



## FOREIGN INTERVENTION AND LOCAL DYNAMICS IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA: TURKEY, THE UNITED STATES, IRAN, AND THE SDF

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### Annotation

*Since Turkey's military intervention in northern Syria beginning in 2016, the region has become a complex area of competing regional and international influences. Turkey's operations against Kurdish autonomy, American counter-terrorism partnerships with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Iranian strategic positioning through Arab tribal networks have created overlapping and often contradictory areas of influence in northeastern Syria. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has further destabilized this weak balance, creating gaps in power that many actors are trying to fill.*

### Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, has evolved into one of the most complex geopolitical conflicts of the twenty-first century, drawing in regional and international actors with competing interests and objectives. What started as a local uprising against the Assad regime quickly transformed into a multifaceted proxy war, with Turkey, the United States, Iran, and different Syrian factions competing for influence across Syrian territory. This conflict's complexity is particularly shown in northern and northeastern Syria, where Kurdish autonomy aspirations, Turkish security concerns, American counter-terrorism objectives, and Iranian regional ambitions cross each other and often clash.

Turkey's involvement in Syria represents a shift from its initial regime change agenda to a focus on border security and preventing Kurdish autonomy along its southern border. The United States, on the other hand, maintained a military presence mainly

to fight ISIS through its partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led force that Turkey views as a terrorist extension of the PKK. Iran has strategically positioned itself to expand its influence through engagement with Arab tribal networks, particularly in eastern Syria, while seeking to maintain a land corridor connecting Tehran to its allies in Lebanon. The Assad regime, though recently fallen, had maintained a complex relationship with these actors, sometimes cooperating and sometimes conflicting with their presence in Syrian territory.

### Turkey's Influence in Syria


Turkey's involvement in the Syrian Civil War shifted from attempts to change the regime to prioritizing its national security interests along its border with Syria (Kardaş, 2025, p. 22). The shift followed a series of military interventions and the establishment of a complex governance system in northern Syria between the years 2015 and 2022 (ibid., p. 23).

### Military Operations and Strategic Objectives

In 2016, Turkey started launching several unilateral military attacks into northern Syria to tackle down what it perceived as a direct threat to its national security (ibid., p. 25). The first operation, Euphrates Shield, was launched in August 2016, and followed them three other operations that caused a significant military presence along Turkey's southern border (ibid., p. 25). These operations progressed from targeting ISIS followers to breaking down the neighboring People's Defense Units (YPG) control over northern Syria, to

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eventually protecting rebel forces in Idlib against regime advances (ibid., p. 25).

Operation Peace Spring, led in October 2019, targeted YPG-controlled areas east of the Euphrates River. Turkey then established control over a territory surrounded by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to the west and east, and by the Assad regime to the south. After these operations, the three Turkish-influenced zones covered an area of around 10,000 square kilometers and were home to over two million Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish people (ibid., p. 27).

Turkey's main concern throughout the Syrian Civil War was Kurdish autonomy along its borders. One of the factors that led Turkey to shift its regime change agenda was the Obama administration's decision to create the anti-ISIS Syrian Democratic Forces by partnering with the YPG (the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party), a Kurdish group established in northern Syria (ibid., p. 24). Another factor was that Ankara perceived the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had started revolting in Turkey since the 1980s (ibid., p. 24). Therefore, Turkey perceived the YPG as a threat to both border security and national security (ibid., p. 24). Despite shared goals in counterterrorism and combating ISIS, Ankara opposed the key components of Washington's Syria policy, and specifically American support for the YPG, which became a worry after 2016 (ibid., p. 24).

To synthesize control over opposition-held territories and prevent more Kurdish expansion, Turkey highly invested in institutional building among Syrian opposition groups, and even Islamist groups that it perceived to have a potential to moderate and transform through careful engagement (ibid., p. 24,27). In December 2017, Turkey financed, trained, unified, and equipped rebel factions under the Syrian National Army (SNA), which is a reincarnation of the Free Syrian Army that was formed in the early years of the Syrian conflict (ibid., p. 27). The SNA then

effectively controlled the opposition areas, operating through the three zones that were established through Turkish military operations (ibid., p. 27).

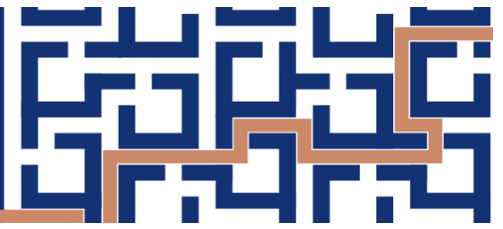
### The Kurdish Forces in Syria

The Kurdish areas were historically neglected, and the Kurds in Syria's identity was oppressed and faced legal discrimination, including the denial of citizenship and even birth certificates (Szekely, 2023). This is because with a 10 percent ethnic Kurdish population in Syria, who had a long-standing political movement that became more nationalist in the late 1950s, influenced by Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, and because of economic and political marginalization under the Syrian state (ibid., 2023).

The regime, however, was supportive of Kurdish movements outside of Syria, such as Hafez al-Assad's support of the PKK during the 1980s. It is worth noting that Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the left-wing Kurdish militant group Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers Party), which has been at conflict with the Turkish government since the late 1970s (ibid., 2023). Later in 2003, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian affiliate of the PKK, emerged. PYD then focused on the Syrian military's withdrawal from northern regions during the civil war. By 2012, the PYD formed its armed wing, which is the People's Protection Units (YPG), with an inclusive ideological agenda focusing on gender equality, which is reflected in the formation of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in 2013 (ibid., 2023).

### Border Security and Refugee Management

Turkey's military actions in Syria weren't just about stopping Kurdish independence. Through diplomatic agreements like the Astana Framework and the 2020 Moscow Addendum, Turkey was trying to achieve several important goals at the same time (Kardaş, 2025). They wanted to prevent Kurdish groups from controlling the entire border



area, deal with terrorist threats, stop more refugees from coming into Turkey, and gain international acceptance for Turkey's involvement in Syria (ibid., 2025).

After Turkey took military control of a major part of Syria's southern border, local groups working with Turkey started trying to rebuild these areas and experimented with post-conflict development and state-building (ibid., 2025). Turkey also closed its borders, completely reversing its initial open-door policy towards Syrians. This was meant to keep refugees inside Syria instead of letting them cross into Turkey. Creating a "safe zone" also stopped Assad's government from its demographic manipulation (ibid., 2025).

Keeping the status quo became important for Turkey's refugee strategy. Turkey saw this as the last line of defense against another huge wave of refugees (ibid., 2025). If Assad's forces attacked and took over opposition-controlled areas, additionally destroying the new local governments there, it would push millions more Syrians toward the Turkish border (ibid., 2025). This would destroy Turkey's new "no more refugees" policy and weaken the careful deal Turkey had made with the European Union to handle the refugee crisis (ibid., 2025).

## United States' Role

### Historical Context: US Support for the SDF as Anti-ISIS Partner


The US-SDF partnership was formed out of urgent necessity during the fight against ISIS. As shown in the Syrian conflict's development, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) Kurdish forces turned out to be the only military groups capable of stopping ISIS's advance in northern Syria (Szekely, 2023, p. 60). The creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces as an umbrella organization led by the YPG and YPJ gave a chance for the United States to provide support while also managing tensions with Turkey over the

PKK connection (ibid., 60). The effectiveness of this partnership became clear during the battle for Kobane in late 2014. "American airstrikes against ISIS positions around Kobane began in October of 2014. With U.S. air support, Kurdish forces were able to retake the city in January of 2015" (Szekely, p. 60). This success created a pattern of US-SDF cooperation that continued throughout the campaign against ISIS's territorial control. By fall 2017, this partnership had achieved major territorial victories (ibid., p. 64). "Raqqa fell to the SDF in mid-October, and SDF forces hoisted their flags over the city center in celebration. More than three thousand were killed in the fighting, including more than one thousand civilians" (ibid., p. 64).

The strategic reasons for US's support expanded beyond immediate military needs. Under the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS" framework, approximately "two thousand U.S. military personnel remain in northeast Syria" supporting operations that maintain "pressure on the group through unilateral and partnered military strikes, and supporting the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who maintain custody of nearly nine thousand IS detainees and forty thousand IS-affiliated families in displaced persons camps" (Stroul, Washington Institute). This detention mission represents a critical ongoing part of the counter-ISIS campaign, as the detainee population poses a continuing security threat that requires sustained management and oversight.

### Strategic Shifts and Troop Redeployments Under Different Administrations

The US approach in Syria has changed significantly, especially under multiple presidential administrations, causing difficulties for the SDF alliance. Particularly unpredictable and damaging to Kurdish allies was the Trump administration's policy. Trump granted Erdogan's request in December 2018, shocking the Pentagon by declaring on Twitter that the United States was withdrawing from Syria (Szekely, p. 65-66). Brett



McGurk, the Special Envoy for Anti-ISIS Operations, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis both resigned in protest (ibid., p. 65-66). The US's trust with Kurdish allies was damaged, even though this withdrawal was partially restored.

When Trump allowed Turkey to launch Operation Peace Spring against the Kurdish autonomous territory in October 2019, it was the most significant change (ibid., p. 66). In October 2019, Trump effectively allowed Turkey to begin a military operation against the Kurdish autonomous region known as Operation Peace Spring (ibid., p. 66). The SDF was thrown into dangerous circumstances as a result of this policy change. Turkey had seized control of a nine-hundred-square-mile area along the border by the time Russia and Turkey negotiated a cease-fire, and the Kurdish leadership, in a desperate attempt to stop the Turkish advance, had consented to let Syrian government forces onto their territory (ibid., p. 66). The strategic situation and the SDF's views of threat were changed by these policy shifts. According to a 2019 study of SDF fighters, Turkey was seen as the biggest threat to the region by 78% of Kurdish fighters and 45% of Arab fighters, who currently likely represent the majority of the SDF (Szekely, p. 66). This change of focus from ISIS to Turkey was a direct result of unequal US protection and assistance.

Despite taking over this complex history, the Biden administration continued to approach the SDF partnership more consistently. But new strategic difficulties were brought about with Assad's overthrow in December 2024. According to Stroul's testimony, the United States' collaboration with the SDF is the primary source of tension for NATO ally Turkey, which views the SDF as a component of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization that the US, Turkey, and other countries have designated as a terrorist organization (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). Efforts to create a long-term, sustainable policy have been hindered by this underlying conflict, which has endured across administrations.

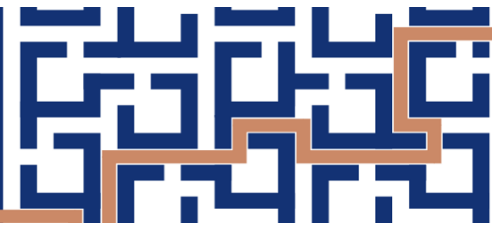
There are now more challenges because of the post-Assad situation. Assad and the SDF were rivals, but in recent years, the regime and its supporters in Iran and Russia established a tense but generally steady relationship with the group (Levy, Washington Institute). The SDF is now vulnerable to new challenges from various angles as a result of this balance collapsing, putting the strength of American commitment to the test once more.

### Complex Security Environment Post-Assad

The SDF now faces a much more dangerous security situation in post-Assad Syria. According to Levy, the SDF's resolve was put to the test earlier this year when Iran and Assad sent Arab tribal fighters to attack its positions in Deir ez-Zor, but the fragile balance of power in the northeast persisted. However, the balance has been broken by the fall of the regime and the worsening of Russia and Iran's influence (Levy, Washington Institute). In order to maintain territorial control and carry out counter-ISIS operations, the SDF now faces threats from several parties at once, necessitating ongoing US support.

The Syrian National Army (SNA), which is supported by Turkey, has become a direct threat. Tal Rifaat, a nearby SDF zone, became vulnerable to SNA attacks after the most recent HTS assault destroyed regime defenses in Aleppo (Levy, Washington Institute). With the aid of heavy Turkish artillery and air assistance, SNA forces rapidly cut off the SDF troops that had been sent on November 30 to provide an evacuation route (ibid., Washington Institute). Given that Turkey and its close allies have been accused of abusing Kurdish people and that Washington has previously sanctioned SNA leaders for such crimes, these losses represent not only territorial setbacks but also possible humanitarian issues (ibid., Washington Institute).

Besides the threat posed by the SNA, SDF-controlled territory also shares a long border with



the jihadist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which launched the military campaign that overthrew Assad (Levy, Washington Institute). HTS is unlikely to tolerate the secular SDF's ongoing existence, at least not as a totally autonomous rival, given the jihadists' objective of creating a unified Syria under their radical interpretation of Islamic law (ibid., Washington Institute). It is hard to imagine the group signing a deal that does not dissolve the SDF or reduce it to a subordinate position, even though HTS has initially shown restraint (ibid., Washington Institute). The jihadist group is a serious potential enemy because of its improved military skills, which include the skillful use of drones for command and control, surveillance, targeting, and anti-armor operations shown during its offensive against Assad (ibid., Washington Institute).

### Issues with Detention and the Persistent Threat of ISIS

Even after losing territory, ISIS still has a great deal of potential for reconstruction, especially given the current uncertain situation (Szekely, p. 67). In an unsuccessful attempt to release the 3,500 fighters detained there, as well as seven hundred boys, the majority of whom were ISIS fighters' children, ISIS terrorists launched an attack against the SDF-run Sinaa prison in Hasakah in January 2022 (ibid., p. 67). This strike proved that ISIS is still capable of carrying out large-scale attacks.

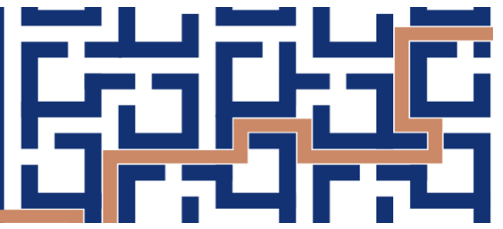
The SDF's prisons are a persistent weakness as well as an essential counterterrorism accomplishment. Ten thousand foreign nationals and almost sixty thousand civilians, including Syrians, are detained in the al-Hol prison camp (Szekely, p. 67). The majority are ISIS soldiers' spouses and kids. The camp's horrible conditions make it a possible location for an ISIS rebirth in Syria, even though only a small percentage seem to be committed ISIS supporters (ibid., p. 67). A significant SDF collapse and IS escape would be devastating given the 50,000 IS-affiliated people now in detention (Levy, Washington Institute). Even before Assad's fall, US

Central Command observed alarming patterns. U.S. Central Command warned that ISIS was "attempting to reconstitute" after observing a sharp rise in IS strikes months before the regime fell (Levy, Washington Institute). By regularly attacking pro-regime forces and intimidating locals, IS militants have partially controlled territory in some places (ibid., Washington Institute). These threats have increased as a result of the regime's fall because instability gives ISIS the chance to grow its operations and possibly free fighters who have been imprisoned (ibid., Washington Institute).

### US Objectives: Balancing Stability, Counter-Terrorism, and Regional Influence

In order to achieve its objectives in northeastern Syria, the United States must perform a difficult balancing act while juggling several conflicting ties and interests. In her testimony, Stroul identified the main obstacles facing the United States: determining whether its newly created government is suitably detached from its al-Qaeda/IS roots and both willing and able to combat terrorism, fight off harmful Iranian influence, and manage Syria in a way that prevents new cycles of violence (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute).

The US involvement is still mainly driven by the need to combat terrorism. However, the mission includes more than just physical operations; it also includes stabilization, prisoner management, and the avoidance of circumstances that promote the attraction of extremists (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). As Stroul pointed out, localities in northeastern Syria that have been freed from ISIS receive stabilization funds from the United States apart from humanitarian relief. In order to lessen the circumstances that leave communities open to violent extremist propaganda and acts, this kind of assistance is crucial (ibid., Washington Institute). Security objectives cannot be separated from the humanitarian aspect of US involvement. 16.7 million Syrians needed humanitarian aid before Assad's overthrow, the



most since the civil conflict began in 2011 (ibid., Washington Institute). The United States was the biggest bilateral donor to Syria's humanitarian needs prior to the freeze, contributing \$1.2 billion in 2024 and more than \$18 billion since 2011 (ibid., Washington Institute).

### Turkey Factor and NATO Alliance Tensions

The gap between US ambitions and Turkish concerns is likely the most persistent obstacle to US Syria policy. Stroul admitted that Turkey is in a position to influence the policies of Syria's leaders and has the strongest connections to the new Damascus leadership, but given Ankara's well-known support for Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood organizations and movements throughout the Middle East, Washington should ask Ankara about its goals in Syria (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). We can see the contradiction, which is that Ankara opposes the SDF's plans to create a semi-autonomous region inside Syria on Turkey's border, despite Turkey being a NATO ally whose cooperation is crucial for regional stability (ibid., Washington Institute). In northeastern Syria, the Syrian National Army (SNA), supported by Turkey, is currently waging a military campaign against the SDF (ibid., Washington Institute). Therefore, the United States is forced to back two rivals: Turkey through the NATO alliance and the SDF for counter-ISIS operations.

Stroul also suggested the United States start a political and military discussion with Turkey that considers the Islamic State's capacity to reorganize in Syria and develops the terms and schedule for a safe withdrawal of American forces from the country (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). As part of this conversation, the United States should ask Turkey to assure to stop targeting the SDF and to order the SNA to stop attacking the SDF and intimidating northeastern towns, because these actions threaten the hard-won victories over IS (ibid., Washington Institute).

### Geopolitical Context and Regional Competition

It is hard to understand the US involvement in Syrian Kurdistan in isolation from larger regional geopolitical competition. According to Salloukh's analysis, since the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the geopolitics of the area have been determined by the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has taken place in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, postwar Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Bahrain (Salloukh, p. 32). This geopolitical struggle got worse by the Arab Uprisings and extended to Syria (ibid., p. 32).

US objectives in Syria are directly impacted by this regional rivalry. As Iran's main strategic friend in the Middle East, Assad allowed Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militia organizations to use Syrian territory to strike Israel and American soldiers, according to Stroul's testimony at the Washington Institute (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). Building on their failure to support Assad, which suffered a defeat, the United States now has a chance to weaken Russian and Iranian positions in the Middle East with Assad's fall (ibid., Washington Institute).

But both Iran and Russia have significant networks of influence that could allow them to play destabilizing roles (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). In order to protect their own interests in post-Assad Syria, like providing commercial contracts to Iran's land route for reorganizing Hezbollah and maintaining Russia's naval base on the Mediterranean, Tehran and Moscow will turn to these networks of influence (ibid., Washington Institute). Careful negotiation with regional and international allies is necessary to manage these conflicting interests while maintaining the SDF collaboration and counter-ISIS objective.



## Policy Coordination and Joint Engagement Challenges

The lack of cooperation among international players interacting with Syria's new leadership is a major obstacle to US policy. Stroul noted this issue: A developing coalition of U.S. allies and partners in the Middle East, Europe, and Turkey is working quickly to engage him, even though the United States has not yet decided whether the new Damascus government's early actions fulfill standards for support (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). However, these governments are not coordinating their expectations or communicating with the United States or each other, which puts Damascus at risk of hearing conflicting messages and not feeling obliged to commit to any course of action that would prevent further instability and violence (ibid., Washington Institute). Engagement levels reflect this diplomatic imbalance. For instance, the Qatari emir recently paid Sharaa a visit in Damascus, and Sharaa's first overseas trip was to meet with the Saudi crown prince and then the Turkish president (ibid., Washington Institute). The United States has only interacted with Sharaa at the assistant secretary level since December 2024. At an important moment in the negotiations on Syria's future structure, this pattern poses the risk of diminishing US influence (ibid., Washington Institute).

Gulf states have financial resources that are necessary for stabilization but may not be supplied by the US (ibid., Washington Institute). Although a plan or vision for Syria and its future role in the Middle East has not yet been agreed upon or established, Gulf officials are already interacting with the Sharaa government (ibid., Washington Institute). According to Stroul's speech at the Washington Institute, the United States should be attempting to bring together, coordinate, and align its regional and international partners, especially in Europe, on measures that show Syria's post-Assad recovery is moving toward stability (ibid., Washington Institute).

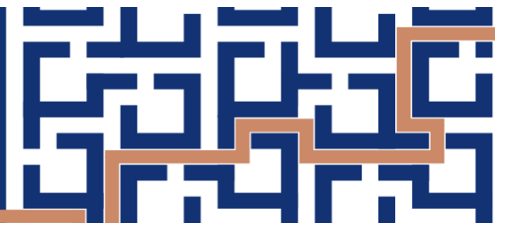
## How the United States is Losing Tribes in Syria to Iran

One of the US's declared regional objectives has been directly weakened by the United States' choice to back the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during the 2023 Arab tribal uprising in Deir ez-Zor, which has given Iran a strategic opportunity to increase its influence in northeastern Syria (Nelson, 2025). According to the article, James Jeffrey, the former US Special Representative for Syria Engagement under Trump, had declared that reducing Iran's influence in Syria was one of his nation's top three objectives. In the same way, Ethan Goldrich, the current Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, has drawn attention to Iran's destabilizing influence in Syria, where the Biden administration approved preparations to attack Iranian targets (ibid., 2025).

### Eastern Syria's Arab Tribal Landscape

To understand how US policy failures have allowed Iranian expansion, one needs to understand the tribal dynamics (Nelson, 2025). The Uqaydat, Baqqara, Jubour, Shammar, and Tayy are the five major Arab tribes of eastern Syria (ibid., 2025). These tribes make up the great majority of Arabs living in the region under the control of the SDF and, consequently, the US, which supports it in Syria (ibid., 2025). The tribal environment is complicated, and each tribe has a tendency for its members to be claimed by a number of players (ibid., 2025). While some collaborate with Turkey and the Syrian opposition, others work with the US and the SDF. Others sided with the Assad government, Iran, and Russia (ibid., 2025).

Another level of complexity is introduced by the governing system. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is in charge of the majority of them, with the exception of portions of the Tayy tribe (Nelson, 2025). However, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose military branch, the People's Protection Units (YPG), is the primary component



of the SDF, controls this governing body. The PYD was founded as the Syrian division of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which is classified as a terrorist group by both Washington and Ankara (ibid., 2025). Because of this, a large number of Arab tribes and clans call the YPG the PKK. Tension has always been a result of this Kurdish-dominated government over mostly Arab regions (ibid., 2025).

### The 2023 Deir ez-Zor Uprising

An important turning point in US-tribal relations was the August 2023 uprising, which also provided Iran with an opportunity (Nelson, 2025). The complex power dynamics of northeastern Syria experienced a major shift on August 28, 2023, when an Arab tribal uprising began in SDF-held areas of the country's eastern Deir ez-Zor province. Ahmed al-Khubail (Abu Khawla), the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, which is linked with the SDF, was arrested and imprisoned, which set off this uprising (ibid., 2025).

The circumstances around al-Khubail's imprisonment were sensitive and symbolic of extremist organizations' tactics. After a two-month conflict, the SDF invited al-Khubail and other senior commanders to a meeting at a base in Hasakah province on August 27 (ibid., 2025). Al-Khubail was taken into custody when the group was cornered. According to many tribesmen who spoke to the author, this tactic, inviting a target to a meeting just to detain them, caused a great deal of resentment among the locals, especially since it is similar to tactics previously used by the Islamic State (IS) (ibid., 2025).

Tensions between Kurdish and Arab leadership were increasing at the time of the imprisonment (ibid., 2025). The previous month, Al-Bakir, Al-Khubail's tribe, had taken action against earlier attempts to overthrow him. The SDF's political branch later claimed that al-Khubail had been arrested because of his supposed ties to Iran and the Assad government, despite the fact that his arrest

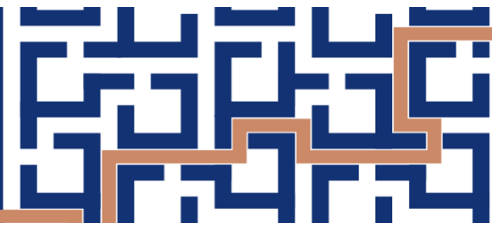
was first justified as a fight on corruption (ibid., 2025).

As tribal forces united against SDF control, the uprising saw early success. The Uqaydat and Baqqara tribes initially secured important territorial gains as a result of the uprising, taking control of Deir ez-Zor's southern regions and capturing over 100 SDF soldiers by September 3 (Nelson, 2025). The withdrawal of YPG soldiers, direct US participation, and attempts to free regions west of the Euphrates from Iranian and Assad government rule were their primary objectives (ibid., 2025). In addition, the tribes specifically wanted American assistance and tried to oppose Iranian influence, which were goals theoretically aligned with US strategy (ibid., 2025).

The uprising's regional dimension showed a wider anti-SDF sentiment. Tribes in Turkish-controlled northwest Syria also organized during the two-week conflict (ibid., 2025). Attacks on the SDF took place by groups from Idlib, Afrin, and other regions, but Russian airstrikes quickly stopped their progress (ibid., 2025). Moscow said it was not going to allow pro-Turkish Arab tribal groups to get involved in the battle against the SDF, which is led by the YPG. The SDF had recovered the majority of its lost territory by September 5 (ibid., 2025).

In the end, US negotiation efforts limited tribal authority while favoring the SDF. On September 2-3, US authorities organized an important conference between SDF and tribal leaders in an attempt to restore peace (Nelson, 2025). Important rebel leaders were clearly missing from this gathering. Following the talks, the SDF issued an extensive ceasefire and announced compassionate gestures, including the release of local combatants (ibid., 2025). Ironically, they also kept holding powerful tribal leaders in detention (ibid., 2025).

American Betrayal: The US Decision to Support SDF Suppression



US priorities were put to the test by the tribal uprising, and the American response severely damaged tribal trust. One major hope held by the Arab tribes during their uprising against the SDF in Deir ez-Zor was that the US would back them and restrict the YPG's power in regions controlled by Arabs (Nelson, 2025). Their military chances against the YPG-dominated SDF were low. However, the US decided to support the leadership of the YPG and SDF, shocking tribal forces (ibid., 2025).

While attending mediation efforts, senior US officials purposefully left out tribe leaders. Major General Joel B. Vowell, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ethan Goldrich attended the September 2023 meeting in Deir ez-Zor (ibid., 2025). They met with tribe leaders chosen by the SDF instead of participating in a negotiation committee established by the Arab tribal forces. These leaders had less actual control over the tribes they represented (ibid., 2025). The US's choice had immediate and significant consequences. After the meeting, the US allowed the SDF to use force to put an end to the uprising. The SDF then began to attack and reclaimed lost territory (ibid., 2025). The Arab tribal troops' surrender put an end to the final group of resistance in the town of Dhiban in Deir ez-Zor. Ibrahim al-Hafel, the commander of the rebellion, seeking safety among his tribesmen on the western side of the Euphrates River within regime control (ibid., 2025).

The American betrayal was quickly and severely sensed by the tribe. The Deir ez-Zor tribesmen formed a deep sense of American betrayal (ibid., 2025). A top Uqaydat tribal leader who thought that the US-led international coalition was working with "the PKK" to push the tribes in the direction of Iran in order to covertly promote Iranian expansion (ibid., 2025). Additional testimony shows the tribal dissatisfaction with American policy. According to a senior member of the Baqqara tribe, the PKK could not continue to rule them if it weren't for the


US (ibid., 2025). In his speech, the United States is portrayed as supporting unwelcome Kurdish control over Arab regions rather than as a liberator (ibid., 2025).

These issues were worsened by the structural obstacles to direct US-tribal engagement. The Baqqara tribe chose to reconcile with the SDF leadership after first backing the Arab uprising against the YPG-dominated SDF (ibid., 2025). The Baqqara tribe, however, did not get to connect directly with the US during this process because the SDF prevents the tribes from meeting American officials face-to-face and restricts contact to individuals it deems acceptable (ibid., 2025). "Only Haj Bashir of our tribe can speak with the Americans," a top Baqqara tribal leader clarified. The Baqqara tribe's most senior tribal leader, Haj Bashir, decided to reconcile with the SDF leadership (ibid., 2025). The United States is unable to establish autonomous connections with Arab tribal leaders and gain personal knowledge of tribal dynamics because of this SDF intervention (ibid., 2025).

### Iran Exploiting American Policy Failures

Iran quickly took advantage of tribal dissatisfaction with the United States. Iran took action after Ibrahim al-Hafel escaped to the Euphrates River's western bank (Nelson, 2025). The Assad regime, guided by Iran, created a situation that allowed tribal troops to strike the SDF-held side of the Euphrates River by using regime-held territories as a launching ground, regardless of previous tensions between al-Hafel, Iran, and the regime (ibid., 2025). This collaboration between former rivals shows Iran's strategy for forming coalitions against the SDF.

From military cooperation to strategic partnership, Iranian engagement changed over time. Since then, Iran has helped the Assad regime and al-Hafel engage directly rather than just allowing access (ibid., 2025). Al-Hafel met with pro-regime tribe leaders in Damascus in February of 2022 and decided to continue to coordinate operations. Since



then, SDF units and checkpoints in eastern Deir ez-Zor have been attacked by tribal militias that support him (ibid., 2025). The stability of US-backed SDF-controlled territories is directly threatened by these constant attacks, which are made possible by Iranian assistance (ibid., 2025).

### **Iranian Strategy in Qamishli: The Tayy Tribe**

Iran shows an extensive understanding of local dynamics by adapting its tribal engagement strategy to various regional circumstances. The demographics of northeastern Syria are unique, especially in the region surrounding the Hasakah provincial city of Qamishli (Nelson, 2025). Arabs and Kurds coexist in the city core of Qamishli, although Kurdish people are concentrated in the east and west, near the Turkish border (ibid., 2025). As part of its Arabization programs in the 1970s, the Ba'ath Party historically backed and settled the Tayy tribe, who make up the majority of the Arabs in this region. Because of the Tayy tribe's presence, the regime's influence in the city remains (ibid., 2025).

Qamishli's current state of governance is complicated. The SDF now controls the majority of Qamishli, however the regime, up until it fell, was still present in the neighborhoods of the Tayy tribe and at the airport (ibid., 2025). However, problems between the SDF and the National Defense Forces (NDF), which were primarily made up of the Tayy tribe, occasionally occurred, and these disputes were frequently resolved by Russian mediation or by the SDF (ibid., 2025). In these mediations, Russian officers usually backed the SDF. Iran, however, gave the Tayy tribe direct support (ibid., 2025).

Iran provides both material and intellectual support for the Tayy tribe. Members of the tribe had received weapons and military training from Hezbollah, which is supported by Tehran, in the Qamishli region (ibid., 2025). Iran pays salary as well. Iran also implements complicated sectarian bridge-building with material support. Iran uses


propaganda against the Tayy tribe as a soft-power strategy trying to create a common narrative based on past events, in particular the Tayy tribe's support for Ali ibn Abi Talib during the Battle of Siffin in the seventh century (ibid., 2025). Iran hoped to overcome Sunni-Shia divisions and create a shared history by using this narrative.

Iran built alternate structures after realizing the SDF's strong position in Qamishli. In Qamishli, the SDF has better logistical abilities in spite of this assistance (ibid., 2025). Iran is establishing an alternative military presence for the Tayy tribe in Deir ez-Zor, where new military formations were being built in areas occupied by Iran-backed Shia militias, because it recognizes that it cannot balance the SDF without direct Russian support (ibid., 2025). Even in regions where the SDF has military power, Iranian influence over the Tayy tribe is guaranteed by this geographic diversity (ibid., 2025).

### **Iran's Long-Term Strategy: Preparing for US Withdrawal**

In agreement with Iraq, Iranian tribal engagement is specifically meant to get ready for a potential American withdrawal (Nelson, 2025). Building ties with Arab tribes is part of Tehran's long-term plan to prepare for the possible withdrawal of US forces from Syria (ibid., 2025). Iran has placed itself strategically to be prepared to fill the hole, much like its neighbor Iraq (ibid., 2025).

Iran is interested in benefiting from an unplanned and sudden withdrawal since it believes the US would not coordinate any withdrawal with Turkey (ibid., 2025). In order to maintain its power in the area, Iran has placed militias that it supports along the Euphrates River. By organizing Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) close to the Sinjar Mountain and the al-Qaim region, it has also increased its presence along the Iraqi-Syrian border (ibid., 2025). Additionally, Iran has engaged in its relationship with the same Tayy tribe in Qamishli, located along the Turkish-Syrian border (ibid., 2025).



Clear territorial objectives are shown by the geographic extent of Iranian position, which is the following: Iran and its allies could advance from the west, south, and east after the Americans leave, using the Tayy tribe in the north to reach the Turkish border before Ankara has an opportunity to start its own military operation into this region of Syria, as it has frequently threatened. Iran's objective is to reduce Turkish influence and presence in Syria.

## Conclusion

The crossing of competing foreign influences in Syria has created a complex security environment that makes it challenging to apply simple solutions. Turkey's interventions, American counter-terrorism partnerships, Iranian strategic positioning, and the emergence of new governance under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham have produced overlapping and contradictory areas of influence across Syrian territory.

Turkey's evolution from pursuing regime change to prioritizing border security and preventing Kurdish autonomy reflects a pragmatic adaptation to changing circumstances on the ground. Through military operations spanning from 2016 to 2019, Turkey controlled significant territory in northern Syria, creating zones that serve multiple purposes: preventing Kurdish territorial continuity, managing refugee flows, and projecting Turkish influence (Kardaş, 2025). However, these interventions have created persistent tensions with the United States over American support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, straining the NATO alliance and complicating regional security cooperation.


The United States military presence in northeastern Syria, though relatively small, serves critical counter-terrorism objectives by partnering with the SDF to maintain pressure on ISIS, manage detention facilities holding thousands of ISIS fighters and their families, and prevent the resurgence of territorial control by extremist groups (Stroul testimony, Washington Institute). However,

this partnership has become weak due to inconsistent American policy across different administrations, insufficient attention to Arab tribal grievances within SDF-controlled territory, and the fundamental contradiction of supporting both Turkey as a NATO ally and the SDF as a counter-terrorism partner despite Turkish perceptions of the SDF as a terrorist extension of the PKK.

Iranian engagement in Syria shows maintaining influence beyond the Assad regime's fall. By fostering relationships with Arab tribal networks through material support, sectarian bridge-building, and exploitation of unfairness against Kurdish-dominated governance, Iran has positioned itself to expand influence should American forces withdraw (Nelson, 2025). This tribal engagement strategy, particularly evident in Deir ez-Zor and Qamishli, represents a long-term investment that could fundamentally alter regional power dynamics if successful. The geographic positioning of Iranian-backed forces along the Euphrates River, the Iraqi-Syrian border, and through tribal connections extending to the Turkish border creates the potential for expansion that would challenge both American and Turkish interests.

The fall of the Assad regime has introduced new uncertainties while creating potential opportunities for reshaping Syrian governance. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's rise to power in Damascus raises difficult questions about international engagement with a group that originated from al-Qaeda but has shown some governance capabilities. The group's stated goal of creating a unified Syria under Islamic law leads to challenges to Kurdish autonomy, potentially creating common ground between HTS and Turkish objectives while conflicting with American support for the SDF (Levy, Washington Institute). How the international community navigates engagement with HTS will significantly influence Syria's future course.

Moving forward, American policy must navigate several competing obligations: maintaining counter-terrorism pressure on ISIS while managing the



detention challenge, balancing support for the SDF with alliance commitments to Turkey, countering Iranian influence expansion without creating conditions for greater instability, and developing sustainable arrangements that can endure beyond the current American military presence. These objectives cannot all be fully achieved together, requiring clear prioritization.

The policy recommendations mentioned in this paper emphasize the need for comprehensive diplomatic frameworks rather than purely military solutions, direct engagement with Arab tribal communities to counter Iranian influence and address legitimate grievances, coordination with international partners to share burdens and align approaches, explicit emergency planning for various scenarios including potential American withdrawal, and sustainable solutions for detention and counter-terrorism that do not depend indefinitely on American military presence. Success in these areas requires sustained diplomatic engagement, adequate resources, and consistent policy across American administrations.

The Syrian conflict has shown that military interventions alone cannot resolve complex political conflicts involving multiple competing actors with legitimate but conflicting interests. Turkey's security concerns about Kurdish autonomy are real, even if the methods chosen to address them are problematic. Kurdish aspirations for self-governance emerge from historical marginalization and current security contributions, even if their exclusive control over Arab-majority areas creates resentment. Arab tribal communities have legitimate grievances about governance and representation, even if Iranian exploitation of these grievances serves destabilizing purposes. Finding arrangements that address these multiple legitimate concerns while maintaining counter-terrorism effectiveness represents the central challenge for American policy.

The broader regional implications of Syria's future cannot be ignored. The country sits at the

intersection of multiple regional competitions: between Iran and Gulf states, between Turkey and Kurdish movements, and between different visions of governance and regional order. How Syria's territorial control and governance evolve will influence these broader competitions, potentially either moderating regional tensions through inclusive political settlements or exacerbating them through zero-sum competition for influence.

In the end, sustainable stability in Syria requires political solutions that give various communities a stake in governance structures while maintaining security against extremist resurgence. International support can assist these solutions through diplomacy, economic assistance, and security guarantees, but cannot impose them through military force alone. The United States, working with international partners and regional actors, should focus its efforts on creating conditions for Syrian-led political processes that can accommodate multiple interests while preventing the resurgence of extremist control. This represents a more modest but potentially more sustainable approach than attempting to impose particular outcomes through military presence or proxy relationships.



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