

THE NATIONAL

Kurds in Syria are facing a 'war of extermination'

9 January 2026

KURDISH
SYRIA
TURKEY
POLITICS
By Sarah Glynn



Kurds in Syria are facing a 'war of extermination'

The Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh are home to half a million people. Like other predominantly Kurdish areas of Syria, the neighbourhoods used the power vacuum of the civil war to establish their own autonomous administrations, but their physical separation from the rest of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria left them vulnerable.

For the residents, the hardships of the war years were exacerbated by repeated blockades, as the government tried to force them back into the Ba'athist fold. Now,

the neighbourhoods' vulnerability has made them the frontline for a new war against the Kurds that threatens to return the whole country to a battleground.

During the civil war, Western powers poured money and weapons into the hands of violent Jihadi militias who they hoped would bring down Assad.



Syrian opposition fighters celebrate the fall of Assad's regime

It was this simplistic thinking, combined with the West's self-serving deference to **Turkish interests**, that enabled Ahmed al-Sharaa to take control in Damascus and to transform himself from jihadi leader to internationally recognised president of Syria.

The installation of al-Sharaa and his followers left the Autonomous Administration in a difficult position. All that they have achieved, with the loss of 12,000 men and women in the fight against Isis, is under threat.

In place of democracy, local autonomy, multiculturalism, secularism, and women's rights, the new government prioritises central presidential control, and regards **Syria** as a Sunni Arab country that should conform to conservative Islamic values.

But the Autonomous Administration knew that they had no choice other than to negotiate to retain something of what they had built, and in March they signed an agreement with al-Sharaa. This was intended to create a framework for establishing the mechanics for integrating North and East Syria – more than a quarter of the country – into the whole.

Debate has focussed on the future of the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is ready to become part of a new Syrian army, but not simply to disband its large and disciplined force and put its fighters under the control of jihadi militias.

They emphasise that, so long as there are no guarantees of democratic rights nor even of basic safety, North and East Syria needs to retain its ability for self-defence. And they point to the massacres that have already taken place against other minorities, especially the Alawites and the Druze.

The March agreement seemed to provide hope that integration, though difficult, might yet be possible; however, Turkey has been determined to block every potential breakthrough and ensure that not the slightest measure of autonomy is allowed to the Kurds.

They then blame the Autonomous Administration for the impasse, and are now using this as justification for military intervention.

Turkish attempts to dominate Syria have included three invasions and occupations during the civil war, and the support of violent mercenary militias. These militias are now officially part of the Syrian Army, but are still controlled by Turkey.

When al-Sharaa was ousting Assad, Turkey and its militias took the opportunity to carry out a parallel fight against the SDF. Their attacks were scaled down in response to the delicate peace talks between Turkey and the PKK, but never stopped.

Intermittent attacks were aimed at destabilising the Autonomous Administration and at prompting retaliation that can be portrayed as SDF attacks. The Turkish Government is also trying to claim that the PKK peace process requires dissolution of the SDF.

The Aleppo neighbourhoods were the subject of a further agreement in April. This allowed for them to be integrated with the wider city while retaining internal autonomy. The SDF withdrew, leaving the internal security forces. This agreement brought hope that similar compromise might be possible on a larger scale, but that was not to be.



Kurds holding flags in support of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan

Emboldened by **Turkey**, Damascus has blocked connections between Administration areas and the rest of Syria, and the Aleppo neighbourhoods have been under siege for over six months. Recently, this extended to cutting off electricity and stopping diesel oil.

The ongoing large-scale assault began on Tuesday afternoon. Turkish-backed groups were soon joined by the main Syrian army. Many of those taking part were involved in the massacres of Alawites and Druze, and some fighters have been spotted with Isis patches.

An adjacent Christian quarter was forcibly emptied for use as a military base, and residents of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh were told to evacuate before 3pm on Wednesday, when their neighbourhoods would be considered military areas. Several thousand left, and there are reports that some of these were abducted and used as human shields.

Civilian areas are being attacked with heavy weapons and there have been attempts to enter the neighbourhoods with tanks.

By midday yesterday, nine civilians had been killed and a further 63 wounded. The Autonomous Administration denounced the attacks as “a war of extermination against the Kurds”.