

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Syria Ceasefire Agreement: A Fragile Truce

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### Summary

The 18 January 2026 ceasefire agreement contains inherent vulnerabilities that could derail sustainable peace from taking root in post-war Syria.

## Introduction

The ceasefire agreement announced on 18 January 2026 between Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander, Mazloum Kobani, alias Mazloum Abidi, marks another pivotal moment in the post-Assad era. Notably, the agreement ended weeks of hostilities and uncertainties about a renewed civil war, following the unsuccessful March 2025 negotiations regarding SDF’s integration into the post-conflict political framework. At the same time, the agreement contains inherent vulnerabilities that could derail sustainable peace from taking root in post-war Syria. One of the structural vulnerabilities of the ceasefire agreement relates to the threat posed by ISIS, which is poised to exploit the mounting security vacuum in Northeast Syria.

## The ISIS Variable

Syria’s vast detention camps, including Al-Hol and Al-Roj—often referred to as breeding grounds of extremism—in Northeast Syria, house nearly 24,000 and 2,400 ISIS family members, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Presently, even as ISIS continues its guerrilla campaign against a new Syrian government, Al-Hol has been injected with renewed apprehensions concerning the domestic and regional security landscape. As the authority shifted hands, from SDF to the Syrian army, many detainees have reportedly fled the confines of the camp amid yet another set of conflicting reports. While SDF has pinned the blame for the brief security lapse on the global community, the government has levelled a serious accusation against the SDF, of deliberately allowing the detainees to escape.

Home to the most extremist elements within the ISIS family units, Al-Hol could witness similar incidents even as the Syrian army looks to establish its authority in the area. These trends are expected to continue replenishing ISIS’s ranks and support infrastructure, fuelling ISIS militancy in the country. Between January and October 2025, ISIS accounted for at least 237 attacks, while nearly 13 mass-casualty attacks were thwarted last year.<sup>2</sup> The security implications have begun manifesting, within days of the 18 January ceasefire announcement, as prison breaks (successful and attempted) have occurred amid competing centres of power and armed hostilities.

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<sup>1</sup> William Christou and Dan Sabbagh, “[Kurdish Forces Withdraw from IS Detention Camp in Northeast Syria](#)”, *The Guardian*, 20 January 2026.

<sup>2</sup> “[From Resurgence to Retrenchment: The Evolution of ISIS After Assad’s Fall](#)”, Karam Shaar Advisory Ltd., 31 October 2025.

Notably, the resumption of clashes that occurred in Hasakah Province and near Raqqa Province, the day after the ceasefire’s announcement, between government-allied tribal Arab militias and SDF fighters, affirms the assessment made previously about power struggles. The sudden derailment of the agreement occurred when the two parties began engaging in hostilities, resulting in several casualties on both sides, with two of the epicentres being al-Shaddadi prison (Hasakah) and al-Aqtan prison (north of Raqqa), both of which house ISIS fighters.

Notably, under the ceasefire agreement, control of the prisons was to be transferred from the SDF to the Syrian government. Accusations were levelled by both parties regarding unilateral ceasefire violations and the security vacuum that enabled approximately 120 ISIS prisoners to escape from al-Shaddadi prison, with the whereabouts of around 40 prisoners remaining unknown as of 20 January 2026.<sup>3</sup> There have also been repeated attempts at prison breaks from al-Aqtan.

On the one hand, the SDF leaders looked to place the blame on the government for these events.<sup>4</sup> The government was held responsible for attacking al-Shaddadi—an accusation denied by the Syrian Ministry of Defence.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, SDF accused the government forces of laying siege to the al-Aqtan prison by cutting off water and food supplies, worsening the situation for SDF soldiers guarding ISIS prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the Syrian army condemned the SDF for deliberately releasing ISIS prisoners from al-Shaddadi while violating the prison-handover clause of the ceasefire agreement. The government-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) carried a statement in which the Syrian armed forces claimed,

The Army Command contacted mediators and SDF commanders to hand over al-Shaddadi prison to the Internal Security Forces for the purpose of securing it and its surroundings, but the SDF leadership refused and continues to refuse to this day.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Sabbagh, “[Concern Over North-east Syria Security Amid Fears IS Militants Could Re-emerge](#)”, *The Guardian*, 21 January 2026.

<sup>4</sup> “[Syrian President to Meet SDF Leader After Ceasefire Deal Amid New Clashes](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 19 January 2026.

<sup>5</sup> “[Kurdish-led SDF Says Armed Group Attacks Islamic State Prison as Syrian Forces Tighten Grip](#)”, *Reuters*, 19 January 2026.

<sup>6</sup> “[Water Cut to al-Aqtan Prison in Raqqa as ISIS Tries to Escape – SDF Commander](#)”, *North Press Agency*, 20 January 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Ammar Cheikh Omar and Charlene Gubash, “[U.S.-allied Fighters in Syria Say They Lost Control of a Prison Holding ISIS Militants](#)”, *NBC News*, 19 January 2026.

## The Kurdish Question

The 14-point ceasefire agreement has broadly extracted significant concessions from the SDF, primarily to preclude a future armed rebellion. The clauses include:

The full and immediate administrative and military handover of Deir ez-Zour and Raqqa Governorates (gas and oil-rich regions with strategic transit corridors) to the Syrian government... control of all border crossings, oil fields, and gas fields in the region.<sup>8</sup>

This clause has delivered a significant blow to the prospects of an independent or autonomous Kurdish state while neutralising the perceived threat faced by Türkiye (which backed al-Sharaa's insurgency against former President Bashar al-Assad) along its southern border. Notably, Ankara has long held that SDF is an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the latter labelled as a terror outfit. Despite assurances of political representation, citizenship guarantees, and rehabilitation of Kurdish refugees who fled during the Syrian Civil War, and integration of SDF fighters (albeit as individuals, not members of a specific unit) into the Ministries of Interior and Defence, the agreement reflects an asymmetric balance of power configuration.

## Other Key Fault Lines

One inherent vulnerability of the agreement is the absence of structural mechanisms to enforce the limited benefits the SDF has accrued from halting its armed resistance. Additionally, it underscores potential flashpoints between the opposing factions, as pressures on an economy ravaged by war and sanctions are expected to mount. The SDF and the Ahmed al-Sharaa-led government are now expected to engage in burden-sharing to counter ISIS's guerrilla campaign.

Amplifying these challenges is the lack of a clear roadmap for allocating cumulative funds to address the rehabilitation of Kurdish refugees, the rebuilding of functional state institutions, and counter-terrorism efforts. The latter concern is significant. A consensus on which areas require greater resource and force deployment to combat ISIS would not be possible without substantial concessions from both sides—an issue the ceasefire agreement has not addressed. While the dilemmas surrounding the complete integration of SDF fighters into government structures and the surrender of arms remain unresolved, competing threat perceptions could create an impasse over a unified counter-terrorism strategic outlook.

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<sup>8</sup> [“Terms of the Ceasefire and Integration Agreement Between Syria and SDF”](#), Syrian Arab News Agency, 18 January 2026.

Widening these fault lines is the gradual shift in American foreign policy. Washington appears to be moving towards greater normalisation of ties with President al-Sharaa, while withdrawing its support for SDF.<sup>9</sup> The scaling back of American support could be one of the fundamental reasons the SDF acquiesced to a ceasefire agreement. Therefore, the once indispensable allies in the fight against ISIS could be pressured to make additional concessions.

This transformative shift risks fomenting dissent within SDF, with some rogue elements breaking ranks and contributing to instability in strategically vulnerable regions rather than ceding hard-won gains. Simultaneously, one could argue that the ceasefire agreement should be read as a tactical pause in armed clashes rather than a structured pathway to rebuilding Syria and addressing the conflict’s root causes. Such inflection points carry the risk of renewed hostilities and upheaval, as the structural fault lines that gave rise to the armed conflict persist, entrenching systemic cycles of violence, mistrust and displacement.

Arguably, the lopsided nature of the 14-point agreement, the unrealised territorial ambitions, and the ruthless pursuit of consolidation of power and authority have culminated in conditions that are not conducive to reconciliation in the immediate future. Collectively, these factors could also act as a harbinger of similar prison breaks, violent clashes, and the deflection of blame, as conflicting parties may pursue a zero-sum game approach to hold on to vestiges of power or co-opt the centre of power through coercion or otherwise.

Therefore, unsurprisingly, despite a four-day ceasefire coming into effect on 20 January 2026, another round of violations reportedly occurred. These occurred as outfits allied with the government were accused of launching an attack, south of Hasakah, along with heavy gunfire and suicide drones on al-Aqtan.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, amid conflicting reports of civilians living under government siege in the city of Kobani (bordering Türkiye), Ilham Ahmed, the SDF’s Head of Foreign Relations (Civil Administration), issued a warning which signals the looming danger in Syria—“If government armed forces continue their advance, there is going to be a civil war...we are ready for it.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Abby Sewell, “[A US Shift Marked Kurdish-led Forces’ Fall From Power in Syria](#)”, *AP News*, 22 January 2026.

<sup>10</sup> Edna Mohamed, “[Syrian Government, SDF Agree on a Four-day Ceasefire](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Raya Jalabi, “[Isis Fighters Escape Syrian Prison After Government and Kurdish Forces Clash](#)”, *Financial Times*, 20 January 2026.

It is also important to note how al-Sharaa and Abidi framed the ceasefire announcement, as this points to lingering tensions, divergent objectives, and divisions that hinder national cohesion in Syria. While al-Sharaa spoke about overcoming division and moving towards “a state of unity and progress”, Abidi’s remarks underscored his unwillingness to be forced to the negotiating table. The SDF Commander framed his soldiers’ clashes with the government in the lead-up to the ceasefire as a situation “imposed on them”, and asserted that the truce and transfer of administrative and military control of Deir ez-Zour and Raqqa provinces were agreed “to stop the bloodshed”.<sup>12</sup>

While al-Sharaa attempted to portray himself and his agreement to a ceasefire through the lens of moral legitimacy, Abidi’s words indicate that the broader SDF leadership has focused on simultaneously popularising a narrative of victimhood and ethical superiority to emerge victorious in the narrative warfare. Such polarising announcements signal that the ceasefire was under strain from the beginning and that the clauses included in the document—particularly given their content—carried elements of coercion, a dynamic that generally bodes ill for the prospects of long-term peace between erstwhile warring factions.

## Conclusion

The ceasefire agreement, rather than laying the foundations for a national demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration strategy, has further cemented structural deficiencies and power imbalances in post-war Syrian society. This has made the prospect of national reconciliation increasingly challenging. Given existing conditions, post-Assad Syria is likely to remain caught in a protracted cycle of ebb and flow for the foreseeable future. Unless a multi-pronged strategy encompassing the redressal of Kurdish grievances, shared security concerns, and the principles of good governance, inclusivity and accountability is pursued, the path towards sustainable peacebuilding will remain tempestuous at best. Finally, without a politically, structurally, and institutionally transformative shift in how the SDF and the al-Sharaa-led government engage with one another, any future agreements between them are likely to be eroded by recurring cycles of violence and mistrust.

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<sup>12</sup> David Gritten and Rachel Hagan, “[Clashes Reported After Syria and Kurdish-led Forces Agree Ceasefire](#)”, *BBC News*, 20 January 2026.

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