

# As Protests in Syria Reignite, Many Syrians Look for a Change in U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

**Recent developments will require the U.S. to expand its objectives in Syria and to reevaluate its approach to local alliances if it hopes to shape a positive outcome to the bubbling frustrations in Syria.**

Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, multiple factions have been battling over Syria's future, while civilians have been the primary victims. Yet over the past month, dynamics assumed to be well established in Syria have shifted in significant ways, both within regime-controlled areas and among U.S.-supported Autonomous Administration areas. In both cases, many Syrians are hoping that the United States will use this window to reassess its involvement in the conflict.

Syrians are well aware that U.S. policy towards Syria has fluctuated repeatedly over the years. On the one hand, U.S. rhetoric has harshly condemned the regime, from former President Barack Obama's declaration that chemical weapons usage would prove a "red line" or Trump's characterization of "animal Assad" after a chemical attack on civilians. Yet elsewhere, Washington has clearly stated that it does not want regime change, despite it being a central tenet of the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254—which unequivocally called for a "political transition" and included the United States as one of its signatories.

The "Friends of Syria"—a collective of mostly Western and Gulf states supportive of the opposition established in the early days of the revolution—have also changed their stances as the war has dragged on. Some of the leaders most vocal against Assad in the past have rekindled ties with the regime and worked to restore its international standing, either publicly or behind closed doors. Various Arab regimes have helped Syria rejoin the Arab League and have normalized diplomatic relations. Though it quickly became clear that the regime would not meet the expected preconditions for that normalization, this welcoming of Assad back into the fold has proved a crushing blow to opposition groups.

Hesitation on the part of the U.S. and international community to act has helped to leave the Syrian Civil War

unresolved. In the intervening years, this lack of decisive action has created an opening for the regime and enabled it, with the help of its allies, to expand into areas previously liberated by opposition forces. At certain points in the conflict, nearly 75 percent of Syrian territory was outside regime control. However, an influx of Russian and Iranian support to Assad reversed rebel fortunes and has allowed the regime to reassert control over much of the country. Today, the Syrian people's aspirations for a civil democratic state have largely been replaced by despair and exhaustion.

The reality that there is no longer a national discourse around a clear political objective for a Syrian state after Assad. Instead, the opposition in its various iterations has shifted from being the presumed representatives of the Syrian people to spokespersons for whoever is funding a given group, with the financial backers in large part determining the opposition's agenda based on their own interests. Yet protests throughout the country emphasize that there are still those that hope to realize that initial dream, or who are frustrated enough with the status quo to rise up in spite of a lack of international support.

While the Syrian regime projects an image of calm and control, developments within regime-controlled Syria speak to significant shifts in the nature of the conflict. Notably, peaceful protests in the South that began in mid-August have continued and expanded over the past month and a half, especially in the cities and areas around Daraa and Suwayda. This is a primarily Druze area, and one of the community's main spiritual leaders, Akl Druze Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri, said that "the main thing is restraint, and we won't give up on our peaceful demands. The street is with us... [We will stay] a day or two or a month or years." The peaceful demonstrators shut down Ba'ath party headquarters throughout the governorate and destroyed statues of Hafez al-Assad. The protests are ongoing and continue to grow with each passing day. In the Hauran region, leaders from both Daraa and the Bedouin tribes have declared their support for the movement. And while protests in Daraa and Suwayda have intermittently emerged in past years as well, the longevity of these protests and the involvement of Druze leadership signals a different kind of pushback against the regime.

Concurrently, there is a tribal movement underway in the Autonomous Administrations' northeastern Syria, led by the sheikh of the al-Uqaydat tribe Ibrahim al-Jadaan al-Hafil. A number of those who have joined point to the SDF's discriminatory treatment of Arabs as the reason behind their fighting. In this region of Syria, Arabs comprise more than eighty percent of the population, and grievances against the SDF run deep among many in the local population. Accusations include corruption in the SDF, the SDF's monopolization of the region's oil and grain resources, and intermittent reports of kidnapping of children by the "Revolutionary Youth," a youth wing of the PKK, to serve as soldiers in this reserve organization. According to a [UN report \(https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/144/96/PDF/N2314496.pdf?OpenElement\)](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/144/96/PDF/N2314496.pdf?OpenElement), the SDF forcibly enlisted 637 children into its militias in 2022, including boys and girls under eleven years of age. Moreover, there are multiple reports of SDF forces razing entire Arab villages, forcibly displacing their residents, and falsely accusing local residents of joining the terrorist group ISIS.

Military operations in the villages of the northeastern Deir al-Zour countryside initially concluded on September 9 after two weeks of fighting in the aftermath of the SDF detention of Ahmad al-Khabil (Abu Khawla), the head of the Deir al-Zour military council, on August 27. However, the fighting has continued over the past month. And while some of the fighting could be attributed to his arrest, much of the rhetoric focuses on poor governance in the SDF itself.

The SDF has tried to justify its violent response to the tribal movement by levelling accusations against several tribes, accusing the entire movement of being backed by Abu Khawla, Turkey, or Iran. The great irony is that Abu Khawla—locally a pariah due to his reputation for corruption and mistreatment of civilians—was in power because of the SDF, which appointed him head of the council. Tribal leaders have demanded on multiple occasions that he be

removed from his position and brought to trial.

The SDF's labelling of Arab tribes as supporters of terrorism also cuts deep in Deir al-Zour society. Years ago, these tribes were the first targets of ISIS: thousands of tribal members were killed or forcibly displaced, and their homes were destroyed. Arab tribes were likewise on the front lines in the battle against ISIS, and their resistance was the key factor in driving out and eliminating the terrorist group. Simultaneously, the SDF accuses the tribal movement of cooperating with Iranian militias and Assad regime forces on the right bank of the Euphrates river. While independent reports also exist of regime and Iranian forces seeking to take advantage of the movement, the tribes themselves have denied these allegations while simultaneously accusing the SDF itself of recognizing and cooperating with the regime.

For years, the SDF proved itself an effective fighting force against both the regime and IS, and the United States considered the coalition of Kurds, Arabs, and other groups a significant military asset. However, in light of the clashes between former allies, many Syrians are eyeing the actions of the United States expectantly. Washington has the capacity to decisively end this wave of violence, both by mediating between the SDF and tribal leaders and pushing for better governance from the SDF.

### **Comparing Washington's Words and Actions**

Despite these troubling developments throughout Syria, as far as Syrians can tell the U.S. administration continues to waver on its role in the region. U.S. officials maintain that the military mission in Syria has not changed and that Syria continues to be important in the fight against ISIS. Congressional interest in Syria also appears to be reignited; Joe Wilson—the chairman of the U.S. House Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia—initially applauded the peaceful protests in southern Syria and tweeted that these demonstrations “against brutal Assad had inspired the world” and that “Syria has no future and will never stabilize under Assad.” He has likewise spoken more recently with Shiekh Hikmat al-Hajri by phone along with two other congressional figures. Likewise in late August, a three person U.S. Congressional delegation—including Republican representative French Hill—made its first visit to northwestern Syria in almost ten years, holding various meetings with civil society organizations in northwestern Syria.

Locally, rumors even included the expectation of US military activity, including additional military supplies for US troops in Syria and Iraq and redeploying forces along border areas with Iraq. This has surprised rival entities in Syria, which have seen these actions as a prelude to broader military action to drive out Iran and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) from the Syria-Iraq border area and disrupt Tehran-Beirut supply routes.

The pro-regime newspaper al-Watan reported that U.S. forces in the Ayn al-Assad Airbase in western Iraq's al-Anbar governorate were planning to close the border strip with Syria, while alleging that U.S. forces had supplied “terrorists” around al-Tanf with chemical substances and training in order to fabricate a chemical weapons incident that could be blamed on the Syrian regime. Al-Watan claimed that this was part of Washington's ongoing efforts to exploit the “chemical weapons issue” to serve its own agenda.

These developments will require the U.S. to expand its objectives in Syria and to reevaluate its approach to local alliances if it hopes to shape a positive outcome to the bubbling frustrations in Syria. In regime controlled areas, Assad's presence is a threat not only to the Syrian people, but also to surrounding countries. Syria is a supplier of Captagon to the Gulf and European markets and an arms smuggler to Lebanon and Jordan. Meanwhile, living conditions within Syria remain very difficult: 90 percent of the population in regime-controlled areas are living under the poverty line, and the Syrian lira has plummeted to 15,000 SYP to 1 USD.

The international coalition's work will be much more successful if it can link the al-Tanf area with liberated areas on the left bank of the Euphrates. In the future, this strategy could be applied to Suwayda, Daraa, and even the Golan.

Such a campaign would provide a chance to strangle the Iranian militias that have steadily been building up their efforts in Syria and sever the supply line to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

And when it comes to SDF areas, the hope is that the United States will work harder to foster governance that better accommodates local concerns and needs. In spite of US reluctance to significantly adjust its Syria strategy, optimists among Syrians expect U.S. stances on and involvement in Syria to evolve moving forward. Regardless of the outcome of the current fight, superficial short-term solutions will not resolve the crisis between the Euphrates tribes and the SDF. The legitimate demands of the people of this region must be addressed with due haste.

Many Syrians are hoping that this new movement inside the country is the wakeup call the U.S. administration needs to quickly reexamine its strategic plans and expand its involvement in Syria. It must make the most of these shifts and reexamine its local alliances within Syria as well as pursuing coordination with the main actors in Syria today—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. A cohesive and comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict in Syria will make it possible to stop further conflict that is likely to arise again in Syria otherwise. ❖

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