



Between Rebuilding & Redrawing Alliances: Dimensions of the Syria Clashes

by Desirée Custers

In January 2026, the Syrian transitional government advanced into areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including parts of the western Euphrates region and north-east Syria, asserting control over Raqqa and other key towns such as Tabqa, which had fallen under SDF military control following the territorial defeat of ISIS. Government forces also seized strategically important oil and gas assets, as well as critical infrastructure and major detention facilities. These advances forced SDF fighters to withdraw toward areas east of the Euphrates River. A 14-point ceasefire agreement was eventually signed on 18 January 2026. Some regional actors, including Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, publicly lauded the Syrian interim president Ahmad al-Sharaa and his "careful management of this sensitive operation". At the same time, there have been reactions criticizing the offensive as it put civilians in danger, as well as accusations that the United States (US) and Europe have abandoned their long-time Kurdish partner in the fight against ISIS. Kurdish and other ethnic communities, primarily through the SDF, have lost thousands of fighters in their fight against Islamic extremism.

Why does it matter?

Following the overthrow of Bashar al Assad on the 8 December 2024, Ahmed al-Sharaa became interim president of Syria. Subsequently, the transitional Syrian government and the SDF entered into talks that led to an agreement signed on 10 March 2025 which outlined the integration of Kurdish SDF fighters into the Syrian army and the absorption of its civilian governance structures into the new state administration. A central point of contention, however, concerns the nature of this integration. The SDF insisted that its units remain intact and that its fighters would not be deployed outside their traditional areas of control, conditions that were rejected by the transitional government. The failure to implement the agreement and lack of trust between the parties triggered the clashes in January 2026. With the recent military advances, al-Sharaa has further consolidated territorial control over Syria and strengthened his internal authority. The latter can be illustrated by the fact that the rapid advance of government forces was partially enabled by the defection of Arab tribal groups that had previously been aligned with the SDF.

While these developments were met with celebration in parts of the country that saw the government takeover as ‘liberation’, they have also generated disappointment and concern in areas with majority Kurdish populations that fear government incursions. The loss of extensive territory by the SDF risks transforming into long-term grievances over political autonomy, security issues, economic marginalization and cultural recognition, which could serve as mobilizing factors for future violence if left unresolved. This is particularly dangerous in a fragile Syria already experiencing rising terrorism, revenge attacks, and sectarian and ethnic polarization. The offensive has also led to considerable internal displacement, that could further destabilize Syria. More than 30,000 people are reported to have been displaced from Raqqa and Tabqa as a result of the recent developments.

What is the big picture?

The military campaign of al-Sharaa's forces has underscored the extent of international and regional support for his leadership. This support had already become apparent early on, when sanctions relief from Europe and the US positioned the Syrian government, rather than the SDF, as their primary security partner in Syria. Both the US and Europe have heavily supported the SDF over the past decade as their tactical ally on security matters in the country.

Regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have also supported a strong al-Sharaa leadership since the inception of the transitional government and played an influential role in Syria's international and regional reintegration, as well as in shaping US policy toward Syria. Syria has also opened direct diplomatic relations with Israel, and representatives of both countries met in Paris early January 2026 to discuss mechanisms surrounding security arrangements.

On the regional level, Iraq has expressed concern over the implications of the recent clashes between the SDF and the Syrian government forces. It fears that events in Syria could further stimulate Kurdish mobilization in western Iraq and can lead to cross-border spill-over effects undermining Iraq's stability. It has been reported that fighters, in support of both the SDF as well as Damascus, have crossed from Iraq to north-east Syria, though exact numbers are unclear. Another major international concern relates to detention facilities holding thousands of detainees, many of them former ISIS fighters. It has been reported that some of them escaped during clashes around the prisons.

What comes next?

Since 18 January 2026, the SDF has taken steps to comply with the ceasefire framework and to engage in the process of integration into Syrian state institutions. Despite the deep mistrust between the SDF and the transitional government, this suggests that space for dialogue and negotiation remains. In future negotiations, the SDF, potentially with US pressure on al-Sharaa, may still be able to secure some form of limited autonomy, most likely through administrative decentralization rather than federalism.

These negotiations will likely take on a regional dimension, as Kurdish actors from outside Syria, particularly from Iraqi Kurdistan, are getting more involved in mediation efforts. President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Masoud Barzani has positioned Erbil as platform for de-escalation and hosted direct talks between SDF commander Mazloun Abdi and US envoy Tom Barrack on 17 January 2026, that focused on the ceasefire achieved on 18 January 2026. On the other hand, actors with close ties to al-Sharaa, mainly Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, also strongly influence any continued negotiations. Ankara has actively worked to eliminate the SDF, which is perceived in Türkiye as an arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist group. Internationally, it remains a question if the US will have enough bandwidth to continue to push for talks between the parties.

Furthermore, as Syria confronts major challenges including reconstruction, transitional justice, balancing foreign relations, and economic recovery, long-term reconciliation with the SDF and addressing Kurdish grievances may not be prioritized as long as the government holds the military upper hand and enjoys sustained regional and international backing. This, in turn, could push factions to opt for a more violent option.

About the Author

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