

The SDF's Approach to Integration Talks in Syria and the Risk of Expanded Conflict

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

Jan 15, 2026

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

Recent clashes between Damascus and the Kurdish forces in Aleppo highlight the risk that stalling integration talks may trigger broader violence.

Since its signing on March 10, no tangible progress has been made on the eight-point agreement between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian Interim Government to facilitate SDF integration into the Interim Government's armed forces. Instead, the talks have run past the [agreement's \(https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/explainer-the-sdf-damascus-agreement/\)](https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/explainer-the-sdf-damascus-agreement/) provision for implementation to be reached by the end of 2025, and violence between the two sides quickly unfolded in Aleppo once the talks stalled after the deadline.

On the one hand, the talks did initially continue past the deadline set in March; the respective parties met again on January 4, signaling both continued mediation efforts and a continued lack of progress. Yet clashes in Aleppo between the two sides—preceded by smaller clashes there in the days leading up to the deadline—have caused civilian casualties and emphasize how the ongoing lack of a resolution can flare into a broader conflict if an agreement is not soon reached.

At stake in the discussions is the future of the SDF as a distinct entity within the Syrian Armed Forces; according to reports, Damascus has [verbally agreed \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-kurdish-forces-race-save-integration-deal-ahead-deadline-2025-12-18/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-kurdish-forces-race-save-integration-deal-ahead-deadline-2025-12-18/) that SDF forces will be incorporated into three distinct divisions of 50,000 fighters along with two special battalions—one [counter-terrorism \(https://npasyria.com/en/131565/\)](https://npasyria.com/en/131565/) focused unit and one female unit. The SDF has also [proposed \(https://npasyria.com/en/131565/\)](https://npasyria.com/en/131565/) a list of seventy of its commanders to be included in these units, as well as in the Syrian Ministry of Defense and General Staff.

Kurdish officials such as Sihanok Dibo, an official of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), argue that the agreement has been delayed because Damascus took several missteps early on, including the exclusion of many Syrian components from Syria's February national dialogue and Damascus's announcement of a constitutional declaration on March 12, just after the March 10 agreement and without consultation with the SDF. The SDF has consistently criticized the new Damascus government for not acting in a manner inclusive of it and other alternative Syrian political entities, and argues that Damascus's "sham parliamentary elections" on October 5—which excluded SDF-held areas and Suwayda—ignored other Syrian groups.

Kurdish officials likewise accuse Turkey of torpedoing the talks between Damascus and the SDF by **imposing** (<https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-surIye/xelil-suriye-bir-boslukta-tutuluyor-bu-yol-yeni-catismalara-goturur-221249>) its demands on Damascus, while **suspecting** (https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/01/closed-door-breakdown-syria-kurdish-talks-foreshadowed-aleppo-clashes?gift_code=3AzDealHCaMqxVnFFrp81jNa1QU) that Turkey supported the Syrian operation in Aleppo and jointly planned the operation months in advance. Nawaf Xelil, Director of the Kurdish Center for Studies and a former spokesperson for the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of the SDF, claims that each of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's four visits to Syria has been followed almost immediately by fighting. Xelil emphasized that, by contrast, "the SDF and the Autonomous Administration are patient and insist on carrying out this agreement with the assistance of our friends, mainly the United States." On January 10, the SDF accused Turkey of carrying out a drone attack in Tabqa, saying the incident shows Ankara's determination to play a direct military role in Syria.

While from the perspective of the SDF the main spoiler in reaching an agreement on these issues is Turkey, the exact Turkish position regarding SDF integration is unclear. Contrary to the March agreement, Turkish Defense officials have publicly **underlined** (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/882457>) that SDF fighters should be integrated as individuals and the SDF as an institution should be disbanded completely, which the SDF views as signaling intensive Turkish pressure on Damascus. A spokesperson for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) **emphasized** (<https://x.com/omerrcelik/status/2003531866008355267>) on December 23 that there cannot be two armies in Syria, adding that the Turkish military is ready to launch another operation if ordered. "We wish that there will be no need for an operation, but if necessary, it will be carried out without hesitation," AKP spokesperson Ömer Çelik said. And in response to this week's clashes in Aleppo, the Turkish defense ministry **stated** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-ready-help-end-conflict-syrias-aleppo-parliament-speaker-says-2026-01-08/>) that Turkey will "provide the necessary assistance" if Damascus requests help.

Privately, senior Turkish officials have also expressed support for the March agreement and emphasized their focus on the removal of non-Syrian PKK fighters from Syria and the return of heavy weapons factories to Damascus. They did so without mentioning the defense ministry's demand for "individuals only" integration as there are public calls from Turkish officials for the complete **disbandment** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/high-level-turkish-team-visit-damascus-monday-talks-sdf-integration-2025-12-22/>) of the SDF as an independent army. Likely complicating the Turkish considerations are the ongoing peace talks between the PKK and Ankara launched **last year** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/winds-change-ankaras-subtle-shifts-towards-reconciliation-kurdish-elements-turkey>).

The manner in which negotiations and public statements on the issue have unfolded recently has specifically inflamed tensions. On December 22, the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Asaad al-Shaibani—in a **joint press**

conference (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/22122025>) with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Damascus—confirmed that the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MOD) presented a proposal to the SDF, that the SDF has responded, and that it was under review by Damascus. The SDF has been especially eager for written guarantees and a form of decentralization, while Damascus **insists** (<https://x.com/Ahmadmuaffaq/status/2001289137077268712>) on a centralized state.

The day of the Turkish delegation's visit, heavy clashes broke afterwards between Syrian government forces and Kurdish-linked internal security Asayish forces near Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya in Aleppo, in which four to five civilians **were killed** (https://x.com/Levant_24_/status/2003388950065611026) and **several were injured** (<https://hawarnews.com/en/sdc-calls-on-transitional-govt-to-adhere-to-signed-agreements>) on both sides. These strategically located Kurdish-majority neighborhoods were under the control of the SDF throughout the civil war, despite their isolation from the SDF territory in the **northeast** of the country. Taking advantage of the two neighborhoods' isolation, the Assad regime blockaded them several times, preventing diesel and other goods from entering in order to pressure the SDF and the YPG. As the neighborhoods are now surrounded by Syrian interim government forces, they have again become a flashpoint between Damascus and the SDF.

As part of a separate April 1 **deal** (<https://anf-news.com/rojawa-suriye/suriye-de-gecis-sureci-tekci-israr-ve-kirilgan-anlasmalar-221239>) between Damascus and the SDF, joint checkpoints between the Asayish and the Syrian General Security were established in Aleppo, a prisoner exchange took place, and the SDF formally withdrew from Aleppo city. During the December clashes, these joint checkpoints fell apart; both the **SDF** (https://x.com/SDF_Syria/status/2003211395941220862) and the **Syrian Ministry of Interior** (<https://x.com/syrianmoi/status/2003126754295324728>) accused the other of withdrawing from the joint checkpoints and violating the agreement.

During these earlier clashes and in general, SDF messaging has continued to focus on the involvement of Turkey in the ongoing talks. A SDF-linked Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) statement characterized the December 22 Fidan visit as **dragging** (<https://hawarnews.com/en/sdc-calls-on-transitional-govt-to-adhere-to-signed-agreements>) “external factors into Syrian internal affairs, [which] only leads to further complication of crises,” a clear reference to the Turkish state. For its part, Damascus has likewise **accused** (https://x.com/Levant_24_/status/2003406424852853018) the SDF of stalling and trying to drag Damascus into military confrontations.

DAANES official Sihanok Dibo linked the initial December clashes in Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood to the Turkish delegation's visit to Damascus that day, and highlighted that the visit was understood to reduce the agreement's eight points to a single issue—namely, the military aspect. For the SDF and many Syrian Kurds, the non-military aspects of the eight-point agreement, such as the recognition of the Kurds as an indigenous community with full citizenship and constitutional rights and the return of IDPs, are key components that must be addressed as well.

The semi-official pro-SDF Ronahi TV has likewise **blamed** (<https://x.com/tvronahi/status/2003515942672957874>) Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions that are now integrated into Syria's Ministry of Defense, such as the Amshat 62nd Division in Hama (led by Abu Amsha), Hamzat 76th Division (led by Sayf Bulad, Aleppo), and 86th Division (led by Abu Hatem Shaqra, Raqqa/Deir ez-Zour) for the December clashes. The SDF concern regarding these divisions extends to the process of these units' formal incorporation. They are understood as still answering primarily to their own commanders, maintaining parallel chains of loyalty, and operating in practice as semi-autonomous brigades rather than fully integrated regular army divisions.

However, the Syrian armed forces divisions currently operating in Aleppo also highlight the ongoing integration process Damascus is pursuing in other units. The 60th and 72nd divisions are both led by veteran HTS brigade commanders who each have a long history in Aleppo, and are among the more mixed post-integration Ministry of Defense units. Each unit contains former SNA factions, HTS brigades, and Ahrar al-Sham sub-groups alongside new recruits.

A second and deadlier round of clashes in Aleppo began on January 6 as talks between Damascus and the SDF broke down, with several killed and injured in both Kurdish-controlled areas and government-controlled areas of Aleppo. Damascus called on Kurdish fighters to be relocated by buses to the northeast on January 9. Although Kurdish forces initially refused and the fighting continued, by the next day Kurdish officials said they would be willing (<https://x.com/ElhamAhmadSDC/status/2009890677593911594>) to evacuate Kurdish fighters. By January 11, Damascus had control of the Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maksoud neighborhoods and a ceasefire was in place.

And since January 13, tensions have expanded to Deir Hafer and the areas surrounding the Tishrin dam, after Syrian Arab Army (<https://sana.sy/en/tag/syrian-arab-army/>) Operations Command declared the areas of SDF-held Deir Hafer (<https://sana.sy/en/tag/deir-hafer/>) and Maskanah (located on the western Euphrates) a military zone, and urged the SDF to leave Deir Hafer. Drone strikes and artillery shelling are now unfolding in these areas. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-use-force-against-kurdish-led-sdf-seems-an-option-turkey-says-2026-01-15/>) reporters on January 15 that Turkey hopes for a peaceful resolution but sees force as an option for the Syrian government.

With this new round of intensified violence, the SDF has framed (https://x.com/SDF_Syria/status/2010059168800264225) its concerns in the context of violence (https://x.com/SDF_Syria/status/2010059168800264225) seen elsewhere in the country. In previous conflicts on the coast, more than 1,400 people were killed (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/22/more-than-1400-killed-in-sectarian-violence-in-coastal-syria-report-finds>) in March, and the clashes in Suwayda in July left (<https://www.commonspace.eu/news/more-1100-people-killed-after-clashes-syrias-druze-majority-province-sweida>) over 1,100 dead. Yet the conflict in this case is centered around the balance of political power in post-Assad Syria, and how much room for decentralization Damascus is willing to cede versus how much the SDF is willing to give up from their previous independence during the civil war years.

The Kurdish community in Syria, however, will continue to fear a sectarian dimension to any further conflict, especially due to their own recent experiences. On October 12, 2019, during the Turkish Peace Spring operation, the Turkish-backed Ahrar Sharqiya group summarily executed (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/female-kurdish-politician-among-nine-civilians-killed-by-pro-turkey-forces-in-syria-observers-say>) the Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf. In May 2025, Damascus appointed (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/838918>) Abu Hatim Shaqra—sanctioned by the United States and reportedly involved in the killing—to head the 86th division, operating across Deir ez-Zour, Hasakah, and Raqqa. However, it seems that Damascus learned from its previous mistakes (<https://sana.sy/en/politics/2289786/>) in the coast and Suwayda. In its recent operations in Aleppo, it emphasized its protection of civilians and rule of law, strictly controlling its fighters and preventing extrajudicial executions.

There are also factors outside of Syria that may limit how widespread violence may become. Despite the messaging from Ankara regarding a military operation against the SDF, such a move would risk ending the peace process between Turkey and the PKK and could prompt the PKK to terminate its ceasefire. To this point, Turkish security

sources have so far [claim \(https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/guvenlik-kaynaklari-catismalarin-sebebi-ypgnin-suriyenin-gelecegini-ve-kaynaklarini-somurme-kaygisidir-931205.html\)](https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/guvenlik-kaynaklari-catismalarin-sebebi-ypgnin-suriyenin-gelecegini-ve-kaynaklarini-somurme-kaygisidir-931205.html) ed that the recent clashes in Aleppo will not affect this peace process.

Therefore, the SDF is especially concerned that Damascus, with Ankara's support, will instead attempt to [create tribal unrest \(https://mailchi.mp/middleeasteye/psyops-or-war-turkey-escalates-pressure-on-syrias-sdf\)](https://mailchi.mp/middleeasteye/psyops-or-war-turkey-escalates-pressure-on-syrias-sdf) in Arab-majority areas under SDF control such as Deir ez-Zour and Raqqa, where there are ongoing Arab grievances against the SDF's control and how the AANES has administered these areas. After Aleppo, there are also signs that Damascus may want to move further to the northeast. In a January 10 [message \(https://x.com/zakorahmed0/status/2010038964539818384\)](https://x.com/zakorahmed0/status/2010038964539818384) to Kurds and Arab tribes in the northeast, Legal Advisor of the President for Tribal and Clan Affairs Jihad Isa al-Sheikh stated that Damascus does not want war, but will defend the country's unity if necessary.

In outlining this potential, SDF officials have [claimed \(\)](https://arabic.anf-news.com/akhr-l-khbr/alqyady-syban-hmw-yjb-an-ykwn-alandmaj-dymqratyaa-wshamlaa-123057) this focus on tribes as following the playbook that unfolded in Suwayda, where tribal forces backed by Damascus fought against Druze armed groups in order to protect Bedouin civilians. Senior SDF official Sipan Hemo has [characterized \(https://arabic.anf-news.com/akhr-l-khbr/alqyady-syban-hmw-yjb-an-ykwn-alandmaj-dymqratyaa-wshamlaa-123057\)](https://arabic.anf-news.com/akhr-l-khbr/alqyady-syban-hmw-yjb-an-ykwn-alandmaj-dymqratyaa-wshamlaa-123057) these massacres as an intelligence plan rather than a spontaneous eruption of violence. And while Israeli intervention prevented Damascus from taking Suwayda, the SDF is aware that Israel would not do such a thing in the northeast, despite Turkish [claims \(https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-warns-israel-ypg-co-op-may-harm-damascus-deal\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-warns-israel-ypg-co-op-may-harm-damascus-deal) of Israeli support for the SDF.

[Some of the tribes that fought in Suwayda are also present in S \(\)](https://x.com/fadi0bed/status/1880676933127766232) DF-controlled areas in Deir ez-Zour. Damascus has also been engaging with two of the main tribes from there. Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl of the Akaidat tribal confederation, who led a failed tribal revolt with a tribal army in 2023–2024 backed by Iran and Assad against the SDF, was [spotted \(https://x.com/fadi0bed/status/1880676933127766232\)](https://x.com/fadi0bed/status/1880676933127766232) with Syrian military officials in January 2025. Sheikh Sami Hifl of the Akaidat, a cousin of Ibrahim al-Hifl, was also [involved \(https://x.com/alsharqia24news/status/1946572125667570082\)](https://x.com/alsharqia24news/status/1946572125667570082) in the fighting in Suwayda.

Furthermore, in early December, Nawaf al-Bashir from the Baggara tribal confederation declared his loyalty to the new Syrian government, although he supported the Assad regime in the past. During the clashes in Aleppo in December, the Baggara tribe—which previously fought as part of the [Iranian-backed Liwa al-Baqir \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-al-baqir\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-al-baqir) against the Syrian opposition—also announced they would be ready to fight the SDF. The Baggara tribe in Ashrafiya [reportedly \(https://substack.com/home/post/p-183978327\)](https://substack.com/home/post/p-183978327) also [played \(https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2009344953890242731\)](https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2009344953890242731) a role in Aleppo. Tribal advisor [Jihad Isa al-Sheikh \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sanctioning-syrian-jihadist-leader-implications-joint-us-turkish-designation\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sanctioning-syrian-jihadist-leader-implications-joint-us-turkish-designation) has also met with several tribes, including the [Baggara tribe \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/1969129190079850/?multi_permalinks=4307929286199817&hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1969129190079850/?multi_permalinks=4307929286199817&hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen), the [Akaidat \(https://www.facebook.com/reel/812237594938001\)](https://www.facebook.com/reel/812237594938001) tribe, tribes in [Ras al-Ain \(https://www.facebook.com/reel/2116934835807721\)](https://www.facebook.com/reel/2116934835807721) (Serekaniye) and [Tal Abyad \(https://www.facebook.com/reel/1334551754830005\)](https://www.facebook.com/reel/1334551754830005).

The SDF's expectation is that in such a case, Damascus [might attempt](#)

<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/10122024>) to seize more Arab-majority areas in northeast Syria in a limited operation, similar to how Turkish-backed groups took Manbij in December 2024 and now also the Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo.

Both the continued stalling of the March 10 agreement and violence in Aleppo underscore the potential for a broader conflict to spread to other areas of Syria. Therefore, several countries have called for a return to negotiations. The U.S. Special Syria Envoy Ambassador Tom Barrack met with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa on January 10 and urged a return to dialogue in accordance with the March 10 and April 1, 2025 agreements. Other countries such as the UK (<https://x.com/UKSyriaRep/status/2009580512965480870>), Germany (<https://x.com/GermanyOnMENA/status/2009515681063293234>), Canada (https://x.com/Greg_Galligan/status/2009334958331207769), and France (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/syrie/evenements/actualites-2026/article/syrie-cessez-le-feu-a-alep-9-01-26?egn-publisher=Twitter&egn-name=Twitter-RS>) have also underlined the importance of implementing the March agreement.

Since the ceasefire in Aleppo, official SDF messaging on the future of the March 10 agreement has been mixed. On the one hand, formally extending or ignoring the deadline of the March 10 agreement is likely considered preferable to risking new violence in the northeast. DAANES official Dibo stated that despite the events in Aleppo, the SDF still believes in dialogue even as he accused some factions in the Syrian government of being against it. “We find at all times that there is no alternative to dialogue, and that all representatives of the people of Syria must have the appropriate opportunity and be represented by the political process and full commitment to its terms in accordance with the March 10 agreement.”

Yet popular anger among SDF supporters at the ceasefire has likely tempered other officials’ language. SDF commander Hemo [appeared more circumspect](https://english.anf-news.com/features/sipan-hemo-the-roots-of-this-game-run-very-deep-83147) (<https://english.anf-news.com/features/sipan-hemo-the-roots-of-this-game-run-very-deep-83147>) when asked about the prospects of integration “We are still in a period of mourning. We are mourning our martyrs, caring for our wounded, and processing the pain. A formal assessment of the situation is still pending, but the right approach will certainly emerge.”

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Crisis Diplomacy in the Middle East: Insights from the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Teams](#)

Jan 15, 2026

◆
Lloyd J. Austin III,
James Jeffrey,
Dana Stroul

(/policy-analysis/crisis-diplomacy-middle-east-insights-bush-obama-trump-and-biden-teams)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Iran's Regime Has Already Lost Its Most Potent Weapon

Jan 14, 2026

◆
Michael Singh

(/policy-analysis/irans-regime-has-already-lost-its-most-potent-weapon)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Why the United States Must Maintain Its International Counterterrorism Leadership Role

Jan 14, 2026

◆
Michael Jacobson,
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/why-united-states-must-maintain-its-international-counterterrorism-leadership-role)