

Iran's Growing Network of Influence among Eastern Syrian Tribes

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Brief Analysis

Iran is building military, social, and economic influence among eastern Syrian tribes, which are poised to invade SDF-controlled regions in the event of a U.S. withdrawal.

Researchers and analysts often discuss Iran's use of Shia proxies to bolster the Assad regime in Syria, and on February 26, those militias drew the world's attention after the Biden administration took its first military action, an airstrike on a facility belonging to an [Iran-backed militia in eastern Syria](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-air-strike-syria-iranian-backed-militia-killed-one-n1259180) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-air-strike-syria-iranian-backed-militia-killed-one-n1259180>). However, despite the attention these militias have garnered in the media and analytical worlds, little material has appeared regarding another ground-level Iranian strategy in Syria: Iran's continuous effort to build connections with the Arab tribes in the eastern part of the country. While there is some information about the most influential tribal militia funded and trained by Iran, the Deir Ezzor-based [al-Baqir Brigade](http://www.aymennjawad.org/18859/the-local-defence-forces-regime-auxiliary-forces) (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/18859/the-local-defence-forces-regime-auxiliary-forces>), mainly composed of members of the al-Baggara tribe (<https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LiwaAlBaqir.pdf>), Iran has also targeted tribes in Northeastern Syria—especially in the governorates of al-Hasakah and Raqqa, which were formerly held by ISIS and have since come under Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control. Tribal militias in these two governorates operate only in areas under the Syrian regime's control and have not clashed with the SDF in its areas. However, these militias are trained and prepared to take over these territories from SDF in the event of a U.S. withdrawal.

[Tribal groups are an important aspect of Syrian political life](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-syrian-tribes-betting-lost-cause) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-syrian-tribes-betting-lost-cause>). Previously, the former Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad established patronage networks with the tribes and used them to stabilize the rural areas. The breakdown of these patronage networks between the state and the tribes was instrumental in igniting the uprising against the regime among the tribes in rural

areas. During the Syrian conflict, tribal kinship ties were (and are still) used by different actors, including Iran, to mobilize and direct the peaceful and armed activities of tribesmen to further their interests in their battle over Syria. By building a rapport with Eastern Syria's tribes, Iran is **attempting (<https://theconversation.com/syria-attempts-by-saudi-arabia-iran-and-turkey-to-co-opt-arab-tribes-will-deepen-the-countrys-divisions-119402>)** to bolster the Assad regime and acquire leverage against U.S. forces and the SDF east of the Euphrates River. In this way, Iran hopes to solidify its presence in eastern Syria, which **Iran considers a strategic connection between its spheres of influence in Lebanon and Iraq (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50324912>)**.

As part of this strategy, **Iran has delivered military, social, and financial support to eastern Syrian tribes (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/stabilization-assistance-amid-geopolitical-competition-case-study-eastern-syria>)**, forming a comprehensive bid for enhanced influence in this strategically important region. Raqqa governorate is considered a strategic governorate for Iran that connects the Syrian Jazeera to Aleppo where Iran already has a presence represented by Aleppo's branch of al-Baqquer brigade. Apart from Deir Ezzor, Syrian oil fields are also concentrated in al-Hasakah governorate. Seizing control of al-Hasakah would enable Iran to ease the impact of sanctions on the Syrian regime, which is currently paying the SDF for shipments of oil. Furthermore, helping Iran are the recurring tensions between the SDF and some members of the Aras tribes in the areas it controls as a result of disagreements on representation in local government and the distribution of the benefits gained from oil and gas sales.

In the military sphere, **Iran continues to fund and train tribal militias in eastern Syria, which it has supported throughout the Syrian conflict (https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2541/RAND_RR2541.pdf)**. Several other tribal militias are currently active in eastern Syria, and they have already had a noticeable impact on the power dynamics in the region. In al-Hasakah governorate, for instance, **Sheikh Mohammad al-Fares (<https://www.hate-speech.org/tribes-of-syria-pieces-on-a-chessboard/>)** of the Tay tribe, a member of the Syrian Parliament, established al-Magawir, a tribal militia that serves as part of the national defence force belonging to the Syrian regime. He **has publicly acknowledged (https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEMC_64_Khaddour_Final_Web.pdf)** and thanked Iranian and Hezbollah forces for founding and training the militia, which played an active role in protecting the city of Qamishli from ISIS in 2015. Now, the purpose of the militia is **to counterbalance the PYD, a Kurdish party and militia that exercises more power and influence (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/2/20/-المغاور-مليشيا-ايران-في-الجزيرة>)** than the regime does in the cities of Qamishli and al-Hasakah.

Another currently active tribal militia is the "Fighters of the Tribes", **a pro-Iranian militia (<https://ayn-almadina.com/details/4307/تركبي,20%البوحد,20%شيداً,20%مزعوماً,20%لعشائر,20%البوشعيان,20%في,20%سورية,20%والعراق>)** under the leadership of alleged tribal sheikh Turki al-Buhamad in the governorate of Raqqa **([:///C:/Users/pac/Downloads/Al-Maghawir%22%20\(The%20Commandos\)](:///C:/Users/pac/Downloads/Al-Maghawir%22%20(The%20Commandos)))**. The militia is composed of 800 men **mainly from Buhamad's clan (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/19789/quwat-muqatili-al-ashair-tribal-auxiliary-forces>)**, the "Bu Hamad," and has played an active role in many **offensives against ISIS in the Syrian desert (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/19789/quwat-muqatili-al-ashair-tribal-auxiliary-forces>)**. While these forces have not directly clashed with the SDF, they occasionally issue threats against the SDF and accuse them of collaborating with the United States.

In addition to military efforts regarding tribal militias in Syria, Iran has also employed social aspects to its tribal outreach, working at the grassroots level to build influence among members of the tribes. Iran's efforts in this area extend back to before the Syrian uprising in 2011, **when Iran renovated several ancient Shia shrines in Syria as a method of promoting Shiism among the tribes. This project included building a Shia shrine over the tombs of Ammar Bin Yasir and Uwais al-Qarni in Raqqa governorate. The Iranians used the presence of the shrine to conduct missionary activities among the local tribes in the region (https://www.academia.edu/35775050/Shii_Mausoleums_of_Raqqa_iranian_proselytism_and_local_significations)**. In an effort to acquire hegemonic soft power in the region, Iran has also recently intensified such efforts to convert tribes to Shiism, efforts particularly concentrated in the governorate of Deir Ezzor but extending to the rest of Eastern Syria as

well. Iran has used those shrines as missionary centres to convince locals to convert to Shiism.

Beyond religious proselytization, Iran has also built ties with social figures among the tribes through diplomacy. **[Iranian officials have invited Syrian tribal leaders to visit Tehran and hold talks with them on many occasions \(https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/13/the-syrian-civil-war-what-role-do-tribal-loyalties-play/\)](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/13/the-syrian-civil-war-what-role-do-tribal-loyalties-play/)**. Iranian and Syrian state media covered the Syrian tribal leaders' visits and portrayed the Sheikhs as important national figures. Moreover, Iran started inviting some of the Sheikhs who had defected from the regime in the early months of the uprising to return to regime-controlled areas, giving them guarantees that the regime would grant them amnesty. **[Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir from the al-Baggara tribe, for example, spent many years in Turkey before returning to Syria \(https://syrianobserver.com/news/47818/has-the-assad-regime-arrested-nawaf-al-bashir.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/news/47818/has-the-assad-regime-arrested-nawaf-al-bashir.html)**, where he has since been working on recruiting fighters from his tribe to join the al-Baqquer brigade and fight alongside Iranian militias in Deir Ezzor.

Furthermore, in order to reinforce these social and military aspects of its policy, Iran uses financial incentives to maintain a long-lasting presence in eastern Syria. Taking advantage of war-induced deprivation and poverty in Syria's tribal communities, **[Iran is supporting more than 12 charities in eastern Syria to further its agendas.](https://www.csis.org/analysis/stabilization-assistance-amid-geopolitical-competition-case-study-eastern-syria)**

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These include al-Zaharah, Jihad al-Bina, al-Amin, and many others. **[Jihad al-Bina is almost entirely funded by Iran and is based in the city of Al Bukamal, where it has been working on rehabilitating schools and hospitals in the governorate. It has also been distributing humanitarian and medical aid to the people of Deir Ezzor](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/)**

[\(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/) under the label of "gifts from the Islamic Republic of Iran." Assistance and aid have been particularly targeted at those who join pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria. In contrast, Iran has yet to expand its charity activities to Raqqah and al-Hasakah due to the SDF's presence there.

While some have categorized Iran's involvement in Syria as a 'quagmire,' Iran has used every possible tool at its disposal to build its influence in Syria. The instrumentalization of tribal structures in eastern Syria suggests that its policies will have long-lasting effects there, and could even expand further if given the chance. Iran's policy of building and training tribal militias is likewise seen as a means of reducing U.S. presence there, with these militias announcing their intention to oppose any U.S. presence in eastern Syria.

U.S. policymakers should take these threats seriously, as Iran has provided the militias with the training and the physical means to seize areas controlled by the SDF should the United States withdraw from the region. As Iran continues to develop its social base and connections with the tribes by attempting to convert tribesmen, flattering tribal authority figures, and providing tribes with financial inducements, Iran is likely to have an increasingly popular base.

What helps Iran is the recurring tensions between the SDF and some members of the Aras tribes in the areas it controls as a result of disagreements on representation in local government and the distribution of the benefits gained from oil and gas sales. These wholistic policies have built a foothold for Iran in the region that may have become highly sustainable. Any efforts to legitimately remove Iranian influence from eastern Syria will require operations to combat Iranian social, military, and financial influence in local tribes there, which may prove quite difficult. ❖

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