

The Murder That Could Unravel Syria's Kurdish Integration

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Last week, a video posted online by members of the Arab Baggara tribe showed the abduction and [killing of Kurdish soldier](#) Sami Sheikhmous Hassou, a former Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighter who had been integrated into the Syrian Ministry of Defense, in the countryside around the town of Sere Kaniye in the Hassakah Governorate. The incident has once again brought Syria's deep-seated ethnic tensions – and the new government's ability to manage them – into sharp focus, serving as a reminder that the Syrian conflict is far from resolved and will require sustained attention from the Trump administration.

As news of Hassou's killing spread, however, [protesters](#) in the Kurdish city of Kobani took to the streets demanding an immediate investigation and accountability for those responsible. As tensions escalated between demonstrators and the city's security forces, reinforcements from the predominantly Arab towns of Sirrin and Manbij were deployed to the city. Their heavy-handed response further enflamed the situation, leading to violent clashes and a wave of arrests. Plans to transfer the detainees to Aleppo then sparked unrest inside the detention facility, where a fire broke out, killing nine inmates.

The incident comes just weeks after former SDF commander Mazloun Abdi [announced](#) the dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces, declaring the integration of its fighters into the Syrian Ministry of Defense complete. Abdi was subsequently appointed as an adviser to interim Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Yet these latest developments – and growing Kurdish dissatisfaction with the terms of the agreement, with even [language rights](#) remaining a point of contention – have once again underscored the difficulty of integrating a region that governed itself for nearly 15 years.

In an effort to de-escalate tensions, Sipan Hamo, the former SDF commander who is now serving as Deputy Minister of Defense for the Eastern Region, [wrote on X](#): “The competent authorities have taken the initiative to apprehend a number of those involved, and they continue their efforts until all the criminals are arrested, to stand before the judiciary and receive a fair trial commensurate with the brutality of the crime committed, in accordance with the law.” Judging by the anger of the protesters across northeast Syria, however, many Kurds do not appear to share that confidence.

Damascus's record of protecting minorities has so far done little to inspire confidence. Since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized Damascus and established the interim government, former HTS fighters have been implicated in serious abuses and [mass killings against Alawite civilians](#) along Syria's coast and against the [Druze community in Suwayda](#). Despite sustained domestic

and [international calls](#) for accountability, the government's response has been [severely inadequate](#), with many perpetrators remaining within the security apparatus. As a result, many Syrians from [minority communities fear](#) that the Sunni-jihadist-dominated government in Damascus is either unwilling or unable to protect them and hold those responsible for abuses to account.

Against this backdrop, the integration agreement between the SDF and Damascus is now being scrutinized by Syria's Kurdish population. The agreement was reached in January after a rapid Damascus offensive, aided by the defection of Arab forces in the SDF, dramatically shifted the balance of power. Throughout the offensive, U.S. troops stationed in northeastern Syria remained in their bases as the Trump administration [signaled](#) its preference for a centralized Syrian state under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Many Kurds viewed Washington's stance as a betrayal, leaving their leadership to negotiate from a position of weakness with a government increasingly confident in its military and political leverage. The latest unrest has exposed the fragility of that arrangement and raised fresh questions about whether the integration agreement can provide genuine security and political inclusion rather than simply formalizing Damascus's authority over the northeast. Reassuring statements from Kurdish leaders about the state of the integration process do not appear to be easing Kurdish concerns, as they seem to reflect the lack of viable alternatives available to Syria's Kurds more than genuine confidence in the agreement's progress.

One particular sticking point in the integration process has been the use of the Kurdish language in schools. After years of Kurdish-language education under the autonomous administration established during the Syrian conflict, the al-Sharaa government issued a decree allowing only a few hours of Kurdish instruction each week. Since the start of the new school year, Kurdish students have been [protesting](#) the introduction of a new Arabic curriculum across the Kurdish regions. Many Kurds had viewed language rights as one of the least contentious issues in negotiations with Damascus over the future of the northeast. Yet even language rights have been significantly rolled back, fueling fears among many Kurds that Syria is gradually reverting to policies reminiscent of the Assad era, when large numbers of Kurds were not even recognized as Syrian citizens. If Washington wants a stable and unified Syria, it must do more to ensure that Damascus embraces the country's "diversity and the legitimate aspirations of all its peoples," an objective that Ambassador Tom Barrack, the principal architect of the administration's Syria policy, has himself repeatedly [emphasized](#).

So far, no one from the Trump administration has publicly commented on the killing of Sami Sheikmous Hassou or the prison fire in Kobani that claimed nine lives, including Ambassador Barrack. In a recent phone call with Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [stressed the importance](#) of integrating all of Syria's minority groups. Washington must match those words with sustained pressure on Damascus to ensure that those responsible for abuses are held accountable and that the former HTS members now serving in the state's security institutions demonstrate through their actions – not merely their rhetoric – that they are prepared to govern as national officials rather than as victorious jihadist factions. Otherwise, Syria risks remaining trapped in a cycle of sectarian violence that will leave its minority communities vulnerable, undermine prospects for lasting stability, and deepen the security concerns of neighboring states, particularly Israel, as increasingly sophisticated military capabilities come

under the control of actors who have yet to demonstrate that they have fully abandoned the jihadist ideology that brought them to power.

As of the time of writing, those responsible for the killing of Kurdish soldier Sami Sheikhmous Hassou have yet to be apprehended. The longer they evade justice, the more confidence will be lost in Damascus's commitment to unifying the country under the rule of law. This episode may ultimately determine whether integration can become more than a political agreement on paper as relations between Damascus and Syria's Kurds face their first genuine test.