

SDF and Damascus: From Negotiating Table to the Brink of Confrontation?



Despite efforts to de-escalate tensions and engage in negotiations between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the new Syrian government, a deep trust deficit and unresolved issues—chief among them the future of the autonomous administration and the fate of SDF’s weapons—continue to hinder any meaningful breakthrough.

While Damascus pushes for a “gradual integration” into the state structure, the SDF insists on maintaining its “political and military autonomy” in the territories it controls.

In this context, the failure of negotiations is no longer just a possibility; it is increasingly viewed as a tangible scenario among decision-makers in Damascus, where internal discussions are now taking place about the legitimacy and limits of a potential military option.

However, this scenario does not exist in a vacuum. It is bound by complex geopolitical equations—from the direct American presence east of the Euphrates and Turkey’s watchful posture, to a web of interlinked regional and international balances.

Is Syria heading toward a new internal confrontation that could once again upend the status quo? Or will international pressure be enough to curb this trajectory and reinforce the political process, however tenuous?

Negotiations on a Hot Plate

The “March 10 Agreement” had initially signaled a thaw in relations between the SDF and the newly reshaped Syrian government. But it quickly became clear that the superficial progress masked deeper disagreements on core issues.

U.S. involvement, notably the July visit to Damascus by White House envoy Tom Barak, failed to transform the political understanding into an actionable roadmap. Instead, it exposed the extent of the rift and the lack of mutual will to compromise.

At the negotiating table, both sides held firm to their maximal positions: the Syrian government insisted on state unity and centralized political and military authority, rejecting any federalist or separatist ambitions.

Meanwhile, the SDF remained adamant about preserving its independent military structure and the current autonomous governance model as a non-negotiable reality.

This impasse is not merely administrative or technical; it reflects two fundamentally divergent visions for Syria’s future. With neither side showing genuine willingness to compromise, negotiations have stagnated, turning into a delaying tactic pending regional shifts or international pressure that might

eventually force movement.

Local news outlets reported recent military maneuvers and reinforcements in Deir ez-Zor province, where tensions between the Syrian army and SDF are rising despite the absence of direct clashes thus far.

In response, the SDF deployed additional forces to eastern Deir ez-Zor and reinforced its presence along the Euphrates River, opposite areas held by the Syrian government. These moves occurred amid heavy surveillance from U.S. helicopters patrolling the region.

Meanwhile, reports from northeast Syria indicate that the SDF has resumed digging tunnels—possibly in preparation for a confrontation should one be imposed upon them.

Military Option Unlikely

Despite mounting tensions, the current political and military landscape suggests that armed conflict is neither realistic nor desirable for either side. Beyond the immense cost and complexity, Syria remains ill-equipped to endure another war.

The wounds of past conflict are still raw, and security challenges persist, especially following recent unrest in the southern province of Suwayda.

Kurdish researcher Osama Sheikh Ali underscores this reality, emphasizing in an interview with Noon Post that “military confrontation would be extremely difficult for both sides.” He noted that Syria’s fragmented security landscape could become dangerously unstable if clashes were to erupt in the east.

“Any military distraction in the northeast,” he added, “could be exploited by other actors—whether in the south, the west, or even by ISIS.”

This grounded assessment echoes the remarks of SDF spokesperson Abjar Dawood, who told reporters that “there are no indications or intentions for a military clash,” reaffirming that both sides remain committed to dialogue, however challenging the path may be.

Damascus, for its part, expressed a similar sentiment in a statement following its July 9 meeting with a delegation from the autonomous administration. While acknowledging certain concerns, it warned against delays or hesitation in implementing agreements, arguing that such behavior could destabilize the situation further.

Kurdish journalist Shvan Ibrahim also described the situation bluntly: “There is no international or domestic appetite for war, nor the actual capacity to wage one.” In his view, “any escalation would be a reckless gamble and could invite new interventions—or even revive ISIS.”

He added that “even Washington will not allow events to spiral out of control,” describing a military solution as “a losing option for both sides—one that only benefits those seeking to prolong chaos.”

In a similar vein, Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra told The Washington Post that the government is not inclined toward a military resolution with the SDF, which “would result in unnecessary bloodshed on both sides.”

These remarks point to a growing consensus: armed conflict is no longer a tool for resolution in Syria. Instead, it would be an added burden for a war-weary nation. Amid complex international entanglements and the lack of unified strategic vision—within the SDF and among Damascus authorities—dialogue, however arduous, remains the only viable path forward.

Washington Withdraws Its Shield

Signs of a shift in Washington’s position on the SDF are becoming increasingly visible, marked by a cooling of political support and the absence of the kind of moral backing the group has long depended on in its military and political battles.

Controversial remarks by U.S. envoy to Syria Thomas Barak sparked considerable debate among Kurds in Syria, reigniting questions about whether the U.S. is preparing to withdraw its political umbrella over the SDF in favor of a broader settlement that would reshape power dynamics in Syria.

Speaking at the Foreign Press Center in New York, Barak stressed that the United States does not support federalism in Syria. “Washington will not accept a state within a state,” he declared, adding that Syria should remain united under the legitimate government of Prime Minister Ahmad Al-Shara, whom he praised for making “serious efforts despite the challenges.”

Barak issued a pointed warning: “The SDF must quickly realize that the true path to negotiations leads to Damascus,” cautioning that the group could face serious problems with both the Syrian and Turkish governments if it fails to integrate swiftly into the Syrian military. He admitted the process would be difficult, given the mutual distrust.

His remarks triggered strong reactions from Kurdish leaders, reflecting growing fears of an impending U.S. pullback—especially given the lack of any clear American endorsement of the autonomous administration project or guarantees for the SDF-held areas.

Kurdish political analyst Ali Temi believes that negotiation failure is now the most likely outcome. “The SDF insists on keeping its weapons, while the Syrian government sees those arms as the exclusive right of the state,” he said.

“These are deep-rooted strategic differences,” he added. “If not resolved at the

negotiating table, military escalation may become inevitable.” Temi also noted that “Washington has already begun repositioning itself politically, and may be preparing to withdraw its support for the SDF as part of a broader regional deal aimed at restoring stability—even if that comes at the expense of federalism.”

Turkey Eases Pressure After PKK Disbands

The recent announcement by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) that it is dissolving itself and laying down arms—responding to a call by its historic leader Abdullah Öcalan—marks a pivotal moment in the region’s political and security landscape. The move has already had significant ripple effects, especially in northeast Syria.

Ankara officially welcomed the decision, calling it “an important milestone toward a terrorism-free Turkey” and hailing the end of violence as a gateway to a new era for Turkey and the broader region.

Observers say this shift has recalibrated Turkey’s priorities and reduced its security anxieties in Syria, potentially discouraging any push for military action against the SDF and creating space for a negotiated settlement between Damascus and Kurdish factions.

Researcher Osama Sheikh Ali remarked that the PKK’s disbandment gives the SDF some breathing room in its negotiations with Damascus. “Turkey is unlikely to encourage military escalation at a time when it is investing in peace talks with its own Kurdish population,” he said.

He noted that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is keen to avoid a repeat of the 2015 collapse of the peace process, which was partly triggered by security incidents in Syria—most notably the ISIS attack on Kobani. Today, Ankara appears to favor regional stability, especially after the PKK’s significant symbolic move.

In this context, the PKK’s absence from the Syrian theater may improve relations between the SDF and Damascus, offering both sides an opportunity to reduce tensions and build mutual trust—particularly amid easing regional anxieties and shifting international priorities.

It is worth noting that Turkey designates the SDF as a terrorist organization affiliated with the PKK. It has launched two major military operations against the group in coordination with Syrian opposition forces: Operation Olive Branch in 2016 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019.

Given these evolving dynamics, the relationship between the SDF and the Syrian government now stands at a crossroads. With faltering negotiations and looming fears of military escalation, both parties appear to be inching toward the only

viable option left: a political settlement driven by international pressure and changing regional realities.

As American backing fades and no regional actor is willing to support renewed conflict, the focus shifts toward reintegrating northeastern Syria into the state—without entirely dismantling the unique postwar status quo that has taken root.

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