

# Kurdish Unity Efforts Gain Momentum Amid an Uncertain Future in Syria

by [Wladimir van Wilgenburg \(/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg\)](/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg)

Jan 27, 2025

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Wladimir van Wilgenburg \(/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg\)](/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg)

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is the coauthor of the recently published book *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. He is a contributor to *Fikra Forum*.



Brief Analysis

## Efforts to develop Kurdish unity in Syria come at a complex point in discussions about the SDF's future role in a new Syria.

On January 16, Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraq-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), [met \(https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3620\)](https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3620) with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander in chief Mazloum Abdi for the first time in a landmark conversation between two major Kurdish leaders. The two discussed efforts to promote unity among disparate Kurdish political movements in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime. The SDF leader also had a [phone call \(https://shafaq.com/en/Report/KDP-s-Barzani-and-SDF-s-Abdi-talks-key-to-Syria-s-Kurdish-future\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Report/KDP-s-Barzani-and-SDF-s-Abdi-talks-key-to-Syria-s-Kurdish-future) with Kurdistan Regional Government president Nechirvan Barzani shortly thereafter, with both discussions signaling a potentially significant shift in relations between the dominant Syrian Kurdish party and the Iraqi KDP, which has long supported rival? Kurdish opposition groups in Syria.

Sinam Mohamad, who serves as the U.S. representative of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the SDF's political wing, welcomed the shift, stating in an interview with the author that the meeting was a very positive step. She likewise noted: "The region is going through a lot of changes, especially in Syria after the collapse of Assad. So now it's very important for the Kurdish people in Syria, and all the Kurdish parties in Syria, to have a united vision to negotiate with Damascus." Such sentiments were echoed by Fasla Youssef, a member of the Presidency of the KDP-supported opposition Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria, who told *Welat TV*, that "the time has come for all Kurdish parties to stand together. This is President Barzani's vision, which underscores the need for joint efforts to safeguard the Kurdish people's interests." [Talks \(https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3630\)](https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3630) are also taking place between the KNC and the KDP regarding this issue.

For his part, KDP President Masoud Barzani [told \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhuBCpDUNgk&t=489s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhuBCpDUNgk&t=489s) *Shams TV* that he advised SDF Commander Abdi to work to unify the Kurds in Syria, engage in dialogue with

Damascus, and limit external influence. Senior KDP member Hoshiyar Zebari, who also previously served as Iraq's foreign minister, told *Dijlah TV* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4c197WGl98>) that "President Barzani's meeting with Mazloun Abdi was historic. Many did not expect it to happen so quickly, but President Barzani took the initiative as a goodwill gesture for the Kurds to unify in Syria."

The meeting and KDP President Barzani's statements come in the context of an effort to change internal Syrian Kurdish politics. There are two major Kurdish parties in Syria: the leftwing Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the dominant local party in Syria and primary member of the SDC—and the more conservative KNC, an umbrella organization of several Kurdish parties with close ties to the KDP. The PYD follows the **leftist ideology** (<https://pydrojava.org/english/internal-system/>) of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan aimed at building an autonomous self-administration for Kurds, while the KNC seeks to establish a federal system in Syria, similar to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. The KNC also has better relations with Turkey, while the PYD is opposed to Turkish influence. For its part, Turkey considers the PYD linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—which Turkey and the United States consider a terrorist group—a claim that the PYD denies. In contrast, the KNC is part of the Turkish-backed Syrian **opposition coalition bloc Etilaf**, (<https://en.etalaf.org/soc-components/kurdish-national-council>) which is now seeking a role in the future government of Syria.

The recent seismic shift in Syrian politics has undoubtedly helped trigger this unprecedented public meeting between the KDP president and SDF leader. In the past, General Mazloun and Iraqi Kurdish leaders have had contacts on several occasions, such as with **Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani**, (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/051120193>) but rarely in public. Moreover, Iraqi Kurdish leaders have frequently called on the SDF to distance itself from the PKK, despite the SDF denying any links to the group.

The recent meeting also comes amidst Western fears for the Kurds' future and a French-U.S. initiative to unify the Syrian Kurds. The senior U.S. representative to northeast Syria, Scott Bolz, **accompanied** (<https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3611>) KDP President Barzani's envoy Hamid Darbandi during his visit with Kurdish parties in Qamishli (Qamishlo in Kurdish) on January 13, and the United States has also **welcomed** (<https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3625>) the KDP-SDF talks.

## **The Path to Syrian Kurdish Unification**

This is not the first time that the PYD and KNC have attempted to create a joint administration. The Erbil I (2012), Erbil II (2013) and **Duhok** (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/221020141>) (2014) agreements, backed by President Masoud Barzani, aimed to unify Syria's Kurds and make Kurdish autonomy more acceptable to Turkey, which has opposed a PYD-run autonomous administration on its border. However, these agreements failed due to a lack of power-sharing at the administrative, military, and political levels. The PYD's military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG) was also hesitant to share power with the KNC-linked 6,000 to 7,000 Rojava Peshmerga, established with the support of the KDP in 2012. Turkey also **held talks** (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pyd-leader-arrives-in-turkey-for-two-day-talks-report-51439>) in 2013 with the PYD to reduce tensions concurrent to its peace talks with the PKK—with both efforts subsequently apart.

After the failure of the Turkish-PKK **peace process** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/winds-change-ankaras-subtle-shifts-towards-reconciliation-kurdish-elements-turkey>) in 2015, Turkey launched three military operations in Syria between 2016 and 2019 with the aim of curbing Kurdish autonomy. Turkey's October 2019 military operation **pushed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3879>) the SDF to once again seek Kurdish unity via U.S. mediation in order to prevent future Turkish threats, resulting in an initial **agreement**

<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/382624>) in 2020. But these talks eventually stalled, demonstrating the ongoing challenges of promoting intra-Kurdish unity in Syria.

The SDC's Sinam Mohammed has emphasized that the new KNC-SDF talks will in all likelihood not be based on the previous Erbil and Duhok agreements, noting that "every circumstance has been changed now" and adding: "I think it is now time to have a good deal together without any [pre-]conditions."

### **The Kurdish Position in a New Syria**

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) takeover of Damascus presents new challenges for the Kurds, as HTS promotes a centralist, Islamist-conservative agenda in contrast to the PYD's secular, leftist project emphasizing **gender equality** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/northern-syrias-new-democratic-federal-system>) and minority rights. The PYD also advocates for a decentralized Syria or autonomy in some form over centralism, an approach that HTS views with suspicion. There is also a history of conflict between the two groups; in 2012–2013, the PYD clashed with HTS's predecessor, the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, over control of Serekaniye (Ras al-Ain), though they briefly operated **joint checkpoints** ([https://x.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/750434901023870976](https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/750434901023870976)).

However, the two groups have retained a truce in the aftermath of the current military operation in Syria. In contrast to the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)—which used the opportunity of a new reality in Syria to expel the SDF from northern Aleppo and Manbij and conduct ongoing clashes in Tishrin—HTS has not fought the SDF. Instead, it has tolerated an SDF presence in two Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo and prioritized negotiations. On December 30, Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani), the head of HTS and new de facto leader of Syria, **met**

<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2025/01/20/%D9%85%D8%B8%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%80-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%83%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>) SDF commander Abdi for the first time through U.S. mediation, though the outcome of the meeting remains unclear. Ongoing negotiations are expected to address issues such as Islamic State detainees and oil and gas resources within SDF-controlled areas, as well as the SDF's potential integration into a new military structure.

Nevertheless, HTS has given no indication that it would accept decentralization or a separate status for the SDF within a new Syrian military. Before Assad's fall, Russia-mediated talks between the SDF and the Assad regime also failed on this point. This is also an issue that extends beyond the SDF. Other anti-Assad militias—including the SNA, Syria's southern factions, and Druze groups—so far have not integrated into the HTS's new Syrian Defense Ministry, although Turkey has just requested that the SNA hand over their weapons to Damascus.

Yet the new HTS-led administration may agree to a continued distinct SDF presence if HTS is granted joint or separate control over national borders, Qamishli airport, and oil and gas resources in northeast Syria, along with a security presence in SDF-held areas similar to the Syrian regime's previous footholds in Qamishli, Hasaka, and border checkpoints. HTS forces could also be deployed in conflict zones between the SDF and the Turkish-backed SNA. So far, the SDF **has been willing** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/negotiators-zero-potential-deal-disarm-syrias-last-battleground-2025-01-19/>) to make concessions on oil and gas—the backbone of the

Kurdish Syrian economy—but negotiations have been stuck on a separate status for the SDF.

## **Developing Sustainable Turkish-Kurdish Relations**

The question of SDF reconciliation with Turkey is even thornier. Turkish leaders have continuously threatened military action against the SDF; Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan recently stated (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/8/turkiye-threatens-military-action-against-kurdish-forces-in-syria>) that non-Syrian Kurdish PKK leadership should leave Syria, while remaining (Syrian) SDF cadres should join the new system and dissolve the SDF. However, the Turkish government has said that it can give Damascus time to deal with this issue.

SDF commander Mazloun told *Al Arabiya* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VywoVPwMEH0>) that the main goal of his visit with KDP President Barzani was to seek the latter's help in stopping the Turkish attacks and mediating on the SDF's behalf, stating: "We know that President Masoud Barzani's relations with Turkey are good." Kurdish unity would also likely provide a path for communication, since the KDP-backed KNC also has good relations with the Turkish government.

Senior KDP member Zebari told *Dijlah TV* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4c197WGI98>) that the KDP is ready to leverage its relations with Turkey to prevent a future Turkish attack while asking the SDF to sever relations with the PKK. He stated that the SDF's "success depends on acting rationally and presenting a unified Kurdish position," adding (<https://www.youtube.com/live/N4c197WGI98?si=XoIIVMXH8n1zrkiE>): "If they approach the situation pragmatically, they have a golden opportunity; otherwise, foreign support will not be possible."

*Reuters* also reported (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/negotiators-zero-potential-deal-disarm-syrias-last-battleground-2025-01-19/>) that parallel talks are taking place between the United States and both the SDF and HTS, while German officials have also visited (<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5103501-german-foreign-ministry-backs-kurdish-dialogue-damascus>) the SDF to encourage dialogue with Damascus. Meanwhile, the involved parties all appear to be in communication; talks between Turkey and HTS and between the SDF and HTS have been reported (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/negotiators-zero-potential-deal-disarm-syrias-last-battleground-2025-01-19/>), including that the actors involved have shown more flexibility (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/negotiators-zero-potential-deal-disarm-syrias-last-battleground-2025-01-19/>) behind closed doors.

Turkish officials have claimed (<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-he-hakan-fidan--minister-of-foreign-affairs--al-jazeera-english--18-december-2024.en.mfa>) that HTS has taken steps to distance itself from al-Qaeda even as it retains its Islamist ideology. The SDF could follow a similar model, distancing itself from the PKK while still adhering to the ideology of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. In 2020, the SDF had agreed to remove all non-Syrian PKK cadres in an effort to appease Turkey, although this effort fell apart. In addition, Mazloun told *Reuters* that the SDF's foreign PKK fighters would leave (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-kurdish-commander-non-syrian-kurdish-fighters-leave-if-truce-agreed-with-2024-12-19/>) Syria if Turkey agreed to a ceasefire. Similarly, the PKK informed *Reuters* that it would agree (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pkk-would-leave-syria-if-kurdish-forces-keep-leadership-role-official-says-2025-01-16/>) to withdraw its fighters from Syria if the SDF retained a status or a role in the future Syrian administration. The question remains of where these fighters will go, since they are not welcome in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and certainly not in Turkey, the two other bases of PKK operation.

Therefore, the talks in Syria between various factions could be more effective if linked to the new ongoing negotiations with imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan in Turkey. In October, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist

Action Party (MHP), suggested that Öcalan could be released if he declared an end to the PKK insurgency and might even be allowed to speak in parliament. Talks between the state and Öcalan have proceeded despite continued fighting between the SDF and SNA in Syria, and politicians from the pro-Kurdish DEM Party visited (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/lawmakers-seek-second-visit-to-ocalan-for-terror-free-turkiye-initiative>) Öcalan on December 28 in a landmark visit and are planning to visit him again, marking an end to over a decade of Turkish policy of politically isolating Öcalan in prison.

*Al-Monitor* also reported (<https://x.com/AlMonitor/status/1882156412245315933>) on January 22 that a possible deal is nearing, with Öcalan expected to call for disarmament of the PKK in exchange for eased confinement, the release of jailed Kurdish politicians, and a shift in Turkey's stance on Syrian Kurdish autonomy. The expected announcement may come on February 15 or March 21, Kurdish Newroz.

Such efforts may also be of interest to the new U.S. administration. U.S. president Donald Trump, with his focus on deal making and friendly relationship (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/turkeys-erdo-hopes-friendship-trump-204127470.html>) with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, could play a key role in supporting a unified Kurdish position in Syria and new peace talks in Turkey—and in pressuring actors, such as the PKK and the Turkish government, to secure a lasting peace in Syria and Turkey. This could also pave the way for a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, provided there is a guarantee for Kurdish rights in a post-Assad Syria.

*Photo via KDP President Masoud Barzani's official website* (<https://www.masoudbarzani.krd/en/news-and-press-releases/president-barzani-receives-commander-in-chief-of-the-syrian-democratic-forces/>). ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Next Steps in Lebanon: From Ceasefire Extensions to Government Formation

Feb 13, 2025

◆  
Fadi Daoud,  
Makram Rabah,  
Efraim Defrin,  
Assaf Orion

(/policy-analysis/next-steps-lebanon-ceasefire-extensions-government-formation)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy (Part 1)

Feb 13, 2025

◆  
Michael Singh

(/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-1)

After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy (Part 2)

Feb 13, 2025



Dana Stroul

(/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-2)