

Agreement between the Kurds and Damascus – a Chance for Syria’s Stabilization

The agreement concluded between the Kurds and the government of Ahmed al-Sharaa is very good news, creating an opportunity for Syria’s stabilization. Its key element is Mazlum Abdi’s announced dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as a separate formation and the integration of their structures into the Syrian government forces in an organized manner, through the creation of five new brigades based on the SDF. The agreement is also in Europe’s interest, as its effective implementation would reduce the risk of migration pressure and an elevated terrorist threat. The open question, however, is whether this is a lasting compromise or the first step towards the recentralization of the state at the expense of the position of the Kurds and other minorities. It is in the interest of the European Union, including Poland, to prevent its collapse. The Damascus–Kurds agreement also fits into the broader context of the region’s geopolitical dynamics and the evolution of the Kurdish question, especially in Turkey. The process of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (PKK) self-dissolution, combined with the disarmament and reintegration of its members, is closely linked to the agreement between the Kurds and Damascus.

Terms of the agreement

The final agreement was announced on 25 August 2026 in Damascus after a meeting between a Kurdish delegation, headed by Mazlum Abdi, until then the commander of the SDF, and Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa¹. Under the arrangements, five brigades are to be created from the SDF: four will join the division of Hasakah Governorate, being responsible for the security of the ethnically Kurdish regions of Derik, Qamishli, Hasakah and Kobane, while one will join the division of Aleppo Governorate, responsible for the Kurdish region of Afrin². The integration, while preserving existing structures, will also include the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), which will become part of the security forces subordinate to the Ministry of Interior³. The Kurdish Asayish security forces will also be integrated with the ministry’s government security structures; in this case, however, they are to be supplemented with persons from outside the existing structures, while the issue of ranks is to be regulated separately.

The integration of administrative structures is to be carried out on the assumption that Kurdish personnel will be retained in ethnically Kurdish areas. Already in February 2026, President al-Sharaa approved as governor the person nominated by the SDF, namely Nureddin Issa Ahmed. The Syrian authorities are also to take control of resources, including oil, which is an obvious consequence of integration. Moreover, Mazlum Abdi was appointed adviser to the President of Syria on Kurdish affairs, while Ilham Ahmed, previously responsible for foreign relations of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES – the name of the quasi-autonomous areas controlled by the SDF), received a position in parliament. The Kurdish language is to have status of a national, but not official, language and is to be included in the curriculum at all levels of schooling in Kurdish areas, with an entry on school certificates, for three hours a week; education itself, however, is to be conducted in Arabic⁴. At the same time, the Kurdish

¹ <https://theamargi.com/posts/sdf-dissolves-as-kurdish-leaders-move-into-syrian-state>

² <https://www.newarab.com/news/sdf-reorganize-four-brigades-under-deal-syrian-govt>

³ <https://rudaw.net/english/categories/syria/1079027>

⁴ <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/918423>

New Year festival, Newroz, was established as a public holiday and a day off work, which had already occurred in January 2026 under a presidential decree.

These arrangements are a compromise solution. It should be emphasized that, for the first time in the history of modern Syria, the Kurds have been recognized as an integral part of Syrian society with political agency. Syrian nationalists, including the Ba'ath Party and the Assad dynasty, regarded the Kurds as an alien element that should be forcibly Arabized or expelled. The issue that arouses the greatest dissatisfaction among the Kurds, however, is the restriction of education in Kurdish to a separate subject. From the perspective of the reality of AANES, this is a regression, as for several years all education had been conducted in Kurdish, although the certificates were not recognized. Now this gains state recognition for the first time in Syria's history.

The emergence of the SDF and AANES, and the issue of relations with the PKK

During the civil war, and subsequently the war against the Islamic State (ISIS), Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) and YPJ units, later incorporated into the broader SDF formation, established quasi-autonomous Kurdish cantons in the territories they had seized. In 2018, this territory was named AANES⁵, which was intended to emphasize that the aim was not to secede from Syria and create an independent Kurdish state. AANES, however, was not internationally recognized, and although the SDF cooperated with the United States and AANES had numerous contacts in Europe, the fact that Turkey regarded it as an entity occupied by "PKK terrorists"⁶ caused its isolation and, consequently, instability and difficult material conditions for its inhabitants. AANES also had two dimensions. On the one hand, it expressed the Syrian Kurds' aspiration for emancipation, political agency and protection of their rights in the face of threats from the Assad regime, Turkey and jihadists. On the other hand, it was an ideological project referring to the Apoist ideology of democratic confederalism⁷. This second dimension, although present from the beginning of the civil war, came to the fore after the seizure of vast ethnically non-Kurdish territories following the expulsion of ISIS. The socio-ideological experiment, including, among other things, the equality of women and religions, ultimately failed despite the far-reaching pragmatism of the AANES leaders, as it collided with the socio-religious conservatism of Arab tribes.

One of the key aspects determining the status of the SDF and AANES was their relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), designated as a terrorist organization. When the YPG/YPJ were being formed, negotiations were ongoing between Turkey and the PKK, which ultimately collapsed in 2016. The founders of the YPG/YPJ and many political organizers of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria originated from the

⁵ Initially, these territories were referred to as Rojava, which means "Western Kurdistan." The designation "North-East Syria" was introduced to emphasize the absence of a separatist agenda, although informally the term Rojava remains in use.

⁶ Created in 2011, the YPG (male) and YPJ (female) units were formed by former PKK members originating from Syria. Furthermore, the PKK itself was also present in Rojava, but in 2016 relations between the SDF and the PKK were curtailed. Turkey, however, did not recognize the separation of these organizations.

⁷ The concept of Apoism is associated with recognizing the ideological leadership of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been held in a Turkish prison on Imrali Island since 1999. In the 1990s, he developed the concept of democratic confederalism, i.e., deep decentralization. For more on this topic, see: C. Błaszczuk, *Rojava. Demokratyczny konfederalizm i myśl ustrojowa Demokratycznej Federacji Północnej Syrii* [Rojava: Democratic Confederalism and Political Thought of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria], Warsaw 2019.

PKK or drew upon the ideology of Apoism and Öcalan. Nevertheless, until 2015, talks were held between Turkish authorities and Apoist Kurdish leaders from Syria alongside the PKK peace process. However, these talks collapsed together with the PKK negotiations, leading Turkey to treat the YPG/YPJ, and subsequently the SDF, as identical to the PKK and attempt to force its NATO allies to adopt a similar approach. This fueled rising mutual hostility and triggered Turkish military interventions in northern Syria. Specifically, in 2018, Turkey ousted the SDF from Afrin in northwestern Aleppo Governorate, and in 2019 from the Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) region, causing a mass exodus of the local Kurdish population. Later, Turkey repeatedly threatened new interventions, which were blocked by US opposition.

Kurds–Damascus relations after Assad’s fall

Following the fall of Assad, AANES and the SDF sought to obtain for entire AANES territory the status similar to that of Kurdistan Region in Iraq. The region would have actual, far-reaching autonomy, while the SDF and Asayish, although formally integrated into state structures, would in fact remain independent of them. However, the circumstances of the creation of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq were entirely different. First of all, the decision to create it was made as early as 1970, without external interference, under an agreement between the then Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani and the Iraqi authorities represented by Saddam Hussein. A new conflict led to the collapse of that agreement, but the Kurdistan Region reemerged in 1991 thanks to the protective umbrella of a no-fly zone established after the First Gulf War by the United States. The legal foundations from 1970 nevertheless remained and became the starting point during the constitutional negotiations in 2005. Representatives of the Arab majority did not see the Kurdistan Region as an illegal entity imposed on them by an external superpower, but as the result of internal arrangements among Iraqis.

Furthermore, the geopolitical situation in 2025 was different from that of 20 years earlier. It was no longer favorable to the Kurds, and they could not count on international support for such a project. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US could afford to pursue a unilateral policy as it was the undisputed global hegemon. In particular, it did not have to take Turkey's position into account when achieving its goals in the region. Kurds in Iraq were, meanwhile, viewed by the Bush administration as a key ally. In contrast, in 2025, both Europe and the US, under the leadership of Donald Trump, welcomed the overthrow of Assad and gave the new authorities a vote of confidence, despite their jihadist roots. This was the result of disappointment stemming from the failure of the Middle East democratization project under the 2011 Arab Spring, and the consequential belief that centralization serves stabilization by preventing the growth of migratory pressure and terrorism. Meanwhile, the US had lost the position it held 20 years earlier, and neoconservative interventionism was replaced by isolationist sentiments and the rejection of the imperative to spread freedom and democracy as a US mission. Furthermore, Turkey, which rejected any possibility of accepting Kurdish autonomy in Syria, increasingly began to be seen as a key partner.

As a result, although an agreement between Mazloum Abdi and President Ahmed al-Sharaa on integrating AANES into state structures was announced as early as March 2025, it was not implemented due to differences in interpretation. The new Syrian authorities sought to integrate the SDF on an individual basis, without preserving unit distinctiveness and excluding women from service in the security and defense apparatus (as is the case in other areas of Syria). Consequently, clashes between the SDF and certain components of the new Syrian army broke out several times in 2025, and in January 2026, following a two-week government offensive, the Kurds were forced to withdraw from all ethnically non-Kurdish areas. Over 1,000 people were killed in the fighting at that time⁸.

Background to the Agreement – Internal and External Factors

Thanks to international pressure, particularly from Europe and the US, fighting was halted and talks resumed⁹. In March 2026, Sipan Hemo became Deputy Defense Minister, while simultaneously—at Syria's request—ceasing to be designated a terrorist by Turkey. This sudden shift, demonstrating pragmatism and readiness for compromise not only from both sides (the Kurds and Damascus) but also from Turkey, was linked to several additional internal and external factors. Although the Syrian leader could now negotiate from a position of strength, he was aware of Syria's fragile stability. His forces remain heterogeneous, and abandoning an Islamist agenda does not suit all forces under his command. To consolidate power, he needs allies, not enemies. Meanwhile, the agreement with the Kurds strengthened him not only internationally (as a responsible leader) but also domestically. The Syrian president also knows that Kurdish forces will not support any attempt to overthrow him; on the contrary, in such a scenario, they could prove to be a valuable ally.

Added to this is the problem of instability in areas inhabited by other minority groups, particularly the Druze in As-Suwayda Governorate, as well as the threat from ISIS. This latter issue is of fundamental importance for foreign partners, both Western (Europe and the US) and regional states. Following the January offensive, Damascus assumed responsibility for the fight against ISIS, whose activity had spiked again due to internal conflict. Particular concerns were linked to the issue of ISIS terrorists and their families held by the SDF, especially the al-Hol camp, where at the end of 2025 more than 23,000 people (strongly radicalized family members of ISIS terrorists) resided. The camp area came under government force control, but during the SDF withdrawal, a significant portion of the detainees escaped. This also applied to terrorists imprisoned in areas taken over by government forces, with both sides mutually blaming each other for the situation. Ultimately, a significant portion of the ISIS terrorists was transferred by the US from Syria to prisons in Iraq¹⁰, and Iraqi authorities also repatriated approximately 21,000 of their citizens from the al-Hol camp and other

⁸ <https://thenewregion.com/posts/4350>

⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-announces-new-ceasefire-deal-with-kurdish-led-sdf/live-75553804>

¹⁰ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-completes-transfer-of-over-5-700-isis-detainees-from-syria-to-iraq/3829200>

detention sites¹¹. Most of the remaining imprisoned terrorists and family members held in al-Hol (including individuals from Europe) were taken over by Syrian authorities and transferred to other facilities. However, some were released, some escaped (though some were later recaptured), and a small portion remained under SDF control at the al-Roj camp, where many individuals from Europe also reside. The lack of an agreement between the Kurds and Damascus would have hampered restoring control over this situation, threatening the security not only of Syria, but also of neighboring countries and Europe. Furthermore, given the ongoing US withdrawal from both Syria and Iraq, success in preventing an ISIS resurgence depends on cooperation between the Kurds and Damascus, as well as between them and Iraq and Turkey.

Israel's actions regarding Syria, the Israeli-Turkish conflict, and the PKK disarmament process also had a massive impact on negotiations between the Kurds and central authorities. The political conflict between Turkey and Israel, growing for years, escalated after Assad's fall, as Israel became determined to prevent the growth of Turkish influence in Syria, particularly the establishment of a permanent military presence. Moreover, Israel regards the consolidation of new authorities in Damascus with great caution, especially in the context of a potential permanent Turkish military presence in Syria, despite having maintained communication channels with jihadist rebels from the start of the civil war and US attempts to mediate an agreement between Syria and Israel. Therefore, immediately following Assad's fall, Israel began bombing Syrian military installations and expanded its occupied area in Quneitra Governorate. Subsequently, in April 2025, it bombed the T4 base near Palmyra to prevent its takeover by Turkey. In mid-August, it bombed the Abu al-Duhur airbase in Idlib Governorate near the Turkish border, where Turkish soldiers were stationed. This policy stems from several factors determining how Israel perceives national security protection, which naturally constitutes its paramount interest. On one hand, there is a pessimistic perception of the surroundings, where a lack of belief in peaceful coexistence leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to weaken potential adversaries as much as possible, even at the cost of fueling resentment toward Israel. On the other hand, it is also a consequence of the expansionist approach of co-ruling religious Zionists Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, which collides with peaceful cooperation with neighbors. Furthermore, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Israel based its policy on the assumption that it was in Israel's interest for its Sunni (jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood, and its offshoot Hamas) and Shia (Assad, Hezbollah, Iranian allies) enemies to fight each other, as this would naturally serve Israel's security. This logic was maintained even after Assad's fall, which is why Israel views plunging the region into the chaos of ethnic and religious conflicts as the best protection against the emergence of an anti-Israeli front across ethnic and sectarian divides.

In line with this logic, Israel also began positioning itself as a patron of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, particularly the Druze and Kurds. In the latter case, however, Israel took no real action (specifically

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https://www.pukmedia.com/EN/Details/82633?fbclid=IwY2xjawUPNwxwZG9mBWV4dG4DYWVtAjEwAGJyaWQRMUh4dGs5NUpXSGtTV0VMT21zcnRjBmFwcF9pZBAyMjIwMzIxNzg4MjAwODkyAAEeWnbNSIF3vZpe-Q6ZUwfwJL4fr4TnQ33p3yDj8_kH94AfKc_96ruQS1Aax7s_aem_atR_KYTWFc1-xgSfLz-HhA

in January 2026, when fighting broke out between the SDF and Syrian government forces) that could actually be considered support (military aid, economic aid, or even diplomatic actions), limiting itself solely to a narrative building the opposition: Kurds vs. Arabs, Islamists, Arabs, Iran, and Turkey. This framing harmed the Kurds more than it helped them, as it exposed them to being perceived in the region as an Israeli Trojan horse. Therefore, it can be concluded that the goal was not real support for the Kurds, but their instrumental utilization against the new Syrian authorities and Turkey, and in a broader sense, also Iran. Israel's efforts thus came to nothing, not only because Kurdish leaders did not view them as credible. A major factor was also that in late 2024 Turkey decided to neutralize the PKK problem through negotiations. Consequently, in February 2025, Öcalan called for the dissolution of the PKK; in May 2025, a special PKK congress made that decision; and in August 2026, the Turkish parliament passed a law regulating the process of surrendering weapons and reintegrating PKK members¹².

Conclusions

Although cautious acceptance of the agreement dominates among Kurds, voices of dissatisfaction with the outcome have also emerged. These stem partly from a lack of mutual trust and primarily concern language status and its role in education. According to some commentaries, the new positions of Mazloum Abdi and Ilham Ahmed signify a reduction in their roles and isolation from the Kurdish base. However, this should be viewed differently: the presence of Abdi and Ahmed in Damascus will allow them to react to potential crises, the likelihood of which remains high. It can be assumed that opponents of the agreement exist on the other side as well. Years of civil war have bred mutual distrust. Decades of pan-Arab nationalism instilled negative perceptions of Kurds among a significant portion of Syrians, while the jihadist past of the current governing forces generates ideological conflict.

In this context, one must also remember the link between the agreement in Syria and the PKK disarmament and reintegration process, as well as the fact that this is not beneficial for Israel, as it deprives it of a potential "proxy" in its confrontation with Turkey and Iran. The proposal promoted by Israel to "arm Iranian Kurds" would neither lead to the overthrow of the Islamic Republic system in Iran nor create a stable quasi-state Kurdish entity; instead, it would cause an escalation of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, as the strongest organization of the Kurdish armed opposition in Iran is the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), affiliated with the PKK. This would carry a high probability of derailing not only the PKK disarmament process but also destabilizing relations between Damascus and the Kurds in Syria. It must also be remembered that the alternative for Kurds in Syria is the threat of new war, destruction, isolation, and poverty. This would result in migratory pressure, which has been building in North-East Syria for several years, leading to an existential threat for Kurds in Syria and new problems for Europe. Renewed fighting would destabilize all of Syria. A positive development in Kurdish-Damascus relations will increase the likelihood of a similar development

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-parliament-passes-landmark-law-advance-pkk-peace-process-2026-08-10/>

in relations between the Druze and Syrian authorities and serve to eliminate the threat of persecution against Alawites and Christians.

The European Union should support both the PKK disarmament and reintegration process in Turkey and the implementation of the Kurdish agreement with Syrian authorities, though the nature of engagement should differ in each case. In Turkey, the EU should limit itself to general political support for such a process without overly interfering in the country's internal affairs. It should be kept in mind that the Turkish-Kurdish conflict moved to Europe alongside migration, making it an EU security issue regarding the activities of extremist Kurdish and Turkish organizations within European states. Reintegrating PKK members in Turkey will also reduce Turkish-Kurdish tensions in Europe.

Regarding Syria, the engagement of both the EU and individual member states, including Poland, in supporting the implementation of the agreement between the Kurds and Damascus should be significantly greater. Here, the EU possesses far more leverage instruments, as Syrian authorities require reconstruction support and further legitimacy. Furthermore, the EU can utilize the Syrian diaspora—both Arab and Kurdish in origin—to ease tensions between these groups in Syria. The EU's interest in this regard is clear and obvious: the destabilization of Syria means renewed migratory pressure and an increased terrorist threat. EU involvement in this process should not be limited to diplomatic presence in Damascus. Opening an EU field office in Qamishli or Hasakah is also necessary. This is not about a separate diplomatic representation, but a task-oriented presence (monitoring the agreement, mediating disputes, conflict prevention, developmental and humanitarian activities) agreed upon with Damascus. Opening consular missions of EU states in this region is also advisable, which will foster economic engagement in an area rich in oil yet severely neglected in infrastructure. Naturally, this must occur in accordance with international law and could not be interpreted as an action targeted against Syria's territorial integrity.

The EU should also support the restoration of full communication between territories that were previously part of AANES and the rest of Syria. As part of monitoring the agreement's implementation, involving EU non-governmental organizations to promote dialogue among various communities in Syria is recommended to avoid escalating tensions and to build mutual trust and understanding. The process of national reconciliation and acceptance of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of the state by the dominant Sunni Arab group is key to lasting stability and avoiding new war. The EU should also monitor the return of Kurdish refugees from the Afrin and Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) regions to their homes. Supporting mediation during incidents can prevent their escalation into armed clashes. Opening border crossings between former AANES territories, Turkey, and Iraq is another crucial factor for stabilization. Reviving trade exchange and cross-border mobility will demonstrate tangible benefits of the agreement to residents.

Poland should participate in these processes, as the migration crisis on the border with Belarus showed that we are not a country unaffected by this problem. Furthermore, it is in our interest to minimize the terrorist

threat in other EU states, as this determines processes that are unfavorable from the perspective of Polish state interest in allied nations. The future of our position in the EU depends on Poland's involvement in resolving pan-European problems.

Poland should therefore restore operations at the Polish Embassy in Damascus as soon as possible, alongside establishing working contacts with the Kurdish community in Qamishli. The integration of Kurdish territories with the rest of Syria opens opportunities for Polish companies, such as in the necessary development of transport infrastructure and public transit in these neglected areas of northeastern Syria. Promoting cooperation at the level of non-governmental organizations as well as educational and scientific institutions is also worthwhile. To this end, Poland should leverage the human resources of former diplomats who know Syria well. It is worth noting that certain actions are already being taken. The 2026 humanitarian aid plan included Syria, though excluding a significant portion of it, including former AANES territories. While remaining outside state jurisdiction could have served as justification for such exclusion, it has now lost its rationale. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Poland has for years been involved in helping Syrian refugees outside Syria, e.g., in Lebanon, which built a positive image for organizations such as Polish Humanitarian Action (which also carried out assistance operations in Idlib Governorate) or the Polish Center for International Aid.