

# Between war and peace in Turkey and Syria – last week in Kurdish news

As we wait for news on the dissolution of the PKK, this week's article begins with the politics surrounding the expected announcement. It goes on to examine Wednesday's meeting between France's President Macron and Syria's Interim President, Ahmed al-Sharaa. It looks at debates over that meeting, and at the relative weakness and short-term pragmatism of al-Sharaa, as exemplified by some worrying recent appointments.



**Sarah Glynn**

*Since this article was initially written, we have received news that the PKK Congress was held from the 5-7 of this month and that the congress decisions will be shared soon.*

## **Peace?**

I try not to write about what might happen and to focus on actual events, but the widespread belief that we will soon hear news that the PKK has held their congress and agreed to dissolve themselves is too important to ignore. On Thursday, HaberTürk reported that President Erdoğan told his party, “We have overcome all obstacles. Today or tomorrow, the PKK will lay down its weapons and dissolve the organisation. Then a new process, a new era for all of us, will begin.” The article is now gone from the website, and there is no information as to how or where this might be achieved. There is also nothing concrete to back up reports of plans for major legal and constitutional changes to be implemented after the PKK’s dissolution.

What is clear, is that Abdullah Öcalan is committed to this course of action, arguing that the PKK has served its purpose and has given birth to a wider movement that can pursue the struggle via political means; that Öcalan’s leadership is unchallenged and his position has the support of PKK members; and that when the PKK is taken out of the equation, Turkey immediately loses the ability to use it as a pretext to criminalise all Kurdish political activity, both in Turkey and beyond.

As people are well aware, the Turkish Government’s interaction with Öcalan is driven by their own political considerations, including a drive to win votes from supporters of the pro-Kurdish DEM Party in the next presidential elections. This has been accompanied by attempts to sow division between the DEM Party and the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). The CHP has been under major attack at the same time as the DEM Party has been drawn into the new potential peace process. This week, the CHP’s imprisoned presidential candidate and deposed mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, had his Twitter account [blocked](#) at the request of Turkey, and the [CHP’s mass protest](#) outside Istanbul University was plunged into darkness by the authorities.

The government have kept all negotiations with Öcalan to themselves, and have not responded to Öcalan’s demand that the parliament becomes involved. The lack of wider involvement leaves the process vulnerable to government whims, which proved fatal to the previous peace talks that ended ten years ago.

The DEM Party’s main negotiator in the talks, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, lost his battle against major heart failure last Saturday. Actor, director, writer, and politician, Önder came from a Leftist Turkman family, and in taking up the Kurdish cause he embodied in himself the call for genuine Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood. His death has been met with a broad outpouring of grief – and numerous promises to continue the vital peace work that he had been involved in.

The [European Parliament’s latest report](#) on Turkey – accepted with a big majority this week – reinforces their previous criticism of Turkey’s democratic backsliding, which

continues to exclude it from EU membership. It also welcomes Öcalan's call for the PKK to lay down arms. It "underlines that this represents a significant opportunity and must be followed by an inclusive political process, with a prominent role for the Turkish Parliament".

The movement for change generated by Öcalan and the PKK has most fully realised its ideas in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES); but it continues to face major challenges, both from within the country and also from external powers competing for control – notably Turkey and Israel.

A peace agreement in Turkey would change the dynamic in Syria, too. When Öcalan first issued his call for the PKK to dissolve itself, Mazlum Abdi, Commander in Chief of North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [observed](#) that Turkey would then be deprived of their justification for carrying out operations in Syria.

It is recent developments in Syria that will form the focus of the rest of this week's article.

### **Al-Sharaa in Paris**

On Wednesday, France rolled out the red carpet as the self-acclaimed Interim President of Syria and former leader of the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Ahmed al-Sharaa, paid his first visit to Europe. In order for him to come to meet French President, Emmanuel Macron, the United Nations would have had to grant a special exemption as he is still designated a terrorist.

The meeting is part of a concerted building of ties and discussions between the two governments, but the invitation was the subject of much [political disagreement](#) in France. France has been very active in supporting negotiations with the Syrian Interim Government that aim to promote a peaceful settlement with minority groups and with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. These negotiations can benefit from this high-level engagement – and no one is more aware of the pragmatic need to engage with the Interim Government than the leadership of the Autonomous Administration. However, engagement needs to be carefully calibrated and presented so as to avoid gifting the Interim Government a legitimacy that cloaks its deeply problematic nature and actions.

At their joint press conference after the meeting, Macron [asked](#) al-Sharaa to "do everything possible to ensure the protection of all Syrians without exception" and to ensure the prosecution and trial of the perpetrators of sectarian violence; but the [image](#) of Macron and al-Sharaa in a smiling hug can be used to boost acceptance of the Interim Government, and, thus, whitewash their complicity in the violence.

Al-Sharaa's main concern is to see the end of the sanctions that have crippled Syria's economy, and Macron gave his support to the "gradual lifting" of sanctions. He [told al-Sharaa](#), "that if he continues along his path then we'll continue along ours, first by continuing the progressive lifting of European sanctions". This framing is deeply

problematic when al-Sharaa's path has frequently headed in a regressive direction, however, economic sanctions are weapons that rarely hit their intended target. Instead, they cause mass distress and frustration – and this can also feed factional violence, especially in a land awash with guns.

The French Government's desire for Syrian peace and prosperity, is not without self-interest. They see an opportunity to increase French power and influence in the region and to promote French business interests in its reconstruction. Even before this latest meeting, a French company had signed [a 30-year contract](#) to develop and operate the port of Latakia. Al-Sharaa has made clear that his Syria is very much open for business and ripe for exploitation by Western capital.

France is proud of their history of supporting and working with the Kurds, initially in Iraq and more recently also in Syria, and the French Foreign minister [met with Syrian Kurdish leaders](#) in Erbil in April. After his meeting with al-Sharaa, Macron [praised](#) the agreement between the Syrian Interim Government and North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and proposed that the Interim Government join North and East Syria and the international coalition in the fight against ISIS. But, since the signing of that agreement on 10 March, Syria has continued to see some very worrying developments that question both the sincerity of the new leader and his ability to govern.

### **Al-Sharaa's Syria**

The 10 March agreement was signed to the background of the wholesale massacre of Alawite communities on the West coast, which the SDF hoped to be able to help bring to an end. Since then, we have seen lethal sectarian attacks on the Druze in the south, and attacks against Alawites are still taking place, all be it at a smaller scale. Only days after the agreement's signing, al-Sharaa produced [an Interim Constitution](#) that negated its commitment to partnership and cooperation. This constitution is meant to last for five years and gives primacy to Islamic law and huge power to the president.

Much of the sectarian violence has been blamed on militias from Turkey's mercenary Syrian National Army (SNA); but these have been officially recognised as part of the Syrian army, and there has also been evidence of direct involvement of Syrian Army troops from al-Sharaa's, now officially dissolved, HTS.

There have been reports of other acts of violence, too, committed by bands of young men armed with guns and a violently intolerant Islamist ideology. A video from Monday night shows gunmen entering a Damascus nightclub. The floor is red with blood from the wounded and there is the lifeless body of a woman. This followed another nightclub attack in the same district the day before, and [the New Arab](#) comments "There have been previous unverified reports of armed men, purportedly linked to the government's security apparatus, raiding venues that play music and serve alcohol or harassing their owners."

It is clear that al-Sharaa has little control over the various groups that have been cobbled together into the new Syrian Army. He has been described as a very pragmatic man, but recently that pragmatism has been focused on immediate survival at the expense of any long-term strategy. Self-preservation has led him to give powerful positions not to the best person for the job, but to loyal supporters or to those he fears to disappoint. While he is insistent that the highly disciplined Syrian Democratic Forces should not be allowed to integrate into the Syrian Army as a distinct unit, the SNA militias have been kept intact. These militias often function as particularly violent mafia gangs, and al-Sharaa's Syrian Army lacks any effective command structure. At the press conference with Macron, al-Sharaa was asked what he planned to do about the presence of foreign jihadists, which has raised many concerns over security. He simply [claimed](#) that these fighters would respect the law, and talked about the possibility of giving them Syrian nationality.

A serious partnership with the powerful SDF, much the largest, as well as the best disciplined and equipped, fighting force in Syria, would allow the Syrian Government to escape from the dangers of this short-term survivalism, but Turkey is looking over al-Sharaa's shoulder and pressuring him against working with the Kurds and their allies.

Three appointments last week highlight the nature and impact of al-Sharaa's approach. (Cédric Labrousse has provided detailed biographies on Twitter.) Last weekend, al-Sharaa strengthened his own power with the promotion of [Hussein al-Salama](#), a longtime HTS loyalist, as head of Syrian intelligence. And he appointed another loyalist, [Amer Namas al-Ali](#), as head of the Central Authority of Supervisions and Inspection. This is a post created by Hafez al-Assad to oversee and control all other parts of the administration; keeping it shows how al-Sharaa is replacing one autocracy with another.

On Monday we learnt of an appointment that casts a deep black shadow across hopes for a more peaceful future. [Abu Hatem Shaqra](#), who has been promoted to Commander in Chief of the army's 86th Division, based in Raqqa, Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, has dedicated his life to amassing wealth through all means, including theft, corruption, extortion, kidnapping, trafficking, and murder. He is detested and distrusted by all sides, and has been sanctioned for war crimes by the United States and others. He had little connection with the fight against Assad, but his group of bandits was used by Turkey against the Kurds, for whom he is infamous as the man responsible for the torture and murder, in 2019, of the Kurdish woman politician, Hevrîn Xelef.

This time, the reason for the appointment appears to be fear of making a ruthless man an enemy. It has been done to placate a powerful group that al-Sharaa and his government are unable to rein in. Such an appointment, which makes a final agreement with the SDF even harder, and alarms the western countries the new president is trying to impress, is evidence of the relatively weak position that al-Sharaa finds himself in.

The uncertainty and violence reinforce the importance of the Autonomous Administration's decision to maintain their ability for self-defence and not rush into dissolving the SDF into al-Sharaa's army. It also underlines the importance of the

Kurdish demands for decentralisation, as [I wrote last week](#). North and East Syria's model of a local autonomy that recognises different ethnic groups has become an inspiration for Alawites, Druze, and other minorities, and also for secularists concerned about the Islamic government in Damascus.

## **Turkey and Israel**

Turkey's SNA militias are still generally abiding by the ceasefire at the crucial Tishreen Dam, which they failed to take from the SDF despite Turkish air support, but that doesn't mean that Turkey has given up on their neo-Ottoman ambitions. They hope, through political machinations involving the Syrian Interim Government (which they helped nurture), to gain a creeping control over more and more areas, at the expense of the SDF.

Israel also has expansionist ambitions, with dreams of a Greater Israel that includes more than half of Syria. More immediately they want to block the power of Turkey and any Islamist groups, including the new Interim Government. They have bombed and destroyed Syria's military facilities, and Turkey and the Interim Government have been unable to do anything about it. But Israel and Turkey don't want war with each other and, as al-Sharaa confirmed at the Paris press conference, the Interim Government is involved in indirect discussions with Israel to "contain the current situation".

Amidst all the uncertainty, one positive is the attention that Kurdish issues are now getting internationally. This has been exemplified over the last few weeks by some serious and sympathetic reporting by the BBC World service – a series [of three radio programmes](#) looking at the historical background to Öcalan's peace call, and [a critical documentary film](#) examining Turkey's military expansion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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