

Syria's Northeast on Edge: QSD Between Ankara and Damascus



The situation in Syrian al-Jazeera is deteriorating due to the hysterical arrest campaigns carried out by the Syrian Democratic Forces militia ("QSD"), which continue relentlessly against the local population. In recent days, these militias have staged large arrest operations targeting dozens of civilians from

al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor; the operations are still underway. The pretext, as usual, is membership in ISIS.

These arrests were followed by another, even more serious escalation: the so-called “Self-Administration” affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) declared that it would suspend and prohibit instruction using Syrian government curricula in all schools—including Christian ones.

These are consequences that QSD was expected to resort to after its negotiations with the Syrian government faltered. This escalation came immediately after the government refused to attend the Paris conference scheduled for last August—one sponsored by France.

It seems that QSD had invested heavily in that conference; however, Ankara’s involvement appears to have influenced the Syrian government not to attend.

QSD Continues Pressure on the Population

Since late August, the provinces of Raqqa, al-Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor—regions of al-Jazeera under QSD control—have been subject to sweeping arrest campaigns. Dozens of civilians have been detained, including women, children, and seniors, on charges of terrorism, cooperating with external entities, or dealing with the Syrian government.

These campaigns coincide with searches inside the al-Hol camp east of al-Hasakah, under the banner of “combating ISIS”—a recurring public narrative that nonetheless runs in parallel with arrests and gives them a justificatory cover.

These arrests are not new but are a continuation of ongoing detentions since December 2024 in al-Jazeera. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, there were 59 instances of arbitrary detention by QSD in August this year alone, including 8 children and 5 women.

In this context, the escalation did not stop there. The so-called Education Authority of the “Self-Administration” affiliated with the PYD announced it has suspended and banned the use of Syrian government curricula in universities, institutes, and schools throughout al-Jazeera.

This decision effectively ends what remained of government schooling in al-Hasakah province, and it has stirred strong reactions among the population. It also applied to Syriac and Assyrian schools.

According to sources interviewed by Noon Post, dozens of families—including Christians and Kurds have left al-Hasakah and gone to areas under Syrian government control to continue their children’s education there.

They did so because QSD is imposing curricula that are neither recognized legally

nor devoid of ideological content connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Activists and human rights defenders from al-Jazeera issued a public statement condemning QSD's decision. They rejected unequivocally the monopoly on education or its transformation into a tool for political domination.

They emphasized that education is a fundamental right guaranteed by law and should remain free of politicization and ideological indoctrination.

They made clear that imposing ideological curricula does not reflect the region's diversity, does not meet the aspirations of its inhabitants, and threatens the social fabric and future.

Following that, QSD also changed the name of the "Arab Cultural Center" building in al-Qamishli (al-Hasakah province) to "Shlêr Center for Kurdish Literature," and seized buildings belonging to the Education Directorate and Economics colleges. The militia's Education Authority reportedly dismissed dozens of Arab teachers working under its authority because they objected to teaching the QSD curricula.

Ongoing Preparations for War

QSD continues to reinforce its military presence on various fronts from the banks of the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor, through Raqqa, Tal Abyad, the M4 road, and reaching into the Deir Hafir area in eastern Aleppo.

These movements include digging new tunnels, building defensive embankments, and laying mines over wide areas. The latest mine-laying was in the stretch from the south of the Euphrates Dam west toward the Mansoura highway, west of Raqqa, according to the local media outlet Nahr Media.

Local sources report that QSD has recently settled dozens of former officers from the Assad regime in the Rmeilan residential city in al-Hasakah province. It is worth noting that in earlier periods QSD absorbed over 3,000 remnants of the regime's forces into its ranks and deployed them across Raqqa and al-Hasakah provinces.

On another front, QSD intelligence arrested around 40 of its own members in Raqqa for alleged contacts with foreign bodies, followed by the arrest of several Arab leaders of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council (DMC), as reported by Nahr Media.

These moves signal that QSD is preparing for a broad war and mobilizing its forces at a time when there is no sign of an agreement with the Syrian government. Preceding these developments were harsh measures by the militia, including cutting cellular communications for the population by suspending the

state-owned companies “Syriatel” and “MTN.”

The people of al-Jazeera live under what one source described as catastrophic conditions: worsening crises of water, drought, pollution, the suspension of education, and breakdowns in essential services under QSD rule.

Secret Agreement, Diverging Perspectives

The Turkish Position

Turkey is watching closely as the PKK issue is being dismantled on two fronts: within its borders and in northern Syria and the Qandil Mountains. Ankara appears to show considerable patience as it awaits a political settlement with PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, detained on İmralı Island since 1999. Though many question how serious and how enforceable such a settlement might be, indicators suggest Turkey is determined to press ahead.

Syria is not exempt from this process: Turkish policy toward QSD remains cautious, observant, and laced with veiled threats rather than outright action, pending progress in negotiations for QSD's integration with the Syrian government.

This policy became clear in recent statements by the Turkish Defense Ministry, followed by remarks from Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), part of the ruling coalition: “Everyone must know that the Syrian Democratic Forces must strictly abide by the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the Syrian government on 10 March 2025, and fulfill its requirements precisely. Otherwise, joint military intervention by Ankara and Damascus will be inevitable.”

Then came a statement from the Turkish Defense Ministry at its weekly press conference. The spokesperson, Admiral Zeki Aktoprak, said: “The terrorist organization QSD must commit to the process of integrating into the Syrian Army and abandon any acts that undermine the country's unity.

Turkey is closely following this integration process and will provide all forms of support to Damascus when necessary, whether for its security or to contribute to Syria's stability.”

Overall, Ankara is ready for all scenarios concerning QSD, and it ties it also to the issue of settlement with the PKK. But in the near future, Turkey is unlikely to launch a full-scale war. It will likely continue limited pressure, and we may see targeted military strikes if QSD proves obstinate over integration.

Also, Ankara is coordinating with the United States in this matter, and with Russia too, which has recently redeployed its forces in al-Hasakah around its old base at Qamishli Airport.

Turkey also wants to make the Kurdish issue—including QSD—a Turkish file generally. Turkey pressured the Syrian government to refuse to go to Paris, partly to keep this Kurdish question within Ankara's sphere of influence and to prevent other parties from intervening.

QSD's Position

On the other side, QSD's stance toward the Syrian government and its handling of the 10 March agreement can be summarized as one of "delay, stalling, and flooding with details," wagering that the Assad regime might collapse.

QSD does not seem willing to relinquish easily the gains it has made on the ground over the past ten years. It insists on decentralization and autonomy with an independent military force, and continues to pressure the Syrian government and its host state by various means, including arbitrary arrests of Arabs in al-Jazeera areas.

It is also increasing war preparations by digging tunnels, expanding its military numbers. QSD is moving in two directions: on the one hand, endless stalling; on the other, military build-up, in attempts to drag the Syrian government into an armed confrontation—one that would allow QSD to claim new victimhood, mobilize external support, and incite opposition to Damascus—thus enabling it at least to achieve much of its goals.

The Syrian Government's Position

The Syrian government continues to reject any form of federalism by any name. Damascus considers the country's territorial unity a red line. By contrast, QSD seeks federalism under the label of autonomy ("decentralization").

Since April of this year, the 10 March agreement between both sides has made no forward motion; negotiations have merely consisted of sterile back-and-forth.

QSD responds with various provocations—sometimes against Arab populations, sometimes with military skirmishes along the Euphrates, or in eastern Aleppo.

President Ahmad al-Sharā (this name reflects the one you used; if perhaps your source meant Bashar al-Assad or another, please clarify) is attempting to settle the al-Jazeera file with QSD peacefully as a priority, while also assisting Turkey in building a professional military structure. All options remain on the table in relation to the QSD file, however long it takes.

Despite the deadlock, interactions continue between the parties—for instance in oil supply and transit movement. We are likely to see progress in the negotiation file between QSD and the Syrian government before the end of this month; otherwise unexpected scenarios may emerge in Syria.

Conclusion

Turkey's current patience on the QSD issue can be attributed to two factors: first, its understanding with the United States, which is seeking security guarantees concerning prisons and camps housing members and families of ISIS, and seeks to avoid escalation in Syria.

Thus, Turkey cannot, for example, launch a comprehensive ground military operation without U.S. green light, as was the case in the operations "Olive Branch" and "Peace Spring."

Second, Turkey does not want to sacrifice the ongoing peace process with the PKK, which aims for its dismantling. A full-scale military offensive against QSD now would mean an end to that process, and Ankara continues to watch over the viability of the political path. Recently Abdullah Öcalan, leader of PKK, said: "Syria and its northeast are a red line for me," reflecting the sensitivity and trans-border interconnection of this issue.

All that is on one side of the scale, and the plight of civilians in QSD-controlled al-Jazeera on the other. Conditions continue to worsen due to QSD practices, and finding a way out of this dilemma is now an urgent necessity in practice.