

Syria in Transition

Syria's Kurds have an opportunity

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With the military balance shifting and regional dynamics realigning, Syria's Kurds face a rare opening: shift decisively from armed militias to political engagement and pluralism within a constitutional framework. They should seize the opportunity or risk further reversals.

Less than a year after the 10 March 2025 agreement, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) integration file entered a decisive new phase. The SDF lost its bases in Aleppo, west of the Euphrates, and across eastern and northeast Syria, right up to the outskirts of Hasakah city.

The 18 January agreement came amid shifting balances of power and control on the ground. It offered a more detailed alternative formula for de-escalation and integration, culminating in an understanding on 30 January that converted calm into an executable package: withdrawals from frontlines, the entry of Interior Ministry security forces into the centres of Hasakah and Qamishli, and a sequenced pathway for merging civilian and military institutions.

This progress makes clear that the SDF, as an umbrella label, has exhausted its functional purpose. What now matters is the hardcore elements: the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), and the connected security and administrative networks accumulated under the banner of the so-called Autonomous Administration.

The more precise question, then, is not whether the SDF is ending, but how the armed structure is dismantled and re-absorbed within a single national chain of command that prevents future security and military confrontation.

The 30 January understanding offers an initial answer by establishing a military division comprising three brigades, including a Kobani brigade, within a formation subordinate to the Ministry of Defence. This shifts power from a partisan, militia framework into a regular, accountable, disciplined institution. Yet no level of military engineering will succeed without parallel political buy-in.

Political pluralism among Syria's Kurds

Here the need for plural representation of Syrian Kurds becomes unavoidable. Damascus requires a Kurdish interlocutor it can deal with that is not organisationally tethered to the PKK. Continued linkages to the PKK

automatically internationalises Kurdish rights as a regional security issue with Turkey, rather than anchoring them as a matter of domestic citizenship – especially when those rights have already been safeguarded by Decree No. 13 of 2026 and are set to be enshrined in any future constitution.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) demonstrated an ability to organise and dominate through its military and security arms. It was unable to produce a credible political representation of Syrian Kurds beyond the logic of monopoly and force. The 10 March 2025 agreement spoke of integration, yet never moved beyond words. The 18 January 2026 deal arrived as a practical alternative only after the SDF's room for manoeuvre had eroded.

The opportunity now lies in prospective parliamentary representation – particularly if indirect elections are fully implemented in the northeast – and if Kurdish MPs are also appointed within the President's bloc. This could entrench pluralism beyond the PYD, allowing the emergence of Syrian Kurdish figures and parties with recognised social roots and political histories, foremost among them the Syrian Kurdish National Council, alongside others.

This is no luxury. It is a prerequisite if Kurds are to formulate a political project aligned with legitimate rights – already partly met through presidential decisions and declarations on language, culture and citizenship – and consistent with the logic of a single state rather than an armed canton.

The regional dimension reinforces the urgency. A Syria emerging from a long war is repositioning itself: a reduced Russian footprint, a near-complete contraction of Iranian influence networks, and much improved relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In such a landscape, any Kurdish project that misreads the prevailing winds will fall outside the equation: either it integrates into a state rebuilding its sovereignty and institutions, or it becomes a permanently draining armed enclave that ends in full military exclusion – as happened to Assad's regime and its much vaunted army. This will also have negative ramifications for economic and development prospects for Kurdish communities for many years to come.

Message to the international community

Washington has played a diplomatic role in stabilising and propelling the integration track, signalling that this issue is no longer read merely as a local bargain but as part of a broader arrangement to avert regional confrontation. Given

this, there are two main messages for the international community that many Syrians like me have. The first is political. Breaking the PKK's monopoly over representing Syrian Kurds is a net gain for stability in Syria. It allows the rise of independent, pragmatic voices closer to organic Kurdish society who are more likely to adhere to agreements and integrate better into mainstream Syrian society.

The second message is related to security. Successful integration requires three parallel tracks. The first is controlling weapons and the chain of command, ending the duality between forces that claim integration while field commanders are still loyal to the PKK's leadership in Qandil. Second, integrating local security personnel into the Ministry of Interior, with retraining professional standards

and accountability. Third, removing non-Syrian PKK elements, whose presence helped derail previous understandings.

The irony is that Abdullah Öcalan himself – judging by reports of his recent messages and statements – appears more alert to the cost of Qandil-style brinkmanship. He reportedly describes escalation in Syria as an attempt to sabotage peace and urges solutions that move Syria away from open warfare and back into the realm of politics. If the symbolic leader of the PKK grasps the logic of compromise, why did SDF power centres insist on manufacturing a rhetoric of general mobilisation and “grand resistance” as if it were a path to salvation?