



Major Advances by Government Forces Prompt the SDF's Rapid Retreat in Northeast Syria

The Syrian government has made key territorial gains in the country's northeast, significantly consolidating its control over the entire nation and prompting Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) rapid retreat. The recent developments mark a notable geopolitical shift in the post-Assad era, as the new government seeks to unify the country under a central authority following years of fragmentation and conflict. Government forces have seized control of major cities and oil and gas fields from the SDF which are critical for the country's economic recovery and prospects of stability, as well as strategic infrastructure such as the Euphrates Dam. In the aftermath of these gains, the Syrian government announced a fragile ceasefire agreement aimed at giving the SDF several days to begin integrating soldiers into the Syrian national army in order to continue efforts towards bringing Syria under the direct central authority of the Damascus government. As mediating officials have sought to point out, the latest developments represent a critical juncture whereby the SDF is being offered a pathway to full integration into a unified Syrian state – something that was long denied under the repressive previous Assad regime.

Observers have outlined how the shifting geopolitical landscape in Syria is largely due to the United States' attempts to bolster the legitimacy and stability of the new Syrian government, and in turn, a recalibration of its longstanding support for the SDF. As highlighted by U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack, "Historically the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria was justified primarily as a counter-ISIS partnership. The SDF proved the most effective ground partner in defeating ISIS's territorial caliphate by 2019...At that time, there was no functioning central Syrian state to partner with [but today] the situation has fundamentally changed. Syria now has an acknowledged central government that has joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (as its 90th member in late 2025), signaling a westward pivot and cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism. This shifts the rationale for the U.S.-SDF partnership: the original purpose of the SDF as the primary anti-ISIS force on the ground has largely expired, as Damascus is now both willing and positioned to take over security responsibilities, including control of ISIS detention facilities and camps." Additionally, Barrack has emphasized that integration into the new Syrian state not only offers Kurdish participation in governance which goes far beyond the semi-autonomy the SDF held amid the fragmentation of conflict in Syria, but a failure to integrate would also open the door for instability and even the potential of ISIS resurgence. Barrack has also expressed displeasure with leadership of the

SDF for itself contributing to instability in Syria and seeking to drag destabilizing regional entities like Israel into internal Syrian affairs.

The United States, Turkey, and others have urged the SDF to accept the Syrian government's offer aimed at integration into the state. Both the U.S. and Turkey have voiced their support for the new government – which seeks a united Syria under the central control and authority of Damascus. After suffering expansive territorial losses to the Syrian government, the SDF was compelled to accept a 14-point deal that outlines a sweeping integration into the Syrian state, as well as the immediate and full handover of provinces, border crossings, prisons, camps, and oil and gas fields to the central government for state protection and resource management – aspects that analysts have long outlined are vitally important for Syria's economic recovery. As a part of the deal, the Syrian government reaffirmed its commitment to continuing its fight against ISIS and other terrorist networks alongside the United States as a now active member of the International Coalition in order to ensure the security and stability of the region at-large. Damascus also stressed its desire to pave the way for the safe return of displaced residents in northeast Syria to their homes. Notably, SDF personnel are expected to integrate on an individual basis, rather than as cohesive units, as it had been demanding. Thus, the agreement would effectively dismantle the SDF as an autonomous military entity. On January 20th, a new four-day ceasefire was announced to allow for further internal consultations and a practical mechanism for the integration to begin.

As experts have sought to highlight, the framework for integration has received the backing of major mediating parties like the U.S. and Turkey due to its fairness and being viewed as the best chance to guarantee Syria's stability moving forward. The agreement explicitly recognizes and codifies Kurdish rights through state laws and presidential decrees, including cultural and linguistic recognition. Ultimately, what Damascus is rejecting is the idea of armed self-rule, not Kurdish identity or rights, as the deal would transfer these rights into the state itself instead of leaving them dependent on militias outside of the state apparatus. Furthermore, by dismantling parallel entities of the state and consolidating control under a central authority, the prospect of enduring stability will be significantly bolstered. The framework for integration prioritizes Syrian territorial unity and security as well through the dismantling of autonomous structures which pose a threat to the state sovereignty of not only Syria, but its regional neighbors. International mediators view the individual-based integration of vetted SDF members, as opposed to keeping intact full units, as necessary in order to restore a single centralized national chain of command. This is an essential component for attracting long-term and much-needed reconstruction investment into the country, as it seeks to recover following years of conflict and repression.