



# DAMASCUS AND THE YPG ON A COLLISION COURSE IN SYRIA

RECEP T. TEKE

**T**he changing dynamics in Syria, following the ouster of Bashar Assad, have set the stage for a confrontation between the new government in Damascus and the YPG — the offshoot of the PKK terrorist group — in northeastern Syria. Having achieved a degree of internal stability and made significant progress in strengthening its regional and international standing, the transitional government is now

turning its attention to the broader objective of unifying Syria. For Damascus, the dissolution of all armed groups is a critical imperative for consolidating authority and restoring Syria's territorial integrity. To that end, it has proposed a political solution to the YPG. Whether through political dialogue or military means, the transitional government appears resolute in its commitment to bring all of Syria under centralized control.

Growing confidence within Damascus, fueled by shifting political and security conditions, has led key Syrian officials to take a stronger stance against the YPG's presence in northeastern Syria.

However, the YPG has rejected Damascus's political proposal, maintaining its ambition to preserve autonomy and control over the territories it currently occupies. Although negotiations between the two sides are ongoing, their contrasting visions for Syria's political future have prevented meaningful progress. Meanwhile, Damascus is steadily gaining the upper hand over the YPG, consolidating its position both domestically and internationally. Yet, unwilling to acknowledge the shifting dynamics working against it, the YPG continues to drag its feet. As a result, the YPG and the transitional government are on a collision course, as their mutually exclusive objectives make the prospect of a negotiated settlement increasingly tenuous. Should the YPG persist in its intransigent stance against an increasingly confident Damascus, the prevailing deadlock is likely to endure, exacerbating tensions and heightening the risk of open confrontation.

## SHIFTING DYNAMICS

After the fall of the Assad regime, the new government in Damascus adopted a pragmat-

ic approach, prioritizing internal security and seeking international legitimacy instead of engaging directly with the YPG. This cautious policy was also informed by the former U.S. administration's steadfast support for the YPG, which made any potential confrontation diplomatically risky. Against this backdrop, a meeting was held in Damascus on December 30 between the transitional government and a YPG delegation, marking the first direct contact between the two actors.<sup>1</sup> While the discussions did not result in substantial agreements, both sides agreed to continue the dialogue.

Yet, this careful approach now gives way to a more assertive strategy. Growing confidence within Damascus, fueled by shifting political and security conditions, has led key Syrian officials to take a stronger stance against the YPG's presence in northeastern Syria. The transitional government has solidified its authority by securing internal stability through targeted operations against the remnants of the Assad regime and successfully disbanding and integrating various armed factions — except the YPG — into the Ministry of

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<sup>1</sup> "Syria's de facto leader al-Sharaa holds talks with Kurds", *The New Arab*, 31 December 2024.



Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa meets with armed group leaders to discuss their integration into the Syrian Defense Ministry.

Defense.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, its increasing international recognition, strengthened through diplomatic engagements with key regional and global actors, has bolstered its position. This confidence has been further reinforced by Donald Trump's inauguration in the U.S. on January 20, as his administration signals a reduced U.S. commitment to Syria, including the possibility of a full withdrawal. These developments have created a more favorable geopolitical environment for Damascus to advance its objectives regarding the YPG and adopt a more aggressive stance.

## GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

The latest statements from Syrian officials reflect the transitional government's shift toward a more assertive stance. While Damascus continues to emphasize its pref-

erence for a negotiated resolution, it has not ruled out the possibility of military action should diplomacy fail. In a recent interview, Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra reaffirmed the government's willingness to engage in dialogue with the YPG but underscored that military measures remained an option if political negotiations proved unproductive.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa has made it clear that demands for federalism or autonomy are unacceptable, reaffirming Damascus's commitment to a centralized Syrian state.<sup>4</sup> Al-Sharaa has consistently opposed the group retaining its weapons, asserting that only the state should control all arms in Syria. While he also supports a political resolution, he has emphasized that the government retains the right to take whatever actions are necessary to preserve Syria's territorial integrity.

<sup>2</sup> "Forging a united front: The challenges of building Syria's new army", *The New Arab*, 3 February 2025.

<sup>3</sup> "Syria defense minister says open to talks with SDF, but ready to use force", *Al Arabiya*, 22 January 2025.

<sup>4</sup> "Syria's Transitional Crossroads: Ahmed Al-Sharaa's Vision for the Post-Assad Era", *The Syrian Observer*, 27 January 2025.

Damascus prioritizes a negotiated resolution to the crisis, but the continuation of the dialogue depends on several key conditions, including the disbandment of the YPG and the full surrender of all weapons to state control.

These statements indicate that Damascus prioritizes a negotiated resolution to the crisis. The absence of military confrontation so far underscores this intention. However, the continuation of the dialogue depends on several key conditions. These include the disbandment of the YPG, the full surrender of all weapons to state control, and the rejection of any form of federalism or autonomy.<sup>5</sup> In return, Damascus has offered to recognize the cultural rights of the Kurdish population in the country and ensure their inclusion in the new constitution. The government has also proposed creating opportunities for Kurds to participate in new security and military institutions. Additionally, the offer includes a governance model that would empower local councils to manage their own affairs, ensuring greater autonomy within a unified state framework. In response, however, the YPG has rejected this proposal and put forward its own set of demands, challenging Damascus's terms for resolution.

### YPG'S CALCULATION

The YPG has so far maintained a largely uncompromising stance in the ongoing

negotiations, relying on the international support it has garnered over the years. This support, mainly given by the U.S., initially stemmed from the group's role in the fight against DAESH/ISIS, but the YPG believes it will continue due to its control over DAESH camps and prisons in Syria's northeast. As a result, the group feels secure in the face of an emboldened Damascus, assuming that international backing will persist, given the ongoing concerns about the resurgence of DAESH. From the YPG's perspective, the international community is unlikely to support a military solution by Damascus, fearing the destabilization of the region and the potential for an DAESH comeback.

This calculation strengthens the YPG's belief that a political resolution is more likely than military action in the current context. Consequently, the group dismisses Damascus's conditions and instead offers its own terms in negotiations. Its primary goal is to preserve the status quo with minimal concessions, ensuring it maintains substantial autonomy within a decentralized Syria. As part of its demands, the YPG aims to be incorporated into the Syrian army as a "mil-

<sup>5</sup> "Syrian peace or conflict? The future of HTS-SDF relations after al-Assad", *Al Arabiya*, 28 January 2025.





U.S. forces provide armed training to the YPG militia in northeastern Syria, near the Türkiye-Iraq border. (AA Photo)

itary bloc", retain control over its existing territories, and secure a share of the revenues generated from oil and gas fields in the region.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, unwilling to relinquish its leverage over the DAESH threat, the YPG insists on maintaining control of the DAESH camps and prisons in northeastern Syria. In exchange, the group pledges to transfer control of border crossings to Damascus and expel foreign PKK fighters from the region.

## IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

The conflict between Damascus and the YPG represents a zero-sum game, with each side pursuing mutually exclusive objectives that leave little room for compromise. At the heart of this confrontation

is a fundamental disagreement over Syria's future political structure. For Damascus, the creation of a centralized, unified state under its control is non-negotiable. The idea of autonomous regions, particularly YPG-controlled areas in the northeast, is seen as a direct challenge to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Granting the YPG autonomy is also a dangerous precedent that could encourage other communities, like the Druze and Alawites, to seek similar privileges, undermining state unity and threatening Syria's political stability. The YPG, on the other hand, insists on maintaining control over its territories and demands administrative autonomy, seeking the ability to govern and manage local affairs independently

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<sup>6</sup> "Negotiators zero in on potential deal to disarm Syria's last battleground", *Reuters*, 19 January 2025.



An oil well in Hasakah, northeast Syria. (AA Photo)

within a decentralized Syria. It views centralization as a threat to its established governance structures and military control in the northeast.

In addition to administrative autonomy, the YPG has demanded to integrate into the Syrian army as a “military bloc,” refusing to disband its units and seeking a separate command structure within Syria’s Ministry of Defense. However, Syrian officials categorically refused this demand as allowing the YPG to maintain its military autonomy would pose significant risks, including the potential for future instability and even the threat of a coup.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, the Syrian government cannot permit any armed group, particularly one with independent control over a substantial territory and significant oil revenues, to retain such power within the national military. Doing so would undermine state authority, complicate efforts to restore

national unity, and jeopardize future stability, as demonstrated by the Iraqi example.

The DAESH issue remains another point of contention between Damascus and the YPG. The YPG insists on retaining control over the DAESH prisons and camps in northeastern Syria, viewing this as crucial for maintaining its political relevance and international recognition.<sup>8</sup> However, the Syrian government wants the YPG to hand over control of these prisons and camps and views this issue as a strategic maneuver by the group to justify its autonomy. Syrian officials, including President al-Sharaa, have accused the YPG of exploiting the DAESH problem to justify its territorial control and military autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Damascus has rejected the use of oil revenues as a bargaining chip in the ongoing talks, expressing its unwillingness to engage in the oil file as part of any negotiation strategy by the YPG.

7 “Fate of US-backed terrorists in Syria hangs in balance”, *Daily Sabah*, 20 January 2025.

8 Haid Haid, “Unity or conflict: Where are fragile HTS-SDF talks headed?”, *Al Majalla*, 3 February 2025.

9 “New Syria government does not want conflict with Kurds, Al-Sharaa says”, *Middle East Monitor*, 26 January 2025.



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa hold a joint press conference following their meeting at the Presidential Complex in Ankara, Feb. 4, 2025. (AA Photo)

## DAMASCUS GAINING THE UPPER HAND

The significant gap between the actors' expectations in the dialogue process stems from their maximalist demands. The new government is determined to assert its authority across all of Syria, aiming to monopolize political and military power — an objective consistent with the priorities of any central authority. In contrast, the YPG seeks to maintain its autonomy and preserve its military structure, resisting full integration into the new state apparatus. As such, its demands from the new Syrian government largely mirror those it previously presented to the Assad regime. However, the political landscape has undergone profound transformations since then. With Assad's departure, domestic, regional, and international dynamics

have shifted considerably in favor of Damascus, weakening the YPG's negotiating position.

The new government in Damascus is steadily gaining both domestic and international legitimacy. Having overthrown a decades-old brutal regime at the end of a prolonged civil war, it has gained significant momentum. Crucially, it has avoided dismantling the institutions of the old regime, ensuring a smoother transition and greater institutional continuity. Unlike many revolutionary governments driven by a desire for retribution, it has refrained from pursuing a revenge agenda, instead committing to a more pragmatic and inclusive approach.<sup>10</sup> It has pledged to avoid the missteps of its predecessor and promised to establish a political structure that accommodates Syria's diverse

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<sup>10</sup> "Sectarian violence in Syria has been less intense than feared since Assad's ouster", *AP News*, 21 December 2024.

ethnic and sectarian communities. Through effective communication and careful policymaking, the transitional government has garnered broad support from Syrians, including those in the diaspora. While the new government continues to gain popularity, the YPG is increasingly viewed as an occupying force seeking to divide Syria.

Syria's regional recognition further strengthens the new government's position. Following the regime collapse, regional states moved swiftly to engage with Damascus, eager to shape Syria's political future and participate in its reconstruction. This diplomatic momentum led to a series of high-level meetings, solidifying the new government's legitimacy. Syria has made it clear that its revolution would not threaten the security of regional states in any way, a stance that has reassured many in the region.<sup>11</sup> Today, it enjoys substantial backing from key regional actors such as Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom prioritize stability in Syria. On the international stage, global powers have also begun recognizing the new administration, as reflected in the increasing number of diplomatic engagements with Damascus. Even Russian officials have visited the capital, signaling a pragmatic shift in their approach.<sup>12</sup> This growing political and diplomatic support strengthens the central government's hand, allowing it to exert greater pressure on the YPG and leaving the group increasingly isolated.

Among its regional allies, Türkiye has emerged as Syria's most crucial partner,

particularly in addressing the YPG challenge. With deep-rooted national security concerns stemming from the YPG's ties to the PKK, Ankara has been unwavering in its demand for the dismantling of PKK-aligned structures in Syria.<sup>13</sup> Viewing the YPG's continued presence as an existential threat, Türkiye remains committed to eliminating this challenge and shows no signs of relenting. While Damascus exerts political and diplomatic pressure, Türkiye applies direct military pressure, as evidenced by ongoing clashes between the YPG and the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). This dynamic enables Damascus to capitalize on Türkiye's military pressure, using it as additional leverage to compel the YPG into making concessions and accepting its terms.

## YPG LOSING GROUND

Conversely, the YPG is experiencing a decline in strategic leverage, as its primary source of external support — international backing — appears increasingly precarious. A potential shift in U.S. policy, particularly under an administration inclined toward a full withdrawal from Syria, could leave the YPG without its most significant patron. In the event of an escalation, U.S. support is unlikely, as President Trump explicitly stated his reluctance to involve the U.S. in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, with both Iran and Russia no longer posing strategic threats in the country, Washington has little incentive to maintain a military presence or extend support to the YPG. Without a broader geopolitical rationale to justify its involvement, the U.S. is in-

11 Jeremy Bowen, "Syria not a threat to world, rebel leader Ahmed al-Sharaa tells BBC", *BBC*, 19 December 2024.

12 "Russian diplomats make first visit to Syria since al-Assad's removal", *Al Jazeera*, 28 January 2025.

13 "PKK/YPG terrorists have no room in Syria's future: Turkish FM", *Daily Sabah*, 22 December 2024.

14 "Trump says to decide on future of troops in Syria", *Rudaw*, 31 January 2025.



creasingly disengaging, further weakening the YPG's position.

Meanwhile, European states that once viewed the YPG sympathetically are now prioritizing diplomatic engagement with the transitional government in Damascus. In the event of a serious confrontation, their support is likely to align with the central authority rather than the YPG. Notably, France—one of the YPG's strongest supporters—has signaled a shift in its position, with President Emmanuel Macron extending congratulations to President al-Sharaa upon his inauguration, underscoring France's evolving diplomatic stance.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz recently held a phone call with al-Sharaa, while Germany's foreign minister explicitly urged the YPG to disarm and integrate into Syria's new security forces.<sup>16</sup> Hoping for alternative sources of support, the YPG had also expected assistance from Israel. However, this failed to materialize, as Israel's backing remained purely rhetorical, never translating into tangible

aid. These developments reflect a broader trend of diminishing international support for the YPG, further isolating the group as the balance of power continues to shift in favor of Damascus.

Additionally, the counterterrorism justification that once underpinned Western support for the YPG is losing relevance, as the new government in Damascus has pledged a firm commitment to combating extremism in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the rebel group that led the offensive against the Assad regime, previously demonstrated its effectiveness in countering terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and DAESH in Idlib.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Türkiye has vowed to support Damascus in its counterterrorism efforts, bringing together Syria's neighbors—Jordan and Iraq—to address regional security concerns within an institutional framework.<sup>19</sup> Turkish officials have explicitly stated their intention to assist Damascus in the fight against DAESH, including securing DAESH

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15 "France's Macron discusses Syria's future with new leader Al-Sharaa", *France 24*, 5 January 2025.

16 "Germany says Kurdish militias in Syria must be disarmed", *Reuters*, 20 December 2024.

17 "US lifts arrest bounty on Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa", *TRT World*, 20 December 2024.

18 Charles Lister, "Pragmatic jihadist or opportunistic warlord? HTS's Jolani expands his rule in northern Syria", *Middle East Institute*, 13 October 2022.

19 "Turkey says it will join with neighbors to fight the Islamic State group in Syria", *ABC News*, 2 February 2025.

camps and prisons in the northeast.<sup>20</sup> Besides, the U.S. has begun sharing intelligence with the new government to prevent terrorist attacks in Syria.<sup>21</sup> At least one attempted DAESH attack has already been thwarted thanks to this coordination, signaling a shift in U.S. priorities toward supporting stability under the new administration rather than continuing to back the YPG.

The YPG also faces enduring legitimacy challenges within Syria. As an extension of the PKK, with cadres originating from Iraq's Qandil Mountains, it has struggled to establish itself as a genuinely Syrian entity. Its past collaboration with the Assad regime and its allies during the Syrian civil war has reinforced perceptions of the group as counter-revolutionary. Moreover, the YPG's opportunistic stance during the final HTS offensive further damaged its reputation. While the rebel groups were focused on combating Assad, the YPG concentrated on expanding its own territorial control, distancing itself from the broader goal of overthrowing the regime. This left the YPG further marginalized among those advocating for a comprehensive revolutionary change.

Although the YPG governs large swaths of northeastern Syria, its rule is increasingly contested, particularly by the significant Arab population under its administration, who have staged multiple uprisings against its authority.<sup>22</sup> Rather than relying on local support, the group has largely maintained control through coercive measures. Most re-

cently, the YPG has been forced to launch extensive "security" operations in its areas of control, aiming to suppress dissent from Arabs who oppose its rule and prevent desertions from within its ranks.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the YPG's terrorist attacks in the Manbij district of Syria's Aleppo province have provoked widespread outrage across Syria. In an attempt to destabilize the city after losing control, the group carried out seven car bombings, killing at least 28 civilians and injuring many others.<sup>24</sup> These attacks have drawn strong condemnation not only from Damascus but also from other regional actors, highlighting the growing frustration with the YPG's actions.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the YPG is also at a military disadvantage. While it has built a force with U.S. training and weaponry, boasting an army of around 100,000 fighters, its position is far from secure. One major vulnerability is the Arab factions within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are unlikely to engage in a conflict against the Syrian government and could even align with Damascus. Additionally, any military action by the government would most likely be supported by Türkiye, whose air superiority and firepower would make it difficult for the YPG to hold ground. With Syria's northeast bordered by Türkiye to the north and the government-controlled areas to the west, the YPG's defensive lines are easily compromised, leaving it highly exposed. So, if the YPG believes that it can resist any military offensive, it is playing with

20 "Syria's new government ready to run ISIS detainee camps, Turkish minister says", *Financial Times*, 20 December 2025.

21 "U.S. shared secret intelligence with Syria's new leaders", *The Washington Post*, 24 January 2025.

22 "Arab tribes, PKK terrorists renew clashes in Syria's east", *Daily Sabah*, 7 August 2024.

23 "Protests and SDF defections: Discontent simmers in eastern Deir e-Zor", *Syria Direct*, 13 December 2024.

24 "28 civilians killed in terror attacks in Syria's Manbij since late December", *Anadolu Agency*, 4 February 2025.

25 "Syrian presidency says Manbij criminals will face most severe punishments", *Middle East Monitor*, 4 February 2025.



The aftermath of a car bomb explosion in Manbij, Syria, Dec. 24, 2024. (AA Photo)

fire and putting countless human lives at risk. Accepting the terms offered by Damascus would be the wiser choice, considering its vulnerable position, as resisting could lead to even greater devastation.

## CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of the evolving power dynamics between Damascus and the YPG suggests that, should tensions escalate into a prolonged confrontation, the YPG will face considerable strategic vulnerabilities. The strengthening position of the central government, coupled with waning external support for the YPG and deep-rooted local opposition to its rule, indicates that the group will eventually be forced to make concessions if negotiations are to progress meaningfully. Damascus is already expressing its frustration, accusing the YPG of dragging its feet in talks, while the group continues to resist demands that would curtail its autonomy. If neither side demonstrates flexibility, the prospects for a peaceful resolution remain slim. Furthermore, as regional and international actors increasingly shift their engagement toward Damascus, the geopolitical landscape appears to be align-

ing against the YPG. The transitional government's growing legitimacy, its ability to consolidate power domestically, and the broader strategic recalibration in the region have significantly altered the balance of power. The YPG now faces the reality of isolation, as its long-standing reliance on foreign support proves unsustainable in the face of shifting international priorities.

Ultimately, while a military confrontation is not yet inevitable, the conditions for one are gradually taking shape. The YPG and Damascus are on a collision course, with both sides unwilling to compromise. If the YPG continues to reject Damascus's demands despite the shifting geopolitical realities, it risks being increasingly marginalized and potentially facing a forceful campaign aimed at dismantling its control. Whether through political pressure or military action, the transitional government remains resolute in its goal of restoring full sovereignty over Syria. With growing domestic and international support, Damascus has the upper hand, leaving the YPG with diminishing options in an environment that is becoming ever more hostile and unfavorable to its continued autonomy.

## About the Author

### Recep T. Teke

He completed his master's studies in International Relations at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara. His master's thesis examines the Kurds of Syria and their representation in Western media. As part of his academic journey, he also studied at Sciences Po Paris. Currently, he is a PhD candidate in Area Studies at METU. His research interests include Middle East affairs, Türkiye's Middle East policy, and Syrian politics. He is fluent in both English and French.



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#### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA  
**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20  
**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr  
**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)