



Syria Transition Challenges Project

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The Battle for the Tribes in Northeast Syria

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Introduction

Northeast Syria (NES) is fragmented under the control of different powers that are all seeking to gain the support of the local Arab tribes. Those seeking to upset the status quo include the Assad regime and its allies (Russia and Iran), Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies, and ISIS—all seeking disruption with different motivations, yet working side by side. Those seeking to maintain the status quo include the U.S.-led Coalition, the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Often, earning the support and alliance of the tribes is a transactional process whereby the tribes seek direct financial support and community investment, employment opportunities, military support, and autonomy to run their own affairs. Currently, most local tribal groups are calculating that a tenuous U.S.-protected order in northeast Syria provides better security and provisions than the alternatives from the Assad regime and its allies, or by Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies. However, ISIS remains a threat to all the powers involved in northeast Syria, and it is the major spoiler seeking to create the conditions for a return to the old order which was established under ISIS's territorial Caliphate from 2014-2019.

Working By, With, and Through Tribes for Post-ISIS Stabilization

The tribes in northeast Syria are "atomised," meaning that most tribal groups in northeast Syria are small, geographically bound, and not able to mobilise more than several hundred people at any one time for warfare. While there are some tribes and even a few tribal confederations (multiple tribes joined in an umbrella of kinship) that can mobilise potentially thousands of people for warfare, many of them have fragmented leadership. This fragmentation was the reality before the start of the Syrian uprising and the subsequent civil war, though ISIS has further exacerbated it.

Mobilisation power is the key question for the multiple parties involved in northeast Syria, thus identifying respected tribal leaders with the highest mobilisation potential is vital. The U.S. faced this challenge while they pursued the counter-ISIS campaign in northeast Syria and struggled to mobilise tribes with fragmented leadership. For example, the Egaidat and Baggara confederations in Deir Azzour Province are made up of several distinct tribes which are divided into sub-tribes with different leadership and relationships with the different powers in the region. The Afadhlah confederation of Raqqa Province is also like the Egaidat and Baggara in this way.

The problems between the SDF and the tribes differs from area-to-area in northeast Syria, but the common denominator is autonomy. In some areas, especially in Deir Azzour Province and southern Hasakah Province, the tribes that have the most problems with the SDF want to be more autonomous and run their own affairs according to their own customs, while keeping their armed tribespeople local and controlling local resources for themselves. These tribes want resources from

the SDF to rebuild their communities and to hold local decision-making authority, even if that authority runs counter to the SDF and AANES's efforts. In these instances, the AANES is tolerated when it is a river of resources that does not make too many demands on the local tribal groups. When it is not, problems follow, which the U.S. and the SDF tried to avoid in the build-up to the battle to capture ISIS's putative capital in Raqqa.

The Kurdish-majority People's Protection Units (YPG, the backbone force of the SDF that also provides command-and-control for the organisation) had practice engaging with smaller tribal groups in the northern Syrian-Turkish border areas in Hasakah, Raqqa, and Aleppo Provinces before the SDF was formed in October 2015. Expansion of SDF territorial control beyond the core Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria was shaped by the campaign to capture Raqqa. The SDF's Office of Tribal Outreach was a main driver of this effort and it was created in the build-up to the Raqqa battle. The SDF used the Office of Tribal Outreach extensively to engage with local tribal groups throughout Raqqa Province. Prior to capturing the city of Raqqa from ISIS in October 2017, the SDF and the AANES focused on securing tribal support in the countryside around Raqqa - including in Manbij and Tabqa - as prelude to the battle for the city. There was a clear purpose behind this approach, which was to build a tribal constituency in Raqqa's outlying areas from key groups (such as the Afadhlah al Hamrat, Afadhla Afula, al Na'im, al Fed'aan, al Wazza, al Hanada, and al Turkim) and to incorporate the tribes into the governance and security apparatus in and around the city.

The SDF further identified tribal sheikhs that it believed had significant local influence in and around the city of Raqqa, who could organise tribal gunmen and who would be willing to support the AANES even in the face of pressure by the Assad regime and its allies, Turkey, and ISIS. The Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) was organised to administer the stabilization effort in the city after ISIS, and a Raqqa Internal Security Force (RISF) was mobilised from local residents and trained by the U.S. to provide post-ISIS security. Presently, the situation in the countryside around Raqqa is comparatively stable, and both the RCC and the RISF are still functioning. However, the continued disrepair of Raqqa from the battle against ISIS (an estimated 70% of the city is still destroyed three years after the battle ended), persistent local unrest because of the lack of basic local services, and the periodic attacks against local AANES and SDF authorities (reportedly by ISIS, the Assad regime, and Turkish-backed sleeper cells), are ongoing challenges. In Raqqa, the slow reconstruction of the city and tenuous security situation looms over everything.

Deir Azzour Province further serves as a good case study of the complicated dynamics between the U.S., the AANES, the SDF, and the local tribes. In Deir Azzour, the AANES has delegated governance, administration, humanitarian relief distribution, and security to the Deir Azzour Civil

Council (DeZCC) and the Deir Azzour Military Council (DeZMC). Both of these councils depend on the support of local tribes for their legitimacy, and the tribes understand this dynamic very well. Local protests against SDF control in Deir Azzour Province are arbitrated through the effort of the DeZCC in engagements with local tribal notables. However, the DeZCC frequently defers to the local tribes, especially regarding the application of 'urf (tribal customary law) to handle local matters. This includes settling disputes over land and property, both petty and serious crimes such as murder, and managing security issues related to former ISIS fighters from the local tribes. This deference to 'urf significantly reduces the power of the DeZCC over the tribes. Therefore, the DeZCC is often most influential over local tribes when it distributes humanitarian assistance and coordinates stabilization projects, especially infrastructure-building projects that the U.S. provides to the AANES and the SDF for use in Deir Azzour.

Concerning the security of Deir Azzour, the SDF delegates authority to the DeZMC to manage day-to-day security in the province. The DeZMC is a multi-tribal force that nominally recruits fighters from throughout the province. Yet in reality, the DeZMC is an organisation held together by an agreement between some sections of the Baggara and Egaidat confederations, especially the Shaytat tribe and the Bakir tribe, where the DeZMC leader Abu Khawla is from. The dominance of the DeZMC by these tribes causes tensions between the DeZMC and some of the local tribes in the province, especially those that have blood feuds with the Bakir and the Shaytat. These feuds developed during the period between 2012-2014 after the Assad regime withdrew from most areas of Deir Azzour, and before the imposition of ISIS's control in the province.

YPG units continue to have a strong role in the security functions in Deir Azzour, especially in guarding and controlling oil facilities and conducting raids against ISIS. The DeZMC is limited in its authority by the presence of the YPG in Deir Azzour, which in turn exacerbates tensions with the local tribes when the Kurdish-majority YPG units conduct raids against the local Arab population and control local oil facilities. These tensions limit the DeZMC's ability to attract recruits and increases antagonism toward the DeZMC among some segments of the population in Deir Azzour.

Opponents of the U.S., SDF, and AANES in Northeast Syria

AANES-administered areas in northeast Syria are actively challenged by an insurgency fuelled by Turkey, ISIS cells, the Assad regime and allies, and some tribal groups' desire to have greater local control. These challenges are most acute in Deir Azzour Province. In the event of a U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria, the region's control centres would shift. The Assad regime and

its allies would be best positioned to move into Deir Azzour Province as well as most of southern Raqqa Province and the city of Raqqa. Turkey would likely control northern Raqqa Province and attempt to militarily seize the entirety of the Syrian-Turkish border area east of the Euphrates River to Iraq. ISIS would likely maintain an insurgency throughout northeast Syria, with particularly strong networks in Deir Azzour.

ISIS

ISIS's continued survival depends on the vacuum of social, political, and security leadership and stability. While not currently a reality, these vacuums could form across northeast Syria, regardless of who controls the area. ISIS is presently executing a long-term strategy of attrition against the security, governance, and administration structures that ISIS's opponents have been trying to build after the territorial Caliphate. ISIS retains a network of operatives in many areas of northeast Syria. SDF sources estimate as many as 2,000 local Syrian ISIS fighters "went underground" throughout northeast Syria and are living under the protection of their families, clans, and tribes. The SDF assesses that ISIS has at least 10,000 members in a support network that can facilitate roadside bombings, targeted assassinations, and disruptive activities such as burning crops and targeting administrative and security offices with explosives to challenge efforts to replace ISIS.

Turkey

Turkish intelligence is believed to sponsor Arab tribal groups to oppose the AANES and the SDF throughout northeast Syria. Turkey's engagement with the tribes in northeast Syria has been both overt and covert. Overtly, Turkey has consistently sponsored councils of tribal notables from northeast Syria that have made public declarations opposing the AANES and the SDF and calling for tribal revolts against them. Covertly, Turkish intelligence is believed to have sponsored tribal attack networks against the AANES and the SDF, such as the organisation Harakat al-Qiyam which conducted attacks against AANES and SDF officials in Manbij and Raqqa. Turkish lines of influence into Hasakah and Raqqa Provinces are considerable, especially the northern areas of these provinces and in the area around the city of Manbij in Aleppo Province. Often, Turkey has influence over branches of the same tribes that the AANES and SDF work with regularly in these areas.

The unity talks between the two main Kurdish-majority parties in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), are important in the context of the relationship between Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), and the U.S. Turkey and the KRG support the KNC and want to expand its influence in northeast Syria to reduce

the power of the PYD. The talks between the PYD and the KNC hold little significance in Arab-majority areas in Raqqa and Deir Azzour. These talks only matter so far as they can lead to a stable channel of engagement between the AANES and the KRG and can ensure humanitarian assistance and trade remain open from Iraqi Kurdistan into tribal areas of northeast Syria. However, Turkey could pressure the KRG, and especially the Barzani family, and close that channel.

Assad Regime and Allies

Generally, the regime and its allies are believed to be seeking to subvert the SDF by funding an insurgency against SDF-held areas (Raqqa, Manbij, and Deir Azzour) and turning local tribal groups against the SDF. The Assad regime does not have a coherent approach to Arab tribal engagement in northeast Syria, although it tries to use general messaging to the tribes that the U.S. will be leaving Syria soon and that the regime will inevitably return to power throughout northeast Syria. Damascus also tries to appeal to the tribes' Syrian and Arab nationalist pride to get their support to oust the "imperialist" Americans from Syria and frustrate the "separatist" Kurds. This messaging has some effect, and there is evidence of efforts to exacerbate differences between the SDF and the tribes in Deir Azzour, and to a lesser extent in the city of Raqqa, to expand regime lines of influence in these areas.¹

The Assad regime is limited in its options for tribal engagement. The regime is limited in the amount of money and military resources it can provide tribal leaders in northeast Syria to win them away from the U.S., the AANES, and the SDF. This is exacerbated by U.S. and international sanctions on the Assad regime, the collapsing state of the economy, and the strain of the COVID-19 crisis in regime-held areas of Syria. The regime is not generally well-liked in Deir Azzour, and there is also dissatisfaction among local tribes with Iran's strong role in the regime-held areas in the province. In some areas, such as in Hasakah Province and around Qamishli, the regime relies on the regime-appointed pre-2011 administration to maintain lines of influence over tribes like the Tayy and Jabbour. This effort is further buttressed by the Russian military base at Qamishli Airport.

Russia and Iran have different approaches to tribal engagement in Deir Azzour. Russia has taken a more conventional approach in Deir Azzour, typically working to mobilise local tribal fighters to fight for the regime. Iran is heavily invested in Deir Azzour, including active outreach programmes to the local tribal population which sometimes works through, and sometimes bypasses, the regime. The Iranians operate cultural centres to try to win influence over the local tribal population and have sought to mobilise tribal militias from regime-held areas of the province.

¹ Eva Kahan, "Warning: Russia Escalates in Eastern Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 9, 2020.

Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir, the most important regime-supporting tribal leader from the Baggara confederation, is actively working to establish Iran-backed militias in Deir Azzour. Further, the Iranians have turned the stretch of the province from the cities of Mayadin to Albu Kamal into an exclusive security zone for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including building a major reinforced, missile base in the vicinity of Albu Kamal.² Several Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias maintain a garrison presence in these areas of the province to support Iran, and thus by extension, but really only loosely, the Assad regime.

Conclusion

The U.S. and its AANES and SDF partners are currently the most effective actors in northeast Syria in appealing to the local tribes. U.S. support is essential for the AANES and the SDF to continue the post-ISIS stabilisation mission in tribal areas of northeast Syria. The local economic, socio-political, and security situation in these tribal areas is fragile, tense, and exacerbated by destruction from the war and the metastasising COVID-19 crisis. Further, without U.S. military power, particularly the de facto “air shield” that the U.S. Air Force provides against attacks from the Assad regime and its allies and Turkey, the SDF would be at a decisive military disadvantage. Even when there is tension between the AANES and the SDF and the tribes, because of the financial and military power the U.S. brings to bear, these tensions are often alleviated. However, the tensions persist throughout Arab-majority areas of northeast Syria, especially in Deir Azzour. The Assad regime and its allies, Turkey, and even ISIS will continue to seek to undermine, and if possible, destroy the new order being built in large areas of northeast Syria by the U.S., the AANES, and the SDF. However, unless the U.S. chooses to withdraw militarily from Syria, the current status quo is likely to remain indefinitely.

² Kyra Rauschenbach, “Iran’s Entrenchment of Strategic Infrastructure in Syria Threatens Balance of Deterrence in the Middle East,” *Critical Threats Project*, July 13, 2020.