

Deir Ezzor Is Trapped Between Corrupt Local Leaders and External Governance

by [Omar Abu Layla \(/experts/omar-abu-layla\)](#)

Sep 4, 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omar Abu Layla \(/experts/omar-abu-layla\)](#)

Omar Abu Layla is the executive director of Deir Ezzor 24 and an expert on security and governance in northeast Syria. Abu Layla obtained a master's degree in public policy from Princeton University. He can be found on Twitter at @OALD24.



Brief Analysis

On Sunday August 27, Deir Ezzor Military Council (DEMC) Head Abu Khawla—along with a number of senior commanders from the DEMC—were invited to meet with the commander-in-chief in the SDF Mazloun Abdi in neighboring Al-Hasakah province.

However, a meeting supposed to focus on resolving ongoing tensions between them ended up with the arrest of the commanders, along with the subsequent decision to dismiss the general commander of the council and the senior commanders arrested alongside him.

The incident dates back to a dispute between an SDF commander called Roni and the DEMC earlier this month over policy decisions that the DEMC rejects. The interference escalated into serious clashes, which lasted hours and claimed casualties on both sides. Eventually, the incident was fully contained and the hostilities ended.

Clashes between the two sides renewed on August 27 in the wake of Abu Khawla's arrest, with the fighting now covering vast areas in both the eastern and northern countryside of Deir Ezzor. As a result, both parties sustained further casualties, in addition to a number of civilian deaths.

While the SDF is formally in control of the Deir Ezzor region, the DEMC enjoys more support from the local populace in the countryside, both because most of the council's elements are locals and belong to tribes and because it was established in connection with the local fight against Daesh in 2018.

Abu Khawla and the SDF: A Marriage of Convenience

Nevertheless, the SDF's original choice to support Abu Khawla and promote his control of the DEMC is a questionable one. He belongs to the Baqir tribe, one of the most prominent tribes in northeastern Syria. After the beginning of the battles between the SDF and Daesh in the region, the SDF presented Abu Khawla as the most capable and suitable representative of the Arabs within the SDF. However, the local population opposed his appointment in the beginning due to his background. Locally, Abu Khawla had developed a reputation prior to the

beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 as a leader of a group in illegal activity—especially car and motorcycle theft. This group’s operations were mainly carried out in the northern countryside of Deir Ezzor, which connects Deir Ezzor province to Hasakah.

Abu Khawla utilized the proceeds from these activities to strengthen his group and impose levies on individuals involved in the local oil industry. His actions and notorious reputation led to a lack of acceptance by military factions in Deir Ezzor from 2011 to 2014, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) once the revolution developed into armed conflict with the Assad regime. As a result, Abu Khawla only found a place in the opposition forces through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) years later when they initiated their campaigns against Daesh.

Despite his less-than-stellar reputation, Abu Khawla adhered to SDF policies and orders in regard to the administration of the affairs in Deir Ezzor, and he maintained his relationship with the SDF for years. This understanding between the two sides contributed to the empowerment of Abu Khawla, as he gained broad military and administrative authority throughout Deir Ezzor. He succeeded in securing even more than he might have expected in the years that followed, extending his influence and wealth, especially through his control of the river crossings between the eastern and western banks of the Euphrates River.

Yet Abu Khawla did not stop there, setting his sights on positions other than his role as a military commander in Deir Ezzor. Along with establishing a local following, he appointed himself tribal leader to whom the rest of the tribes were expected to listen and obey, efforts that alienated other tribal leaders. More recently, a number of audio voice messages have surfaced in which he allegedly uses extremely offensive language when referring to prominent tribal Shaikhs in the region. Nevertheless, he has continued to act as the main tribal leader benefitting from the fact that he was a local representative in a governance system largely perceived as outsiders within Deir Ezzor.

The recent collapse of this relationship demonstrates the limits of this working arrangement. Abu Khawla is now rebelling against the SDF, mobilizing those who sympathize with him and funneling local anger against the SDF. For its part, the SDF is now reaping what it sowed, as it was well aware of Abu Khawla’s poor reputation in Deir Ezzour prior to his appointment.

The ongoing developments in Deir Ezzor reinforce the idea that the situation in northeastern Syria is a ticking bomb. The approach that the SDF has applied in this region are increasingly proving fragile and unrealistic. And it is clear that if it were not for the American presence in Deir Ezzor, its relative stability would immediately collapse. By itself, the SDF seems to be incapable of confronting serious threats such as Daesh cells, Iranian and Russian militias, or the Assad regime. Stability in the region has so far been linked only to the American presence maintained on the ground.

Identifying an American Policy in Deir Ezzor

I have participated in several high-level political discussions between American officials and tribal and local figures. The frustration on the latter side has always been that the United States deferred to the Kurds in determining their policy in the mainly Arab Deir Ezzor. While this may be an understandable position given U.S. reliance on the Kurds in the fight against Daesh, the recommendations and demands of the local Arab Deir Ezzor community in those discussions have been reasonable and have often responded to policy imperatives articulated by the United States.

The primary request was to rely on moderate voices that actually represented their communities, rather than outsiders such as the Kurds or corrupt individuals from Deir Ezzor such as Abu Khawla. These requests went unheeded, leaving people across the country caught between these equally objectionable choices. This is the fundamental problem facing eastern Syria, especially in Deir Ezzor given the lack of local Kurdish presence in the area, in contrast to the mixed region of al-Hasakah. While the recent clashes have placed a spotlight on this dynamic, these issues have been simmering for years, and the current skirmishes are unlikely to be the only fallout. In order to address it effectively, two main points must be addressed:

1. Rebuilding a Genuine Policy in Northeast Syria:

The United States must develop a comprehensive and consistent policy for the highly significant region of northeastern Syria, which borders Iraq. In describing security measures to the local population, a long-term perspective and broader strategy should be articulated to those most affected by it. Accurately assessing the real threats in the region, including ISIS, Iranian and Russian militias, and the Assad regime, and communicating with local tribal leaders to help protect the eastern Euphrates region with the help of its own residents can help reverse the perception that this area has been left to the devices of these other external forces.

2. Establishing Direct Communication Channels

This is necessary to address local concerns and empower local leaders. To this end, Washington should foster more direct communication between the Arab component of the population and key influencers in the region that bypasses corrupt individuals. Specifically, there should be regular meetings between the coalition and local residents in order to listen to their needs, working to address them effectively and break down the extant tensions that exist here.

To do so, U.S representatives will need to develop a deeper understanding of tribal dynamics and deal with them on the basis of respect and meaningful participation of all components in northeastern Syria. They should also prevent SDF leadership from overtly interfering in the administration of Deir Ezzor and consider granting the province greater autonomy or genuine assurances from the international coalition that the local population will have more say in their own governance structures.

More can be done to engage and ultimately empower the educated young generation of this region—one that cares about stability, security, and the protection of the region. Likewise, anti-corruption strategies are much needed. These efforts can help establish trust — a much needed and currently lacking component among the populace of Deir Ezzor, a critical area. ❖

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