



## Unprovoked SDF Shelling of Aleppo Prompts Days of Clashes with the Syrian Government and a Tenuous Ceasefire

Following days of clashes last week, the Syrian government and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reached a deal brokered by U.S. officials that is aimed at putting an end to the recent troubling outbreak of fighting in Aleppo. The agreement stipulated the withdrawal of SDF fighters from Syria's second-largest city, with government forces coordinating buses and a security escort in an effort to transport them to SDF-controlled territories in northeastern Syria east of the Euphrates River. Analysts have highlighted this as a significant development as it marks the withdrawal of the group's forces from pockets and neighborhoods in Aleppo such as Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyah that they have controlled since 2011. Thus, as a result, many view it as a strategic victory for the new Syrian government in its attempts to centralize state authority and exert control, while also paving the way for the return of thousands of displaced civilians. However, even as a degree of stability has returned to Aleppo, the prospects of the Syrian government being able to successfully centralize authority in the long-term remain in flux and fraught with obstacles given that the root cause of the clashes – the stalling of the process to integrate the SDF into the national army – remains unresolved.

The latest fighting was triggered by a failure to implement the March 2025 agreement which sought to integrate the SDF into the national Syrian army. The end of 2025 deadline for this passed without progress, leading the Syrian government to view the isolated Kurdish-controlled enclaves in Aleppo as a challenge to its central authority. During talks between the SDF and the Syrian government in Damascus, the latter proposed incorporating SDF forces into the Syrian military, but the SDF has continued to insist on self-rule. Both Syria and nearby Turkey have refused this. The early January violence broke out when SDF troops began shelling Aleppo in an unprovoked manner, and in doing so, killing civilians. Many have suggested that the recent SDF attacks have been supported by Israel – an external entity which has already received a wide array of criticism over the past year for its repeated attempts to destabilize the new Syrian government. There have even been recent rumors that other destabilizing actors in the region like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have also lent their support to the SDF, with reports of both the UAE and Israel arming the SDF and other Kurdish groups in Syria. For years, the SDF has been a major counterterrorism partner of the United States in fighting against ISIS but despite this long-running support, the U.S. has developed close ties with the new government in Damascus as well and pushed the SDF to abide by the terms of the March 2025 deal.

In addition to the March 2025 agreement, Syria has signed a military cooperation deal with Turkey which seeks to counter destabilizing militant groups and help strengthen Damascus' centralized control. Similarly to the new government in Damascus, Turkey has also grown impatient with the SDF's failure to abide by set-out conditions and integrate into the Syrian state. Thus, the Turkey-Syria cooperation has involved discussions for Turkey to expand its operations against the SDF and other militant groups within a substantial buffer zone in northern Syria. Likewise, the U.S. has emphasized the need for these forces to be pushed east of the Euphrates River. The SDF occupies roughly 25% of Syria, but the issue lies in the fact that it holds areas with significant energy resources such as oil and gas fields as well as critical agricultural lands and water infrastructure. All of this is why the prospect of Syria's future economic recovery and stabilization hinges on the new government in Damascus being able to regain control over these vital resources.

While a tenuous calm was brought about by the SDF withdrawal, the group is believed to be regrouping and amassing troops north and east of Aleppo – which prompted the Syrian army to declare areas in the eastern Aleppo countryside as closed military zones. As such, experts fear that the risk of further clashes persists, particularly in strategically sensitive and contested areas. The Syrian army has criticized the SDF for destroying multiple bridges connecting government-held territories to SDF-controlled ones in an attempt to hinder additional government advances. Furthermore, the Syrian government continues to call on militant groups to withdraw to the east of the Euphrates River, accusing them of launching drones against civilians in Aleppo. Tensions have therefore shifted from the city of Aleppo itself to the surrounding countryside, with concern regarding the potential for a renewed outbreak of violence despite ceasefires and efforts to de-escalate.