implementing the March 10 integration agreement. When negotiations collapsed in early January 2026, it set off a chain of events that would fundamentally reshape Syria's post-Assad order.



Kurdish-Majority Neighborhoods in Aleppo



Trigger and Escalation

On January 4, a [high-level meeting](#) in Damascus between SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi and Syrian officials was abruptly terminated by Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani. Though the SDF [signaled](#) talks would continue, by the next day Syrian security forces were [shelling Kurdish neighborhoods](#) in Aleppo. Sources involved in the negotiations tell JINSA they believe that this

was a pre-planned operation, as roads leading in and out of the area had been blocked by Damascus since late December. The onslaught followed Syria-Israel talks described as “[positive](#),” suggesting the transitional government felt emboldened domestically after international diplomatic progress. The breakdown also came amid [mounting Turkish pressure](#), with Ankara having urged Damascus to force SDF integration by a year-end 2025 deadline that had just passed without SDF capitulation.

Violence and Reactions

On January 6, Syrian government forces began a sustained assault on Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud—neighborhoods that had become sanctuary for [up to 200,000 people](#), primarily Kurds but also Arabs and religious minorities who had fled violence elsewhere in Syria since 2011. Damascus issued [evacuation orders](#) and [deployed](#) tanks into residential districts. Artillery bombardment destroyed or damaged [over 300 homes](#) and repeatedly hit the only operating hospital in Sheikh Maqsoud, leaving it without power. More than [140,000 civilians](#) were displaced within days as fighting intensified.

Just two days into the assault, on January 8, Turkey’s defense ministry announced it stood ready to “[support](#)” Damascus in its operations against the SDF, if requested, framing the offer as assistance in Syria’s “counter-terrorism” fight. The timing underscored Ankara’s role in the escalation. Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan then stated on January 9 that the “[SDF has no chance of getting anything done through dialogue without the threat of force](#)”—a doctrine that appeared to be playing out in real time on Aleppo’s streets.

Many of the government-aligned forces were drawn from armed factions with documented records of targeting Kurdish and minority communities. Groups such as the Hamza Division, Sultan Murad, and al-Amshat—formerly part of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and now integrated into Syria’s new army—had been sanctioned by the [United States](#), the [United Kingdom](#), and the [European Union](#) for ethnically motivated abuses in Afrin, Tel Abyad, and elsewhere. Residents reported fighters [speaking Turkish](#) during the assault.

By January 10, the last SDF fighters [withdrew](#) from Aleppo entirely, ending Kurdish presence in pockets of the city they had held since 2011. The violence left at least [23 dead](#) and scores more injured. What had been the sole example of Kurdish-government coexistence—and a rare safe haven in Syria’s brutal civil war—was now a template for forced displacement.

Deir Hafer and the Expanding Offensive

With Aleppo secured, Damascus quickly moved to expand operations beyond the city. On January 13, Damascus [declared](#) the Kurdish-held towns of Deir Hafer and Maskanah—located on the western bank of the Euphrates River, roughly 50 kilometers east of Aleppo—a closed military zone. The army accused the SDF of mobilizing forces alongside “[PKK terrorists and remnants of the deposed regime](#),” claiming the area had become a launch point for attacks targeting Aleppo. Damascus ordered all armed groups to withdraw east of the Euphrates and warned civilians to evacuate, opening a “[humanitarian zone](#)” from 9am to 5pm on January 14 to allow residents to flee.

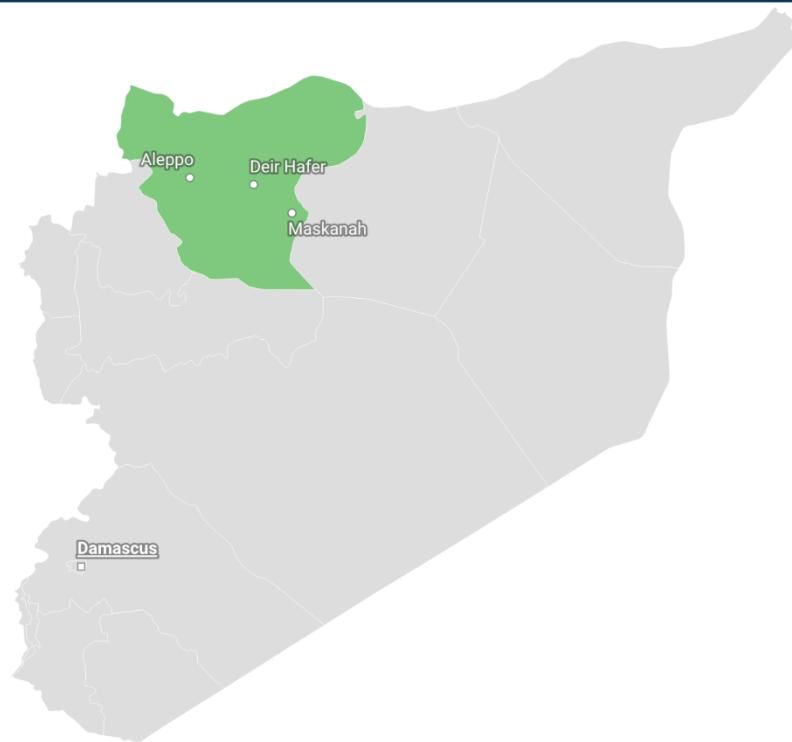
The military buildup was substantial. Reinforcements [arrived](#) from Latakia province on the Mediterranean coast, signaling that Damascus was marshaling resources from across the country for the operation. Damascus-aligned forces [reportedly began shelling](#) Deir Hafer, targeting infrastructure, spurring mass displacement toward Raqqa and Tabqa. The SDF reported [multiple attacks](#) across eastern Aleppo: suicide drone and artillery strikes near the strategic Tishreen Dam, rocket

fire on the village of Umm al-Marra, and a failed infiltration attempt at Zubaida village that SDF forces repelled. The SDF [reported](#) that Syrian forces led drone strikes near Tabqa injuring several fighters—the third attack within a week.

What began as a focused operation around Deir Hafer rapidly escalated into a broader offensive that would fundamentally alter Syria's territorial map. On January 16, Abdi [announced](#) that as a gesture of "good faith" to allow for negotiations to continue, the SDF would withdraw from Deir Hafer and Maskanah. Consequently, by January 17, Syrian forces [took control of](#) the two towns, then pushed further east to capture the strategic city of Tabqa—home to a critical dam on the Euphrates River—and the nearby Mansoura Dam, placing them less than 5 kilometers from Raqqa's western entrance. The Syrian Petroleum Company [announced](#) it had taken control of the al-Rasafa and Safyan oilfields after SDF forces withdrew.

The SDF reported clashes in Deir al-Zor province as government-aligned forces [attacked](#) positions in the towns of Gharanij, Abu Hammam, Al-Kishkiyah, Al-Dhiban, and Al-Tayyanah. In al-Mansoura, fighting [erupted](#) as Damascus-affiliated forces advanced. The offensive's breakneck speed resulted from the [defection](#) of Arab tribal components of the SDF, ceding territory to the government without a fight. The pace of the change in control of territory raised immediate concerns about ISIS detention facilities. SDF-affiliated authorities warned that a prison holding ISIS detainees in Raqqa faced "[imminent danger](#)" due to ongoing fighting, claiming they had been coordinating with the [U.S.-led coalition for three days](#) to transfer detainees to safer locations but that "no practical steps" had been taken. Damascus, however, accused the SDF of using the prison crisis as leverage, with Syria's Interior Ministry later claiming the SDF had deliberately released detainees as [political blackmail](#) and had refused repeated requests to hand over the facility to Damascus's control. CENTCOM [publicly urged](#) Syrian government forces to "cease any offensive actions" between Aleppo and Tabqa—a rare direct statement that underscored American alarm at the rapid deterioration.

Locations of Fighting in Aleppo Governorate



March 7–9, 2025	Government forces kill over 1,500 Alawites
March 10, 2025	SDF and Damascus sign integration agreement
April 1, 2025	SDF removes heavy weapons from two Aleppo Kurdish neighborhoods
July 14–18, 2025	Government forces kill over 1,000 Druze in southern Syria
August 9, 2025	Damascus refuses to attend Paris talks with SDF
October 7–8, 2025	Clashes near Aleppo occur; U.S. brokers temporary ceasefire
December 18, 2025	Turkish FM Fidan threatens military action against SDF
December 22, 2025	Turkey and Syria warn SDF to accelerate integration
January 4, 2026	Damascus terminates senior-level SDF negotiations
January 6, 2026	Syrian forces shell Aleppo's Kurdish neighborhoods
January 7, 2026	Damascus issues evacuation orders for Aleppo's Kurdish neighborhoods
January 8, 2026	Turkey offers to support Syrian operations against SDF
	Damascus declares brief ceasefire window for evacuations
January 10, 2026	SDF-affiliated fighters withdraw from Aleppo
January 13, 2026	U.S. envoy Barrack meets Turkish FM Fidan in Ankara
	Syrian forces mobilize toward Deir Hafer
	Damascus declares Deir Hafer and Maskanah closed military zones
January 14, 2026	Damascus opens humanitarian corridor from Maskanah through Deir Hafer to Hamina for evacuations
	Syrian reinforcements arrive from Latakia
January 15, 2026	Syrian forces advance on Deir Hafer as evacuations continue through humanitarian corridor
January 16, 2026	U.S. convoy meets SDF commanders in Deir Hafer
	SDF withdraws from Deir Hafer
	President al-Sharaa issues decree on Kurdish rights
January 17, 2026	Syrian forces seize Deir Hafer and Maskanah
January 18, 2026	Sharaa hosts U.S. Special Envoy Barrack to discuss ceasefire
	Damascus announces ceasefire and SDF integration
January 19, 2026	Fighting occurs near ISIS prisons; 200 detainees escape
	Abdi-Sharaa meeting; no agreement reached
	Sharaa and Trump discuss Kurdish rights by phone
January 20, 2026	Damascus issues four-day integration deadline and renewed ceasefire

The Ceasefire That Wasn't

As Syrian forces seized territory across northeast Syria at breakneck speed, Damascus moved to formalize its gains with what appeared to be a comprehensive settlement. The question was whether the SDF's capitulation on paper would translate into lasting peace—or whether the ceasefire would collapse as quickly as the military campaign had succeeded.

Deal on the Table

On January 16, as Syrian forces advanced rapidly across northeast Syria, Sharaa [issued a decree](#) declaring Kurdish “an essential and integral part of the Syrian people” and pledging to guarantee Kurdish rights and security. The decree made Kurdish a national language, allowed its teaching in public schools, abolished the controversial 1962 census measures that had stripped many Kurds of citizenship, and declared Nowruz—the Kurdish new year—a paid national holiday. It marked the first formal recognition of Kurdish rights since Syria's independence in 1946. While a far greater acknowledgment of Kurdish rights than had ever previously existed in Syria, the decree, even if it had the force of law, lacked the permanence of the constitutional guarantees being sought by Kurds.

Two days later, after the SDF had lost nearly half of its territory in a matter of days, Sharaa and SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi signed a [14-point ceasefire agreement](#) that represented a near-complete capitulation. The deal stipulated immediate and complete administrative and military handover of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor provinces to Damascus. All SDF military and security would integrate individually into Syria's Defense and Interior Ministries—abandoning the SDF's long-standing demand to preserve cohesive Kurdish units. Strategic assets including ISIS detention facilities, oil fields, hydroelectric dams, and border crossings would transfer to government control. The [agreement](#) named Hasakah and Kobani—the SDF's remaining strongholds—for gradual integration.

U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack [hailed the agreement](#) as brokered between “two great Syrian leaders” and praised Sharaa's affirmation that “the Kurds are an integral part of Syria.” Syria's Envoy to the United Nations Ibrahim Olabi was more [blunt](#): “The SDF will be dissolved. Individual fighters will be integrated within the army after conducting security screenings.” Syrian Interior Ministry forces [entered](#) Raqqa that evening to prepare for deployment across all neighborhoods. For Damascus, the deal appeared to be a total victory.

Immediate Collapse

Within 24 hours, the ceasefire collapsed. On January 19, fighting erupted across multiple fronts as both sides accused the other of violations. The SDF reported that government-affiliated forces [attacked](#) al-Shaddadi prison in Hasakah governorate, which holds thousands of ISIS detainees. Syria's military [blamed](#) “terrorist groups” linked to the PKK and “remnants” of the former regime, saying three soldiers were killed. Clashes also intensified around al-Aqta prison near Raqqa, where the SDF [reported](#) nine fighters killed and 20 wounded.

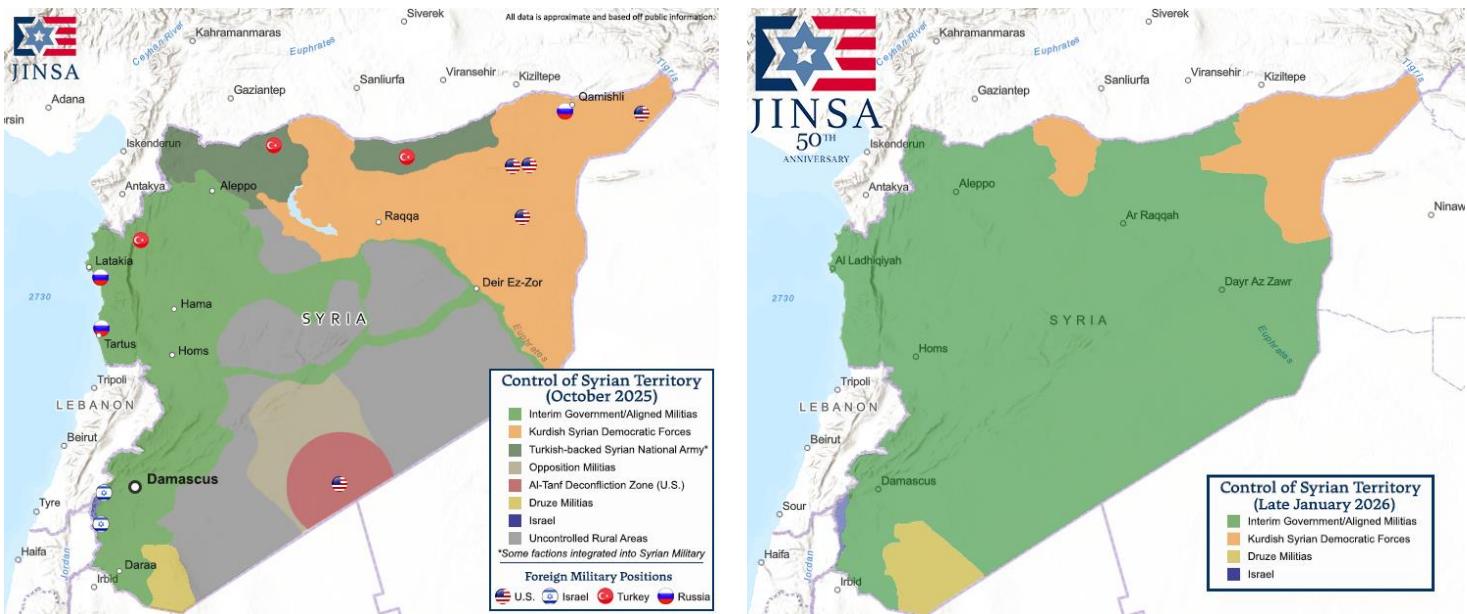
During the fighting, roughly [200 ISIS detainees](#) reportedly escaped from al-Shaddadi prison. Each side blamed the other: Syria's Interior Ministry [accused](#) the SDF of deliberately releasing prisoners as “political blackmail,” while the SDF said it [lost control](#) of the facility after attacks by government-aligned tribal fighters. By day's end, Syrian forces [reportedly recaptured](#) 81 escapees, with dozens still at large.

A meeting in the evening of January 19 between Abdi and Sharaa [ended without agreement](#). SDF negotiator Rohilat Efrin [said](#) Damascus had fundamentally revised its demands, insisting the SDF “immediately evacuate Hasakah and Kobani, lay down [its] arms, and join the army individually.” She said the SDF sought time to assess the new terms but was refused, warning the demands would “destroy 13 years of gains and subjugate the Kurdish people’s will.” Later that evening, Sharaa [spoke by phone](#) with President Donald Trump, with both leaders expressing a shared desire for a “strong and unified” Syria and emphasizing the need to guarantee Kurdish rights within the Syria state.

Ongoing Skirmishes and Four-Day Deadline

By January 20, Syrian forces backed by tribal fighters had [advanced](#) to the outskirts of Hasakah, the SDF’s last major urban stronghold. The SDF reportedly [repelled](#) attacks south of Kobani, while [unidentified drones](#) struck positions south of Hasakah. It [warned](#) that Kobani, Hasakah, and Derik would become a “graveyard” for attackers and called on Kurdish youth in Rojava and the European diaspora to “join the ranks of the resistance.” Citing “international indifference,” the SDF [announced](#) it had withdrawn all forces from securing al-Hol camp in Hasakah—home to tens of thousands of ISIS-affiliated civilians—to redeploy them to priority combat areas.

The Syrian presidency announced it had given the SDF [four days](#) to agree to a plan for the “practical integration” of Hasakah province, effectively issuing an ultimatum. Barrack [urged](#) Kurdish leaders to seize what he described as their “greatest opportunity,” arguing that the balance of power had “fundamentally changed” and that the U.S.-backed integration offered the best chance to secure lasting rights within a recognized Syrian state. While acknowledging risks—including fragile ceasefires and hardliners—he warned that continued separation could fuel instability or an ISIS resurgence. A new ceasefire was [announced](#) for 8:00 p.m. local time on January 20. The SDF [pledged full adherence](#) and said it would not initiate hostilities unless attacked.



What Comes Next

The ceasefire has remained largely symbolic as attacks and clashes have continued along the contact lines between Kurdish forces and units aligned with Damascus in the south of Kobani and around Hasakah.

Multiple videos circulating online appear to show captured Kurdish fighters being summarily executed after being taken alive by Syrian forces, and the bad blood runs deep. In 2012, Kurdish forces fought off the al-Nusra Front—al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, then led by current president Sharaa—in many of the same areas that are now turning into battlefields again.

In the coming days, one of three outcomes seems likely: a deal that increasingly resembles capitulation for the SDF will be signed; the SDF will return with a counter-proposal demanding meaningful autonomy for Hasakah and Kobani; or the fighting will continue, with the Kurds forced into what could become a final stand.