

# GREEN LEFT

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/conflicting-futures-syrias-kurds-and-other-minorities>

## Conflicting futures for Syria's Kurds and other minorities?

Sarah Glynn

August 13, 2025

Issue

1436

World



While Syrian president Ahmed al-Sharaa stalls on negotiations, Turkish-backed groups affiliated to his government are carrying out attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces. Photo: ANF English

Foreign leaders rushed to welcome Ahmed al-Sharaa as the new president of Syria, and — in their anxiety to be first in line for new

business contracts — were primed to believe in his fairytale conversion from violent jihadist frog to democratic prince. Now they are being daily presented with reasons to rue their credibility.

Meanwhile, the political and physical help that they have given to al-Sharaa and his Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) are bringing increasingly worrying consequences to the peoples of Syria.

Al-Sharaa wooed Western leaders by [adopting neoliberal economics](#). I could write many pages about the new Syria's economic corruption — a result of the [appropriation](#) of Bashar al-Assad's corrupt legacy, and of foreign deals that [lack any transparency](#) or accountability — but I will focus here on Al-Sharaa's relations with Syria's ethnic and religious minorities, and especially with the Kurdish dominated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

For his new role as internationally respected national leader, al-Sharaa has not only learnt how to dress the part, but also how to speak the language of democracy and mutual respect and hide his real aims. He is hardly alone in his hypocrisy and his focus on achieving personal power, but the situation in Syria makes it especially dangerous.

This is a country that has undergone fourteen years of civil war and external intervention, and been impoverished by severe sanctions. It is full of militias who operate on a dangerous mix of gangsterism and a violent interpretation of Islam.

Al-Sharaa nominally directly controls [about 60%](#) of Syria. Ten percent is occupied by Turkey and under the sway of the violent militias that Turkey used as mercenaries. In the south, the Druze control the region of Suwayda, and Israel has been increasing its control beyond the 1967 ceasefire line in the Golan Heights.

In the north and east, 25% of the country is controlled by the AANES, which has a very different vision for the future of Syria as a whole. In place

of the centralised autocratic power envisaged by al-Sharaa, they call for democratic local autonomy.

In place of al-Sharaa's Arab state and Sharia law, they promote secularism and multi-ethnic coexistence. And in place of HTS misogyny, they emphasise women's rights.

Although HTS and its allied militias were able to sweep away Bashar al-Assad's demoralised army, they have not shown themselves to be a well-disciplined force, and Syria's new army now also incorporates the militias nurtured by Turkey, including groups and leaders under international sanctions for their brutality. Rather than risk confronting these leaders, al-Sharaa has kept them on his side by giving them prominent roles.

Foreign Islamist fighters who flocked to Syria to join the militias fighting Assad have been promised Syrian citizenship. Many of these, and other militia members, were once members of ISIS, and some still sport ISIS patches on their uniforms.

In contrast, North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) form a large and well-disciplined army, which, thanks to the United States, is also well equipped. The US has supported them in the fight against ISIS, while always making it clear that this tactical alliance does not extend beyond the anti-ISIS fight. The SDF incorporates the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units), but, just as the AANES now includes non-Kurdish areas liberated from ISIS, so the SDF is a multi-ethnic force, with more Arab fighters than Kurdish ones.

## **An initial agreement**

The AANES has always regarded itself as an integral part of Syria — despite Turkey's attempts to portray it as separatist — and it accepts that, in the new reality, this means coming to an agreement with al-Sharaa. With such different world views this was never going to be easy, but on March 10, Mazloum Abdi, Commander in Chief of the SDF, and al-Sharaa

signed an agreement to integrate North and East Syria with the rest of the country. There were no details at this stage, but they agreed to form joint committees to negotiate how this could be implemented in all its different aspects, political and military.

Since then, the only definite arrangements have been over less contentious issues, such as recognition of school qualifications, while the Syrian government has continued to develop institutions that take no account of views in North and East Syria, or of anyone else who might disagree with them.

## **Immediate problems**

Almost as soon as the ink was dry on the agreement, al-Sharaa [announced a new interim constitution](#) that gave him extraordinary powers and prioritised Islam — through Islamic law and through the stipulation that the president be Muslim. The AANES made clear that this constitution was completely against the spirit of the agreement.

Al-Sharaa has recently announced parliamentary [“elections”](#), but two-thirds of the members of parliament not appointed directly by himself will be elected by committees selected by a committee he appointed.

Three vital areas in which it is proving especially hard to agree on terms are: the relative importance of centre and regions; the integration of the SDF with the Syrian army; and the return of displaced people to the regions still occupied by Turkey. In all these cases, hopes of reaching agreement have to overcome al-Sharaa’s ambitions, the religious prejudices of his supporters and Turkey’s interference.

The AANES wants to maintain its own institutions and practices, especially those that facilitate multicultural coexistence and promote women’s rights. And it wants the SDF, including its women’s units, to retain its own integrity within the army.

Bedran Çiya Kurd, Co-Chair of Foreign Affairs for the AANES, [explains](#), “Integration means engaging in Syrian state institutions democratically, while ensuring the political will and identity of our people through their existing institutions and the autonomous administration of their regions.

“The transitional authority wants us to relinquish our entire political will and dissolve our protective system, which is not a solution. The solution is genuine partnership in managing the country.

“Insisting that the solution lies in a centralised system, means returning to a system of assimilation, Arabisation, and denial of components.”

## **Self defence**

Recent events have confirmed the importance of the AANES’ insistence on maintaining its own self defence. Even as Abdi was signing the agreement in March, Syrian government forces, together with militias officially under their control, were carrying out a massacre of Alawites on the West coast. In July, the army’s sectarian violence was let loose again, this time [against the Druze](#) in the southern region of Suwayda. Government forces have now withdrawn from the region, but there are still sporadic attacks and Suwayda remains [under blockade](#), with restricted access to fuel and food.

## **Talks postponed**

Both the US and France have been working behind the scenes to progress the agreement between the Syrian government and North and East Syria, but with rather different approaches. Tom Barrack, the US ambassador to Turkey and special envoy to Syria, has been accused of being dangerously pro-Turkey and of whitewashing Syrian government atrocities. After meeting with Mazloum Abdi in April, France’s Foreign Minister [tweeted](#) “The rights and interests of Kurds must be taken fully into account in the Syrian transition.”

It was planned that delegations from both the government and North and East Syria would be hosted in Paris in July, but the invitation for the delegation from North and East Syria was postponed at the last minute. Then, on August 9, two days after meeting with Turkey's Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, the Syrian government announced it was pulling out of the planned meeting altogether.

Their ostensible reason for this decision was a conference organised by the AANES the previous day, which brought together representatives of the different ethnicities in Syria — including the Alawites and Druze — and [called for](#) “a single, free, democratic, decentralised and pluralistic Syria, based on the rule of law, human dignity and equality.”

The Syrian government spokesperson also represented the decision as a rejection of external interference, insisting that meetings should take place in Damascus — a conceit that conveniently ignores the foreign powers behind al-Sharaa's own rise, as well as al-Sharaa's clear deference to Turkey.

But the real reason seems to be [Turkish fears](#) that France would be sympathetic to the Kurds.

While al-Sharaa stalls on negotiations and imposes his own autocratic institutions, Turkish-backed groups affiliated to his government are [carrying out attacks](#) against the SDF. These attacks, which break the ceasefire that was part of the March agreement, seem designed to provoke a retaliation that can be used as an excuse for discrediting North and East Syria.

## Turkey

It is no secret that Turkey wants to maximise their own control in Syria and minimise any sort of Kurdish autonomy, especially when that is linked to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan.

All these developments are happening alongside Turkey's tentative peace process with the Kurds. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants to make the minimum of concessions in exchange for peace. He has also tried to claim that Öcalan's call for the dissolution of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) also applies to the SDF — which the SDF firmly denies. However, the risk of jeopardising an end to the fight with the PKK will also inform Turkey's interventions in Syria.

## **In an age of imperialism**

Syria's unhappy situation is the product of the selfish and ill-informed meddling by external powers, but, in our unequal world, the Syrian people — even autonomous and organised North and East Syria — are forced to turn to those same powers to help extricate them from this mess.

[Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – visit her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#) or [bluesky](#).]