

# KURDISH POWER AND THE BATTLE FOR A PLACE IN SYRIA'S FUTURE

Noor Omer | May 4, 2025



Etched by years of conflict and geopolitical changes in motion, the Middle East faces a new era of uncertainty in the wake of the fall of the Assad regime. The Arab and non-Arab powers fiercely compete to shape the political and security structure of Syria. The geopolitical changes of the Middle East signal a new age of diplomacy supported by a transactional foreign policy of key players involved in Syria. Post-Assad Syria should adopt a balanced and moderate policy to proactively engage local actors and balance foreign interventions. A new Syria strategy needs a new form of diplomacy that incorporates religious, ethnic, and nationalistic differences between Arab and non-Arab actors. As a starter, the Syrian interim government should recognize the role of sub-state and non-state actors engaging in paradiplomacy that falls outside the constraints of its sovereignty. Syria's various sub-state and non-state actors' engagement in the practice of paradiplomacy defines the new age for diplomacy in the Middle East given that sovereign states can no longer ignore the importance of these actors, especially when they establish diplomatic relations without going back to the state for approval. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Northeastern Syria stand as a true testament to the growing influence of sub-state actors' paradiplomacy.

The difficult path ahead of Syria requires a pro-peace diplomatic initiative on behalf of the Syrian interim government that recognizes the legitimacy of these actors and offers them a place at the negotiating table. On the other hand, considering the transactional nature of foreign policy, the survival of sub/non-state actors like the SDF/PYD hinges on the balance given a drastically different US foreign policy in the Middle East, in addition to the Israel-Gaza war. Iran and Russia's deepened isolation in Syria in contrast with Türkiye's increasing interventions will indefinitely impact the legitimacy and political status of sub-state actors like the SDF, which is the largest military force in the country. In recent diplomatic talks, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by Commander General Mazloum Abdi- a renowned military leader in the fight against ISIS - signed a deal with the leader of the interim government of Syria Ahmed Al-Sharah to integrate the SDF into the Syrian state apparatus. While this deal offers a potential avenue

for political recognition for the Kurds, it might jeopardize the Kurds' hard-won autonomy and independent diplomatic capacity. In this sense, the uncomfortable political realities in Syria demand the Kurds to accommodate an adaptable approach to diplomacy, not only needed to forge strategic relationships, but also to survive the fluidity of the alliance structure.

The most viable strategy for the Kurds is to delay entering into agreements, shifting the burden of uncertainty onto the Syrian government rather than bearing it themselves. Early compromises risk weakening the Kurds diplomatically, jeopardizing their future political representation as Syria moves toward elections and the establishment of a new government. Despite the changing dynamics of alliances in Syria, the Kurds must seize this historic moment by embracing adaptable diplomacy. Today's diplomacy demands an innovative, flexible approach that moves beyond the traditional constraints of state sovereignty- a strategy exemplified by figures like Henry Kissinger.



Figure 1: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coordinating with the U.S.-led coalition forces in Deir ez-Zor in 2022. Credit: *MediaNews*.

## Key Background

Although the SDF may have initially been seen as a temporary actor formed in response to the rise of ISIS, their survival and their evolution into the largest military force in Syria demands diplomatic leverage. The strategic decision by Washington to partner with the SDF and other ground forces against ISIS turned into an incremental step to normalize state and non-state actor relations. During the fight against ISIS, the SDF, built around the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) and supported by Sunni Arab groups and other smaller factions, received significant U.S. support through training, weaponry, and airpower, and played a critical role in dislodging ISIS from key territories in Northern Syria.

The SDF's political wing, the PYD under the leadership of Salih Muslim rose to prominence as a governing force- historically intertwined with Kurdish sentiments of marginalization in Syria. For decades, the Syrian Ba'athist regime denied citizenship rights to Syrian Kurds by implementing discriminatory policies, including Arabization campaigns. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, the PYD established de facto control over most Kurdish cities following the Syrian regime's withdrawal of forces in 2012. Introduced in 2014, the Constitution of the Rojava Canton legitimized political groups such as the PYD, which soon evolved into a political platform backing the SDF. It emphasized Kurdish self-rule through pluralistic democracy and advocated for the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and democratic autonomy.

The survival of the SDF and its political wing, the PYD underscores their strengthened diplomatic and military status and their growing pursuit of recognition both regionally and internationally, following the defeat of ISIS in Syria. However, the future status of the Kurds in Syria's new political structure will largely depend on how they engage with Damascus and other key diplomatic actors. An equally critical factor is the need for effective talks with Syria's interim government, particularly negotiations over drafting a new constitution that ensures meaningful political representation for the Kurds. Ensuring Kurdish political recognition within a new constitution requires building a robust network of communication and cooperation with unconventional allies, such as Türkiye in



addition to formal diplomatic channels with key actors including the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Technical cooperation with both key allies and non-allies is crucial for Syrian Kurds as they pursue greater regional and international legitimacy. To achieve this, the Kurds need to reinforce local deconfliction channels and exhaust all diplomatic avenues to ease tensions with non-allied actors. This complementary diplomatic approach is not only crucial to safeguard the Syrian Kurds' political gains, but to also secure a sustainable and prominent role in Syria's evolving governance structure.

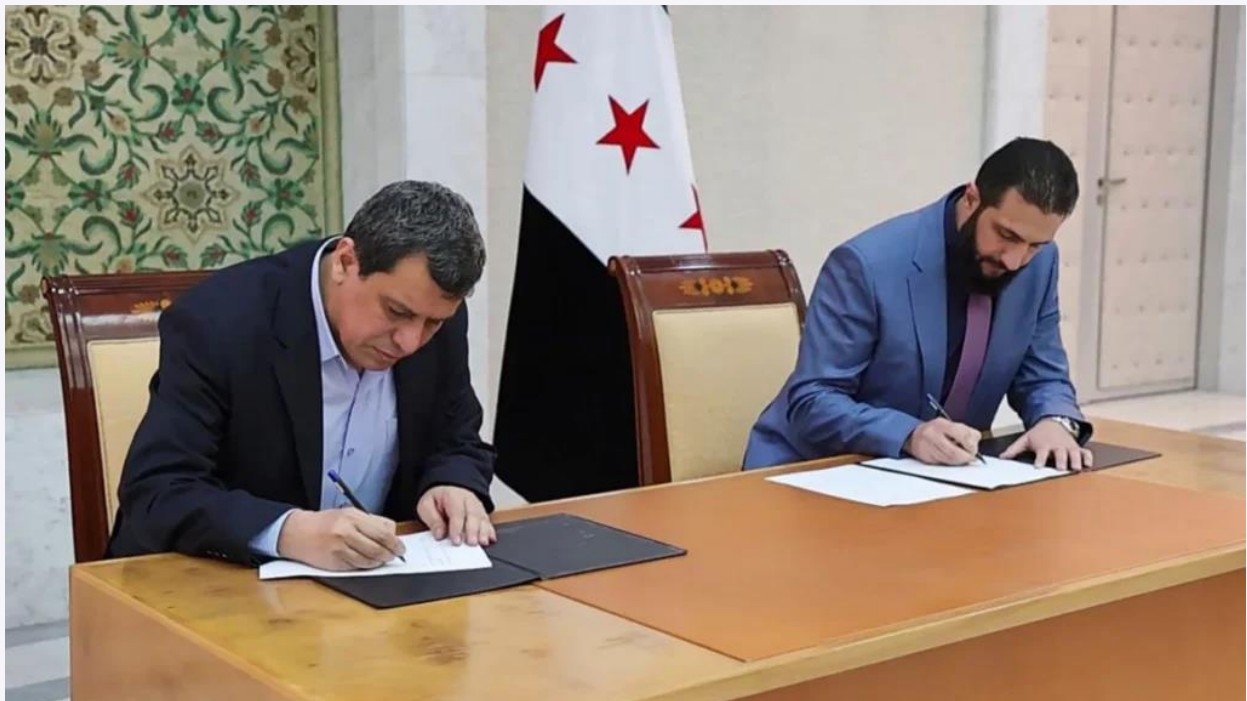


Figure 2: Syria's interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa, right, and Mazloun Abdi, the commander of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, sign a deal in Damascus, Syria, on Monday March 10, 2025. Credit: *AP*.

## The Deal with Damascus

Under the new deal, the Syrian interim government and the Syrian Democratic Forces agreed to work together towards national reconciliation and avert renewed conflict in Northeastern Syria. The SDF's strategic hold on territories and resources is to be ceded to the interim government and merged with its current

administrative, military, security, and economic institutions. All provisions of the deal are to be finalized and implemented by the end of 2025, including gradual integration of Northeastern Syria's border crossings, airports, and oil and gas fields into the full control of Damascus. Aiming to establish a unified national army, the agreement mandates the SDF to integrate its forces into the security and military structure of the Syrian Ministry of Defense. This deal presents a historic opportunity for the SDF and other Kurdish factions to recalibrate their positions and engage proactively with Damascus in pursuit of regulatory frameworks that safeguard their long-term interests within Syria. What was once politically unattainable for the Kurds under the Assad regime — namely, securing diplomatic and political recognition — is now within reach, thanks to the fluid and transactional nature of international and regional stakeholders seeking leverage in Syria.



Figure 3: Text of the first page of the agreement stipulating the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the institutions of the Syrian Arab Republic, 10 March 2025.

SDF's deal with Damascus proves emerging centers of influence in Syria, as a consequence of multipolarity and an increasingly uncertain international support system. SDF, which previously heavily relied on the US for support, now actively engages in dialogue to build diverse relationships to pursue their interests outside traditional alliance structures. The SDF's ongoing adaptation to shifting dynamics is crucial for breaching political deadlock and mitigating the vulnerability created by the planned U.S. military drawdown to just 1,000 troops in Northeast Syria. All in all, the SDF's de facto control and ability to provide security and governance in Northeast Syria indicates a key factor in their interactions with both the Syrian interim government and the international community.

The current agreement President Ahmed Al Shara intends to implement on behalf of the Syrian interim government reflects a pragmatic acknowledgement of the SDF's overarching authority as well as a negotiation of competing claims of power in a deeply fragmented Syria. Thus, any engagement with Damascus will likely require the SDF to prioritize securing a meaningful role in future peace negotiations as a distinct regional entity and advocating for constitutional amendments that recognize Kurdish rights within a unified Syria. Achieving co-decision power in political settlements and treaty negotiations will be crucial for safeguarding Kurdish interests in the long term.

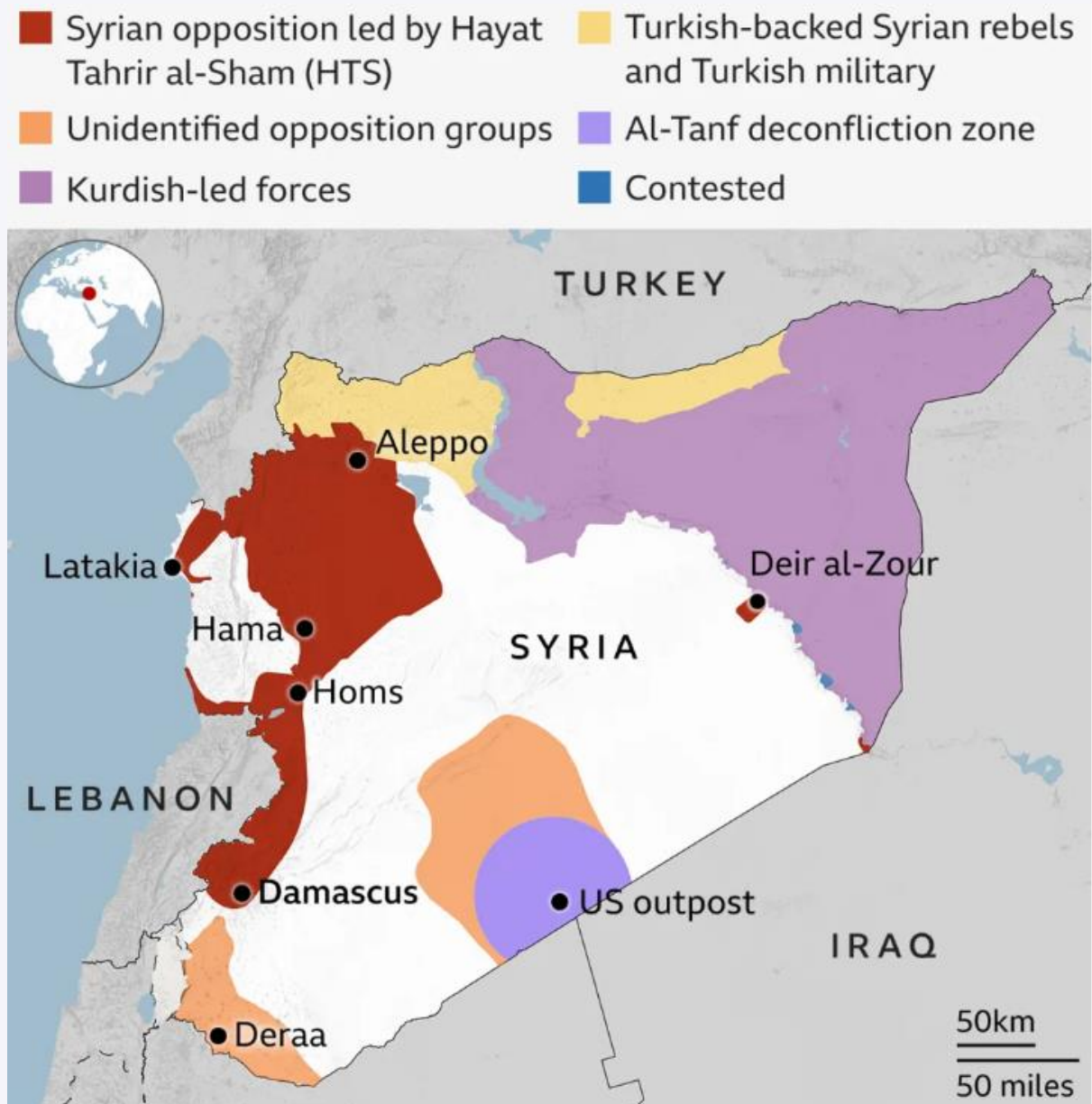


Figure 4: Territorial control in Syria following the December 8, 2024, revolution and the overthrow of the Assad regime. Credit: *BBC*.

## Federalism and The Path Forward

On the question of federalism, the Syrian interim government advocates for a multilateral platform that strengthens Syria's unity and territorial integrity. In fact, the interim government's Presidency issued a statement rejecting the establishment of separate entities under the pretext of federalism or self-administration without broad national consensus. However, not all components of Syria share this strong position against federalism. For instance, the Kurds, who



recently held “the Kurdish Unity and Solidarity Conference” in Qamishlo, support federalism as a comprehensive national solution for the Syrian Kurds. The SDF and Kurdish military and political factions such as PYD and Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ) share their desire for a federal Syria that constitutionally safeguards the territorial control of Northeast Syria in the hands of the Kurds. Given the diverse social fabric in Syria, namely Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Druze, Alawites..etc., it is unlikely that any other form of government or constitutional amendment not based on federalism could lead to comprehensive national consensus. Negotiations over the constitution are not the only concern for Syrian Kurds. There is growing concern over the form of the electoral system that directly impacts the size and effectiveness of their representation in a new Syrian government. Demands for a proportional representation electoral system are on the rise, especially by Kurds and minority groups to ensure equal participation in a new government.

A proportional representation election system brings all the voices and diverse backgrounds to a newly established government, but to what extent such an election system is favored by the interim government is not clear, especially as Syria’s current president has close ties with Türkiye. This could be problematic given that Türkiye seeks low representation for Kurds and may leverage its relationship with the interim government and ignore demands for a fair electoral system, let alone demands for federalism or decentralization of power. In this sense, it is in the Kurds’ best interest to strike a political deal through technical cooperation with Türkiye and the interim government together before elections take place, and certainly before a new Constitution is drafted. This political deal with the interim government is highly important for Kurds, as US withdrawal in Syria will reshape not only the security situation but also a new political and diplomatic prospect between the competing players present in Syria.

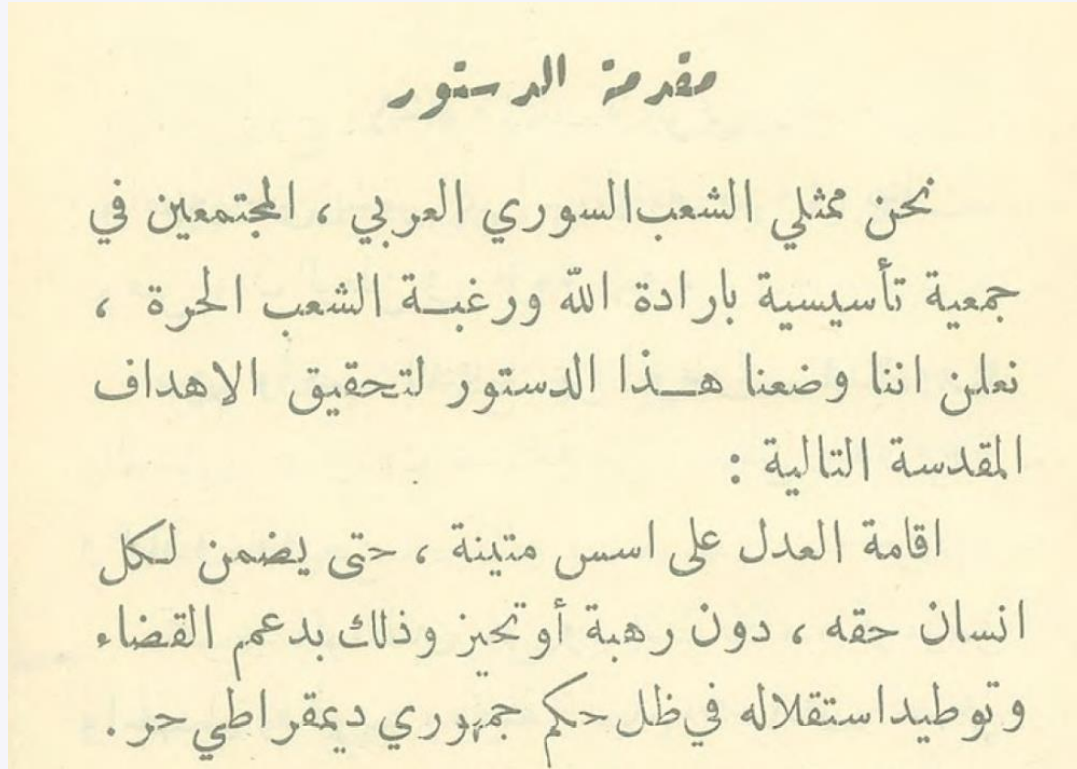


Figure 5: Photograph of the preamble to the 1950 Syrian Constitution, which reads: "We, the representatives of the Syrian Arab people, assembled in a Constituent Assembly by the will of God and the free will of the people, declare that we have enacted this Constitution to achieve the following sacred objectives: the establishment of justice upon firm foundations, in a manner that guarantees every individual their rights without fear, coercion, or delay, through the support of an independent judiciary, under a republican democratic system of free will."

Note: While the preamble emphasizes principles of justice and rights, it notably does not acknowledge the presence of other ethnic components of Syrian society, such as Kurds.

In the event of a partial U.S. drawdown—particularly under the uncertain leadership of a second Trump administration—the Kurds may find themselves in a stronger position. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are larger and better armed than the military forces of the Syrian Interim Government. Türkiye's role in shaping Syria's political future is crucial, particularly considering its long-standing interest in limiting the political status of the Syrian Kurds. Syrian Kurds could explore the option of working closely with other Kurdish entities, like the Kurdistan Region, to create a bridge for better relations between Türkiye and Northeast Syria. This collaboration could help secure long-term stability for the Syrian Kurds as the

geopolitical situation in Syria continues to change. A peace agreement between Türkiye and Israel would play a significant role in strengthening the political standing of Syrian Kurds in Syria's future political structure. This would not only enhance the Kurds' diplomatic leverage but also help ensure their interests are represented as the political situation in Syria evolves. By strategically involving with key competing players in Syria's peace and governance negotiations, Syrian Kurds could gain a more influential role in shaping the country's future.

**Table 1:Local Syrian Actors**

Local Actor	Role/Position in Syria	Vision/Future Supported for Syria
<b>HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham)</b>	Sunni Islamist rebel group dominant in the Idlib region.	Transitional Islamist-leaning government; rebranding efforts as "moderate."
<b>SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)</b>	Kurdish-led coalition controlling Northeast Syria.	Decentralized/federal Syria with Kurdish autonomy.
<b>SNA (Syrian National Army)</b>	Turkish-backed Sunni Arab rebel group.	Centralized Sunni-majority government aligned with Türkiye.
<b>Islamic State (ISIS)</b>	Remnants of the extremist group.	Return to extremist Islamic caliphate governance.
<b>Syrian Interim Government</b>	Turkish-backed political body linked to opposition forces.	Sunni Arab-led government replacing Assad; pro-Turkish influence.

**Table 2: International and Regional State Actors**

State Actor	Role/Position in Syria	Vision/Future Supported for Syria
Russia	Former primary supporter of Assad; currently hosting Assad in exile.	Initially backed the Assad regime; weakened now, future uncertain
United States	Supported SDF; limited engagement after ISIS defeat.	Supports a pluralistic, decentralized Syria focused on security.
Türkiye	Strong influence via SNA; anti-SDF stance.	Sunni Arab-led centralized Syria; opposed to Kurdish autonomy.
Iran	Backed Assad with military and financial support; IRGC presence.	Seeks to maintain influence through allied groups; Shia-axis survival.
Israel	Conducts airstrikes on Iranian positions; security-driven policy.	Prefers fragmented Syria to curb Iranian/Hezbollah power.
Saudi Arabia	Rebuilding diplomatic ties; part of Arab normalization.	Favors Sunni Arab political dominance; counters Iranian influence.
Hezbollah (Lebanon)	Armed group allied with Iran and Assad.	Maintain Shia corridor and influence across Syria.
United Nations (UN)	Mediator for political transition and humanitarian aid.	Advocates inclusive political process, constitutional reform, peacebuilding.

## **Kurdish Autonomy and Syria's Constitution**

A recognized political status of the Kurds in Syria as much as it depends on the peace negotiations between the political actors involved, especially US, Israel, Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, it equally depends on how, when, and who writes the new constitution of Syria. Current efforts to write the constitution will compromise equal political representation and inclusivity as the drafters are not direct representatives elected by the people of Syria as a result of a fair and transparent election. Drafting a constitution that represents the voices of the people of Syria with all its ethnic and religious components requires first a fair and transparent election where selected representatives will oversee drafting a constitution for everyone. The Kurdish population of Northeast Syria ought to unite and prepare for elections in order to participate in the new government of Syria and secure the political rights that were long denied to them by the former Assad regime.

The current political situation requires the Kurds to engage in negotiation and bargaining to find common ground with the Syrian interim government and to identify practical steps toward shared interests. Equally important, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, should rely on recognized actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to engage directly with the interim government and regional players. This engagement is key to building favorable perceptions through diplomatic initiatives, especially among major regional powers, which are essential for strengthening the legitimacy of Northeastern Syria as a regional entity.



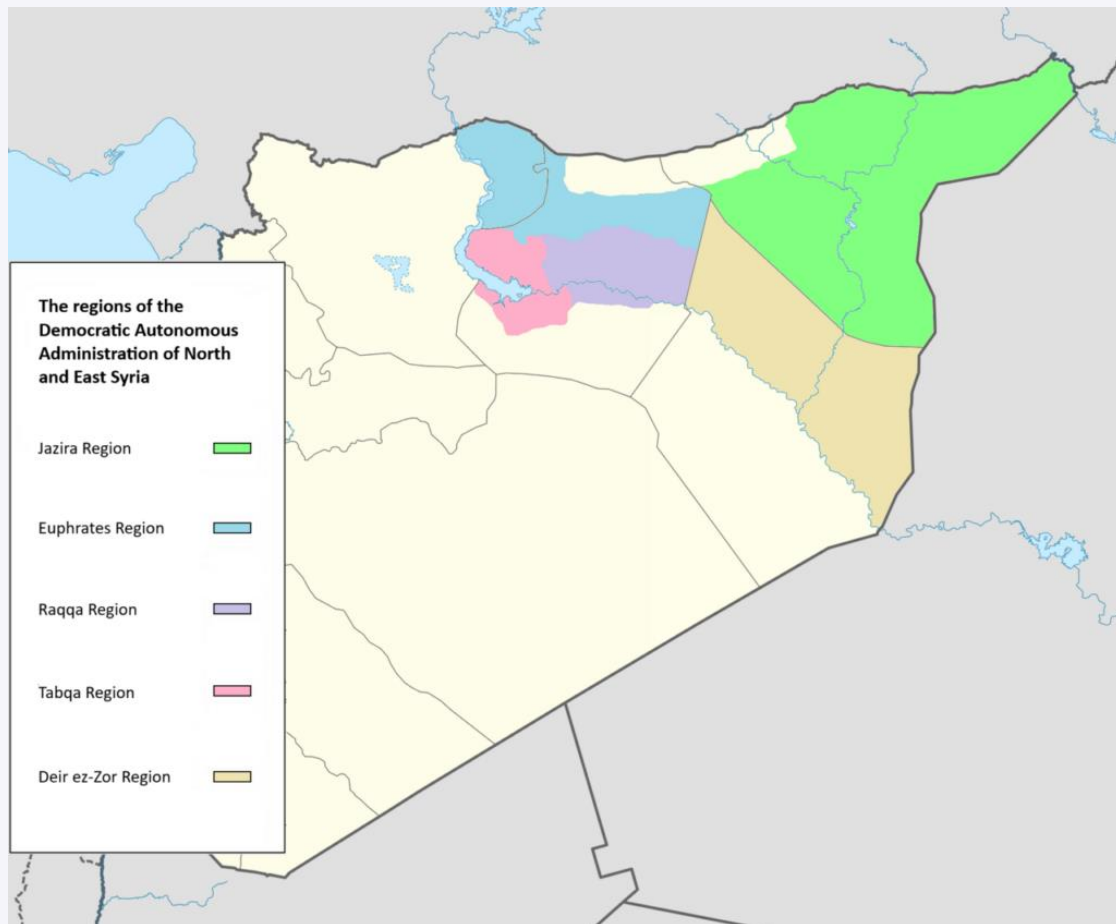


Figure 6: Regions of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

The SDF should develop a clear agenda aimed at safeguarding Kurdish rights within a unified Syrian state. This agenda can gain traction by opening channels of communication with adversaries and exploring unconventional partnerships, including Türkiye and Israel. In the Middle East, given the multi-faceted conflict involving numerous state and non-state actors, strengthening crucial diplomatic ties for the Syrian Kurds is paramount to leveraging the evolving regional order to solidify their autonomous status. The Kurds' openness to explore unconventional partnerships could serve as a pivotal step in elevating their political standing within Syria and securing greater diplomatic recognition both regionally and internationally, especially in light of the shifting interests of all stakeholders in a post-Assad Syria.

Given the rapidly evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region, avoiding unnecessary escalation with Damascus remains important. However, Iran's

diminishing presence, coupled with the growing assertiveness of Israel and its allies, may present a timely opportunity for the Syrian Kurds under the leadership of the SDF and AANES to adopt a more proactive diplomatic strategy to consolidate their autonomy. While the views of international powers still matter, what truly counts now is the SDF and AANES's ability to govern well, keep the support of their people, and carefully read the changes happening in the region. These factors will be key in building international recognition for Northeast Syria in the evolving landscape of the Middle East.

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## CONTACT

CHANNEL8 BUILDING,  
KURDSAT QTR , AS SULAYMANIYAH, IRAQ  
+964 (0)770-608-8885  
INNOV8@CHANNEL8.MEDIA