

## The Positioning of the PYD in Syrian Arab Republic's Future: The Civil War, the 10th Congress, and December 8\*

*Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti'nin Geleceğinde PYD'nin Konumlanması:  
İç Savaş, 10. Kongre ve 8 Aralık*

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### Abstract

This study examines the position of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), one of the most prominent actors in the Syrian Civil War, in shaping Syrian Arab Republic's future after December 8. Since 2011, the PYD has pursued a third-way strategy, distinct from both the government and opposition, leveraging the military pressure exerted by its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to secure strategic gains. The study aims to analyze the PYD's role and influence in the search for a new order in Syria. While the PYD seeks to integrate YPG-commanded Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)—which has established a de facto governance structure over a significant portion of Syrian territory—into Syria's future framework, the Syrian Interim Government, led by Ahmed al-Shara, underscores the necessity of disarmament for all groups and the preservation of territorial integrity. This study conducts a situational analysis based on the PYD's 10th Congress held on September 21–22, 2024, and developments following December 8, 2024, when opposition forces took control of Damascus. Notably, the exclusion of the PYD and its affiliates from the National Dialogue Conference on February 25, 2025—where discussions on Syria's future took place—is a crucial indicator for forecasting future developments. The study will present a general future projection based on the eight-point agreement signed on March 10, 2025, between Syrian Interim Government President Ahmed al-Sharaa and SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi, as well as the implementation of its provisions. The study will discuss the claim that the most tangible manifestation of the PYD's political and military gains during the civil war, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces, will be one of the key factors shaping Syria's future order. While the general framework of the developments from the internal conflicts to the present is drawn from key reference sources in the field, an extensive review of media reports and analyses were conducted to assess the current situation. In this way, the study aims to present a dynamic analysis and contribute to current debates on the post-Assad era in Syria.

**Keywords:** PYD, SDF, Syrian Civil War, Syrian Arab Republic, National Dialogue Conference

### Özet

Bu çalışmada Suriye İç Savaşı'nın en çok öne çıkan aktörlerinden biri olan Demokratik Birlik Partisi (PYD)'nin, 8 Aralık sonrasında Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti'nin geleceğindeki konumu

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tartışılmaktadır. 2011'den beri hükümet ve muhalifler dışında üçüncü yol stratejisi izleyerek siyasi ve silahlı kanadı olan Halk Savunma Birlikleri'nin (YPG) oluşturduğu baskı ile askeri kazanımlar elde eden PYD'nin, Suriye'deki yeni düzen arayışlarında rolünün ve etkisinin ne olacağı çalışmanın ortaya çıkış amacıdır. PYD, YPG tarafından komuta edilen Suriye Demokratik Güçlerini'nin (SDG) ve Suriye topraklarının önemli bir bölümünde fiili bir durum oluşturan Kuzey ve Doğu Suriye Özerk Yönetimi'ni Suriye'nin geleceğine taşıma arayışındayken, Ahmed eş-Şara'nın başkanlığını yaptığı Suriye Geçici Hükümeti ise tüm grupların silah bırakmasını ve ülkede toprak bütünlüğü gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışmada PYD'nin 21-22 Eylül 2024 tarihinde gerçekleştirdiği 10. Kongre ve muhaliflerin Şam'ı ele geçirdiği 8 Aralık 2024 tarihi sonrası gelişmeler üzerinden durum analizi yapılacaktır. Özellikle 25 Şubat 2025'te toplanan ve Suriye'nin geleceğine yönelik tartışmaların yapıldığı Ulusal Diyalog Konferansı'na PYD ve türevlerinin davet edilmemesi, gelecekteki gelişmeleri öngörmek için oldukça önemlidir. Çalışmada 10 Mart 2025 tarihinde Suriye Geçici Hükümet Başkanı Ahmet eş-Şara ile SDF Genel Komutanı Mazlum Abdi arasında imzalan 8 maddelik anlaşma ve anlaşma maddelerinin uygulamaya konulması üzerinden genel bir gelecek projeksiyonu ortaya konulacaktır. Çalışma, PYD'nin iç savaş süresince siyasi ve askeri kazanımlarının en somut hali olan Kuzey ve Doğu Suriye Özerk Yönetimi ve Suriye Demokratik Güçleri'nin yeni düzende edinecekleri konumun, Suriye'nin gelecekteki düzenini şekillendirecek en önemli etmenlerden biri olduğu iddiasını tartışacaktır. Çalışmada iç çatışmalardan günümüze kadar gelen süreçlerle ilgili genel çerçeve alandaki değerli başvuru kaynaklarından çizilirken, güncel durumun değerlendirilmesi için yoğun bir medya haberi ve analiz incelenmiştir. Böylece dinamik bir araştırma ortaya konulmaya çalışılmış ve Suriye'de Esad rejimi sonrası dönem üzerindeki tartışmalara güncel bir katkı verilme arayışında olunmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** PYD, SDG, Suriye İç Savaşı, Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti, Ulusal Diyalog Konferansı

## Introduction

Among the dramatic events resulting from the popular movements commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, Syria has undoubtedly remained the central focus up to the present day. The street protests that began in 2011 triggered a protracted civil war, and the international community witnessed, day by day, how a society was gradually dragged into catastrophe, particularly in the case of Syria. In the later stages of 2024, with the march initiated by the Syrian opposition culminating in Damascus and Bashar al-Assad leaving the country, expectations for the return of peace surged significantly. Although armed conflicts have largely ceased in Syria—aside from a few local instances—the emergence of various actors with different agendas during the civil war has rendered the establishment of a new order a topic of considerable interest. In this context, the rhetoric of Ahmed al-Sharaa, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who currently stands as the most influential force within the opposition movement, about forming a new government in which all Syrian factions will come together in consensus and all segments will be represented, has generated a notably optimistic atmosphere.

The protests and uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2010 and rapidly spread across North Africa and the Middle East soon reached Syria. Among the countries affected by the domino effect of the Arab Spring, Syria experienced one of the most intense upheavals (Cooper, 2015; Çağlar, 2025). The protests that erupted in early 2011 quickly escalated into violent clashes, eventually evolving into a protracted civil war that would engulf the country for years. The destruction that unfolded in Syria during this period created a grim picture on multiple levels (Byman & Speakman, 2016,

Rabinovic & Valensi, 2021, p. 41-70). However, the capture of Damascus by opposition forces in December 2024 and the subsequent departure of Bashar al-Assad marked a turning point. With the cessation of hostilities, strong expectations emerged regarding the establishment of a new order that would bring an end to the civil war and pave the way for Syria's future stability.

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, numerous state and non-state actors became involved in the conflict (Oktav, Parlar Dal & Kurşun, 2017). While the early stages of the war saw the Syrian government on one side and opposition forces on the other, over time, the interventions of domestic, regional, and global actors intensified. As a result, Syria became the epicenter of a multi-layered cycle of violence (Hinnebusch & Saouli, 2019). Within this power struggle, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) steadily positioned itself in a growing equation of strategic gains in northern Syria. The PYD rapidly secured both military and political achievements, managing to preserve them in various ways up to the present day.

Founded in 2003, the PYD emerged as one of the primary beneficiaries of the political and military landscape shaped by the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. The international and regional backlash against ISIS's terrorist activities, along with the necessity for a coordinated response, significantly elevated the PYD's prominence as a local actor. In particular, the defense of Ayn al-Arab against ISIS not only brought the PYD into global recognition but also positioned it as a strong proxy candidate in the eyes of the United States. Benefiting from substantial external support in its fight against ISIS, the PYD, particularly through its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), leveraged its military pressure to advance its political ambitions. As of today, the PYD-YPG has established a de facto authority over a vast expanse in northern and eastern Syria, and it is evident that the group seeks to carry its current gains into Syria's post-war future.

This study targets to outline a general framework focusing on the PYD's 10th Congress, held on September 21–22, 2024, which was of critical importance given the political climate of the period. The emphasis on democratic autonomy during the Congress, where a co-chairmanship change also took place, revealed the fundamental direction of the PYD's future policies. It became evident that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), declared in 2018, would pursue a strong initiative to transition from a de facto structure to one with recognized legitimacy and a formal legal framework. For years, the PYD had been preparing for the post-civil war order through its external relations and the armed forces within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, the development that ultimately pushed the PYD toward a policy shift was the successful Damascus march led by HTS and opposition forces in November and December 2024. Following December 8—which was later declared a national holiday—the PYD, recognizing the shifting power dynamics of the new era, began exploring new political strategies.

The study examines the constants and shifts in the PYD's strategy following the developments after December 8. Throughout the Syrian Civil War, the PYD secured significant maneuvering space, gained external support, established political security through the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and achieved military assurance through the Syrian Democratic Forces, creating a de facto situation across a large part of Syria's territory. A key question to address is whether the PYD will maintain its previous autonomy claim in the new post-Assad order. The role of AANES and the SDF in the new order established by the Interim Government and in the emerging constitutional process will be a decisive factor in determining Syria's stability. The extent to which the PYD will accept being part of the new Syria and under what conditions will be crucial for sustaining peace in the country. Therefore, the nature of the PYD's relationship with the Interim Government and the balance between its concessions and insistence on its demands will be fundamental in shaping Syria's reconciliation process. The eight-point agreement signed

by Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazlum Abdi on March 10 has sparked significant hope for establishing a new order in Syria. This study will examine the feasibility of implementing this agreement and assess the risks for Syria's future.

The study aims to provide an analysis based on the PYD, contributing to the broader discussions on Syria's future following the departure of Bashar al-Assad and the capture of the capital, Damascus, by opposition forces. It will examine the role of the PYD, which currently claims authority over a large area and possesses significant military power, within the new order to be established in Syria. The 10th Congress and the subsequent debates offer important insights into this issue. Conducting such an analysis will also facilitate understanding Ahmed al-Sharaa's diplomacy with local, regional, and global actors, as well as the policies he intends to implement. Whether the PYD will continue its claim to autonomy and whether the SDF will dissolve itself are undoubtedly among the most significant factors determining the future direction of Syria. The first section of the study will outline the general framework of the PYD-YPG and the Syrian Civil War, followed by an analysis of the PYD's 10th Congress held on September 21–22. The third section will evaluate the diplomacy conducted between the interim government, SDF, and AANES representatives after December 8, based on media reports. A general framework will be outlined regarding the National Dialogue Conference, which aims to bring together all factions that have laid down arms in Syria, followed by an analysis of the March 10 agreement. Due to the dynamic nature of the process, media reports and recent analyses will be utilized to assess the current situation and provide projections for the future. Thus, the success of the Interim Government in shaping Syria's future will be analyzed through PYD's approach to the process, its relations with other Kurdish entities, and its external engagements.

## 1. PYD and Syrian Civil War

Following the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK entered a phase of dissolution and sought to reposition and restructure itself through a series of congresses in the 2000s. At its 8th Congress in 2002, the PKK declared its repeal and ceased all activities, leading to the establishment of the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) (T.C. Ministry of Interior, 2017). In 2003, KADEK was replaced by the Kurdistan People's Congress (Kongra Gelê Kurdistan, or Kongra-Gel). The 11th Congress in 2005 introduced the concept of Kurdistan Democratic Confederalism (Koma Komalên Kurdistan, or KKK), which later evolved into the Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, or KCK) in 2007, forming the final structure of the overarching organization (Şahin & İrdem, 2017; Çelik, 2019; Erdoğan, 2019). As an umbrella organization, the KCK was established to expand PKK activities across Kurdish-populated regions in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which constitutes the subject of this study, was founded on October 17, 2003. It is evident that the party serves as the Syrian branch or the western wing of the KCK structure. Throughout its existence, the PYD has taken a pragmatic and context-dependent approach, at times acknowledging its ties to the PKK/KCK and at other times framing their relationship as merely ideological affinity. However, several factors make this connection explicit, including the PYD's recognition of Abdullah Öcalan as its leader, its adoption of his democratic autonomy discourse

as a core principle, and its identification of Kongra-Gel as its judicial authority in its charter (Lowe, 2014, pp. 227–228; Gunter, 2014; Soner, Aslan & Kiyıcı, 2017, p. 20). The influence of both Öcalan and the PKK on the PYD is not limited to its founding phase but has remained evident throughout the Syrian Civil War. Their guidance is particularly clear in the PYD's military strategies during the conflict and its establishment of autonomous administrations in captured areas (İşyar, 2017, p. 49–51). The PYD has consistently embraced and sought to implement Öcalan's theories on democratic confederalism (Demir, 2024).

Benefiting from the PKK's support and its historically rooted opposition to Türkiye, the PYD-YPG has distinguished itself from other Kurdish parties in Syria, allowing it to adopt a more advantageous strategy. This has enabled the PYD to secure significant territorial and political gains, establish diplomatic channels with international actors, and rapidly strengthen its armed forces (Orhan, 2014, p. 33–35). The People's Protection Units and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) have been the primary drivers behind the PYD's military successes during the civil war (Kartal, 2018; Köylü, 2018). Later integrated into the Syrian Democratic Forces, these units remained the dominant armed factions in northern Syria, particularly after the international coalition weakened ISIS (İşyar, 2017; Ağır & Tatlı, 2020).

With the onset of uprisings against the government, Kurdish groups in Syria initially aligned themselves with the opposition. However, it soon became evident that the PYD was following a different path from other Kurdish formations (Allsopp, 2015). Although no official agreement was publicly announced, several key developments indicated a tacit understanding between the PYD and the Assad regime: the withdrawal of government forces from northern Syria, permission for Salih Muslim to re-enter the country, the release of many PYD members from prison, the absence of significant clashes between the YPG and government forces, the long-term coexistence of YPG and government forces in Qamishli, and the PYD's divergence from other opposition-affiliated Kurdish parties (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 12-13; Toktaş et al., 2022, p. 50-51).

A major factor influencing this shift in Assad's approach toward the Kurds was the emergence of common enemies, particularly the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Al-Qaeda, and ISIS (İşyar, 2017, p. 40-41). Consequently, the civil war presented the PYD with a historic opportunity to establish a Kurdish-controlled entity in Syria, often referred to as Rojava, (the West) in Kurdish nationalist discourse. The conflict, coupled with prolonged instability and the erosion of state sovereignty, allowed the PYD to emerge as a significant political and military force (Lowe, 2014). Moreover, the PYD gained control of several cities with minimal resistance from government forces, enabling it to regulate economic activity in these areas and secure substantial revenue (Savelsberg, 2014, p. 98-99). Following the withdrawal of state forces, the PYD became the dominant armed entity in the region, systematically seizing northern cities and intensifying efforts to establish an autonomous administration (Gunter, 2014, p. 110-

111; Allsopp, 2019). The PYD's decision to refrain from collaborating with opposition factions also meant that it was largely spared from attacks by the Syrian Air Force and avoided direct confrontation with Russian forces (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019, p. 70-71).

The outbreak of conflict in Syria, the withdrawal of state authority from the north, the PYD's positioning as a key force in the fight against ISIS, and its rhetoric all contributed to its emergence as a viable actor in the eyes of external powers (Demir, 2022). Undoubtedly, the most critical development in this regard was the siege of Ayn al-Arab by ISIS and the resistance mounted by PYD-YPG forces. The battle, coupled with the narratives promoted by PYD-affiliated sources, played a significant role in garnering support from Western governments and public opinion (Thornton, 2015). The most substantial steps toward realizing the PYD's Rojava project were taken through the relationships it cultivated on the ground as part of the coalition against ISIS. By leveraging the YPG's role in the fight, the PYD positioned itself within a framework of legitimacy, securing crucial backing for its long-term objectives (Federici, 2015, p. 84-85). Prior to the siege of Ayn al-Arab, the PYD was viewed with skepticism in the West due to its ties with the PKK, its opposition to Syrian opposition groups, and its ambiguous relationship with the Assad government. However, this perception gradually shifted over time (Elsayed, 2023, p. 57-58).

Throughout the Syrian civil war, the PYD's armed wing attracted recruits from both PKK ranks and various other countries. Foreign fighters from dozens of nations participated in clashes within the ranks of the YPG-YPJ and, later, the SDF (Toktaş et al., 2022, p. 25-28). The SDF warrants particular attention, as it was established as a direct result of the international coalition's efforts to create a local force to combat ISIS on the ground. While it was officially formed in October 2015 with the participation of various local factions, it is evident that the SDF's core structure was built around the YPG and YPJ (Orton, 2018, p. 166-167; Önenli Güven, 2025, p. 116-117). It is important to note that since its formation, the SDF has been commanded by Mazloum Abdi, a former YPG commander. Shortly after the creation of the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) emerged as its political counterpart. Today, the SDF serves as the military wing of the self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

It is important to note that the United States has provided the most significant support to the SDF to date. Following air operations against ISIS, the SDF was trained and equipped as a ground force. As a result, the SDF can be considered a proxy actor for the United States and the Western coalition. The permanence of this force in northern Syria has been crucial for the United States' Middle East policies (Polat, 2020, p. 81). The creation of the SDF can be seen as an effort to obscure the names of the PYD and YPG, which are linked to PKK/KCK, and to bring other factions within Syria under a unified umbrella, allowing for direct foreign support. The fact that the SDF is now engaging with the Syrian interim government marks a significant point in understanding its



position and role in the current political landscape.

In 2013, after the declaration of the Founding Assembly, the PYD began declaring cantons, which became the administrative regions of Afrin, Jazeera, and Ayn El-Arab. While these regions were said to be governed by a system based on the representation of all elements, PYD's absolute dominance was clear. The cantons were not formed according to demographic distribution but were instead shaped by the influence of the YPG forces. The governance structure in the cantons consisted of the Legislative Council, the Executive Council, and the Judicial Council (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 22-26). In these declared cantons, the administration was formally managed by TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society), which aimed to bring together civil society. These initiatives, which aligned with Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism, gradually reflected the PYD's preparatory mindset for the post-civil war period in Syria. The governance, societal processes, economic administration, and security experience gained in the cantons laid the foundation for the *de facto* situation being attempted today (Plakoudas, 2017, p. 103-104). In 2014, a mandatory military service law was implemented to protect the cantons. Later, these cantons were merged, leading to the establishment of the Transitional Administration of Rojava. In 2016, the cantons were officially united and a federation was declared. By 2018, the structure known today as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was proclaimed. Today, AANES controls nearly 25% of Syrian territory. It is important to note that this structure, which has created a *de facto* situation in northern and eastern Syria, aims to establish control over areas rich in natural gas and oil resources (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024, p. 1090). With the emergence of AANES, the democratic autonomy initiative voiced by the PYD since the beginning of the civil war was completed. It is crucial to highlight that the support provided by the United States across various areas and the involvement of the SDF on the ground has been instrumental in the continuation of this structure (Rashid, 2018). AANES currently consists of seven regional administrations: Jazeera, Afrin, Euphrates, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zor (Syrian Democratic Council, n.d.). Allsopp and van Wilgenburg argue that the name and organizational changes were driven by internal processes, aiming to send messages to external actors, demonstrate the development of the structure, seek recognition, establish legitimacy, and form alliances. These changes were not publicly disclosed for approval or validation but were primarily an internal decision-making process (2019, p. 89-90). In contemporary usage, the term "Democratic" has been added to AANES, leading to the adoption of the acronym DAANES.

The external support PYD was able to garner during the civil war has been pivotal in determining its fate and current position. The PYD succeeded in securing support from both the United States, the most significant global actor during the civil war, and Russia. While deepening its relationship with the U.S., the PYD effectively became a proxy actor. Meanwhile, Russia not only invited the PYD to peace talks but also

allowed the establishment of its office in Moscow (Federici, 2015). With the backing and endorsement of these two major powers, the PYD gained a substantial advantage in legitimizing its political initiatives and strengthening its operations on the ground (Knights & van Wilgenburg, 2021). Despite Türkiye's opposition and warnings, the adoption of this policy by both the U.S. and Russia highlights the significance of PYD in regional and international politics (Demirdüzen & Özel Özcan, 2021; Martin, 2025).

The most significant opposition to the *de facto* order that the PYD sought to establish with excessive confidence came from Türkiye. As a country keen on securing its borders and supporting Syria's territorial integrity since the beginning of the civil war, Türkiye turned to military operations after failing to achieve results through diplomatic negotiations. Relying on Article 51 of the UN Charter, Turkish army conducted the Euphrates Shield operation in 2016, Olive Branch in 2018, Peace Spring in 2019, and Spring Shield in 2020 (Kadioğlu, 2020). These operations were carried out by informing all relevant actors in Syria and prioritizing civilian safety, demonstrating Türkiye's true aim of preventing any *fait accompli* efforts to establish terrorist groups within Syria (Erkmen, 2022; Erendor, 2025; Güneş, 2025). Through these operations, Turkey showed its determination even using military tools to thwart any threat to the national security, while also shaping the behavior of actors like the PYD, YPG, and SDF, who had acted recklessly.

It must be stated that the PYD emerged as one of the actors that gained the most from the Syrian Civil War. The key factors contributing to this success were its ability to find opportunities, territory, legitimate grounds, and external support during the conflict (Plakoudas, 2017, p. 115). Before the civil war, it would have been difficult to imagine that Kurdish groups could establish a political and military situation in their current positions. However, PYD has now carved out a third path in Syria, beyond the government and opposition, using its armed forces, PKK support and experience, external backing, and its role in the fight against ISIS. Through YPG and SDF, PYD has achieved significant gains (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024). To legitimize itself, it pursued a strategy of downplaying its PKK ties, frequently expressing its adoption of Western values, engaging in diplomatic efforts, and delegitimizing its greatest opposing actor, Türkiye (Elsayed, 2023, p. 68-72). The portrayal of PYD as an actor opposing ISIS, emphasizing themes such as democracy, human rights, female fighters, resistance, and self-governance in influential media outlets, has played a significant role in shaping its image (Koç & Öztürk, 2024). It is also important to note that the PYD has effectively capitalized on the disagreements and competition among other actors involved in Syria's conflict (Ağır & Tatlı, 2020).

The PYD's refusal to join the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria and its perception of other Kurdish political formations as threats reflects one of the core approaches of the PKK since its founding. The PYD has either blocked the growth of other Kurdish parties or, particularly through its military power, demonstrated



absolute hostility towards them. This has prevented the formation of an effective Kurdish movement in Syria outside of political and civil formations operating under its control (Lowe, 2014, p. 230-231; Federici, 2015). In particular, the opposition to the KNC has been a fundamental source of tension between Kurdish groups throughout the civil war. The ENKS, supported by Mesud Barzani's parties, accused the PYD of acting unilaterally and establishing close ties with the regime (National Coalition of Syria, 16.03.2013; Federici, 2015). Although various talks took place between the two groups, no close relationship was established. However, as will be discussed in later sections, this situation began to change after December 8.

Finally, it is necessary to address the local election announcement made by the AANES Assembly in April 2024 (Al Monitor, 06.06.2024, Arab News, 06.06.2024). It was declared that elections were being prepared in seven cantons, with approximately three million voters expected to participate. Initially scheduled for May 30, the election date was later postponed to June 11. Undoubtedly, this initiative is the result of a planned process aimed at providing the de facto structure established in northern Syria with a legitimate and legal foundation. The election announcement received strong reactions from Türkiye and parties within the ENKS. Türkiye declared that it would not recognize an initiative imposed as a *fait accompli*, which it viewed as a violation of Syria's territorial integrity and unitary structure, and stated that it would intervene, including military options if necessary. Other Kurdish parties within the ENKS also protested, arguing that this was not a fair election but rather an organization solely carried out by the PYD. As a result of Türkiye's diplomatic pressure, the PYD announced that the elections were postponed first to August and then to a later date due to deficiencies in the preparations (Solaker, 31.05.2024; TRT Haber, 06.06.2024).

## **2. PYD's 10th Congress and Subsequent Developments**

As the year 2024 unfolded in this atmosphere, the PYD announced that it would hold its 10th Congress. Having held its first congress in 2003, the PYD convened again on September 21–22, 2024 (Kurdpress, 24.09.2024; Rudaw, 22.09.2024). This congress was of significant importance, as it took place while the civil war was still ongoing and during a period of heightened tensions with Türkiye due to election-related claims. In addition to changes in co-chairs, the rhetoric reflected in the congress provided insights into the policies the PYD would pursue.

The two-day congress was attended by 700 delegates from both Syria and abroad. These delegates elected 90 members to the PYD General Assembly, a notable decrease from the previous 145 members. Changes were made to the party's political program and bylaws during the congress (Firat News, 22.09.2024). It is important to highlight that the PYD does not hold annual congresses; rather, they are considered exceptional events, convened in response to leadership changes, modifications to the political program, internal regulations, or pressing internal and external circumstances (Jusoor, 09.10.2024).

Undoubtedly, the most significant development of the congress was the change in co-chairs. Salih Muslim, considered the most influential figure within the PYD, and his co-chair Asya Abdullah were replaced by Xerib Hiso and Perwin Yusif. Salih Muslim, who had held senior positions in the PYD since its founding in 2003, served as co-chair alongside Asya Abdullah from 2010 to 2017. After briefly stepping aside, he resumed leadership in 2022 and continued until the 10th Congress. While this leadership transition may appear to be a routine change, it can be interpreted as a strategic move to prepare the PYD for a new phase. Given Salih Muslim's remarkable influence within the party, especially in European relations, this shift signals a potential evolution in the PYD's political strategy in the post-civil war period.

The most significant points reflected in the speeches of both former and newly appointed co-chairs, as well as the general atmosphere of the congress, were the strong emphasis on ties with the PKK, loyalty to Abdullah Öcalan's ideology, and the intention to advocate for his release. Additionally, the commitment to strengthening the autonomous administration was a recurring theme. Another key emphasis was on unity in rebuilding Syria, with a consensus on prioritizing political solutions to secure existing gains. The PYD also underscored its active role in establishing a democratic and decentralized Syria. Furthermore, statements reaffirmed the plan to proceed with the elections that had been postponed since May (Jusoor, 09.10.2024; The Syrian Observer, 24.09.2024).

The Congress was particularly noteworthy in emphasizing PYD's ideology of democratic confederalism. Strengthening the autonomous administration established during the civil war and expanding this ideological framework across society was prioritized. Moreover, the need to promote a federal approach that legitimizes autonomous administrations in Syria's future was highlighted. In this regard, accelerating efforts to seek support from international actors and encouraging other ethnic groups in Syria to endorse this vision were emphasized as key strategies. Strengthening AANES and expanding the influence of the SDF were identified as critical elements in this process. Additionally, the strong emphasis on the PKK was one of the most striking aspects of the congress. The close ties of the newly appointed co-chairs with the PKK signaled the direction PYD would prioritize in the new period. Following the congress, it became possible to discern clues about PYD's future approach concerning its relations with other Kurdish groups in Syria, particularly the ENKS, its international engagements, its autonomy claims, its insistence on local elections, and its stance on Syria's future.

As mentioned in the previous section, PYD's traditionally distant stance toward other Kurdish groups and its reluctance to join broader alliances during the civil war now appears to be shifting. For instance, ahead of the elections held in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on October 20, 2024, PYD co-chairs engaged in discussions to support Bafel Talabani, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) candidate, against

Mesud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Anadolu Agency, 16.10.2024). This move was undoubtedly perceived as a response to the rivalry with the ENKS, which is backed by Barzani in Syria. However, with opposition groups consolidating their hold over Damascus, the growing political momentum regarding Syria's future has also influenced PYD's rhetoric and actions. In this context, negotiations have been initiated with ENKS and Iraqi Kurds to explore common ground for Kurdish unity in Syria (Rudaw, 18.12.2024).

The 10th Congress, held before December 8, served as a platform for PYD to reaffirm its commitment to the general strategy it had followed throughout the civil war. Feeling politically and militarily advantaged and pushing all possible conditions for local elections, PYD continued to set its own agenda amid the uncertainty between the opposition and the regime. The convergence of its internal and external relations with the prevailing conjuncture at the Congress created the impression that PYD had achieved its ideal conditions. While strengthening its de facto political and military presence to secure a strong position at the negotiation table for post-war autonomy, PYD also took steps to enhance its alliances against any potential Turkish military operation. However, the opposition's march, which began in November, forced PYD to reassess its calculations.

### 3. The Position of PYD in the Future of Syria

With opposition forces led by HTS entering Damascus in December 2024 and Bashar al-Assad fleeing to Russia with his family, it is possible to say that Syria has entered a new chapter following the civil war. Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that they would rebuild Syria alongside all Syrian factions and called for international support in this endeavor (Harmon Center, 04.02.2025; Al Tamimi, 30.01.2025; Middle East Eye, 13.01.2025). However, significant obstacles and uncertainties remain on Syria's path to restoring stability or establishing a new order. In this context, PYD's claim to autonomous governance and the restructuring of Syria's political framework represent major challenges for both the country's future and PYD itself. Post-December 8 developments, including negotiations between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the SDF, other Kurdish factions, and the Syrian Interim Government, offer critical insights into the evolving political landscape.

In the post-December 8 period, discussions emerged advocating for the unified representation of Kurds in Damascus. In this context, ENKS expressed its openness to unity, stating through its spokesperson Nawaf Rashid that the Rojava administration and Mazlum Abdi must undergo a transformation. The rapprochement was said to be contingent on Mazlum Abdi refraining from self-declaring as the sole Kurdish representative, AANES avoiding past mistakes, and the rejection of PKK ties in a manner that would ease Türkiye's concerns (Rudaw, 18.12.2024). On January 16, Masoud Barzani and Mazlum Abdi met in Erbil, emphasizing the meeting's significance for

Kurdish unity and cooperation in Syria's political transition (Euronews, 16.01.2025). At the core of this meeting was the establishment of a joint delegation to engage in negotiations within the framework of the new political order.

Following his election as transitional head of state, Ahmed al-Sharaa emphasized Syria's territorial integrity, the disbandment of all armed groups, the establishment of new institutions, the drafting of a new constitution, and the recognition of diversity as a source of strength (BBC, 31.01.2025). In line with al-Sharaa, Syria's new senior officials and other groups stated that administrations outside the central government would not be accepted, as they would hinder the reconstruction of the new Syria (Salik, 2025). The newly appointed Minister of Defense, Murhaf Abu Qasra, explicitly rejected the SDF's reluctance to disarm and its desire to form a bloc within Syria's new army (Reuters, 19.01.2025). On February 17, 2025, a meeting was held with the participation of the Syrian Democratic Council, the executive civil administration, the Rojava Autonomous Administration, and Mazlum Abdi. The meeting concluded with agreements on integrating the SDF's military and security institutions, as well as the Autonomous Administration's security bodies, into the Syrian army structure. Additionally, it was decided that Syrian state institutions would resume operations in northeastern Syria and that foreign fighters within the SDF ranks would be withdrawn from SDF-controlled areas as a step toward supporting national sovereignty and stability (Rudaw, 19.02.2025).

As discussions regarding the status of the SDF continued, a significant development occurred on February 18, 2025. The Syrian Democratic Council and the Syrian Democratic Forces reached an agreement with the Syrian interim government. According to the agreement, military units and institutions would be integrated into the new Syrian army. The announcement came from SDF's Northern Brigade commander, Abu Omar al-Idlibi, who stated that the SDF would be incorporated as a single bloc within the Ministry of Defense of the Damascus government, either as part of a corps or the Eastern Region Command (The New Arab, 18.02.2025; Rudaw, 19.02.2025). Additionally, in a recent development, SDF General Commander Mazlum Abdi congratulated Ahmed al-Sharaa on his election and invited him to visit northern Syria. He also noted that the central government had presented three demands: the removal of non-Syrian fighters from the SDF ranks, the handover of ISIS militants and their case files, and the entry of central government institutions into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rudaw, 20.02.2025). The presence of foreign groups within the SDF had been a long-standing but largely unacknowledged issue. However, Abdi's admission of this reality in December 2024, along with his statement that these groups might leave Syria following the resolution of issues with Türkiye, was seen as an implicit confirmation (Reuters, 19.12.2024). Moreover, SDF officials have highlighted the potential resurgence of ISIS or other Salafi groups, arguing that complete disarmament could have severe consequences. They have thus demanded a

privileged status in the north (The Sunday Times, 16.02.2025). Consequently, the SDF set conditions for disarmament, namely the complete withdrawal of Türkiye from Syria and the total elimination of ISIS elements (Kurd Press, 22.05.2025).

Meantime, statements from the SDF and AANES emphasized their commitment to national dialogue initiatives, arguing that no preconditions should be imposed for participation in this process (North Press Agency, 18.02.2025). Finally, it is worth noting Mazlum Abdi's remarks in an interview with *The Guardian*. He reaffirmed that they consider themselves part of Syria and are committed to a unified state, though he acknowledged differences in implementation and timing. He also pointed out that tensions with Türkiye have disrupted negotiations and created additional pressure, adding that Türkiye's actions have become increasingly unpredictable following the withdrawal of U.S. forces (The Guardian, 21.02.2025). In response, representatives of the Syrian interim government have maintained that all parties wishing to participate in the national dialogue must first disarm. They further stated that only those who meet this condition would be invited to the upcoming national conference (Reuters, 13.02.2025).

As one of the latest development, the preparatory committee finalized its work, and the Syrian National Dialogue Conference was held in Damascus on February 25, 2025. With approximately 600 invitees, the conference aimed to discuss non-binding interim regulations for rebuilding Syria's future. According to official statements, all factions within Syria were invited (The Associated Press, 25.02.2025). However, Kurdish groups led by the PYD issued a statement claiming they had not been invited. They criticized the conference for not being inclusive, arguing that selectively inviting certain figures was merely an attempt by the new administration to legitimize itself, making it no different from the Assad era (ANHA, 24.02.2025). This exclusion is undoubtedly linked to the SDF's refusal to disarm. During the conference preparations, concerns were frequently raised about the PYD's leadership of the SDF and its close ties to the PKK (Levant 24, 13.02.2025). Similarly, AANES declared that the conference did not represent Syria and that it would play no role in implementing its outcomes (ANHA, 25.02.2025). The conference itself emphasized Syria's unitary structure and territorial integrity while also condemning Israeli occupation (Al Jazeera, 26.02.2025).

In his speech at the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, which served as a platform for a one-day exchange of ideas and discussions, Ahmed al-Sharaa emphasized that Syria had liberated itself and was fully capable of rebuilding on its own. He asserted that uniting all armed forces under the state was not a luxury but a duty and necessity. Furthermore, he underscored Syria's indivisibility, stating that its strength stemmed from this unity (BBC, 25.02.2025). The conference's final communiqué included several key points, notably: the preservation of the unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, the rejection of any form of division or fragmentation, and the commitment to never cede any part of the country. It also stressed the consolidation of

the principle of citizenship, the rejection of all discrimination based on race, religion, or sect, and the establishment of a system free from ethnic or religious divisions, based on equal opportunity. Additionally, it called for fostering a culture of peaceful coexistence among all components of Syrian society while rejecting violence, incitement, and acts of vengeance. The communiqué further highlighted the need for swift legal reforms ensuring the participation of all social groups in the political process, alongside the implementation of fair political isolation measures (Haber Türk, 25.02.2025).

The Interim Government's firm stance on unconditional disarmament and its refusal to recognize the preconditions set by the SDF signaled that the process might unfold to the PYD's disadvantage. While the National Dialogue Conference can be seen as an attempt to establish order in Syria despite the PYD, intense negotiations between the parties soon became necessary. Consequently, on March 10, 2025, an eight-point agreement was signed between the Syrian Interim Government and the SDF. With Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi at the negotiating table, the agreement can be interpreted as a declaration of intent to resolve at least some of the long-standing disputes.

The agreement broadly aims to remove barriers to the equal participation of all Syrians in political processes and state institutions without discrimination, recognize the Kurdish community as an integral part of Syria with constitutional guarantees for their citizenship rights, and establish a nationwide ceasefire. Additionally, it outlines the integration of all civilian and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the central government, the transfer of airports, border crossings, and energy facilities to state control, and the facilitation of the return of displaced Syrians. The agreement also commits to combating threats to national security left by the Assad regime, rejecting hate speech and calls for division, and forming implementation committees to ensure the agreement's provisions are carried out by the end of the year (Al Jazeera, 10.03.2025; The Guardian, 10.03.2025). The agreement had a significant impact both within Syria and internationally. It addresses two longstanding unresolved issues: the disarmament of all armed groups and the consolidation of central government authority across Syria. On one hand, SDF elements are set to integrate into the national army, and the state is officially entering AANES structures. On the other hand, the agreement guarantees the constitutional rights of the Kurdish population and commits to eliminating any threats directed at them. At first glance, the agreement appears to follow a win-win principle for both sides. However, the actual implementation of its provisions will depend on the work of the committees and the evolving dynamics of the process.

Whether this agreement represents a permanent solution for Syria or a short-term strategic maneuver will become clear over time. For the Kurds, it can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain their gains in a post-U.S. withdrawal scenario while securing central government protection against potential attacks, particularly from Turkey. On the other hand, the agreement is crucial for the Interim Government's full legitimacy



(Schiavi, 2025). Although some analysts suggest that AANES will completely dissolve and the SDF will be fully integrated into the national army (CNN, 13.03.2025), such an assessment appears overly optimistic. The committees established under the agreement must determine whether the SDF will integrate into the army without any special status and whether ongoing conflicts with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army will cease (Goldbaum & Ward, 2025). One key aspect of the agreement is the influence of U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump. The announcement that CENTCOM Commander Michael Erik Kurilla met with SDF officials before the agreement (Rudaw, 10.03.2025; CNN, 13.05.2025) underscores the strategic dimension of this development. The shift in U.S. risk assessments and its commitment to ending conflicts in Syria suggest that Washington has guided the SDF toward becoming a more cooperative actor. Trump's "America First" approach, by facilitating this agreement, has inadvertently set the stage for a regional order-building initiative (Kourdi & Damanhoury, 2025). Despite the U.S. role in the process, unresolved issues such as AANES' official status, the full integration of the SDF into the army, the transfer of prisons holding ISIS detainees, and ongoing tensions between Türkiye and the PYD remain critical challenges (van Wildenburg, 2025). Ultimately, based on the agreement's provisions, it appears that the Interim Government has secured more advantages. The SDF's acceptance of disarmament, the transfer of border crossings and energy facilities to the central government, and the reinstatement of state institutions in the region align closely with Ahmed al-Sharaa's core demands (Görücü, 2025).

Throughout the civil war, the PYD appeared to be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the conflict, yet in the emerging new order, it now faced the risk of becoming one of the greatest losers. On one hand, all armed groups across the country are being urged to integrate into the new national army; on the other, Syria's territorial integrity and the full activation of central institutions nationwide remain key priorities for the interim government. This clearly places significant pressure on both the SDF and AANES. Additionally, the U.S. plans for a complete withdrawal from Syria pose another major challenge for the PYD, further complicating its position in the evolving political landscape (Hall, 2025, p. 49-50). It is particularly important to emphasize that Türkiye will be one of the key determinants of PYD's trajectory in the new order. One of the most critical red lines for Türkiye, as a key actor in the Syrian civil war, has been the threat posed by PYD-YPG and the formations it leads. Consequently, the gains or concessions of PKK-affiliated structures in Syria's new order will be the primary determinant of how much Türkiye stands to gain in the process. The new administration's stance on the autonomous governance initiatives and YPG elements—Türkiye's primary concerns—aligning with Turkish policies can be seen as its main motivation in the evolving political landscape.

HTS is striving to shape the new order by merging its ideology with national and international dynamics. Syria's current situation cannot be considered in isolation from regional developments. The stance of regional and global actors, who have played

a significant role throughout the civil war, will directly influence both Syria's future and the broader dynamics of the Middle East (Singh, 2025, p.65-68). While Ahmed al-Sharaa announced a draft for the new constitution and activated committees, he also unveiled his new cabinet consisting of 23 ministers on March, 30. Although the cabinet is primarily HTS-based, a Kurd was appointed as Minister of Education, an Alawite as Minister of Transport, a Druze as Minister of Agriculture, and a Christian as Minister of Social Affairs. Through these appointments, the Syrian Interim Government aimed to project an image of an inclusive administration both domestically and internationally. However, the fact that key ministries remain under HTS control, Kurdish demands for greater representation, and the absence of Turkmen representation at the ministerial level will likely lead to questions about the new government's inclusivity.

### **Conclusion and Assessment**

After nearly 13 years of conflict, Syria has suffered significant losses across political, economic, military, demographic, and cultural dimensions. With the cessation of hostilities, the scale of humanitarian, physical, demographic, and economic devastation is becoming more evident. It is clear that the reconstruction of Syria—whether humanitarian, physical, demographic, or economic—will be an extremely challenging task. On the other hand, the political reconstruction of Syria will also face a particularly difficult period. The declaration of December 8 as a national holiday by the Syrian Interim Government marks a symbol of hope for the future of the country. The agreement signed on March 10, despite all the challenges, has created a sense of optimism for the future of Syria, and it is clear that the implementation of the eight articles will serve as one of the key foundations for establishing order in the country.

It is clear that Ahmed al-Sharaa is supported by numerous local, regional, and global actors. The reasons behind this support are evident in the frequent emphasis he places on key concepts such as "reconstruction of Syria," "diversity and richness," "political representation of all Syrians," "democratic governance," "combating extremist ideologies and terrorism," "integration into regional and international policies," "disbanding armed groups," and "territorial integrity." Among the many challenges faced by Syria's new government, one of the most crucial issues is how to resolve the situation in the country's northern region. Key challenges include how the Syrian Democratic Forces will be integrated into the new army and what the status of the AANES will be.

The PYD, which emerged from the civil war with the most significant gains, has established formations in Syria such as the SDF and AANES, and these formations are non-negotiable elements in maintaining its position. After the 10th Congress, the PYD continues on its path with military and political confidence, but it is clear that after December 8, it has tried to adopt a more conciliatory approach. Particularly, the continued support from the United States means that the PYD will sit at the negotiating table with other Kurdish groups and the interim government with a strong position. As mentioned earlier, it is clear that the discussions regarding the integration

of armed forces will be resolved through mutual concessions. However, it is certain that the Kurdish side will not agree to unconditional integration without securing full approval from the United States and will use Türkiye and ISIS as pretexts for this. They are already demanding assurances for the fight against ISIS and its variations, which they claim have started to activate, and insist on a complete agreement with Türkiye as a precondition. It is clear that the guarantees provided by the Syrian Interim Government at this point will have an impact on the process. On the other hand, it must be noted that there has been no external negotiation or agreement regarding the autonomous administration that the PYD has gradually implemented throughout the civil war. Resolving this issue is seen as a priority in determining whether Syria's new constitution will be unitary or federal. It is not a reasonable option for the PYD to easily relinquish its current *de facto* gains. Furthermore, the recognition or tolerance of this *de facto* situation would set a precedent for other groups in Syria to make similar demands and attempts. In this context, it is obvious that if the PYD does not achieve its political goals, it will be unwilling to disband the SDF or join the general army.

The 10th Congress was expected to be a key determinant of the PYD's future policies. It should be noted that the outcome of the Congress was aimed at expressing a strong will for the PYD to carry its political and military gains into the future; however, the events following December 8 led to a revision of the PYD's goals and policies. While HTS and other opposition groups entered Damascus, the SDF forces, eager to capitalize on the situation, attempted to advance west of the Euphrates. However, due to armed retaliation and political rhetoric, the SDF forces were forced to retreat. From this example, it must be emphasized that the PYD will continue to make efforts to strengthen its position as a pragmatic actor in Syria's future. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, it is not difficult to predict that the PYD will pursue all possible diplomatic efforts to legitimize the current situation in northern and eastern Syria. In this regard, while the PYD will engage with groups it previously hesitated to align with, it is clear that it will also seek support for autonomous governance from the ethnic groups in the rest of the country.

The exclusion of Kurdish parties from the Syrian National Dialogue Conference has shown the Interim Government's firm stance on its demands. Although the primary request of the conference's preparatory committee was the unconditional surrender of armed groups, the SDF's indecisive position was met with backlash. Additionally, the emphasis on territorial integrity and the unitary structure of Syria, particularly in the context of the country's reconstruction, suggests that the status of the AANES will be more heavily debated. While the PYD has attempted to strengthen its position by initiating new communication dialogues with other Kurdish groups, it is clear that it will be forced to make concessions in the face of the Interim Government's resolute stance. At this juncture, the policies pursued by Türkiye and the interests of the United States in Syria under Donald Trump's second presidency will constitute critical points that need to be considered.

The March 10 agreement can be seen as a form of reconciliation emerging from the tensions between the Kurds and the central authority during the Victory Conference and the National Dialogue Conference processes. As outlined in the previous section, AANES and SDF have posed the primary challenge for the Interim Government. As discussed throughout the study, the Kurds, particularly the PYD, are a key component of the new order in Syria. Their role has proven crucial in ensuring the country's territorial integrity, maintaining its unitary structure, and drafting an inclusive constitution. Although they were initially excluded from the National Dialogue Conference, it soon became evident that this exclusion was a major obstacle to national stability. Alongside Alawite and Druze groups, the Kurds argued that the conference lacked national legitimacy and would never be viable. Intense negotiations and diplomatic efforts following the conference, with the involvement of external actors, ultimately led to an agreement. This indicates a strategic shift by the PYD, moving away from its previous unilateral stance toward integration within Syria. At the same time, the Interim Government adopted a more inclusive and tolerant approach. Undoubtedly, Ahmed al-Sharaa and HTS remain the dominant forces in Syria, yet it is clear that the resolution of the country's political structure hinges on the PYD.

In conclusion, it must be emphasized that the Kurds—one of the groups neglected and suppressed during the Assad administrations—will continue their struggle to be actively involved in the constitutional process and parliamentary representation as Syria is being rebuilt. The presence of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, along with the explicit support of the United States, are significant factors strengthening their position at the negotiation table and enabling them to extract concessions. The PYD is aware that peace and stability cannot be maintained throughout Syria unless the Kurds leave the negotiation table satisfied. In this context, in order to legitimize its demand for autonomy, the PYD will continue to remain on the agenda by alternately using the SDF as leverage, leveraging external support, or capitalizing on its ties with groups that are unable to establish good relations with the new interim government. Although in the short term it may postpone or keep its autonomy claim off the agenda to avoid provoking reactions from other groups, it will likely try to maintain the status quo in the form of a *de facto*, though unspoken, arrangement. Therefore, it is inevitable that one of the most significant challenges in Syria's future will revolve around the PYD. At this point, the policies pursued by other Kurdish movements that are separate from the PYD and aligned with the support of Syria's unitary structure may strengthen the hand of the Interim Government.

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