



### [Iraq Kurdistan Government's Bolstering of the PKK in Syria Jeopardizes Prospects of Stability](#)

Following years of conflict and repression under the previous Assad regime, Syria is in the midst of a fragile and high-stakes transition aimed at alleviating political fragmentation, economic deprivation, and prolonged instability. These conditions have driven much of the population into poverty and caused mass internal displacement. Syrians have also sought refuge beyond the country's borders in over 130 countries worldwide, a figure cited as illustrating the scale of the humanitarian crisis. To address these issues and improve circumstances within Syria, the new government in Damascus under President Ahmed al-Sharaa has sought a unifying agenda which promotes a more centralized government, combats security threats, and focuses on reconstructing the economy and establishing harmonious diplomatic relations with countries around the world. This is an approach that the United States and other foreign partners view as a potential pathway towards long-term stability. Greater stability in Syria could attract foreign markets, boost productivity, foster trade, and enable economic recovery and the much-needed delivery of humanitarian aid. It could further support the reconstruction of essential infrastructure such as healthcare systems, housing, and transportation, as well as facilitate the return of displaced civilians.

Despite these goals, Syria's efforts face challenges, particularly from Kurdish authorities and forces who view centralization and integration as a threat to their autonomy and economic security. In response to the widely backed agreement which calls for the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian state apparatus, recent reports have indicated that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq has mobilized and allowed some military members to join the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria. Although the KRG has historically opposed the PKK, designating them as a terrorist organization, analysts note that current events have pressured them to respond, which puts significant strain on their relations with Turkey. The groups' original objective of establishing an independent Kurdish state in Turkey prompted decades of conflict – one which has lasted for several decades and has shaped their responses to Syria's integration and centralization efforts as well.

If Syria's centralization attempts proceed, some Kurdish forces fear a loss of not only territory, but also their primary source of economic leverage: control over oil and gas fields. Major energy sites such as al-Omar and Rumaila, located in northeastern Syria, have been controlled by the SDF for years, and account for nearly 70%-90% of Syria's oil. The KRG has played a

significant role in purchasing and exporting this oil, a relationship that has supported the Kurdish economy for years. Yet, some sources have questioned where the oil revenues have been distributed, with members of the Barzani family facing long-standing allegations related to oil operations. Both Nechirvan and Masrour Barzani maintain that oil exports go towards funding government salaries, public services, and infrastructure development, but there is ample evidence of stolen and exploited oil and other resources. Investigative reports and independent audits have consistently highlighted significant discrepancies in the KRG's oil revenue accounts, contrasting sharply with the Barzani family's assertions that funds are appropriately distributed for public services and salaries. Instead, reports indicate billions of Iraqi Dinars remain unaccounted for and have been diverted for personal use, fueling longstanding corruption and theft allegations.

From the KRG's standpoint, the loss of oil revenues and the dismantling of the SDF represent a broader threat to Kurdish autonomous structures, not just in Syria but across the region. This response is often framed as a security-driven calculation, not a reflection of ideologies, and sheds light on why the KRG is allowing some of their militia members to join the PKK as a response to policies that could alter existing power balances. Should conditions in northeastern Syria deteriorate and spark new conflict, there is a legitimate concern among analysts that Kurdish communities across the region are likely to mobilize further – potentially leading to more civilian displacement and increased instability. A troubling outcome like this would place additional strain on humanitarian systems, like refugee camps that are already at capacity and struggling to care for displaced populations.

Additionally, heightened mobilization, resistance to Syria's efforts aimed at centralization under the new government in Damascus, and threat of destabilizing conflict pose other risks. The PKK has been known to rely on guerrilla warfare tactics, including conducting their operations in civilian-populated areas, which can increase the likelihood of further death and displacement. Limited resources and present conditions raise even more concerns about civilian harm and displacement. The expansion of armed conflict could also undermine ceasefire efforts and derail any prospects for peaceful dialogue and agreements. While the pursuit of stability in Syria offers long-term benefits, many observers argue that the safety of civilian populations will ultimately depend on whether armed groups like the PKK and non-state governing authorities decide to engage in diplomatic efforts with the new Syrian government – as the latter has emphasized its commitment to instituting policies that prioritize inclusive governance and the protection of the cultural and social rights of all Syrians. International mediators have pointed to Syria's 14-point plan which grants Kurdish individuals citizenship rights and cultural protections as clear evidence of Damascus' efforts to promote inclusivity and stability. Analysts see integration and the consolidation of Damascus' control over the country as vital to Syria's prospects of stability, and without it, the state lacks the capacity to rebuild.