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SYRIA: Kurdish Refusal to Join Syrian Government Will Likely Fuel Conflict

Summary: Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) refused the Transitional Government's request to dissolve its military bloc. The SDF currently holds roughly 10,000 ISIS fighters under its prison authority. The transition of prison authority from the SDF to the Transitional Government may pose vulnerabilities for another ISIS prison attack. The SDF will likely find a compromise due to its ethnic complexity to avoid conflict.

Background: On 19 January, the Transitional Government denied the SDF's proposal to keep its military bloc and requested the SDF to transfer the authority of the prisons holding ISIS, according to Reuters. The SDF has been a U.S.-backed ally in Syria tasked with fighting ISIS since 2014, with 2,000 U.S. personnel still actively embedded, according to the U.S. Defense Department. The SDF currently holds roughly 10,000 ISIS members in its prisons, according to *Alarabiya News*. Since the fall of the Assad Regime in early December, ISIS has attacked SDF prisons holding ISIS fighters twice, according to Reuters. Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, views the SDF as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is a designated terrorist group by the U.S. and Turkey. The SDF recently met Turkish demands and agreed to expel all PKK members from its territory in Syria, according to Reuters. SDF-controlled territory is majority Arab, and Kurdish towns are scattered and not contiguous.

Feasibility of an Autonomous Kurdish State: The recent SDF compromise with Turkey likely indicates future integration with the Transitional Government. The SDF has been striving towards an autonomous state apart from any regime within Syria. However, they will likely concede due to external and internal pressure, which could escalate to unwanted conflict. The land under SDF control in question for an autonomous Kurdish state is majority Arab, with Kurdish settlements scattered and not contiguous. Demonstrations and political unrest have appeared in SDF territory from the Arab population demanding to be ruled by the Transitional Government in Damascus. A non-contiguous Kurdish land mass will likely prove challenging in creating an autonomous Kurdish state.

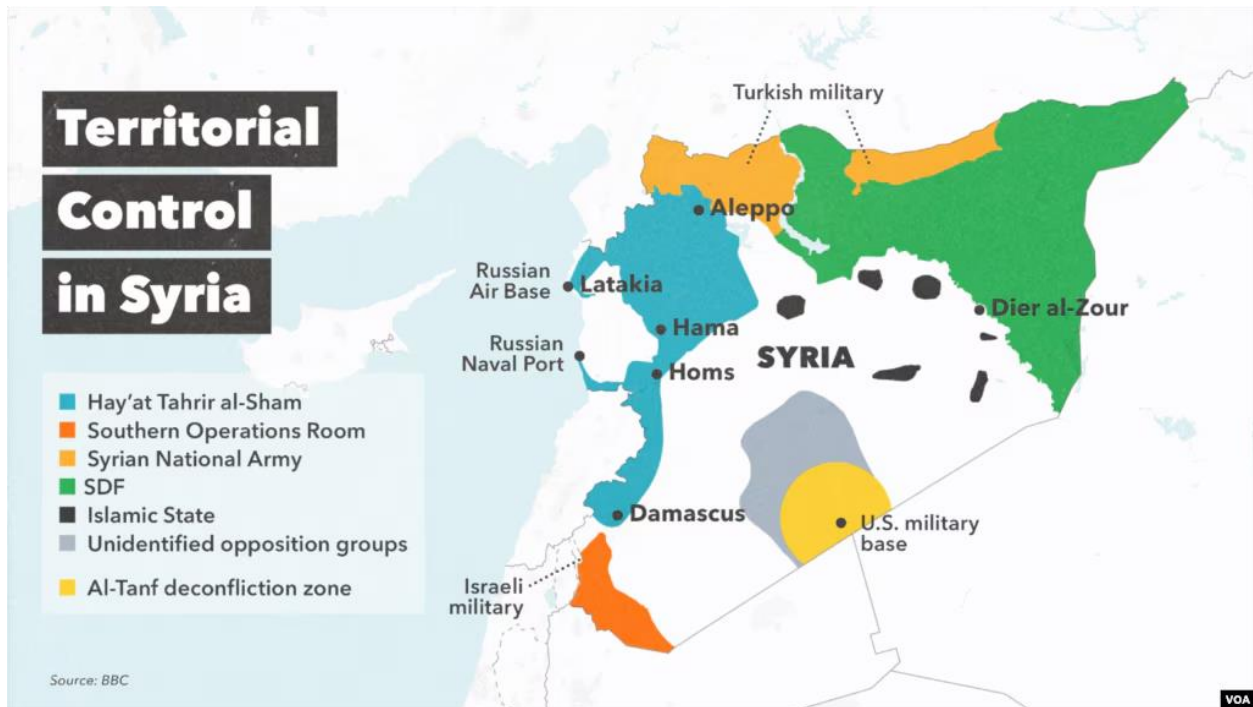


Figure 1: Territorial Control in Syria after the fall of the Assad Regime.

Relationship Between the SDF and the Transitional Government: The Transitional Government and Turkey have been demanding the SDF to transfer the authority of 10,000 ISIS prisoners, which is a powerful piece of leverage for the SDF's argument against dissolving their military bloc. The Transitional Government has made agreements with the U.S. not to allow any threats to operate within Syria, such as ISIS. The Transitional Government wants authority over the ISIS fighters, likely to prove on the international stage its legitimacy and strive for stability against terrorism. The new government in Damascus has promised the Kurdish minority full rights in Syria and within the government. SDF officials will likely weigh compromise with Turkish and Transitional Government demands to secure a seat in the new formation of Syria and avoid a conflict that would likely lead to their expulsion from Syria entirely.

Outlook and Implications: The SDF will likely compromise with the Transitional Government and opt out of an autonomous state which could instigate conflict capable of destabilizing northeast Syria. The destabilization of northeast Syria would probably pose implications for the 10,000 ISIS fighters under SDF authority. If conflict and instability rise in northeast Syria between the SDF and the Transitional Government, ISIS will likely attempt a third attack to

regain its fighters and create a foothold in Syria. In the event that the SDF concedes its authority over the ISIS prisoners under its control to the Transitional Government, the SDF will likely integrate with the Transitional Government due to the negotiating leverage that the prisoners give the SDF. The Transitional Government will likely utilize the SDF to shape Syria's national security due to its existing manpower, training, and experience fighting ISIS, benefiting Syria's long-term stability and international image. The SDF will likely view this integration as a beneficial long-term decision, a move to secure Kurdish rights in Syria's future, and the opportunity to take part in the reconstruction of Syria.

[Jacob Faciana]

RUSSIA: Relationship with New Syria Likely to Ensure Continued Power Projection

Summary: The Russian delegation likely seeks to rekindle its relationship with Syria under the new government to ensure the continued operation of Russian military bases on the Mediterranean Coast, continuing Russian power projection into the region.

Development: On 28 January, a delegation of Russian officials arrived in Damascus, marking the first visit since former Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia in December, according to *Al Jazeera*. The delegation is meeting to negotiate the future of its military bases in Syria, including a naval facility in Tartous and the Hmeimim air base near Latakia, according to Reuters. The delegation will meet with Syria's de facto leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, who obtained power after the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) ousted Assad, according to *Al Jazeera*. During the war, Moscow intervened in support of Assad. In 2022, Turkey closed off the Bosphorus Strait to warships from any country, according to *USNI News*.

Analysis: Moscow likely seeks a relationship with the new Syrian government to ensure the continued operation of its military bases on the Mediterranean coast. Despite Moscow's military backing of Assad against HTS, the possibility of losing Russian footing within Syria greatly motivated them to rekindle foreign relations. As both bases are positioned along the Mediterranean coast, Moscow likely utilizes them to project Russian power across the region and into Africa. Moscow almost certainly values its naval base in Syria as its only means for sustaining a naval presence in the region without first transiting the Baltic Sea or challenging Ankara's denial of military vessels passing through the Bosphorus straight. Without the airbase in Hmeimim, Moscow would likely rely on Ankara for air movement approval, further hindering its ability to freely conduct operations within the Middle East and Africa.

[Hailey Thatcher]

SYRIA: Ongoing Conflict May Be Resolved Under Certain Treaty Conditions

Summary: Given the stated priorities of Ankara, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), they will likely accept a ceasefire in the current conflict under certain conditions, barring adverse foreign intervention. These conditions would likely include the expulsion of non-Syrian Kurdish fighters, transferring control of ISIS camps and prisons, as well as oil fields within the Kurdish-controlled Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, to Damascus, heavily militarized borders and some federal oversight of the SDF's political administration and military activities. However, the SDF would retain extremely high influence over local governance, including some control over Kurdish fighters, and receive guarantees for Kurdish cultural rights. This detente may be achieved in the coming months.

Background: On 30 November, the SNA, a Turkish proxy militant group, launched Operation Freedom Dawn, attacking territory controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF. The SNA has since captured the cities of Manbij, al-Bab, and Tel Rifaat, as well as numerous outlying villages. The SDF repelled an attack on Kobani. Beginning on 8 December, the SNA attacked the Qara Qozak bridge and Tishreen Dam. The SDF maintain control of the bridge and dam, although fighting is ongoing. HTS also attacked SDF positions, capturing the city of Deir ez-Zor. Ankara and the SNA have rebuffed efforts by Washington to broker a ceasefire. Negotiations between the parties, primarily brokered by Washington with some influence from Paris, are ongoing.

Turkish Aims: Ankara would likely accept a ceasefire proposal that ensures the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish terrorist group operating primarily in Turkey, cannot receive support from the rest of Kurdistan. The SDF's international backers, most notably Washington and Paris, also hold strong relations with Ankara; these governments sporadically deployed troops and equipment to deter SNA attacks on the SDF from 2016-18. Ankara likely prioritizes

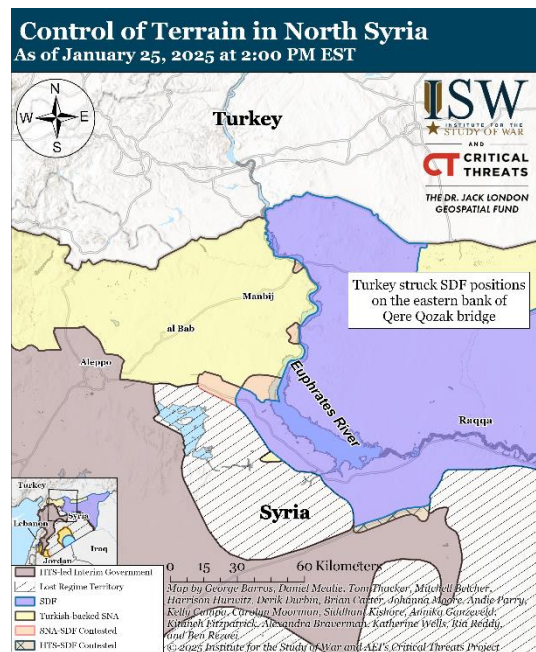


Figure 1: Current Map of Territorial Control in Northeastern Syria

maintaining friendly relations with these countries. In addition, Ankara likely does not want its current offensive to escalate into an intra-NATO conflict, motivating Ankara to accept a potential ceasefire under certain conditions. Ankara has demanded full SDF disarmament, the expulsion of PKK leaders and other foreign fighters from Syria, and the transfer of SDF-run camps and prisons holding ISIS camps and prisons to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which runs the main Syrian government. However, Ankara would likely back down on some of these demands to achieve its higher priorities. Ankara likely prioritizes securing its territory from the PKK. It would almost certainly demand the expulsion of foreign fighters, including Turkish PKK members, but would likely be willing to permit a degree of military autonomy for the SDF. However, it would likely require a highly militarized border between Syrian Kurdistan and Turkey, as well as security checkpoints on Syrian and Iraqi routes leading into SDF-controlled territory. This would offer Ankara greater confidence that the PKK is isolated from potential members, funding, and supplies from Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups.

HTS Requirements: HTS will likely demand a stronger governing role than the Assad regime held since the fall of the ISIS caliphate, but its preferences for economic prosperity and internal stability will likely override its desire for full Syrian unity. HTS would likely concede full SDF integration into a unified governing structure but would require a prominent role in the administration of Northeastern Syria, giving a heightened impression of Syrian unity. HTS places a high rhetorical emphasis on Syrian unity and territorial integrity and has demanded the full integration of the SDF into the Syrian Army; Ankara has backed this demand. However, it would likely be willing to partially relinquish this demand if it furthered other closely held goals, such as reduced international sanctions and greater stability within Syria. HTS has repeatedly requested the suspension of international sanctions on Syria to promote economic development. The European Union and many of its constituent countries have expressed willingness to suspend some of these sanctions, but prolonged conflict with the Kurds would jeopardize HTS' chances of convincing these powers to fully lift sanctions; this will likely motivate HTS to seek a lasting detente. In addition, HTS has promised minority protections for Syrians in its quest to shore up domestic and international support, averting a counter coup and increasing the likelihood of it gaining international economic assistance. Assuming these promises were made genuinely, they indicate a strong willingness to agree to some key SDF demands, namely language and cultural rights.

Kurdish Priorities: The SDF would likely require de facto political autonomy and continued existence as an independent military entity as conditions for a ceasefire. Given historical oppression of the Kurds by both Damascus and Ankara, Kurdish experiences under ISIS, and the longstanding transnational Kurdish aims of independence and autonomy, the SDF will almost certainly refuse full integration with Damascus, and likely fears that full disarmament and integration into a centralized Syrian army would be a precursor to future persecution. However, the SDF would almost certainly be willing to accept a ceasefire in exchange for partial autonomy, as evidenced by Kurdish acceptance of similar arrangements in Iraq and under Assad's Syria. Senior Syrian Kurdish officials expressed willingness to expel foreign fighters and PKK members, give HTS control over oil fields in SDF-controlled territory, and partially integrating with the Syrian defense ministry, respecting its regulations but operating as a distinct military bloc. It would also likely be willing to concede full or partial control over ISIS camps and prisons to HTS and the SNA, although it, and its international backers. In exchange, the SDF would likely demand a high degree of regional autonomy, a guaranteed portion of Syrian oil revenues, protections for minority language and cultural rights, and the right to maintain some independent military presence, controlled by SDF officials, within the territory it controls, although it may be willing to place these units under Damascus' de jure control, with federal oversight.

Outlook and Implications: Overall, a détente will likely succeed. A ceasefire proposal that integrates Ankara's preference for internal security, HTS' preference for internal stability and prosperity within a generally unified framework, and the SDF's preference for a high degree of local governance would likely succeed. HTS and Ankara would likely concede their demands for full Kurdish integration into the Syrian Army in exchange for tightly controlled borders, some oversight of Kurdish fighters, and control over ISIS camps and prisons and oil fields within SDF-controlled areas. Meanwhile, the SDF would likely be willing to relinquish its relatively high levels of autonomy since 2016 in exchange for a ceasefire, high levels of local governance including some control over Kurdish militants, and protections for Kurdish rights. Ongoing negotiations appear to be converging around these points and will probably produce a ceasefire in the coming months.

This forecast depends on four major assumptions. First, HTS has spoken truthfully in its recent public statements, proclaiming a desire for stability and economic prosperity and promising to respect and protect minority rights. If these statements do not represent their true intentions, HTS will likely not genuinely seek or respect a compromise of detente. This would likely provoke intensified fighting, which would very likely draw in other international actors such as the Peshmerga. HTS' recent actions have largely aligned with their public statements, creating moderate confidence in the analysis that their statements accurately reflect their priorities. Second, HTS represents a unified bloc, rather than a loose coalition with diverse priorities. Very little readily observable infighting has occurred, leading to moderate confidence in this assessment, although the situation is volatile and could change suddenly. However, if false, this could lead to a potential ceasefire failing as main HTS leadership loses control over detente-opposing factions. Third, this assumes that Ankara will maintain control over the SNA in the near future. To date, the SNA has acted almost exclusively under Ankara's direction, and this will almost certainly not change imminently. Last, this forecast is contingent on the absence of any outside actors who seek instability. Moscow, Tehran, and Jerusalem are most likely to seek this, but all are unlikely to exert significant influence over the outcome.

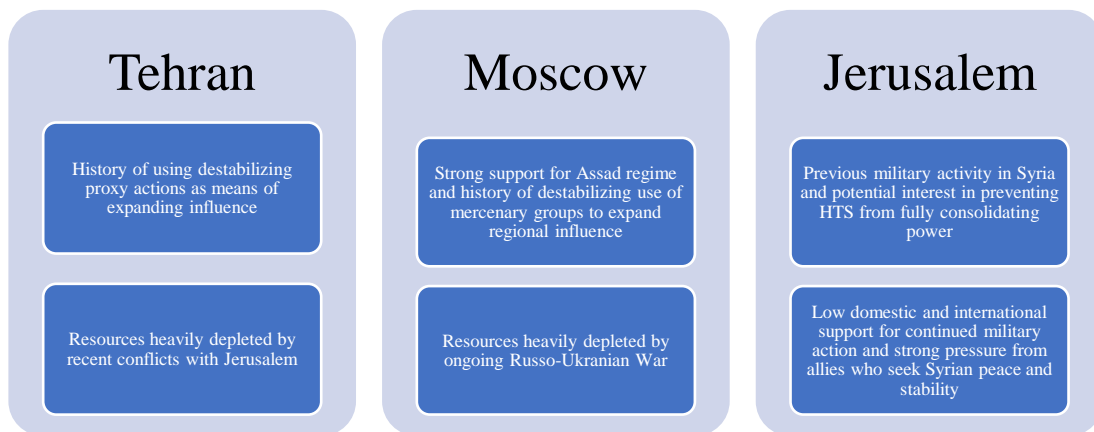


Figure 2: Key international players with their motivations for and against destabilizing intervention in Syria

[Christina Muchow]

About GSIS

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's (ERAU) Bachelor of Science in Global Security & Intelligence Studies (GSIS) degree program at our Prescott Campus blends both academic and professional studies to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become future leaders in intelligence, security, and law enforcement. The program provides students with a sound foundation in the liberal arts, including international relations, foreign languages and cultures, international law, foreign policy, political and military history, and other essential topics.

About EE

Eagle Eye Intelligence (EE) is an intelligence and research organization led by the students of the GSIS program at ERAU in Prescott, Arizona.

Dr. Philip E. Jones founded EE and Embry-Riddle's GSIS program in 2002, following a career with the Central Intelligence Agency and consulting work in international development and global security. Currently, Professor Dale R. Avery, a former career intelligence analyst, serves as EE's faculty advisor.

EE strives to provide actionable intelligence and analysis to its customers during the academic year. We are driven by a number of goals – continuous development, nonpartisanship, interdisciplinary studies, global awareness, and professionalism.

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Lauren Estrada, a Senior in the GSIS program, currently serves as EE's Editor in Chief. For questions or comments, contact the team at editorsee@gmail.com or Professor Avery at 928.777.4708. If you use material from this publication, you should attribute: Eagle Eye Intelligence Edition 463, a publication created by students at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona.



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