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## Why Kurds in Syria Are Unlikely to Follow the Iraqi Kurdistan Path to Autonomy



Kurdish SDF fighters in northeastern Syria, 16 November 2015. Source: Wiki CC

An intriguing aspect of the aftermath of the collapse of the Assad regime is the future the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Given the conflicts between the SDF and Turkish-sponsored Syrian armed groups, what possible role could the SDF have under the country's new rulers? Could they follow a path similar to that of their fellow Kurds in Iraq, and administer a federal entity?

Despite attempts at Kurdish autonomy in Syria, fundamental historical, geopolitical, and structural differences will render an Iraq-style outcome unlikely. Here are four key reasons why:

### **1. Lack of International Protection**

Iraqi Kurds' federal status was not a direct result of the 2003 US invasion or the 2005 Iraqi constitution. It dates back to 1991 when the UN Security Council imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, granting Kurdistan de facto autonomy. For over a decade before regime change, Kurds in Iraq had their own administration, a separate currency, and security forces under international protection.

In contrast, Syrian Kurds lack any form of international legal recognition or protection. No global power has enforced a no-fly zone over Rojava, nor is there legal backing for Kurdish autonomy. Without this kind of support, achieving a similar status to Iraqi Kurds is improbable.

### **2. Limited Political and Military Influence**

Kurds in Iraq played a significant role in shaping post-Saddam Iraq and were key local collaborators with the forces that brought about regime change in the country. In Iraq, Kurdish factions were among the most powerful groups both militarily and politically following the 2003 fall of the regime. The Kurdish political leadership played a crucial role in shaping the new Iraqi government and constitution. Even prior to the toppling of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, Kurdish leaders were key participants in Iraqi opposition meetings, positioning themselves as central players in the country's future.

In contrast, Kurds in Syria have largely been excluded from political discussions regarding Syria's future. When Ahmed al-Sharaa declared himself transitional president on 30 January 2025, at a conference that included key armed groups involved in toppling the Assad regime, major Kurdish groups were absent. Without representation in significant negotiations, any ability to secure constitutional autonomy remains weak.

### **3. Strong Regional Opposition**

The geopolitical landscape in Syria also makes Kurdish autonomy far more difficult. When Iraqi Kurds gained de facto autonomy in 1991, regional powers such as Turkey and Iran lacked the military and political leverage to prevent it, despite their reservations. Syria, however, is a different case. Turkey maintains a significant military presence in Syria and exerts strong political influence over Damascus. Ankara opposes Kurdish autonomy, particularly any such polity led by the SDF, which it views as an extension of the PKK. Unlike Iraq, where opposition was relatively weak, Turkey's active intervention makes a Kurdish federal region in Syria extremely difficult.

### **4. Centralised Governance in Post-Assad Syria**

Post-2003 Iraq embraced federalism and power-sharing, backed by the US, with the 2005 Iraqi constitution explicitly recognising Kurdish autonomy. In Syria, decentralisation is not a priority, at least not in the way the Kurds envision it (as a path to autonomy). Many supporters of the new al-Sharaa administration oppose power-sharing and the model of decentralisation implemented in Iraq after 2003. Unlike Iraq, where external actors supported Kurdish federalism, no major power in Syria advocates for Kurdish autonomy. Without such backing, the new Syrian powers are unlikely to grant legal recognition to Kurdish self-rule.

## Conclusion

While Iraqi Kurds benefited from early international protection, political strength, and regional dynamics that allowed for federal recognition, Kurds in Syria face a far more challenging environment. The absence of international legal safeguards, the Kurds' political exclusion, entrenched Turkish opposition, and the Syrian administration's centralisation mindset make a federal Kurdish region in Syria unlikely.

This does not rule out some form of Kurdish self-administration in Syria. However, achieving legal recognition – particularly through constitutional guarantees, as in Iraq – seems an improbable outcome at this stage.

## About the author



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Kamaran leads the PeaceRep Iraq research team with the LSE Middle East Centre. As part of this project, he also conducts research on the underlying drivers of conflict and state fragmentation in Iraq. He tweets at @KamaranMPalani

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