

Arab Tribes and Saudi Influence in Northeastern Syria

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia has worked with Syrian tribes in the past to bolster their involvement in Northeastern Syria, but tribal frustrations with the SDF and shifting geopolitical realities are impacting this relationship.

During the past several months, shifting allegiances, external geopolitics, and the threats of incursion have all impacted political alliances in Syria. In particular, the imminent threat of a Turkish invasion of Northeast Syria—which a tripartite meeting between Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Ebrahim Raisi did little to curtail—has left the Autonomous Administration searching for support.

Previously, during the boycott period between Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries against allies Turkey and Qatar, the Autonomous Administration could count on some support from Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the Kingdom condemned Turkey's incursion into Northeast Syria in 2019 and has worked to develop some ties with the SDF over the past several years. However, the ongoing rapprochement—including Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and the UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed's recent visits to Turkey—have created some uncertainty as to what support the SDF would receive from the Gulf during another incursion.

Tribal links between the Gulf and Arab tribes in the upper Euphrates region—especially between the Saudi ruling family and the Jarba tribe—have led to a clear interest from the Gulf in developments in this area of Syria. Saudi Arabia has likewise worked since mid-2018 to strengthen its ties with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to develop the Arab presence in the area and counter Iranian influence. Its leadership has focused on growing tribal involvement in the SDF, helping to incorporate a significant number of tribal members into the SDF with the objective of maintaining a base level of influence in Syria and to use the Kurdish issue to pressure Turkey. The Kingdom has also provided financial backing for the SDF and funded infrastructure projects in areas under the SDF's control. In late 2019, Riyadh provided 100 million USD

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amp) for SDF and some tribal representatives with the goal of furthering cooperation with the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Saudi Minister of State Thamer al-Sabhan visited the area and met with leading Arab and Kurdish figures. A delegation from the SDF also visited Saudi Arabia on November 25, 2019 at the official invitation of the Saudi government, according to sources close to the SDF. The SDF delegation included both civilian and military leaders and discussions focused on ways to support the development of SDF-controlled territories as well as improving ties between Kurds and Arabs there.

Some reports also indicate the Saudis are trying to strengthen ties with the tribes in this region because the Turkish involvement in the eastern Euphrates region makes the allegiance of residents of the area to Saudi interests more important. The tribes have continually opposed forced displacement operations carried out by the SDF against residents as well as the razing of some Arab villages in the area. They have a clear stance against the involvement of the SDF in the region, which is similar to the position of the Arab majority in the upper Euphrates region in Syria.

With a potential Turkish incursion looming, the international and regional parties to the conflict have recently all shown a new interest in these tribes and in developing the presence of an Arab force alongside the Kurdish force in the area. However, Saudi support for these tribal connections is not likely to prove of benefit to the SDF this time around. This is particularly true since, earlier this year, several areas and calls

(<https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/573912/amp>) for a civil revolt among the Arab tribes against the Syrian Democratic Forces and their repressive policies, including forced conscription imposed on residents of the area.

The tribal sheikhs and leaders of Raqqa, al-Tabqah, and Deir ez-Zour have called upon residents affiliated with the SDF to withdraw from the area. They have also emphasized the importance of sending a message to the international community to put pressure on the SDF to respond to their demands. Protesters have accused the SDF of stealing the region's resources and spending them on military operations instead. They have also demonstrated against corruption and looting, which are an understood feature of the Autonomous Administration's institutions and its military branches.

Conversations with various tribal activists in the region make clear that members of the tribes realized the importance of making the most of the current rapprochement between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These leaders are increasingly looking to create an independent economic and military force that draws upon the region's resources in order to form a deterrent force against the SDF Forces and the al-Assad regime in the scenario were the latter two to join. To these activists, such a move seems necessary based on statements from SDF officials, Russia's actions, the urgent need to curtail the influence of Iran, which has exploited residents on an economic level. One resident stated that Ankara knows how important Saudi and Gulf support is to its economy given the concurrent crises and shifts in the international arena. Tribal leaders are also focused on securing regional supporters due to receding U.S. influence in and support for northern Syria.

Tribal relations will also shape the nature of the SDF force if fighting occurs. The incursion will likely be led by Turkey-backed Syrian National Army, which includes a contingent of Arabs from the same tribal communities of Deir Ezzor—including the Aqaidat, the Baggara, the Busaraya, and Jubour. The majority of militias acting under the Deir Ezzor Military Council—militias under the umbrella of the SDF—have signaled their refusal to become involved

in any military operations countering Turkey's impending incursion in the region . The Deir Ezzor Military Council threatened to leave SDF altogether should its militias be forced to take part in such operations. A few desertions have already been **reported** (<https://go.shr.lc/3cN2gK7>). On July 7, local networks documented the defections of tribesmen from the SDF. The Nahr Media network said that about 11 newly recruited young SDF fighters had fled from the 17th Division camp in Raqqa.

While Arab tribal connections once served as a link between the SDF and the Gulf, this is proving a tenuous and disintegrating connection. The ongoing rapprochement between Gulf countries and Turkey is only furthering the isolation of the Autonomous Administration, and **Kurdish leadership** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-will-autonomous-administration-leadership-and-civilians-view-turkish-incursion>) is consequently looking towards the Russian-backed Assad regime as its partner. Such a move is likely, however, to further exacerbate the tensions between Kurdish and Arab tribal forces in the area and add another layer of complication to an already deteriorating situation. ❖

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