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# The Fate of Kobane: A Riddle for Turkey and a Dilemma for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

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## Authors

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**Summary :** Considering the experience of previous Turkish operations in the Jarablus-Bab, Afrin and Sarê Kani lines—one lasting about two months, another eight days, and the third approximately seven months—and given that three sides of Kobane are now occupied and its area is limited, it can be said that if Turkey wishes to invade Kobane, it could occupy the city relatively quickly. However, Turkey's task may not be easy due to SDF's defensive preparations, such as tunnels and other defensive measures, as well as the use of drones. Despite these challenges, Turkey could ultimately invade the city. Yet, it does not appear eager to do so because:

After nearly a decade, Kobane has once again emerged as a political and military turning point. In 2014, the United States, Peshmerga forces, and even Turkey assisted the YPG in preventing the city from falling into the hands of ISIS. By the end of 2024, a major conflict between SDF, Turkey, and pro-Ankara opposition groups has unfolded over the city's 7 square kilometers, which could potentially extend beyond its borders. This could serve as a critical juncture for Syria's future, the Kurdish issue, Turkish policy, and the interests of numerous influential states in the evolving political landscape of Syria. Currently, there is a mix of political and military uncertainty, with contradictory views on the situation on the ground. On the one hand, both sides exhibit pragmatic stances. On the other hand, both have repeatedly violated the fragile ceasefire that was declared under pressure from the United States and the international coalition. The situation in Kobane has become a political riddle for Turkey, while also placing SDF in a historic dilemma. This ambiguity may persist until Trump returns to office and the potential establishment of the Jolani regime's principles in Damascus.

## Turkey and the Kobane Riddle

Following the fall of Assad and the withdrawal of SDF from Tel Rafah, Manbij, and Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo, there were hopes that Turkey might be able to expel SDF from Kobane through threats or limited fighting, or even dissolve it altogether. However, this strategy did not succeed. Now, the prospect of capturing Kobane in a major battle presents a double-edged sword for Ankara. There remains significant uncertainty about Turkey's true intentions regarding SDF and the future of the autonomous administration. On December 8, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told a Rudaw journalist at the Doha Forum that SDF would not be accepted unless it changed itself, leaving open the possibility for negotiation. In the following days, he called for the dissolution of SDF and the expulsion of its leaders from Syria. However, he shifted focus away from SDF, speaking more about the PKK and YPG and referring the matter of dissolving SDF to Jolani. This shift indicates a softened position from Turkey compared to previous statements, suggesting that Turkey may be open to hypothetical negotiations. SDF's desire to integrate into the Syrian army under Assad, while maintaining its own status, could be a factor in this flexibility. Moreover, the YPG and PKK's history of rebranding themselves adds another layer of potential for compromise. Turkey may eventually accept SDF if it is practically separated from Qandil and does not possess heavy weaponry. This implies that Turkey may not entirely reject the idea of SDF evolving into a local force or even becoming part of the Syrian army.

Considering the experience of previous Turkish operations in the Jarablus-Bab, Afrin and Sarê Kani lines—one lasting about two months, another eight days, and the third approximately seven months—and given that three sides of Kobane are now occupied and its area is limited, it can be said that if Turkey wishes to invade Kobane, it could occupy the city relatively quickly. However, Turkey's task may not be easy due to SDF's defensive preparations, such as tunnels and other defensive measures, as well as the use of drones. Despite these challenges, Turkey could ultimately invade the city. Yet, it does not appear eager to do so because:

First of all, European powers such as Germany and France oppose such an action, and the United States does not want a war. Turkey relies on the U.S. and Europe as much as it depends on Gulf money to maintain the Damascus government. Russia, one of the guarantors of the Turkish-SDF ceasefire, recently withdrew from the airbase in Qamishli, making the United States crucial to the future of events in northeastern Syria. Most likely, the U.S. will not want to dissolve SDF until it is certain about the structure of the Jolani administration in Syria and whether a civil war will break out in 2025. At the very least, the U.S. likely wants any such dissolution to be done through agreement and over time if it occurs. It also wants to assess the impact of the situation in Syria on the fight against ISIS and security concerns related to Israel and Jordan.

The threat from several members of Congress to punish Turkey if it attacks Kobane, combined with the Pentagon's announcement to increase the number of U.S. troops in SDF-controlled areas from 900 to over 2,000, and the relocation of international coalition forces to Kobane, amounts to political pressure on Turkey. Turkey appears to have failed to

convince the Biden administration to give the green light to attack Kobane and dissolve SDF. Thus, it is likely waiting to see if it can replicate its success from 2019 by convincing Trump to withdraw from Syria next year. In the meantime, Turkey is attempting to reshape the situation on the ground to its advantage as much as possible.

Second, as the German Foreign Minister stated, Kobane holds symbolic significance in the fight against ISIS. A potential Turkish attack on Kobane, expected to displace many people and result in numerous casualties, could provoke strong reactions from global public opinion. This follows Mazloum Abdi's, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) General Commander, statements addressing Turkey's concerns and proposals, such as the creation of a demilitarized zone, the isolation of foreign fighters from SDF (who are considered as the PKK), and efforts to reach an agreement with other Kurdish parties, like the Kurdish National Council in Syria (ENKS/KNC), a war in Kobane could legitimately harm Turkey's image. Additionally, it may stir tensions within Turkish domestic public opinion, as it did a decade ago.

Third, the continuation of the war could paradoxically draw the attention of both Israel and Iran, as well as Egypt and other countries, to the Kurdish issue in Syria—countries that do not benefit from the success of Turkey's project. Israel has tensions with Turkey over Hamas, and its foreign minister has spoken twice this month about relations with Syrian Kurds. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has twice criticized Turkey, without naming it, referring to the emergence of the Syrian youth revolution against what he described as "conspirators." It remains to be seen what will unfold, but in the event of a widespread war, there is a strong possibility that SDF may seek foreign assistance to continue a guerrilla war, even if it loses its autonomous administration. Turkey is acutely aware of the impact of Middle Eastern events on the Kurdish issue. This is why MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli recently made his famous overture to Abdullah Ocalan, inviting him to speak in parliament. Of course, Abdullah Ocalan is 76 years old, and should he die in prison, it would present a new security challenge for Turkey, which is keen to prevent Abdullah Ocalan from becoming a security issue again. While there were other domestic policy considerations behind Bahçeli's initiative, the main concern was Turkey's fear that rival forces might provide aid to the PKK. A prolonged war in Syria could further exacerbate Turkey's concerns.

## **SDF's Dilemmas in Syria's New Reality**

In reality, the principles behind the establishment of SDF and the autonomous administration of Western Kurdistan were influenced not only by internal Kurdish dynamics but also by two significant events: the Assad-PKK agreement following the Arab Spring and the subsequent withdrawal of the Syrian army from Kurdish areas, and the fight against ISIS. To prevent the spread of demonstrations across the country and to counter Turkey's strong support for the Syrian opposition, Assad initially asked Kurdish parties to engage with him and reach an agreement. However, the situation at the time suggested Assad's collapse was imminent, so the Kurdish parties rejected the request. Meanwhile, the PKK, due to its historical ties with the Assad family, saw this as an opportunity to strengthen its position and rebuild relations with Syria, which had been strained since Ocalan's expulsion in 1999. The fight against ISIS further presented an opportunity for SDF to solidify its position with the help of the United States and the international coalition. Pragmatically, it was able to continue its relations with Assad, Iran, Russia, the United States, and the international coalition simultaneously.

After the fall of Assad, these two principles are poised to change, meaning the situation for SDF will not remain the same as it was before November 27. Firstly, it will become difficult for the PKK to maintain its position in Syria as it has in the past. Given that states like Iran and Russia, along with non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Iraqi armed groups, have struggled to assert control in post-Assad Syria, the PKK's survival there will not be easy without an agreement with Turkey unless there is a widespread and prolonged war. Until recently, PKK officials denied the presence of their fighters in Western Kurdistan, but eventually, Mazloum Abdi himself acknowledged that foreign fighters are present. He also stated that if a lasting and gracious ceasefire is implemented, these foreign fighters will leave Syria. This acknowledgment reflects the growing realization of the threat to the autonomous administration and SDF. It could also be a pragmatic

move to preserve what remains of their position, as well as a response to pressure from the international coalition, particularly the United States, to bring Kobane and Turkey closer together. According to three informed sources, the U.S. has recently spoken very "harshly" and pressured SDF to soften its stance in order to reach an agreement with Turkey.

The new situation in Syria has reduced the U.S. reliance on SDF, but the need has not been entirely eliminated, which may explain Washington's pressure on SDF. According to several U.S. senators, Turkey has rejected a proposal for a demilitarized zone along the border and has made additional demands. SDF commander Mazloum Abdi had suggested turning his city into a demilitarized zone, which highlighted differences of opinion between the U.S. and SDF regarding the extent of the demilitarized zone, as well as between SDF, the U.S., and Turkey regarding the broader process. Reports indicate that the U.S. has pressured SDF to take practical steps, such as: first, demilitarizing the 30-kilometer border that Turkey has been demanding since 2019; and second, the withdrawal of the PKK from Western Kurdistan. While Mazloum Abdi proposed demilitarizing Kobane as part of a lasting ceasefire, U.S. senators have emphasized the need to demilitarize the entire border rather than just Kobane. The U.S. has consistently acknowledged Turkey's security concerns, which could also be interpreted as objections to the presence of the PKK.

Another point is that the new situation in Syria will make the United States rely on Turkey more than ever, particularly for Israel's security, as Damascus awaits the establishment of an Islamic-Sunni state along Israel's borders. Furthermore, the U.S. now has another candidate for fighting ISIS on the ground: Turkey and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). That was a key basis for cooperation between the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF and the United States. The idea of fighting ISIS with former Syrian jihadists is not unattractive to the U.S. In the past 15 days, the U.S. and Arab forces within SDF have launched at least two attacks against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor, marking a rare example of direct U.S. cooperation with Arab groups within SDF, some of which have recently split and joined the new government in Damascus.

Another important factor contributing to SDF's new dilemma is the efforts by the United States and France to bring SDF and its political wing closer to the Kurdish National Council in Syria (ENKS/KNC). This is as significant for other parties as it is for the U.S., France, and the West in general, as they seek a balance of power in Damascus in the long term. For SDF and the autonomous administration, this represents an attempt to integrate into the new Syrian system, as the (ENKS/KNC) enjoys more legitimacy with the current authorities in Damascus than SDF does. It also presents an opportunity to avoid conflict. This shift may allow the (ENKS/KNC) to negotiate with more leverage in Damascus, as those without strength on the ground are less likely to succeed in negotiations. Ultimately, Turkey may welcome the increased role of the (ENKS/KNC), even if it is compelled to do so, as it could lead to a reduced role for the PKK in Western Kurdistan.

## What Lies Ahead

One hypothesis is that by next spring, Jolani will have control over all of Syria, organizing armed groups under the shadow of the Defense Ministry, leading the country to elections, and preparing a new constitution that protects the rights of minorities, such as the Kurds. Foreign fighters would leave Syria, and the government would return to functioning. However, in reality, this is an idealized scenario that will not materialize easily. Although the de facto rule of Jolani is now accepted, no one is certain what the new Syrian administration will look like. Furthermore, as the new regime begins to consolidate its power in the spring of 2025, disputes over the division of authority are likely to intensify. Therefore, a civil war, even if brief, seems inevitable. From Afghanistan to Iraq and Libya, all regime changes in the Middle East over the past two decades have been followed by civil war, and Syria is unlikely to be an exception. In addition to internal dynamics, many other countries in the region are dissatisfied with the new situation in Syria, which could further fuel internal tensions under Jolani's rule.

SDF and the autonomous administration have two options. The first is to adapt to the new situation in Syria and, with the

help of the (ENKS/KNC) - Erbil, negotiate with Jolani or get support from the United States, France, Erbil, and possibly Ocalan, in an effort to open a path to Turkey. This would require, at a minimum, the soft isolation of SDF from its "foreign fighters." The second option is to hold out, waiting for the inevitable escalation of war. In this case, SDF would likely lose its administration and management institutions within six months, but could secure external support for a prolonged guerrilla war.