



THE YPG'S PRECARIOUS POSITION IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA

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On November 27, opposition groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a major military campaign against the Assad regime, culminating in its collapse on December 8. This marks the start of a new era in Syria, with a key issue being the role of the People's Protection Units (YPG) in the northeast. Backed by the United States but affiliated with the PKK—a

designated terrorist organization—the YPG controls vital energy, water, and agricultural resources. However, the YPG finds itself in a precarious position in this shifting landscape, facing significant challenges from both local and regional forces. Growing pressure from opposition groups like HTS and Türkiye-backed forces complicate the YPG's position. The group's only hope lies in contin-

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ued international support, but this is increasingly uncertain as the recent developments on the ground—the collapse of the regime, escalating conflict, and shifting alliances—create an unpredictable and volatile situation. As a result, the YPG's influence in Syria is likely to diminish in the coming period.

LOCAL FACTORS

The YPG's position in Syria is increasingly defined by local dynamics, especially its relations with the newly empowered actors within the country. In this context, the relationship between the HTS and the YPG will play a pivotal role in shaping the latter's future in Syria. HTS, originally an alliance of Islamist rebel groups, has grown into a dominant force in Syria. So far, the two sides have avoided direct conflict.¹ During HTS's recent military operations, the group prioritized its fight against the regime and largely delegated any confrontation with the YPG to the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of opposition forces supported by Türkiye. The YPG, aware of HTS's growing power, also adopted a cautious approach and even signaled its willingness to negotiate.²

However, this uneasy coexistence is unlikely to last long, as the relationship between the two groups is inherently zero-sum. As Syria's new central authority, HTS will aim to assert control over the northeast's valuable resources, while the YPG will seek to solidify its autonomy. HTS holds a strategic advantage for now, bolstered by the momentum of its recent military victories. In contrast, the YPG has been forced into a defensive posture, aiming to retain its territorial hold. HTS's immediate priorities are likely to focus on consolidating its authority, restoring stability, and acquiring domestic and international legitimacy. While these efforts could temporarily shift attention away from confronting the YPG, a brief reprieve for the group is unlikely due to the ongoing SNA offensive, which continues to put pressure on it.³

The SNA presses on with its military operations against the YPG, maintaining constant pressure and denying the group any meaningful respite. While HTS presents a looming long-term challenge to the YPG's aspirations, the SNA's active and immediate

1 "Syria's North-western Front Erupts", *International Crisis Group*, 5 December 2024.

2 "SDG'den HTS ile diyalog mesajı", *DW Türkçe*, 6 December 2024.

3 "As Assad falls, fighting intensifying over northern Syria town", *Voice of America*, 8 December 2024.



SNA sends military reinforcements to Tel Rifaat

campaign poses an existential threat in the short term. As the SNA remains on the move with Turkish support, the YPG finds itself in a difficult situation, fighting to defend its territorial control against an advancing opponent, even as it braces for HTS's eventual consolidation and expansion.

Kurds make up between 7 and 9 percent of Syria's total population, with the majority residing in the northeastern part of the country.⁴ The relatively small proportion of Kurds presents significant challenges for the YPG in its efforts to secure lasting control and establish a sustainable political structure. This limited demographic composition makes the YPG's control inherently fragile, espe-

cially as it must manage areas with diverse ethnic groups and assert authority beyond the Kurdish-majority zones. Among the various communities under its rule, the YPG faces particular challenges in its relations with local Arab populations, where tensions have already surfaced and are likely to escalate.⁵

Despite controlling a large swath of territory in the northeast, the group governs regions where Arabs form the majority, particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Relations with the Arab tribes living in these regions have been especially fraught, culminating in tribal uprisings against the YPG in 2023 and continued clashes into 2024.⁶ HTS's recent victory has further emboldened these

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4 "Who are the Kurds?" *BBC News*, 15 October 2019

5 Amy Austin Holmes and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurds and Arabs in Northeast Syria: Power Struggle or Power Sharing?" *The National Interest*, 11 August 2019.

6 "Why has fighting started again in Syria's Deir al-Zour?" *The New Arab*, 8 August 2024.



Anti-YPG protests in Deir ez-Zor

tribes, with anti-YPG attacks intensifying in the wake of the regime's fall. In addition, reports indicate that HTS and the SNA have begun deploying troops to these areas, signaling their intent to wrest control from the YPG.⁷ Given these dynamics, the YPG's control over these regions seems to be growing more vulnerable.

Moreover, the YPG's longstanding collaboration with the Assad regime has significantly tarnished its reputation among Syria's revolutionary factions and broader opposition forces. Since 2012, the YPG and the regime maintained "a tacit understanding", avoiding direct conflict and, at times, even cooperating on military and logistical matters.⁸ This cooperation allowed the YPG to operate in certain areas of Syria without facing direct interference from the regime, but it also led to accusations of the group implicitly supporting the Assad government's brutal repression. Unlike HTS, which

has positioned itself as a revolutionary force, the YPG's alignment with a regime that oppressed Syrians for years has alienated many and diminished its legitimacy. This relationship, coupled with the YPG's failure to contribute to the regime's downfall or align fully with the anti-Assad struggle, has further delegitimized the group in the eyes of many Syrians. As a result, the YPG's claim to legitimacy has become increasingly difficult to sustain, leaving it isolated and distrusted by key segments of the population.

Adding to this is the YPG's close connection to the PKK, a designated terrorist organization in Türkiye, the U.S., and the European Union. The YPG has been accused of attempting to materialize PKK ideology, which is rooted in extreme Kurdish nationalism, in its areas of control.⁹ This includes social and political practices perceived as authoritarian or out of sync with local Arab traditions, as well as discriminatory policies

7 "Fighters who overthrew al-Assad claim control of Syria's Deir Az Zor city", *Al Jazeera*, 11 December 2024.

8 "Who is Salih Muslim, the Syrian Kurdish leader wanted by Turkey?", *DW News*, 9 March 2018.

9 Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen, "Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict", *Clingendael Institute*, 19 April 2021, pp. 39-40.

that marginalize non-Kurdish communities. Additionally, the YPG has been criticized for implementing forced conscription, further alienating local populations.¹⁰ Many locals have expressed dissatisfaction with these policies, deepening the rift between the YPG and the population it governs. The international designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization also complicates the YPG's efforts to gain broader legitimacy, as its association with the PKK undermines its attempts to present itself as a distinct and independent actor in Syria.¹¹

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DYNAMICS

The YPG's position in Syria is also shaped by both regional and international dynamics, with external pressures influencing its territorial control, political survival, and strategic alliances. The most immediate and pressing challenge for the YPG on the regional stage is Türkiye's unwavering opposition to the group. Turkish officials have consistently emphasized their commitment to eliminating any YPG presence

along Syria's northern border. Turkish-backed SNA forces recently captured Tel Rifaat on December 1 and Manbij on December 8, demonstrating Turkish resolve. These campaigns were bolstered by Turkish artillery and drone support for the SNA, underscoring the effectiveness of Ankara's coordination with opposition forces. Türkiye will likely expand these operations to target the YPG in the eastern Euphrates region, further diminishing the group's territorial control.

The collapse of the Assad regime, along with the withdrawal of Russia and Iran from Syria, creates a significant disadvantage for the YPG. While the regime's backing was never without controversy, it allowed the YPG to maintain a degree of autonomy by avoiding direct conflict with Damascus. Additionally, Russia and Iran's presence in Syria helped deter Turkish-backed forces and opposition groups from overwhelming the YPG, providing a strategic buffer.¹² With these powerful actors no longer in the region, the YPG is left isolated, unable to rely on their support to counterbalance Tür-

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10 "YPG imposes conscription, disbands popular strike in Syria territories", *Middle East Monitor*, 21 May 2018.

11 Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, "The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship", in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): p. 276.

12 "Assad quietly aids YPG against Turkey", *Al Jazeera*, 11 February 2018.

There is a potential silver lining for the YPG in the form of possible cooperation with Israel. Recent reports highlight that representatives of the YPG have formally reached out to Israeli officials for assistance and protection.



US troops train YPG militants in Syria

kiye's military pressure or prevent the consolidation of rival forces like HTS or the SNA. This shift in the regional balance of power further weakens the YPG's position, making its territorial control and political survival even more uncertain.

On the international front, the U.S. and Israel represent the YPG's primary potential allies in the post-Assad period. The Biden administration has previously reiterated its support for the YPG under the pretext of countering ISIS¹³, despite the terrorist group's diminished presence in Syria. However, the direction of U.S. policy remains uncertain as Donald Trump prepares to assume the presidency in January 2025. U.S. support, while previously strong, may dwindle under a Trump administration,

especially as Ankara's opposition to the YPG becomes more vocal. Trump's administration could pivot toward cooperation with Türkiye and HTS withdrawing American support for the group altogether. With Russia and Iran no longer in Syria and Trump's previous decision to retreat from the country, U.S. support for the YPG is far from guaranteed, especially given that the U.S. now has little incentive to remain involved in Syria. However, there is also a possibility that U.S. policy could shift in the opposite direction. The U.S. might strengthen its ties with the YPG, potentially in alignment with Israeli interests, especially with the recent appointments of pro-Israeli bureaucrats to key positions within the U.S. government.

Despite the uncertainties in

13 "On-the-Record Press Gaggle by White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby", *The White House*, 10 December 2024.

the region, there is a potential silver lining for the YPG in the form of possible cooperation with Israel. The fall of the Assad regime has significantly reshaped power dynamics, particularly with Iran's complete removal from Syria and the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a result, no actor remains capable of counterbalancing Israel's influence in its vicinity. In this context, Israel may seek to strengthen ties with the YPG to expand its influence in Syria and counterbalance the new Damascus government backed by Türkiye. Israel could also view this partnership as a means to weaken Iran's influence in Iraq, given that the YPG controls a significant portion of the Syria-Iraq border. Recent statements by Israeli officials, including Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, reinforce this potential shift in policy. Sa'ar has emphasized the importance of ensuring the security of Syria's Kurds, whom he called a "stabilising force", signaling that Israel sees value in supporting the YPG as part of its broader regional strategy.¹⁴

The potential for cooperation between Israel and the YPG is not a one-sided interest but a mutual desire to establish a relationship. Recent reports, including from Israeli-based *the Jerusalem Post*, highlight that representatives of the YPG have formally reached out to Israeli officials for assistance and protection.¹⁵ This appeal to Israel comes at a time when the YPG, facing increasing pressure from Türkiye and its affiliated groups, is in urgent need of new allies to bolster its position and counter the growing threats to its territorial control. The YPG views Israel as a friendly, Western-oriented actor that could help secure its interests amid the

shifting power dynamics in Syria. However, the viability and direction of this potential alliance will largely hinge on U.S. policy under the Trump administration, which will play a pivotal role in shaping its future. Moreover, this cooperation would face significant challenges due to the lack of a geographic connection and the absence of prior relations between the two. Despite these obstacles, both Israel and the U.S. might still consider a long-term strategic partnership with the YPG. In any case, for the group to maintain a meaningful presence in Syria, external support will be indispensable.

CONCLUSION

The fall of the Assad regime has ushered in a transformative period for Syria, presenting the YPG with both significant risks and limited opportunities. On the local level, the group faces mounting challenges from former opposition groups and an increasingly hostile population in Arab-majority areas. Regionally, Türkiye's military operations and close relations with the new Damascus government leave the YPG more vulnerable than ever. While international backing from the U.S. and Israel could provide a lifeline, this support is far from guaranteed and heavily contingent on shifting geopolitical dynamics. Ultimately, the risks facing the YPG appear to outweigh the opportunities. With its territorial control shrinking and support from international allies uncertain, the YPG's prospects for long-term survival in Syria seem bleak. As external pressures mount, the group may find itself increasingly sidelined, unable to secure a meaningful role in Syria's post-Assad future.

14 "Israel assuming 'worst-case scenario' with Syria bombing", *France 24*, 10 December 2024.

15 "Amid toppling of Assad, Kurds in Syria appeal to Israel for help", *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 December 2024.

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