

Kurdish Collapse in Northeast Syria? Key Things to Watch

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](#), [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#), [Devorah Margolin \(/experts/devorah-margolin\)](#), [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#), [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#), [Zohar Palti \(/experts/zohar-palti\)](#), [Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

Washington Institute experts assess the immediate fallout of the Syrian government's advance into SDF-held parts of the northeast, including mutual disinformation campaigns, implications for the Islamic State threat, the terms of new agreements with the Kurds, and the calculus of outside actors like the United States, Israel, and Turkey.

Cutting Through the Disinformation

By Andrew J. Tabler

As military, security, and government-aligned tribal forces advance in northeast Syria and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) retreat, all eyes are rightly on the extent of Islamic State (IS) prisoners escaping from detention facilities. And Hasaka apparently holds the key to managing both this issue and the rough road ahead.

At the moment, President Ahmed al-Sharaa's government seems intent on taking that province, which has served as a lifeline between the SDF, its Kurdish brethren in northern Iraq, and the U.S. military's force projection in the battle against IS. This means the now-cornered SDF will likely view the fight to hold Hasaka as existential. The oil-rich and ethnically/religiously diverse area is home to Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian communities, making it ripe for sectarian bloodshed.

According to readouts of President Trump's January 19 call to Sharaa, the White House wants Damascus to focus on securing IS detention facilities, rounding up those who have escaped, and halting its advance long enough to reach a diplomatic settlement. And earlier today, U.S. Central Command [announced](#) (<https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/2014007338437341436>) that it is launching a new mission to transfer IS detainees from northeastern Syria to Iraq in order to "help ensure the terrorists remain in secure detention facilities."

As the administration pushes for solutions, perhaps the biggest impediments to developing effective policy on these issues are the rampant disinformation campaigns being conducted by Damascus, the SDF, and their respective supporters, which are aimed not only at Syrian audiences but also at Washington (particularly Congress). Cutting through this fog of war and developing an analytical baseline for the true status of the northeast is increasingly difficult.

Although the administration clearly prefers Damascus and its untested capabilities in that part of the country, it should still make sure to carefully vet the Sharaa government's version of this week's events. This is especially important in cases where reports of potential massacres—similar to those seen last year in Syria's coastal region and Swayda province—circulate among Republicans and Democratic members of Congress and threaten to outrun or derail certain policy decisions. Accordingly, the administration should consider mitigating these policy risks by sharing more intelligence with legislators and urging all officials to carefully vet their information before disseminating it.

Details of the New Kurdish Agreement, and Why U.S. Commitment to the SDF Has Been Tactical

By James Jeffrey

On January 18, Sharaa's government reached a [fourteen-point agreement \(https://sana.sy/en/syria/2291194/\)](https://sana.sy/en/syria/2291194/) with the SDF to halt fighting in the north and set new terms for integrating areas held by the group. Yet the agreement's language raises as many questions as it resolves, including about the future of U.S. commitments to the SDF.

For example, point 5 calls for integrating SDF personnel into the Syrian armed forces on an "individual" basis, shifting from a previous understanding in which the government spoke of unit-by-unit integration. Besides changing terms without explanation, the new language offers little clarity on what will become of the SDF's tens of thousands of Kurdish fighters.

Further down, point 7 has Damascus appointing a local official to govern Kurdish-majority Hasaka province in order to "guarantee" local political representation. But how will this candidate be chosen, with whose input, and under what criteria? Similarly, point 10 commits to Kurdish-vetted appointments for security and civil positions in the central government to ensure "national partnership," yet it does not touch on any of the crucial details that will be involved in implementing this politically difficult process. And although point 11 recognizes Kurdish linguistic, cultural, and legal rights (reiterating Sharaa's presidential decree issued earlier that day), it lacks commitments to anchor those rights in existing Syrian law or a new constitution. Clarifying these issues through further trilateral exchanges with Damascus and the SDF will be critical to avoid further ceasefire breakdowns, so Washington should urgently prioritize such discussions.

Some critics argue that Washington is betraying the Kurds by allowing these developments to transpire. Yet the longstanding U.S. position—which the Trump administration is now implementing under changed circumstances—has been that relations with the SDF are "temporary, tactical, and transactional," as stated publicly during the author's time as U.S. envoy to Syria under the first Trump administration. This posture was adopted to avoid interfering in Syria's future internal structure or antagonizing Turkey, given the group's links to the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Washington has also consistently pointed to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) as the roadmap for post-conflict governance of a unitary Syrian state decided by Syrians themselves—a process that the international community is now engaged on with Sharaa's government. Moreover, the U.S. commitment to defend the Kurds militarily was always limited to threats from IS, Bashar al-Assad, and his Iranian and Russian allies. In other situations (e.g., the Turkish incursion in 2019; the SDF's tensions with Sharaa since December 2024), U.S. commitments were limited to diplomatic support for compromise arrangements.

Securing IS Detention Facilities and Transferring Authority

By Devorah Margolin

The Syrian detainee issue has become a central pillar of the counter-IS mission, with around 35,000 men, women, and minors held in various prisons and camps in the northeast. The indefinite detention of IS-

■ affiliated individuals—including Syrians, Iraqis, and other third-country nationals—was never part of the Global Coalition’s long-term plan to defeat the organization. Yet more than six years since the territorial defeat of IS, it remains one of the country’s most serious security and humanitarian issues—even more so today amid shifting reports about who is securing these facilities and recapturing individuals who escaped during the latest fighting.

IS detainees and their family members are held across several facilities in the northeast. Most women and minors are held in two detention camps: around 25,000 of them in al-Hol, and another 2,400 in the smaller Roj camp. Most of the 9,000 men and teenage boys in detention are held across twenty-five other facilities, which some have called the largest collection of terrorists in the world. All of these facilities have remained under SDF control for years, with military and financial support from the U.S.-led Global Coalition. Yet the SDF’s nonstate status meant that it could not hold trials for any detainees, deport the non-Syrians, or even engage with certain governments directly about their fate. And despite U.S. pressure, most countries have been reluctant to repatriate their citizens.

The SDF has treated the detainee issue as a blessing and a curse. While burdened with administering these facilities, the SDF was also able to align itself with the United States and receive training, money, and what it hoped was protection. Many NGOs have criticized the horrible humanitarian situation for detainees—especially children—while international actors have complained that the SDF withholds information on foreign nationals. Even the coalition has struggled with the far-flung setup of the detention facilities, which has left it unable to biometrically enroll all of the male IS fighters (though it has collected such data for the women and children in al-Hol and Roj).

Over the past year, the Trump administration has made clear that it wants to see a unified Syria address the detainee issue with Damascus at the helm. Even before this week’s events, questions remained over whether Sharaa’s government had the desire or capacity to carry out this mission. The latest violence further complicates this issue, both by decreasing the possibility of the SDF and Damascus working together and by accelerating the timeline for transferring authority over these facilities. Washington has called for de-escalation, but it is unclear how actors on the ground will carry out a peaceful transfer and begin working toward a viable long-term solution for ending the detainee crisis.

Given that Damascus will have a sharp learning curve as it takes on this enormous and complex mission, U.S. officials should not push it to assume sole responsibility for this task overnight—and today’s CENTCOM announcement about transferring some detainees to Iraq indicates that Washington is already thinking about alternatives. The chaos of the current situation could allow for an Islamic State resurgence, and the longer detainees are held with no outcome in sight, the greater the security risks for Syria and the international community alike.

How Will the Government Handle the Fight with IS in the Northeast?

By Aaron Y. Zelin

Since the Assad regime fell, Damascus has actively conducted and assisted with counterterrorism operations against IS, but only in territories under its control. It has not carried out such operations in areas outside its control, such as Suwayda and the border zone with Israel. So as the northeast comes under its control, the government will presumably commence active efforts to tackle the continued IS insurgency brewing there. Yet several factors (including the detainee issue discussed above) could make the northeastern mission more complicated than what Sharaa and his supporters have dealt with elsewhere.

Sharaa’s history of confronting IS goes back to 2013, when his past group, Jabhat al-Nusra, broke away from the Islamic State. Originally, their fights occurred primarily on the battlefield, but by 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra’s successor group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), had adopted a lawfare approach to dealing with IS while building its own statelet in northwest Syria. Between July 2017 and the fall of the Assad regime, HTS conducted sixty-two arrest operations against IS, according to [data compiled by the author \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-)

[analysis/jihadi-counterterrorism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-versus-islamic-state](#)). Since then, Sharaa's new government in Damascus [has conducted \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-syrian-governments-fight-against-islamic-state-hezbollah-and-captagon\)](#) thirty-four such operations, some in coordination with the U.S.-led Global Coalition, which Damascus formally joined in November.

Now that the government has taken over vast swaths of the northeast, it will have to contend with an IS insurgency that has weakened since 2019 but not yet been defeated strategically. In 2025, IS [conducted more than 200 attacks \(https://rojvainformationcenter.org/category/report/sleeper-cells/\)](#) in the northeast, according to the Rojava Information Center. In response, the SDF conducted sixty-four arrest operations against IS cells in that region, illustrating that the terrorist group poses a much larger challenge there than in other parts of Syria. (For more on these and other data points, see The Washington Institute's [interactive Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home\)](#).)

The government has signaled that it plans to continue this fight by co-opting SDF security structures, recruiting seasoned SDF personnel into the Interior Ministry, and training new personnel specifically for this mission. Damascus also announced that it has recaptured 81 of the 120 IS detainees who [reportedly escaped \(https://www.nbcnews.com/world/middle-east/isis-us-allies-syria-terrorism-al-hol-sdf-sharaa-rcna254930\)](#) al-Shadadi prison during the latest fighting (though it is unclear how many other IS affiliates may have escaped other facilities). More broadly, the question of capacity is still a worry in Washington, especially if Sharaa's government also has to contend with a future Kurdish insurgency (e.g., by SDF remnants like the People's Defense Units, or YPG), which could give IS more space to exploit the country's internal seams.

Turkey's Quest to Fully Demilitarize the PKK/YPG

By Soner Cagaptay

Other than stabilizing its southern neighbor and returning the 3 million Syrian refugees still present in Turkey, Ankara's core interest in the current crisis is to disarm the YPG, the SDF's dominant sub-group and an offshoot of the PKK. In late 2024, after waves of counterterrorism campaigns greatly eroded the PKK, Turkey reopened negotiations to disarm the group and its regional affiliates, including the YPG. Jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan accepted the deal, and PKK activity inside Turkey all but ceased in the months after he publicly asked his followers to lay down their weapons. In return, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signaled he was willing to open space for political participation by Turkish Kurds, many of whom have organized under the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (aka the DEM Party).

Outside Turkey, however, many figures in the PKK's collective leadership in northern Iraq's mountainous Qandil enclave rejected Ocalan's call. They also pressured SDF leader Gen. Mazloum Abdi and his tens of thousands of Kurdish YPG troops in northeast Syria not to heed Ankara's calls for ceding their arms and territory.

Ankara believes that if the YPG does not dissolve, the PKK will continue to exist in another form. Hence, Erdogan's endgame in Syria is similar to his approach at home: to end Kurdish armed struggle and convert the movement into the equivalent of a "DEM Party South," that is, a purely political force. Toward that goal, he is closely coordinating policies with President Sharaa on stabilizing and centralizing Syria, steering that process toward the dissolution of the PKK/YPG. Ankara will continue backing such efforts during the current showdown in the northeast.

Regarding the safety of Syrian Kurdish civilians, President Trump has already signaled his concern on this issue to both Sharaa and Erdogan. Given their mutual chemistry with Trump and their personal political and diplomatic interests, they will presumably heed this call. Erdogan knows that any massacres committed against Kurds in Syria would undermine his objectives at home, including the peace plan with the PKK and the broader strategy to earn crucial DEM Party support ahead of Turkey's next presidential election.

Israel and Jordan: Concerned but Constrained

By Zohar Palti

Israel views the evolving Kurdish situation in Syria with considerable skepticism, particularly regarding the new government's capabilities and intentions in the northeast. At the same time, Israel operates under an important strategic constraint: the need to maintain close alignment with the United States following its extensive support on Gaza, the broader confrontation with Iran, and other matters. The Trump administration has unequivocally backed Sharaa, and Jerusalem must be mindful of this stance.

Last year, Israel provided substantial military assistance to minority groups in south Syria, launching airstrikes and playing a decisive role in preventing larger-scale attacks on the Druze population. Over the past week, however, Israel has felt compelled to restrain itself and limit its support for Kurdish forces in the northeast, sacrificing some of the engagement and assistance it might otherwise have provided for people who have proven to be close, effective, and reliable partners in the U.S.-led coalition campaign against IS for more than a decade.

These concerns are also shared by Jordan, a key counterterrorism partner to both Israel and the United States. Indeed, its significant support for the coalition mission against IS has been crucial. The Kurdish withdrawal in the northeast and parallel expansion of Turkish influence send a troubling signal to Amman and Jerusalem alike, raising serious questions about regional stability, deterrence, and the future credibility of U.S.-aligned actors in Syria.

Israel's Syrian Threat Landscape: From Iran-Hezbollah to Turkish-Islamist?

By Assaf Orion

Although the fall of the Assad regime removed one threat from Jerusalem's radar—the effort by Iran and its proxies to build a Syrian military front against Israel—another may be forming in its place. Recent developments point to a potential Sunni Islamist state solidifying in Syria with backing from Turkey, a highly capable NATO member that has ambitions to expand its influence southward while openly expressing hostility toward Israel.

After Hamas's October 7 attack from Gaza, Israel sought to protect its communities on other frontiers from similar attacks. In Syria, this meant keeping current and future threats away from the border while protecting Druze from slaughter by Islamists. Beginning in late 2024, Israel destroyed Assad's military arsenal to prevent it from falling into hostile hands, struck Syrian regime bases to prevent the Turkish military from deploying there, and seized high terrain along and across the Golan Heights frontier. Some saw these moves as an Israeli quest to create a sphere of influence in southwest Syria and pave an air corridor to Iran, using a combination of direct force projection, efforts to weaken Damascus, and close collaboration with Druze and Kurdish elements. Whatever the case, the Syrian government's current blitzkrieg campaign against Kurdish forces in the northeast demonstrates the dangers of a potential Islamist-Turkish threat to Israel, including rapid maneuver of highly mobile forces, atrocities against minorities, the release of IS prisoners, and the expansion of Turkey's influence via the buildup and wider deployment of its partners in the Syrian armed forces.

At the same time, Damascus and Jerusalem still share a common interest in keeping the Iranian axis out of Syria and, perhaps, establishing a quiet border. As such, they have opened talks on new security arrangements, recently agreeing in Paris to establish a security coordination cell under U.S. auspices. Yet no breakthrough has been achieved on broader arrangements so far. Even before the offensive against the Kurds, Israel was not expected to withdraw from the areas it has occupied in south Syria anytime soon; the odds are even slimmer today.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](#)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow in the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Ambassador James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq.



[Devorah Margolin \(/experts/devorah-margolin\)](#)

Devorah Margolin is the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadist groups in North Africa and Syria, foreign fighting, and online jihadism.



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Zohar Palti \(/experts/zohar-palti\)](#)

Zohar Palti is the Viterbi International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](/experts/assaf-orion)

Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is The Washington Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division.

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