

The interests of US imperialism in Syria and the Middle East and the bankruptcy of the nationalist perspective

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Following the December 2024 overthrow of the Russian and Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad—by Islamist jihadists supported by the US and its regional allies such as Türkiye—Syria reached the brink of a new civil war in 2026.

The Damascus regime, led by the al-Qaeda-rooted Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), launched an attack earlier this month on areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Kurdish nationalist groups. Both HTS and the SDF were proxies of US imperialism in the war for regime change.

The Damascus regime first seized the Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo, forcing over 100,000 civilians to flee. Then, with Arab tribes within the SDF switching sides, the Damascus regime quickly seized Arab-majority provinces under SDF control, such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Kurdish forces within the SDF retreated to defensive positions in Kurdish-majority centers such as Hasakah and Qamishli. Damascus forces are reported to have surrounded places such as Kobani.

On January 20, while a four-day ceasefire was in place, the Damascus regime imposed an agreement on the SDF. According to this agreement, dated January 18 and backed by the US and Türkiye, all energy resources under SDF control will fall into Damascus' hands, while SDF forces and the de facto autonomous administration in the region will be dismantled.

It is anticipated that forces affiliated with the SDF will join the Syrian army individually. SDF leaders will be integrated into the central government in positions such as deputy defense minister. Kurdish forces will form the local police force in Kurdish cities.

The balance shifts against Kurdish forces

The HTS regime received the full support of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in its offensive against Kurdish forces. But it was Washington's green light for the attack and its abandonment of the Kurdish movement once again that isolated the SDF and forced it to retreat. Israel, which had previously declared the Kurds a "natural ally", also aligned itself with Washington's position.

US imperialism aims to secure complete control over the resources, energy, and trade routes in the Middle East; to this end, it seeks to eliminate the influence of Russia and China in the region, change the regime in Iran, and bring its allies to their knees. Behind all the aggression, from Israel's genocide in Gaza to the attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon and the US-Israel war against Iran, lies this broader plundering ambition.

In the meantime, the HTS regime has proven that it is not only an ally of

Türkiye but also serves the interests of the US and Israel. While remaining silent on Israel's expansion of its occupation in southern Syria, it helped launch a war against Iran.

Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former Al Qaeda leader who had a bounty on his head a year ago, was welcomed at the White House last November as Syria's "interim president." While Damascus joined the anti-ISIS coalition, US-European sanctions against Syria were lifted. Finally, the Damascus regime and Israel met in Paris on January 6 under US auspices, and a "security mechanism" was established between the two countries. This was followed by attacks on the SDF.

Erdoğan has shifted towards a foreign policy more aligned with US imperialism following Trump's return to the White House. He crowned his tacit complicity in the Gaza genocide by playing an active role in imposing Trump's "Peace Plan" on Hamas. The US wanted to secure the full support of its NATO ally Türkiye in advancing its interests in the Middle East and to prevent the country's growing rivalry with Israel from escalating into conflict, particularly in Syria. The key to this lies in completing the SDF's integration process with Damascus.

The US's preference for HTS

The SDF's efforts to gain as much autonomy as possible in the armed forces and de facto administration were deemed unacceptable by Ankara, which was negotiating with the SDF's sister organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Fearing that such a political status could also encourage Kurds in Türkiye, Ankara secured Washington's support in exchange for more fully serving US imperialist plans in the Middle East.

By the end of the year, with protests in Iran raising the prospect of regime change and US military intervention, Washington opted to rely on HTS to cut the Gordian knot in Syria.

This policy change was made official in a tweet posted on Tuesday by Tom Barrack, the US Ambassador to Türkiye and Special Envoy for Syria. Barrack's statement clearly declared that the Kurdish forces had no choice but to accept the agreement.

Barrack, in his statement, made no secret of the fact that, with the regime change in Syria, the US's temporary alliance with the SDF had ended: "This shifts the rationale for the US-SDF partnership: the original purpose of the SDF as the primary anti-ISIS force on the ground has largely expired, as Damascus is now both willing and positioned to take over security responsibilities, including control of ISIS detention facilities and camps."

Barrack, who presented the agreement imposed on the SDF as a "unique

window” for Kurdish integration, added that the US “prioritizes defeating ISIS remnants, supporting reconciliation, and advancing national unity without endorsing separatism or federalism.” He advised the Kurdish people to be satisfied with their citizenship rights related to culture and language. This was a reference to a decree issued by al-Sharaa last week.

Barrack’s statement also indicated that the US did not plan to keep its troops in areas of Syria controlled by the SDF in the long-term. This points to a plan to balance the existing Turkish military presence in the north of the country against the Israeli military presence in southern Syria.

No support from Israel

Barrack’s comments, leaked from recent meetings, underscore the bankruptcy of the Kurdish nationalist perspective oriented toward imperialism. According to *Middle East Eye’s diplomatic sources*, at a meeting in Erbil on Saturday, Barrack accused SDF leader Mazlum Abdi of “stalling, failing to implement the agreement with the Syrian government, and relying on foreign powers.”

According to sources, Barrack told Abdi, “You are trying to drag Israel into the conflict, and this will not happen,” warning that such a move would bring destruction and risk friction between Türkiye and Israel, Washington’s two most important allies in the region.

AFP reported that Ilham Ahmed, one of the leaders of the Rojava Autonomous Administration, said in a statement on Tuesday, “There are certain figures from the side of the Israeli state engaged in communications with our side... and if this conversation leads to support, we would be open to support... from any source.”

Israel, seeking to expand its influence by encouraging autonomy for the Druze, Kurdish, Alawite, and Christian minorities in Syria, was pursuing a policy aimed at counterbalancing Ankara’s influence over the Damascus regime. With the Paris agreement on January 6, it became clear that the US had, for the time being, reconciled the interests of Türkiye and Israel in Syria. Israel remained silent on HTS’s attack, and the SDF leadership did not receive the support it hoped for from Tel Aviv, which is still subjecting Palestinians in Gaza to genocide.

Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, who plays a leading role in negotiations with Ankara, addressed the attacks during a meeting on January 17 with lawyer Faik Özgür Erol, a member of the  mrli Delegation of the Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party). According to the reported conversation, Öcalan stated, “The process that began with the Paris Agreement aims to turn northern Syria into southern Syria. It is clear that while Israel took the Golan Heights and Suwayda, al-Sharaa was promised the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.” Öcalan also said, “It would be a historical mistake for Türkiye to consider this a process in its favor.”

Erdo an and Öcalan had proposed a reactionary “Turkish, Kurdish, Arab” alliance against Israel’s growing influence in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and the Middle East in general, and against its ambitions for a “Greater Israel.”

A socialist internationalist perspective against pro-imperialist nationalism

The agreement imposed on the SDF demonstrates the bankruptcy of the bourgeois nationalist perspective based on maneuvering between imperialist and regional capitalist powers. Despite all the narratives of the

“Rojava Revolution,” what was advanced was not a struggle *against* the US-led imperialist powers that have been destroying the Middle East and ultimately Syria for over 35 years, attempting to re-colonize it, but rather a struggle waged *alongside* them.

In this war of plunder, just as the Turkish bourgeoisie and other Arab regimes played a pro-imperialist and reactionary role, the Kurdish bourgeois leaderships also voluntarily became imperialism’s proxy forces. Now, as imperialist bandits declare the end of this agreement at the expense of the Kurdish people, the Kurdish nationalist leadership expresses its anger towards the US and its European allies. But it does not change its pro-imperialist line.

As stated in Tuesday’s statement by the Sosyalist E itlik Partisi – D rd nc  Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party – Fourth International):

The Kurdish nationalist movement’s willingness to act as an ally of imperialism is not a mistake but the outcome of its bourgeois class character.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, in regions with belated capitalist development, such as the Middle East, the national bourgeoisie is incapable of establishing even formal democratic rights, including those of minorities, or of pursuing an anti-imperialist policy due to its deep ties to imperialism and its fear of the working class above all else. These tasks fall to the working class as part of a struggle for socialism, which must unite all the oppressed behind it in the struggle for workers’ power against the bourgeoisie and imperialism.

The SDF’s reconciliation with the Al-Qaeda regime in Syria cannot fulfill the democratic and social aspirations of either the Kurdish workers nor workers of other nationalities and sects. This fragile agreement will be subject to the ambitions of US imperialism, and particularly its preparations for war against Iran.

In the Middle East and the rest of the world, workers cannot advance their interests without opposing imperialism and its regional and local capitalist proxies. This means fighting to build a socialist movement within the working class in the Middle East and internationally against imperialist war.



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