

EXCLUSIVE

SDF commander Hemo: Syria's Kurds prepare for threat of war as Damascus talks falter

As US-brokered talks stall, Kurdish forces are preparing contingencies while continuing dialogue with Damascus to secure Syria's future, SDF commander Sipan Hemo told Al-Monitor in an exclusive interview.



Amberin Zaman

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An undated image of Sipan Hemo. — SDF Media Center

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well," Syria's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani said the opposite, telling Al-Monitor that "no positive or practical steps" had been taken so far.

The sides continue to blame the other for the lack of progress. Interim government officials accuse the Kurds of "maximalism," saying the violence in Suwayda and Israel's intervention in defense of the Druze bolstered their confidence, leading them to pile on even more demands. The Kurds say the government was never sincere to start with and is waiting to assert full control over the country before it strikes.

The sides remain nonetheless committed to continuing dialogue amid heightened US pressure to strike a final deal. The longer they fail to reach one, the greater the risk that ongoing skirmishes between the sides could lead to all out conflict.

The Kurds are preparing themselves for that eventuality, according to Sipan Hemo, a top SDF commander who was in charge of Afrin, the sole Kurdish majority region west of the Euphrates River, before its invasion by Turkish-led forces in 2018.

Despite alleged US pressure on the SDF to stay silent about its negotiations with Damascus, Hemo told an SDF-linked outlet weeks before Shibani that no progress had been made.

In an exclusive interview with Al-Monitor via WhatsApp, Hemo warned that the risk of conflict remains real. The interview took place before the announcement that Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, would be meeting with President Donald [Trump at the White House](#) Nov. 10. Hemo did not address any of Al-Monitor's questions about Turkey's role.

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It is true that we are going through an extremely sensitive period in Syria.

With regard to your question on whether there are any new developments, the situation is becoming clearer by the day. In fact, there are no serious steps to speak of. The most important step was, of course, the March 10, 2025, agreement signed between Gen. Mazlum [Kobane] and the interim president [Ahmed al-Sharaa].

It was a draft agreement, actually. And the steps that followed it were meant to complete it. However, no steps followed thereafter. And certain parties accused the SDF of playing for time. I would like to make clear that this is a big lie. To the contrary. We affirmed our commitment to the March 10 agreement, and of course we want to move toward integration in Syria and we want to assume our responsibilities and play our part in all of Syria. This is both a decision and a strategy for us. It is our main objective. Unlike what some claim, we have no separatist agenda nor do we want to establish a separate state. But there are constant lies and propaganda being spewed about us to this effect.

On the main issues dividing the sides:

The main problem between us and the interim government, or the forces leading this process, lies in our different approaches, in the way we view and interpret the issues and the situation. We see things differently. Some see human rights and the rule of law and society in one way and others in a different way. But our position is completely unique. In this matter of integration, we are experiencing a problem of interpretation, of comprehension. For [the interim government], integration is to completely abandon oneself, to annihilate oneself, to deny one's own identity and to completely merge with another, to dissolve inside another. For them, integration is dissolution.

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these can be described as having occurred within the spirit of partnership or the exchange of ideas and views? An interim government was formed. Our opinion was not sought. A constitution was declared; we were not included in that process. Parliamentary elections took place in the form of theater. It wasn't even an election. It was a selection. Once again, we were excluded. So, when you look at things from this perspective, where is the partnership in all of this? This interim government just does things unilaterally. Then they turn around and accuse us of not wanting to integrate. This needs to be properly understood.

On the SDF's objectives:

The SDF has one objective, and that is for Syria to democratize. We want a pluralistic, democratic government. If the SDF detects the same goals and aspirations in Damascus, then the SDF will automatically become part of that process and will defend it to the hilt. The answer to the question of when will the SDF relinquish its weapons and integrate is tied to these matters. It depends on the democratization of Damascus. Therefore, to set a deadline for integration is misguided — is wrong.

To be clear, the problems do not arise from us. The interim government's decisions and steps, as I just outlined, are among the reasons for this delay in integration. Another is to do with the security and military situation. Let me explain.

For example, the SDF is a defense force. If there were no massacres in Syria, if everyone was living in peace and security and saw their will respected in Damascus or their views represented in Damascus, the defense mechanism, the instinct for self-preservation, would ease. But put yourself in place of the SDF: When presented with the incidents in Latakia [targeting Alawites] and those in

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WE WERE IN OUR THINKING.

All these incidents were provoked by [the interim government.] We have not engaged in any provocations, nor do we have any secret agenda.

On the role of the United States:

The Americans, who are our main partner in the [fight against the Islamic State](#), are at the center of these negotiations, of this process of integration. In certain instances, I as an individual, as Sipan Hemo, have difficulty understanding the positions they embrace. As you know, the US special envoy to Syria, Mr. Tom Barrack, all but blamed our forces for the [breakdown in the July 9 talks between Kobane and Syrian officials]. I really didn't understand how they came to this conclusion. We were freed from an absolutist, fascist, despotic Baath regime. Are we now going to be subjected to the same, with the sole difference that they are sporting beards? Is this what the Americans see as legitimate leaders for the Syrian people? In all of these developments and processes, we undoubtedly see the Americans playing a central role. As the SDF, our main interlocutor is the United States.

On his meeting with Syria's minister of interior and minister of defense:

I have participated in one meeting [with interim government officials in Damascus in mid-October] so far. The atmosphere was very positive, and the messages delivered were very nice as I already described [in previous comments to the media.] But none of these were formalized, neither in writing or otherwise. Nothing has been signed. Later, as it was relayed through the press, there was a verbal agreement centered on the creation of three special brigades under the general command of the Syrian army. We made clear that as the SDF we had a unified structure akin to a regular army and that we could carry out defense missions and be answerable to the Syrian Ministry of Defense in the

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On the risk of war:

As you recall, there was an April 1 agreement struck for Aleppo with the government whereby our forces withdrew from Sheikh Maqsoud and a local administration for [the Kurdish majority neighborhoods] was formed. They were supposed to work in coordination with the government administrators in Aleppo. In hindsight, we can say that this April 1 agreement was like an April Fools' lie. At the same time, the road from Der Hafer to Raqqa and Tabqa has remained blocked [by government-linked forces] for the past two months. No military personnel, no civilians — none has access through this road. Thus, as a military commander, what am I to divine from this situation? Are we to revert to a military posture, or are we to focus on dialogue, agreements and alliances. To be honest, the situation is clear. War preparations have taken precedence. And we are not going to delude ourselves. We have had much experience in combat. We learned through those experiences when and under which circumstances war is going to come. Still, dialogue is continuing because our basic goal is to reach an agreement through dialogue, to resolve the future of Syria through dialogue, to secure constitutional guarantees for the rights of all of Syria's people — the Druze, the Alawites, the Christians, the Turkmens and the Kurds.

In the coming days, there may be further meetings. Whether I will participate or not, I am not sure. But Gen. [Kobane] will be leading those talks. And we are fully behind any positive steps that are taken during those meetings. We are with him, and we will do everything within our power to secure a positive result. But as a military commander, of course, we will be focusing on the security situation in the field where conflict is occurring. Sheikh Maqsoud is very important for us. At the same time, there are attacks elsewhere across northeast Syria. Their evolution will either lead us to a more

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not just our areas that are outside the government's control. The other [armed Sunni opposition] groups continue to control the same areas [they did before the fall of the Assad regime] despite pledging allegiance to the interim government. In practice, all these different groups manage their own affairs as they did before. This is true for certain areas in Damascus such as Douma, where government forces cannot enter without permission from Jaysh al-Islam. It's even worse in other areas. The situation in Latakia and Suwayda is well known. In areas surrounding Aleppo, the Damascus government is not in control. Even though the Damascus government is telling the groups blockading Sheikh Maqsoud to lift the siege, they aren't complying. Al-Tanf is a whole different story. Hence, to present the situation in Syria as if it were stable and under control and that the remaining obstacle to progress is the SDF is completely misleading. And in such circumstances, our defense needs to take precedence. Our vigilance and struggle for democracy is not only for the Kurds but for all of Syria, and it will not cease.

On allegations of a split within the SDF:

As for me, I was only 16 when I joined the Kurdish movement. I was a high school student. If we ever have the opportunity to meet some day, I will happily share the details. Other than that, I am not opposed to anybody, and if it is perceived that way, it is wrong. Of course, I am with Gen. [Kobane], and we do the same work. I am a revolutionary. I am a son of the people. I have no interest in careerism or positions. We do everything for our people. We struggle for them. We are an institution. We are an administration. There is no question of my being part of one group against another. I know you well by name, and you have deep knowledge of our movement and its philosophy; therefore, you understand that this is how things work: One for all, all for one.

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