

A Unified Syria or a Return to Civil War?

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Time is running out for a solution to the crisis unfolding in northeastern Syria between the Kurds and the Syrian Transitional Government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa. The most recent [ceasefire](#), which has not even been nominally implemented, gave the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) four days to accept the conditions of an agreement which seem to favor Damascus' priorities over Kurdish sensitivities.

This is now a defining test of whether post-Assad Syria can become a state that integrates its communities through negotiation and compromise, or whether it will fall back into familiar patterns of coercion and mass violence. It is also a test of the strength and value of the United States as a partner. The coming days may determine whether Syria takes a step toward unity or slides back into a renewed civil war. Washington can both advance its interests in a stable and secure Syria and honor its commitments to its SDF partners by working to improve the terms of the deal being offered by Damascus.

A Deal on the Table...

As detailed in an earlier [JINSA Insight](#), the current situation is the result of the breakdown of earlier negotiations between the Syrian government and the SDF. The ensuing fighting saw Damascus make major territorial gains and, as the SDF retreated, offer on January 18 a [14-point integration agreement](#) drafted with U.S. mediation along with a four-day deadline for the SDF to sign on to it. A summary of that deal can be found below.

Ambassador Tom Barrack, who was instrumental in negotiating the agreement, argued that it both serves U.S. interests and represents a good deal for the SDF. He [posted](#) on X that “the original purpose of the SDF as the primary anti-ISIS force on the ground has largely expired” and that “Damascus is now both willing and positioned to take over security responsibilities,” making clear that Washington had drastically shifted its Syria policy. Given those changes, he argued that the deal “creates a unique window for the Kurds...far beyond the semi-autonomy the SDF held amid civil war chaos.” The message to America’s most reliable local partners in the fight against ISIS was unmistakable. The Kurds who lost tens of thousands of their sons and daughters combating extremist Islamist terrorists were effectively told they would now have to fend for themselves.

At the same time as Barrack was expressing U.S. support for the deal, there were misleading suggestions that Israel also favored it. Reuters [reported](#) that Syrian officials said they faced no objections from Israel during U.S.-brokered talks in Paris when floating a limited operation to seize SDF-held territory – raising speculation that Israel may have quietly acquiesced in exchange for Syrian concessions in the south. However, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Yechiel Leiter, who attended the entire trilateral meeting, [issued a clear denial](#): “Israel never condoned an attack by the Syrian army on the Syrian Kurds. Any claim that we did so is false.” It is difficult to imagine Israel, having suffered enormously at the hands of ideologically aligned jihadists in Gaza,

facilitating the consolidation of power in Syria by forces that routinely invoke the “liberation of Jerusalem” as their next target.

Nevertheless, the ceasefire has remained largely symbolic as attacks and clashes continue along key contact lines between Kurdish forces and units aligned with Damascus, particularly in the south of Kobani and around Hasakah. Rather than creating a pause to build confidence and finalize terms, each offensive by government forces is eroding trust and increases the political cost of compromise for Kurdish leadership already facing deep public skepticism about any deal made under duress.

...But Not a Good Deal

In the same post mentioned above, Ambassador Barrack said that Syrian Kurds are being offered “a pathway to full integration into a unified Syrian state with citizenship rights, cultural protections, and political participation.” However, many Kurds do not trust the local and foreign jihadists embedded in the new Syrian army, nor do they believe that promises made today will protect them tomorrow.

Al-Sharaa’s [decree](#) on Kurdish rights rings hollow and falls way short of the constitutional guarantees sought by the Kurds but that’s not the biggest problem. The most contentious point in the current deal is that SDF personnel would be absorbed into state forces as individuals, not as cohesive units. This runs directly against the SDF’s preferred model, which sought to keep its command structures to retain and protect a measure of local self-rule. Only weeks ago, Damascus seemed prepared to move in that direction, with discussions reportedly centering on folding several SDF divisions and brigades into the national army. That opening quickly closed once the SDF rejected the accompanying price tag: allowing Syrian government units to deploy and operate freely throughout the Kurdish regions. With that red line in place, the understanding unraveled.

The SDF and its Kurdish constituents cannot simply accept the deal Damascus is imposing because it amounts to surrendering the very security architecture that has protected the northeast for more than a decade. By forcing SDF fighters to integrate as individuals rather than intact units, the agreement effectively dismantles the SDF as a coherent force and strips it of any ability to safeguard local governance and sense of security. At the same time, Damascus would assume control over the region’s most strategic assets – including energy infrastructure, border crossings, and ISIS detention sites – while offering only symbolic political inclusion through “vetted” appointments inside a highly centralized system, with no constitutional autonomy or federal guarantees.

After years of fighting ISIS, al-Qaeda-linked factions, and Turkish-backed proxies, Kurdish communities are acutely aware of how quickly “integration” can become disarmament, and how easily “unity” can become submission. What is being offered, from their perspective, is not a negotiated settlement between partners, but a conditional ultimatum backed by force.

This distrust is being reinforced by multiple [videos](#) circulating online that appear to show captured Kurdish fighters being summarily executed after being taken alive by Syrian forces. And the animosity between the parties is not just a product of the past year. In 2013, [Kurdish forces fought off the al-Nusra Front](#) – al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, led at the time by current President Ahmed al-Sharaa though then he was called Abu Mohammad al-Julani – in many of the same areas now turning into battlefields once again. That history matters because it frames today’s conflict not just as a mere administrative dispute over governance or authority, but as a confrontation between communities with vastly differing worldviews.

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What Happens Next

This is why the next few days could determine Syria's trajectory for years. One of three outcomes seems most likely. The first is that the SDF signs a deal that increasingly resembles capitulation. This would be a forced arrangement that Damascus can market as national reunification but that Kurds will interpret as coerced surrender. Such an outcome will institutionalize resentment – which has already transcended the borders of Syria and has caused public outrage across the Kurdish regions in neighboring Turkey and Iraq – and will likely set the stage for future unrest, insurgency, or mass displacement.

The second possibility is that the SDF returns with a counter-proposal demanding meaningful autonomy for Kurdish-majority regions of Syria, including guarantees over internal security and governance. This path would not reject Syrian unity, but it would redefine it. It would ask Damascus to accept a model in which Kurds are partners rather than subjects – an approach that could stabilize the northeast, preserve counterterrorism gains, and reduce the risk of renewed civil war. But it would require Damascus to compromise, and it would require international actors to insist that compromise is the price of legitimacy.

The third – and most dangerous – outcome is that fighting continues, with the Kurds forced into what could become a final stand. Judging by the worrying developments around the town of Kobani and the reinforcements that Damascus is sending to the northeast, everyone is bracing for impact.

Way Forward

It is encouraging that Ambassador Barrack met with the SDF as recently as Thursday, January 22, in Erbil to [reaffirm the United States' commitment to "the integration process."](#) But for this latest round of negotiations to produce a stable and lasting outcome – one that advances peace in Syria, serves U.S. interests, and honors the sacrifice of our Kurdish partners – he must make clear to Damascus that the Kurds need the ability to provide security and govern their own regions.

If the ceasefire collapses completely and the battlefield becomes the primary arena of decision, Syria will not be “reunified.” It will be fractured once again into open conflict, with consequences extending far beyond the northeast. The war against ISIS will suffer, sectarian and ethnic tensions will surge, and the fragile promise of a post-Assad recovery will be squandered before it even begins.

Damascus can pursue a settlement that treats the Kurds as stakeholders in a new state, or it can attempt to impose “unity” by force. The United States needs to make clear that Kurdish security is non-negotiable as recent history shows that sectarian and ethnic tensions in the Middle East do not stay in the Middle East.

Summary of Proposed 14-Point Agreement

Ceasefire and Territorial Control

- *Point 1:* Immediate comprehensive ceasefire tied to full SDF withdrawal east of the Euphrates as a preliminary redeployment step.
- *Point 2:* Full and immediate administrative and military handover of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor provinces to Damascus, including transfer of all civil institutions and facilities, with immediate decrees to permanentize current employees within Syrian state ministries.
- *Point 3:* Integration of all civilian institutions in Hasakah province into Syrian state administrative structures.

Resource and Asset Control

- *Point 4:* Syrian government takes control of all border crossings, oil fields, and gas fields, with protection by regular forces to ensure return of resources to Syrian state, while considering special cases of Kurdish areas.

Military and Security Integration

- *Point 5:* Full integration of all SDF military and security personnel into Defense and Interior Ministries on individual basis (not as cohesive units) following security vetting, granting them military ranks, financial entitlements, and logistical requirements.
- *Point 6:* SDF commits to refraining from incorporating former regime remnants into ranks and providing lists of former regime officers present in northeast Syria.

Political Representation and Governance

- *Point 7:* Issuance of presidential decree appointing nominee for Governor of Hasakah as guarantee of political participation and local representation.
- *Point 10:* Adoption of candidate list submitted by SDF leadership for high-ranking military, security, and civil positions within central state structure to ensure national partnership.

Kobani Special Arrangements

- *Point 8:* Removal of heavy military presence from Kobani, formation of security force drawn from city residents, retention of local police force administratively affiliated with the Interior Ministry.

ISIS Detention Facilities

- *Point 9:* Integration of administration responsible for ISIS prisoners and camps, as well as forces securing facilities, with the Syrian government assuming full legal and security responsibility.

Kurdish Rights Recognition

- *Point 11:* Welcoming [Presidential Decree No. 13](#) of 2026 recognizing Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights and addressing citizenship issues for unregistered/stateless persons and accumulated property claims.

Regional Security Commitments

- *Point 12:* SDF commits to removal of all non-Syrian PKK leaders and members outside Syrian borders to ensure sovereignty and regional stability.
- *Point 13:* Syrian state commits to continuing to fight against ISIS as an active member of the International Coalition, in coordination with the United States, to ensure regional security and stability.

Displaced Persons

- *Point 14:* Working toward understandings for safe and dignified return of Afrin and Sheikh Maqsoud residents to their homes.