

Opinion – The Window Is Closing for a Federal Syria

Written by Hamit Ekinci

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HAMIT EKINCI, APR 24 2025

The devastating civil war that engulfed Syria since 2011 has fundamentally reshaped the country's political landscape. While military confrontations have now largely subsided, the frontlines have shifted from battlefields to backroom negotiations. This transition period presents both opportunities and risks for all actors involved. For the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the core demand remains unchanged: a federal Syria that recognises its pluralistic and decentralised governance model.

Syria has a largely forgotten federal past. Under the French Mandate, the country was divided into a series of autonomous entities known as the Levant States. These structures reflected the region's ethnic, geographic and sectarian diversity. This model stood in direct contrast to the centralised Ba'athist system that later came to define post-independence Syria. Ba'athist centralism, framed as Arab ultra-nationalism, sought to impose a singular identity on a fundamentally plural society. It succeeded in suppressing difference, but not in eliminating it. The Arab Spring exposed the fragility of this arrangement. The Ba'ath system has collapsed, and Bashar al-Assad is now an asylum seeker in Moscow.

But the question now is not simply what will replace the old system. The real question is whether the realities on the ground will be taken into account in building a new Levant or whether the country will repeat history by reproducing a poor imitation of the Ba'athist tragedy. All signs suggest the latter although federalism is a must for future of Syria. In this context, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) must urgently develop a clear and strategic exit plan before it is structurally sidelined.

In the wake of the October 7 conflict, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), despite its jihadist legacy, advanced rapidly across Syria with little resistance. The group took advantage of the collapse of Iran's regional axis and growing fatigue with Assad's rule. It captured Damascus in a matter of days. However, its momentum proved short-lived. Israeli airstrikes destroyed what remained of Syria's military infrastructure. Sanctions continued to suffocate the economy. In contrast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) persisted as a functioning and autonomous entity. It administers regions that produce more than half of Syria's domestic revenue. Governed by Kurdish leadership and grounded in gender equality and decentralisation, AANES presents a direct ideological challenge to HTS. At the same time, Alawite communities on the coast and Druze populations in the south began voicing demands for autonomy.

HTS drafted an authoritarian constitution and declared a closed and exclusionary government. Its abuses and crimes against civilians and refusal to engage in pluralist politics triggered a wave of resistance including the massacre against Alawite civilians in Syrian coast. Israeli pro-Druze intervention and pro-Kurdish rhetoric increased pressure on Damascus. The newly formed Shara government quickly understood that without a shift toward realist foreign policy, its position would weaken. Western actors made it clear that sanctions would remain unless HTS changed course. Even with support from more autonomous actors like Russia, the Gulf or Turkey, Ahmed al-Shara would not be able to hold sway in Syria.

AANES controls most of Syria's oil and agricultural production, as well as critical water infrastructure. Damascus has no alternative source of revenue to replace these regions. Despite this, AANES remains diplomatically sidelined. HTS, despite its record, continues to receive more diplomatic engagement thanks to direct support from several state

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actors. The key reason behind AANES's isolation is Turkey's continued objection. Ankara portrays AANES as an extension of the PKK and actively works to block its recognition.

Turkey now appears to accept that military operations are not a viable long-term solution. It has shifted focus to preventing AANES from becoming part of the post-war state structure. Instead of direct confrontation, Turkey encourages the Syrian government to act as a pragmatic international player while avoiding the formation of an inclusive domestic framework. This approach pushes Damascus to present a rational front abroad while excluding Kurdish and other autonomous actors internally.

Signs of this strategy are already visible. The Shara government, once defined by its jihadist stance, appears to be recalibrating. Syria recently arrested two members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad alleged to be involved in the October 2023 attacks. Diplomacy mediated by Azerbaijan is exploring normalisation with Israel and Turkey. Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR has offered to modernise Syrian oil fields. Syrian economists are reportedly engaging with the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, Turkey has announced a diplomatic "war" targeting the YPG and Syria is expected to appoint a new foreign minister with Ba'ath-era credentials. Warming ties with Gulf countries suggest that the Shara government wants to appear pragmatic on the international stage. However, this repositioning has not been accompanied by internal reform. For AANES, this presents a dangerous paradox. The regime may gain legitimacy abroad while refusing to adopt inclusive politics at home.

AANES faces a strategic dilemma. It is economically indispensable and institutionally stable, yet diplomatically vulnerable. The international system continues to be shaped by interests rather than legitimacy or contribution. Without a clear exit strategy that prioritises regional partnerships, international visibility and institutional depth, AANES risks being left out of the future Syrian order. It may continue to bear the economic and administrative burden of the state when being marginalized and gradually lose its autonomy. SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi's signing of a framework agreement with Ahmed al-Shara marks a step toward recognition of the AANES, but the balance of power in this relationship will ultimately be shaped by diplomatic leverage. What has been gained through sacrifice can still be lost without a clear and proactive strategy.

The recent remarks of Elham Ahmed highlight this challenge from a realist perspective. "We see that strictly centralised systems do not solve problems but deepen them" she said. "Syria must not return to how it was before 2011. It must be decentralised and give the rights of all Syrian components." She added "Our current plan is to preserve what exists and we will try to be more involved within Syria and participate in every process." These comments reflect the core dilemma facing AANES. Time is ticking while the Shara government is actively lobbying to gain legitimacy in international circles and AANES should present itself as an international actor before it is too late.

By way of an example, in the early 1990s, as Yugoslavia disintegrated into violence, Slovenia took a different path. It was the smallest of the republics, but also the most economically integrated with Western Europe. Unlike Bosnia or Kosovo, Slovenia did not wait for permission from the federal centre. It recognised that the system was collapsing and acted accordingly. By building institutional capacity, aligning with European markets and projecting a pragmatic foreign policy, it managed to exit the federation with minimal conflict and gain early international recognition. This did not make it stronger militarily, but it gave Slovenia what others in the region lacked: a strategic exit from chaos.

The AANES now faces a similar decision. It is structurally central to Syria's economy yet politically excluded. It possesses functioning governance institutions, a pluralist administrative model and a degree of legitimacy in the regions it controls. But if it does not define its own future, others will. The Syrian regime, with Turkish support, is actively shaping a post-war order that isolates AANES while benefitting from the stability it generates. If AANES remains reactive, it risks becoming an administrative tool without political agency.

An exit strategy for AANES does not mean secession. It means investing in long-term survival through serious capacity building and proactive diplomacy. AANES must deepen ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, establish modest but functional cooperation with Israel, Jordan and the Gulf, show its willingness to participate regional integration projects like Abraham Accords and IMEC, create formal mechanisms of international outreach. Beyond military deterrence, its greatest asset should be institutional legitimacy. It must showcase itself as a

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constructive actor capable of regional integration, coordination and wealth.

Capacity building must go beyond local councils. It must include economic transparency, budgetary systems, education and diplomatic literacy. AANES should begin presenting itself not just as a temporary authority born of conflict, but as a long-term administrative alternative grounded in regional stability of Levant. This requires active engagement with media, think tanks, research institutions and diaspora networks. AANES must become visible, not just functional. The window is narrow. Unlike Slovenia, AANES does not have access to European institutions or immediate diplomatic recognition. But it has leverage, popular legitimacy and administrative coherence. It cannot afford to wait for the world to notice. It must shape its own future while there is still space to do so.

About the author:

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