



1.2.2. Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), commanded by Mazloun Abdi,[135](#) had an estimated strength of around 100 000 fighters as of early and mid-2025.[136](#) By late January 2026, its strength was estimated at between 50 000 and 80 000 fighters.[137](#) Territorial control by the SDF changed significantly over the reference period as large parts of SDF-controlled territory were captured by the transitional government forces in early 2026.[138](#)

A previous agreement reached between the SDF and the transitional government on 10 March 2025,[139](#) providing for the full integration of the SDF into state institutions,[140](#) was followed up by several steps of de-escalation and reintegration in April and May 2025.[141](#) However, SDF units continued to be involved in recurrent incidents in Aleppo city's Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhoods (notably in a spike in clashes in October 2025)[142](#) and in hostilities with the former SNA and Turkish forces around Ain Al-Arab (Kobane), Manbij, and along the Euphrates axis.[143](#)

In November 2025, ISW and CTP mapped control of the SDF as still encompassing large swathes in the northern and northeastern Syria, including eastern Aleppo, around half of Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor east of the Euphrates, and nearly all of Hasaka.[144](#) In a major shift in conflict dynamics during the reference period, a government military operation, launched soon after the March 2025 agreement expired in December 2025, led to the capture of swathes of previously SDF-held territory.[145](#) By 18 January 2026, the SDF had lost around 80 % of the territory it had held at the beginning of the month.[146](#) As of February 2026, parts of eastern Aleppo, the previously SDF-held territories in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, and much of Hasaka were under transitional government control.[147](#) Particularly in Deir Ez-Zor, a governorate which has long witnessed tensions between Arab tribes and the SDF, Arab tribal fighters played a pivotal role in the SDF's territorial collapse.[148](#) These included Arab defectors from the SDF's ranks such as the Al-Sanadid militia of the prominent Shammar tribe.[149](#) Thus, as of the end of January 2026, the SDF's territorial control was reduced to the border town of Ain Al-Arab (Kobane) and its surrounding countryside,[150](#) and areas in the Kurdish heartlands[151](#) around the cities of Hasaka, Qamishli[152](#) and Al-Malikiya[153](#) (Derik).[154](#) As of late March 2026, by and large, this remained the territorial status quo, although SDF military units retreated from Ain Al-Arab (Kobane) following negotiations with the transitional government in February.[155](#) For further details on the government operation that led to these territorial changes, see section [1.2.1. Syrian transitional government security forces](#) above.

A series of ceasefire agreements were announced between 18 and 30 January, largely halting the clashes.[156](#) The United States, which had previously relied on the SDF as its main partner in Syria, did not intervene militarily as they shifted towards backing the transitional government.

[157](#) While in a first ‘hastily’ concluded ceasefire deal on 18 January, the SDF agreed to an integration protocol that obliged it to fully abandon[158](#) its demand to join as a bloc retaining its internal structures,[159](#) the 30 January permanent ceasefire agreement included elements of compromise with the Kurdish position. While granting the SDF less than what it had demanded, [160](#) the new integration protocol involved the integration of the SDF into the government army as four newly established brigades consisting of SDF fighters.[161](#) These included three brigades – the Hasaka Brigade, Qamishli Brigade, and Al-Malikiya Brigade[162](#) – set to form a new government army division in the northeast,[163](#) as well as an Ain Al-Arab (Kobane)-specific brigade due to operate as part of an existing Aleppo division of the army.[164](#) Simultaneously, the ceasefire agreement provided for the withdrawal of military units of both the government and the SDF from their frontlines in Hasaka governorate and for backfilling these positions with internal security units.[165](#) The agreement also provided for the entry of the Mol’s ISC into the cities of Hasaka and Qamishli for a ‘specific period’ with the declared aim of securing these areas and assuming control over civilian and governance institutions.[166](#) At the same time, Kurdish internal security forces (Asayish)[167](#) were to make preparations to join the ranks of the Syrian security forces[168](#) as they were set to operate as small government units in Hasaka and Ain Al-Arab (Kobane).[169](#) Meanwhile, Kurdish demands for integration of the SDF-affiliated[170](#) Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) into the new military structures have so far not been recognised by the government[171](#) on grounds that the army lacks a female component, although YPJ members were allowed to join law enforcement units under the Mol.[172](#)

As of April 2026, negotiations continued on a more technical level, with core debates revolving around future command structures, the rank of SDF officers within the army, and the future status of the Asayish. The transitional government continued to pressure for a centralised integration of SDF units, while the SDF sought to retain some of its autonomous command architecture.[173](#) In early May, Syrian authorities announced that the four brigades had officially been integrated.[174](#)

On 20 January 2026, control of the Al-Hol camp, housing detainees with alleged family ties to ISIL fighters, was transferred from the SDF to the transitional government[175](#) under ‘chaotic circumstances’ that prompted many residents to leave the camp and UNHCR to announce its closure on 23 February.[176](#) According to the authorities, at least 120 detainees escaped in the process. Meanwhile, Roj camp, another facility holding alleged ISIL family members, remained under SDF control[177](#) and apparently operational, although as of May 2026 there were government plans to close it down.[178](#)

According to SNHR, between October 2025 and March 2026, SDF members were involved in the killing of 71 civilians. No information was provided regarding the victims’ profiles or the circumstances surrounding the incidents.[179](#) Amid the January 2026 clashes, the SDF and the government traded accusations of extrajudicial killings.[180](#)

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