MAPPING REGIONAL ARMED ACTORS AND ALLIANCES IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA (2019-2025)

20. 1. 2026, Anežka Petráková and Mahi Farman[1]

Syria has been shaped by a fourteen-year civil war that created conditions for the emergence, expansion, and institutionalization of numerous armed actors, particularly rebel groups. In northeastern Syria, large parts of Syrian Kurdistan fell under the control of the Islamic State (ISIS) between 2014 and 2019, profoundly transforming local power structures and governance dynamics.

After the fall of the so-called caliphate ruled by ISIS, the security situation in the region has changed significantly, not only because the main enemy was gone, but also due to changes in alignments between armed actors in the area over the years.

This policy paper primarily focuses on the relations between regional armed actors operating in northeastern Syria, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian National Army (SNA), and Arab tribes, and their changes since 2019.

Syrian National Army

The SNA was established in 2017 as a coalition of opposition armed groups fighting against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Kurds. Its creation was closely linked to the gradual fragmentation and military weakening of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which, after 2016, lost most of its combat capacity. In this context, the SNA emerged as an attempt to unify the remnants of factions previously operating under the FSA and to create a formally centralized structure capable of more effective coordination of armed activities. Prior to the launch of the Turkish operation Olive Branch in 2018, approximately 30 groups that had previously operated under the FSA banner had united under the SNA in 2017 (Hamit & Zontur, 2019). That is the reason why SNA is sometimes incorrectly referred to as FSA.

The SNA is often described as a Turkish proxy, primarily due to the extensive financial, logistical, and training support provided by Turkey. Ankara finances the operation of the SNA, pays salaries to its fighters, provides training, and plays a significant role in operational planning during military interventions in northern Syria. Although the SNA has a formal command and hierarchical structure, in practice it functions more as an umbrella "brand" bringing together a large number of autonomous armed factions that often retain their own command structures, recruitment mechanisms, and local agendas. As a result, there are significant internal differences within the SNA that can lead to disputes. (Aldoughli et al., 2025, p.10).

The SNA also includes armed groups that previously operated in the Deir ez-Zor area of northeastern Syria, as well as a number of other Sunni Islamist and extremist groups. In 2022, the number of SNA members was estimated by some commanders to be between 50,000 and 110,000 fighters. Of the more than 30 main factions involved in the formation of the SNA, 21 had previously received support from the CIA or the Pentagon (Al-Issa, 2019).

The internal structure of the SNA shows significant differences between individual corps, particularly with regard to financing (Paes et al., 2025, p.24-25), fighter motivation, and involvement in illegal economies. Strong ties between Turkey and the Second Corps of the SNA have resulted in its members receiving a monthly salary of approximately USD 100, while fighters of the Third Corps receive around USD 20 (Aldoughli et al., 2025, p.10). This disparity is also reflected in recruitment motivation, with the Second Corps attracting fighters primarily for material reasons,

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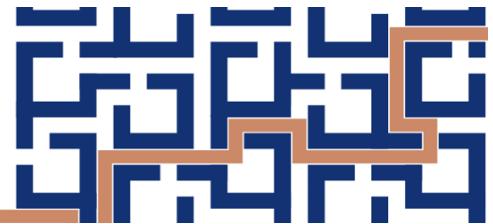
while the Third Corps relies more on ideological mobilization. (Aldoughli, 2025).

Groups within the SNA also differ in terms of sanctions, which are often imposed on specific groups rather than on the SNA as a whole. For example, in May 2025, the European Union imposed sanctions on the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, the Hamza Division, and the Sultan Murad Division due to sectarian violence in Latakia (Council of the European Union, 2025).

An analysis of the combat activities of factions involved in the SNA shows that their enemies have been highly diverse over the years. In 2020, these groups clashed with the Syrian regime and its allies, with the Islamic State, with the SDF, and also with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or its predecessors such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) (Özkizilcik, 2020).

The main aim of the SNA is to fight the Kurds. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, as well as by the EU and NATO. In Syria, the SNA primarily fights against the Kurdish organizations such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed faction People's Protection Units (YPG)[2], which Turkey describes as groups directly linked to the PKK. The YPG currently constitutes the strongest and most numerous component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which were the main ally of the US-led international coalition in the fight against the Islamic State. The presence of the YPG within the SDF and its ties to the PKK are frequently used by Turkey as the main argument to justify military operations against Kurdish areas in northern Syria, which are carried out precisely through SNA units.

According to the Rojava Information Center, several factions under the SNA display extremist tendencies, and there are also claims of the presence of former ISIS members in some units, particularly in groups such as the Sultan Murad Division or the Hamza Division (Rojava Information Center, 2022,

p.10). These cases, however, should not be understood as a systematic infiltration of the entire SNA structure, but rather as individual defections or the incorporation of individuals into existing factions. Nevertheless, these facts contribute to the controversial reputation of the SNA and raise concerns about its discipline, ideological orientation, and behavior toward the civilian population in areas under its control (North Press Agency, 2021).

In 2019, some groups that had previously operated under the National Liberation Front (NLF) were also incorporated into the SNA. (EUAA, 2024). On 4 October 2019, the SNA and the NLF formally unified under the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government, leading to further institutionalization of the armed opposition in areas under Turkish influence (Hamit & Zontur, 2019).

Almost all factions under the SNA have, over the years, participated in Turkish military interventions in northern Syria, including Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring. However, not all groups had prior experience fighting ISIS, and combating this organization never represented a unified priority for the entire SNA (Özkizilcik, 2020).

After the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in 2024 and the takeover of power in Syria by HTS, the SNA announced its dissolution. According to an analysis by the European Union, however, in the case of most SNA groups this represents only a formal integration, while the groups continue their original activities, primarily fighting against the SDF (EUAA, 2025).

People's Protection Units

The People's Protection Units (YPG) emerged during the Syrian civil war in 2011. Following the withdrawal of government armed forces from parts of northern and northeastern Syria, the Kurdish population took advantage of this power vacuum.

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2 Also called People's Defense Units
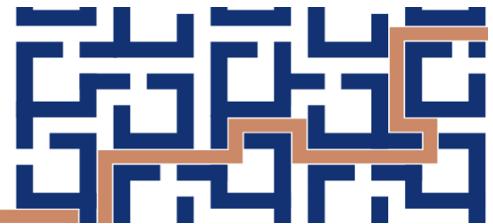
The retreat of state forces created an opportunity for territorial expansion and the establishment of a degree of autonomy in predominantly Kurdish areas.

The ideology of the YPG, which is the armed wing of the PYD, was founded in 2003 and is closely based on the political and social thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the PKK (Portzer, 2020, p. 95). The central concept of this ideological framework is democratic confederalism, a model that departs from the traditional demand for the creation of an independent nation-state (Collombier et al., 2018, p.8). Instead, it promotes a vision of democratic autonomy in which local communities govern their own affairs within a decentralized but unified Syrian state. In October 2015, the YPG became integrated into the structures of the SDF. Nevertheless, it has remained closely linked to the PYD, and within the SDF, the YPG continues to constitute the dominant component.

Due to its close connection with the PYD, the YPG is often labeled a terrorist organization, primarily because of its links to the PKK. A senior member of the PYD, Ilham Ahmed, addressed this issue by stating: "Our movement benefitted from Öcalan's ideology, but physically and organizationally, we are independent from the PKK." (International Crisis Group, 2014).

The YPG gained the greatest prominence through its role in the fight against the IS, where it played a crucial role. Its most significant rise in popularity came during the Battle of Kobani in 2014 against ISIS. This five-month battle, marked by uninterrupted and intense fighting, ended with the recapture of the city by a coalition of YPG forces and the United States, and the withdrawal of ISIS. The battle became highly symbolic and contributed to the image of the YPG as an almost invincible force (Filkins, 2014). As a result, the YPG became a key ally of the United States, gained local legitimacy, and was catapulted onto the international stage. It came to be described as "one of the world's partners in the fight against IS."

After the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, the primary focus of YPG activities shifted. Within the framework of the SDF, the YPG moved away from an exclusive focus on combat operations against IS and increasingly concentrated on governance and territorial control within the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). Nevertheless, its involvement with IS has not entirely ceased, as YPG/SDF forces continue to guard detained IS fighters in prison facilities under their administration (Blanchard, 2025).

In March 2025, an agreement was concluded between the YPG/SDF and the Syrian transitional government on the integration of Kurdish armed forces into a new unified national military structure (Christou, 2025). By the end of 2025, however, the implementation of this agreement had proven unsuccessful and highly complex. Among the main obstacles is Turkey's strong opposition to the integration of the YPG into the state armed forces, due to Turkey's perception of the YPG as a terrorist organization and allegations of its cooperation with Israel (Reuters, 2025).

Main Arab tribes in the region

According to the Jusoor Center for Studies, it is estimated that there are at least 23 Arab tribes across Syria, mainly concentrated in the eastern and northern parts of the country. (Al-Jeratli et al., 2024). Therefore, this policy paper primarily focuses on the tribes located in northeastern Syria, especially in Deir ez-Zor.

There are significant differences among the tribes themselves in terms of the ideologies they follow and the allies they cooperate with. Due to its ethnic composition, Deir ez-Zor is predominantly inhabited by Arabs, with only a very small number of Kurds and Assyrians. This makes the region's
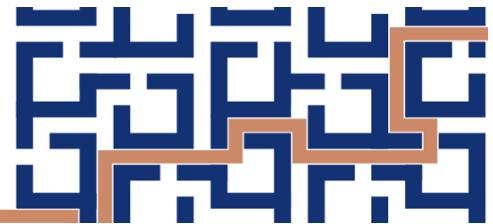
population structure markedly different from the rest of Rojava[3].

As mentioned above, Arab tribes differ not only from one another, but these differences also appear at the level of clans and even individual families. An example is the Walda tribe, which belongs to the Nasser clan, itself divided into two subfamilies: al-Bursan and Faraj al-Salamah. These families played a significant role in pushing Assad-regime forces out of rural and urban areas around Raqqa in 2013. Some tribes supported Jabhat al-Nusra, while others aligned themselves with the FSA. Yet even these alliances were often not long-lasting. The Walda tribe initially supported the FSA, but later the two became rivals (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017, p. 3).

Local tribes in Syria have always played a crucial role in the region's political and social developments, and successive governments have adopted various political approaches toward them. During the Bashar Assad regime, the prevailing approach to tribal identity was to exert control. The main objective was to integrate the tribes into the regime while simultaneously undermining tribal identity itself. This effort extended beyond the political sphere to the social one as well, as the regime attempted to interfere in internal tribal affairs, such as the nomination of sheikhs. Regarding the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, the Assad regime lost control over many parts of the country. As a result, local tribes became largely self-sufficient entities, governing their own territories, applying their own customary laws, and relying on their own resources (Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 2019). The tribal role was essential during the war with ISIS, as tribes held a crucial position in the region. However, the policy toward them was complicated due to diverging stances among tribal leaders and internal divisions. Some tribes sided for pragmatic or ideological reasons with ISIS or al Qaeda, while

other fought against them (Center for a New American Security, 2017, p. 3-5).

Beyond their wartime role, the tribes have retained strategic importance for external actors, particularly Iran. Tehran viewed the tribal networks in Deir ez-Zor as a key instrument for expanding its regional influence and for consolidating a land corridor linking Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and creating "a socio-political belt of influence from Deir ez-Zor to Raqqa.". Consequently, Iran attempted to spread Shiism and encouraged conversions from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam among the local population in Deir ez-Zor (ibid., 2017, p. 4).

Tribes in Deir ez-Zor are organized into several major confederations. The most influential is the Ougaidat confederation[4,] which encompasses numerous local sub-tribes. Other significant confederations include the Baggara (the most populous), the Abeed, the Kul'ayeen, and the Albu Saraya. These tribal structures continue to play a decisive role in governance, resource control, and mediation between local populations and external powers (ibid., 2017, p. 3).

Since 2019, following the territorial defeat of ISIS, the competition for influence over Deir ez-Zor's tribes has intensified among Iran, Russia, the Syrian régime and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Tribal radicalization

The rise of ISIS in northeastern Syria reshaped local political and tribal dynamics, particularly after the group seized Raqqa from Jabhat al-Nusra and established it as the de facto capital of the Islamic State. Deir ez-Zor province, rich in oil and gas resources and forming the most direct territorial link between Raqqa and Iraq's Anbar province, quickly became central to ISIS's territorial strategy. As ISIS consolidated control, it intensified recruitment among local tribes, many of which had previously

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3 "Rojava" refers to the Kurdish-majority areas in northern and northeastern Syria.

4 العُقيدات in Arabic, also known as al-Uqaydat/Ogaidat/Oqaidat/Agaidat/Egaidat
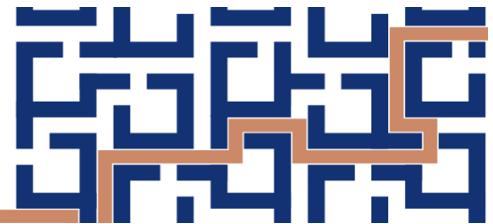
cooperated with a variety of armed actors. After 2014, tribal communities fragmented into pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS factions, with some individuals joining ISIS, while others aligned themselves with Jabhat al-Nusra or other rebel groups resisting ISIS's expansion. (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017, p. 3)

Sub-tribal groups such as the Walda largely supported Jabhat al-Nusra, with only minimal defections to ISIS, while the Afadla tribe more consistently backed ISIS. Other tribes, such as the Sabkha, shifted their allegiance over time and emerged as strong supporters of ISIS in Raqqa province. (ibid., 2017, p. 5) By contrast, the Busaraya tribe generally maintained neutrality, though some members eventually joined ISIS, after July 2014, when ISIS allegedly gained control over the "entire" Deir ez-Zor province; those who joined often did so for material incentives rather than ideological commitment. (ibid., 2017, p. 5-6)

The Baggara tribe illustrates how tribal leadership could shift positions repeatedly in response to personal interests or anticipated benefits: some Baggara members followed the rising influence of ISIS, while others sided with Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, or other anti-ISIS groups, and according to a policy paper from the Washington Institute written by Andrew J. Tabler (2017) about Securing the Middle Euphrates River Valley from an interview with a member of the Baggara tribe, the tribe's leading sheikh reportedly later shifted to supporting pro-regime, often Shi'a-aligned militias. (ibid., 2017, p. 6)

Despite sharing the same position against the Assad regime, tribal cohesion failed, as demonstrated by the Ougaidat tribe, which split over disputes concerning oil fields, one faction aligning with ISIS and the other with Jabhat al-Nusra, ultimately drawing the tribe into the broader conflict between the two jihadist groups. In the end, ISIS succeeded in seizing most of the towns in the area that had previously been controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra, although territorial control continued to shift in certain parts of Deir ez-Zor. (ibid., 2017, p. 6-7)

Tribal position in the region after 2019

The fall of ISIS occurred around 2019. While ISIS was not entirely destroyed, its territorial control and sphere of influence were significantly reduced. However, ISIS cells continue to operate in the region, and recent reports indicate growing activity in northeastern Syria. After 2019, as ISIS became less of an immediate threat, the dynamics in the region shifted. Arab tribes, once heavily influenced by ISIS, began refocusing on their own interests and objectives. During ISIS's peak, many tribes either sided with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or others were aligned with the U.S. This dynamic has since changed.

Northeastern Syria, once controlled by ISIS, is now primarily governed by DAANES, a Kurdish-led administration, after the SDF expanded into former ISIS-held territory. Following ISIS's defeat, Arab tribes began demanding greater autonomy within the DANNES framework, leading to increasing clashes between SDF forces and the Arab tribes. Meanwhile, Iran's influence in the region, especially in Deir ez-Zor, has grown through Iranian-backed militias. This situation created fertile ground for the emergence of new groups with divergent views and loyalties, supporting different regional actors. Though tribal allegiances remain diverse, sometimes even within individual families, Arab tribes increasingly sought greater autonomy within DANNES, leading to tensions. These were compounded by DANNES's attempts to manipulate tribal structures by appointing leaders perceived as incompetent or aligned with Kurdish interests. This sparked growing mistrust between the parties. Moreover, the relationship between DANNES and the Syrian regime also contributed to the fragmentation (Daza Sierra, 2025, p. 29).

Historically, alliances with Arab tribes were based on pragmatic, transactional considerations rather than ideological motives. By 2020, most tribes aligned with the U.S., as it offered more security guarantees compared to aligning with the Syrian regime and its allies (Russia, Iran), or Turkey and its proxy forces.
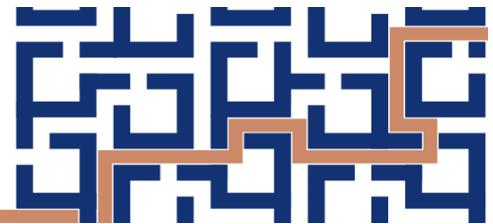
(Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2020) This led to DAANES and its SDF forces establishing control over northern and northeastern Syria. However, by 2021, tensions between the SDF and the Arab tribes started to grow. The initial perception of the SDF as "liberators" soon shifted, with many tribes now referring to them as "occupiers." This shift was partly due to the overwhelming Kurdish presence within DANNES, rather than an Arab majority (Snell, 2021).

The tribal leadership in the region during and after the Syrian Civil War could be broadly categorized into three main groups. First, there were those who aligned with the Syrian opposition and Turkey, seeking to counter the Assad regime. Second, there were tribes that, fearing the regime's reprisals, formed tactical alliances with the SDF, hoping for greater autonomy under Kurdish-led governance. Third, some tribes remained loyal to Bashar al-Assad and aligned themselves with Iranian-backed militias fighting against the SDF. These differing loyalties laid the groundwork for ongoing tensions and shifting allegiances in the region (Sharawi, 2025).

In 2023, the SDF launched an operation in Deir ez-Zor to arrest Abu Khawla, a prominent tribal leader and head of the Arab-majority Military Council in the governorate, which operated under the SDF. This led to a tribal uprising, resulting in days of clashes and the deaths of 118 people, according to monitoring groups (Ward, 2025).

After the regime's coup at the end of 2024, Arab tribes regained political significance in the region. Gaining the support of these tribes became crucial for Ahmad al-Sharaa's regime, as it sought to implement an agreement to integrate the SDF into Syria's unified armed forces. Some tribes, following the regime change, leaned toward the regime, perceiving it as more favorable than continued Kurdish rule. According to The New Arab, some Arab tribes now find the Syrian regime, after Assad's fall, to be more appealing than the SDF, considering it a more favorable option (ibid., 2025).

In 2025, some Arab tribes, such as the Al Naim, Al Bushaaban, Qais Aylan, and Al Baqara, called for mobilization and unity against the SDF, aiming for the "liberation of the Syrian Jazira." Since Assad's fall, many anti-regime tribes now see Damascus as "more alluring than the SDF," according to researcher Alexander McKeever, author of the "This Week in Northern Syria" blog. (ibid., 2025) However, these tribes calling for mobilization had previously been aligned with Assad's regime. That said, this does not imply a uniform position among all tribes. Major tribes such as the Shammar, Ougaidat, and Jabour have long cooperated with the SDF, and this cooperation has largely continued (Haid, 2025).

On the other hand, Hussein al-Salama, a prominent figure from the Ougaidat tribe, is currently the director of Syria's General Intelligence Service. He is frequently regarded as a long-time ally of Al-Sharaa, the current president of the transitional Syrian government. (Dukhan, 2025) These shifting alliances and dynamics raise important questions about the future of tribal relations in northeastern Syria, as well as the potential for further conflict or cooperation between the tribes and various regional powers.

Interactions between armed organizations

SDF/YPG and Arab tribes

Relations between the YPG and Arab tribes are complex and often volatile, marked by shifts over time and periodic escalations. It is also important to note the lack of unity among Arab tribes themselves, as their views and interests differ significantly from one tribe to another. At a general level, however, many Arab tribes have recently expressed dissatisfaction with Kurdish dominance within the SDF, particularly in leadership positions largely associated with the YPG (Kurdistan24, 2021).

As mentioned above, following the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in 2019, Arab tribes increasingly sought greater autonomy over their territories. Instead, administrative control was assumed by the

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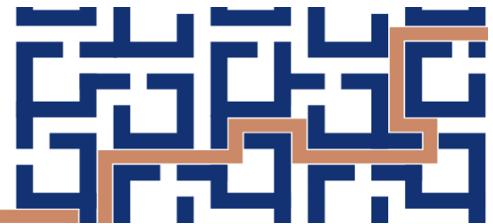
SDF and its political structures, and the area was incorporated into the DAANES. Despite historical cooperation with YPG in the US-led coalition for the battle with ISIS, some tribal leaders openly reassessed their alliances. Sheikh Humaydi Daham al-Hadi of the Shammar tribe, for example, acknowledged his readiness to reach an understanding with Bashar al-Assad. It was not an isolated case; similar positions were taken by the Bou Bana, Hanada, and Bou Sultan tribes, all of which relocated to regime-controlled territory (Al-Monitor, 2019).

In 2021, Turkey and the Assad régime, together with their allies Iran and Russia, intensified efforts to draw Arab tribes to their side and encourage opposition to the SDF. Tribal figures loyal to the Assad government issued statements calling on Arab tribes, particularly in Hasakah province, to reject SDF authority (Kurdistan24, 2021). Tensions escalated in March 2021 after several members of the al-Burahma clan were killed during demonstrations in Hasakah. These deaths sparked widespread anger, and some Arab leaders described the SDF as a "separatist project," accusing it of buying the loyalty of certain tribal sheikhs (Al-Monitor, 2021).

The following year presented a different picture. In 2022, many Arab tribes aligned themselves with the SDF when they defended Manbij alongside the YPG against a Turkish operation. At that time, Ahmed Abu Faisal, a tribal dignitary opposed to the SDF, stated that the region's tribes could be divided into three groups: those loyal to the SDF, those loyal to the regime, and a smaller group opposed to both. He also noted that many tribes shared interests and objectives with the SDF, and that any Turkish aggression or war would be highly detrimental to them. As a result, the majority of tribes supported the SDF, even though almost all called for peace and rejected both war and displacement (Al-Monitor, 2022).

Support for the SDF in Manbij was often framed in pragmatic terms. In the event of a loss of Manbij, tribesmen who had cooperated with the SDF would likely be unable to remain in the city. To demonstrate their position, tribal members set up a tent at the Ghassaniya School in central Manbij to express solidarity with the Manbij Military Council and opposition to the anticipated Turkish military operation (Al-Monitor, 2022).

Western coverage frequently portrays the SDF as a unified Kurdish force, yet in reality, it is a heterogeneous coalition. Alongside the YPG, it includes Arab formations such as the Sanadid Forces, historically associated with the Shammar tribe, and the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, which incorporated fighters from the Uqaydat and Baggara tribes. Over time, however, these tribal networks have increasingly fragmented (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022).

Relations between the SDF and the local Arab population have repeatedly deteriorated. Arab communities have accused the SDF of seizing land and exploiting local resources. These tensions reached their most violent phase in August 2023, following the arrest of Ahmed al-Khubail[5], the leader of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council. The arrest triggered heavy clashes between SDF and Arab tribal forces[6], leaving dozens of dead on both sides (Al-Monitor, 2024). Shortly after the arrest, an audio recording circulated on social media and was attributed to Ibrahim al-Hafel, a member of the Uqaydat tribe and leader of the Arab Tribal Forces based in regime-controlled Deir ez-Zor and one of the main figures behind the uprising. In the recording, he stated that his forces would continue their operations to "liberate and cleanse the area of the Qandil terrorist militia," a phrase commonly used to refer to Kurdish elements within the SDF. The Arab tribal forces demanded the withdrawal of the SDF from Deir ez-Zor and called for direct coordination between local tribes and the United States. The US, however, maintained its support for the SDF. The confrontation ended after an SDF

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5 Also known as Abu Kawla

6 Also known as Arab Clan Forces
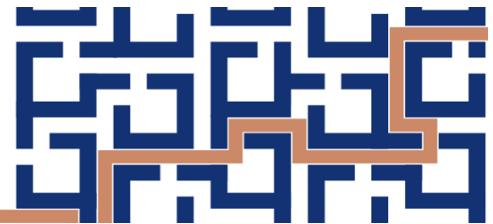
counteroffensive, and Ibrahim al-Hafel withdrew to regime-held territory (Syria Direct, 2023).

In September 2023, some tribal members took control over the entire eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor. But it was only for a short time, before the SDF took control back (Al Mayadeen English, 2024).

In 2024, clashes resumed when Arab tribal forces launched attacks against the SDF in Deir ez-Zor following the death of a Hamas commander, Yahya Sinwar. These operations were conducted from areas controlled by the regime and Iranian-aligned militias (ibid.). Under the leadership of Ibrahim al-Hafel, the group openly framed its campaign as an effort to "liberate Arab land from SDF occupation" (Al-Monitor, 2024).

Since the fall of the Assad regime, the status of Arab tribes in Syria has changed. In August 2025, the Al Naim, Al Bushaaban, Qais Aylan, and Al Bagara tribes called for a general mobilization against the SDF. According to the tribal leader, Sheik Faraj al Salamah, the mobilization was described as „waiting for the right moment for liberation of the Syrian Jazira" (Sharawi, 2025). In addition, on 22nd December 2025, the Baggara, the major Arab tribal federation and the largest group, called again for a general uprising against the SDF. The aim should be to push the SDF from Arab-majority territories. Tribes again accused the SDF of occupying Arab-majority areas and pursuing policies, even as the United States, Türkiye, and Syria engaged in diplomatic efforts to shape the SDF's future relationship with the central government (Türkïye today, 2025).

SNA and Arab tribes

The SNA did not come into extensive contact with the Arab tribes discussed in this paper, primarily those located in northeastern Syria. In general, the SNA did not have a strong presence in the Deir ez-Zor area and therefore did not interact closely with Arab tribes in this region. However, some fighters originally from the Deir ez-Zor area later moved to territories controlled by the SNA, and some of them joined its ranks (STJ, 2021). Historically, certain groups affiliated with the SNA did operate in northeastern Syria against ISIS, at times in cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to information reported by Daily Sabah, in 2021a meeting was supposed to have taken place between Arab tribes, the SNA, and the Syrian opposition in a village in the Ras al-Ain area. During this meeting, possible cooperation in the fight against the YPG and the regime of Bashar al-Assad was reportedly discussed (Daily Sabah, 2021). This meeting may have represented an attempt by the SNA to secure cooperation with Arab tribes in the region against Kurdish units in Rojava.

In 2023, during clashes between the SDF and the SNA, the SNA attempted to gain the support of Arab tribes and encourage them to join its side in the fight against the SDF. The SNA did so by attempting to open crossings in order to facilitate easier recruitment of new members, particularly in the Manbij and al-Bab areas. According to reports by al-Mayadeen and claims made by the SNA, some local tribes did join the SNA and carried out several attacks on two fronts. The SDF, however, disputed it (Al Mayadeen English, 2023).

Following the change of the Syrian regime at the end of 2024, the SNA no longer operates or presents itself as an independent entity. Instead, due to its integration, it now operates under the Syrian Armed Forces led by the government of Ahmad al-Sharaa. Information appearing on some news blogs suggests that certain tribes, particularly from the Deir ez-Zor area, are calling for a unified Syria (Reddit, 2023). This therefore, represents a shared objective of both the tribes and the regime's new armed structures, under which the SNA now falls.

SNA and Arab tribes

As noted earlier, one of the main objectives of the SNA has been its fight against Kurdish forces,
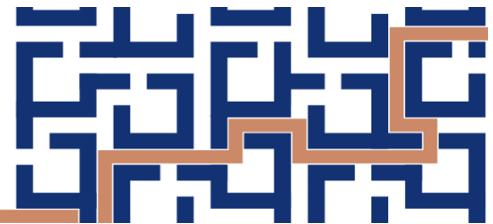
primarily the YPG, which forms the largest component of the SDF.

Despite the defeat of the so-called caliphate in 2019, the security situation for the SDF did not significantly improve. This was largely due to the Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria, known as Operation Peace Spring, which was carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces in cooperation with the SNA.

Therefore, the Tishreen Dam represents a strategic site for the DAANES and has long been one of the most contentious areas between the SNA and the SDF/YPG. Tensions intensified especially after November 2024, when the SNA took control of Manbij as part of an operation Dawn of Freedom. Although the SNA had already been formally integrated into the official Syrian army structures, it continued to carry out strikes on the Tishreen Dam in January 2025. This area is frequently affected by violence against civilians, and any serious damage to the dam could result in catastrophic consequences (Hasan, 2025).

Operation Dawn of Freedom was an SNA offensive marked by a high number of civilian casualties. Its objective was to prevent the SDF/YPG from establishing a territorial corridor connecting key areas such as Tel Rifaat and Manbij, as well as to seize strategically important towns and block efforts to link their territories into a continuous zone of control. The offensive led to clashes between the SNA and the SDF/YPG, caused civilian casualties, and triggered the displacement of Kurdish civilians (STJ, 2025). During the operation, the SNA captured much of Tel Rifaat and large parts of the Manbij area, while also cutting off key supply routes used by the YPG to access Kuweires Military Airport and the Minnugh Airbase (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

Following the change of regime in Syria in 2024 and ongoing efforts to unify the country's armed forces, clashes between the SDF/YPG and the SNA have nevertheless continued, reflecting their persistently strained relations. Although the SNA now operates under the official structures of the Ministry of Defense, it continues to confront the SDF much as it did in the past, and tensions between the two sides remain unresolved.

Conclusion

SDF still plays a crucial role in the battle against ISIS cells in Syria, but their position and alliances with the US or cooperation with Arab tribes are weakening. This is also due to their ongoing refusal to integrate under the Ministry of Defense in Syria, as it would mean participation in the same organization as the SNA.

In addition, American President Donald Trump said at the beginning of 2025 that the number of soldiers in Syria would decrease. After the fall of the Assad regime, the US supported the new regime more than anyone had expected. Therefore, it is not certain whether the US would stand on the side of SDF, as it has in the past, or whether the Syrian regime would become its new ally. The loss of US support would be a major loss for SDF and their position in the region.

In 2025, there were many changes in relations and security, but 2026 brought even more challenges for relations between the SDF and the regime, the US, and Arab tribes than SDF might have expected.

At the beginning of January 2026, major clashes erupted in Aleppo between the SDF a Syrian regime. During January, the SDF was defeated and concluded a ceasefire agreement with the Syrian government. As a result, Syrian forces took control over a wide area in Syrian Kurdistan, DAANES lost its autonomy in northeastern Syria and the majority of Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor sided with Damascus (Al-Monitor, 2026).
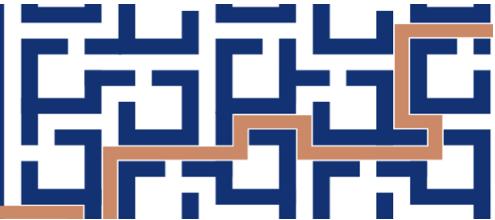
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