What the New Agreement Means for Kurds in Syria and Beyond

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After days of intense diplomatic traffic amid heightened military tension, the Syrian interim government and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced a new agreement on Friday that averts what could have become a bloody showdown in Syria's Kurdish regions. Damascus and the SDF said they had agreed to a ceasefire "under a comprehensive agreement, with an understanding on a phased integration process for the military and administrative forces between the two sides." As part of the arrangement, both sides are to withdraw their forces from points of contact along the front lines, easing immediate risks of escalation.

As ever in Syria, implementation will matter far more than the announcement itself. Still, at first glance, the agreement seems to be an ambiguous middle ground between earlier frameworks. It falls short of the more expansive March 10 Agreement signed last year, which envisioned a broader political settlement and stronger guarantees for Kurdish self-administration. At the same time, it represents a clear improvement on the Syrian government's maximalist demands in the January 18 Agreement (something I called for in an earlier article here), which came at a moment when the SDF was under acute pressure and had already retreated from much of the territory it once held, particularly after many of its Arab tribal components joined operations by forces loyal to Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa.

One of the most consequential distinctions lies in the treatment of SDF forces. Under the new deal, Damascus has agreed to the formation of a military division composed of three brigades drawn from the SDF, while allowing the SDF to retain a separate brigade responsible for the border town of Kobani. In the January 18 framework – which SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi ultimately refused to sign – SDF fighters would have been required to disband as a collective force and rejoin the Syrian military only as individuals, subject to vetting by Damascus.

By contrast, the new arrangement preserves institutional continuity for Kurdish forces, at least in the military sphere. While far from guaranteeing autonomy, it allows the SDF to negotiate its future as an organized actor rather than as a pool of manpower to be absorbed and dispersed. In the context of Syria's fractured security landscape, this distinction could prove decisive not only for Kurdish leverage in future talks, but also for maintaining basic stability in the northeast. It was previously reported that if the SDF was made to fully dissolve, "U.S. officials saw no reason for the American military to stay in Syria".

Notably absent from the agreement, however, are detailed provisions governing the future of civilian and administrative institutions in northeastern Syria. The Autonomous Administration built over the past decade, referred to by Kurds as Rojava, has developed its own governing structures and social contracts. How, and on what terms, these institutions will be integrated into the Syrian state remains unclear. But for the first time in months negotiations over the administrative character of the Syrian state appear more likely to be conducted through political bargaining rather than military confrontation. Whether Damascus is prepared to tolerate meaningful power-sharing remains an open question.

The implications of the past few months' developments extend well beyond Syria's borders. The clashes in northeastern Syria and the perceived threat to Kurdish gains have catalyzed an unprecedented degree of Kurdish unity across all four parts of Kurdistan – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Political rivals who have long competed bitterly with one another have pulled in the same direction around a shared objective: protecting Rojava from eradication.

Equally striking has been the outpouring of international support framed explicitly around the need to "protecting the Kurds in Syria and beyond." Over the past several weeks, members of the U.S. Congress from both parties, along with media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have voiced growing concern that Washington was on the verge of abandoning the Kurds – partners who lost tens of thousands of fighters in the campaign against the Islamic State – amid an apparent recalibration of U.S. policy toward Damascus by Ambassador Tom Barrack. The Syrian Transitional Government seems to have heeded warnings from Washington that an all-out confrontation with the SDF would carry significant political and strategic costs.

Together, these trends suggest that the Kurdish question is undergoing a structural shift. What was once largely treated as a set of domestic issues – managed, often brutally, by the states in which Kurds live – is now not only internationalized, but arguably even more importantly for the Kurds, internally nationalized. This means an attack on one part of Kurdistan is increasingly perceived as an attack on all of Kurdistan – a reality made visible when hundreds of Kurds from Turkey, and more strikingly from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, rushed to the Syrian border to take part in the defense of "the homeland", regardless of which Sykes–Picot–era national border it fell within. This, no doubt, will complicate efforts to compartmentalize Kurdish issues country by country.

While the transitional government in Damascus may have reclaimed much of the country territorially, it remains acutely sensitive to external pressure, particularly from the United States. The presence of U.S. troops in northeastern Syria, the continued importance of counter-ISIS cooperation, and the broader question of sanctions all give Washington leverage, if it chooses to use it.

Ilham Ahmed, one of the Syrian Kurdish leaders who participated in the Damascus meeting with the interim government, wrote on X: "We express our profound gratitude to the countries and mediating entities, led by the United States of America and France." It is crucial that these countries now ensure both sides remain committed to the integration process and act as guarantors until it is fully implemented.

The new agreement, then, should be understood not as an endpoint, but as a waypoint. It reflects the balance of forces at a particular moment: a Syrian government seeking consolidation without provoking international backlash; a Kurdish movement partially battered but wholly unified; and an external environment in which the fate of the Kurds has become too big for any one nation-state to contain within its own borders.

Whether this ceasefire becomes the foundation for a sustainable political settlement or merely the prelude to another round of confrontation will depend on choices still to be made in Damascus. For Syria's population and diverse communities, this agreement offers neither security nor democracy. But it does preserve something essential: the possibility that their future will be decided at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield.