

## The SDF's Insurgency Challenge in Deir ez-Zor

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Brief Analysis

### The SDF's current role in Deir ez-Zor and the local grievances surrounding it requires an understanding of the origin of its entry into the region, along with the underlying tension between U.S., Iranian, and Syrian regime interests there.

The Arab province of Deir ez-Zor is currently divided between the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who control the east bank, including the majority of Syria's oil and gas resources, and the Syrian government and Iranian proxies, who control the west bank of the river that runs through the Deir ez-Zor governorate. Since late August, the SDF has faced a significant insurgency challenge from tribal fighters. With the conflict emerging in part due to Arab grievances over Kurdish control, Iran and Damascus are also invested in the destabilization of this region for their own benefit, fueling a conflict in a manner designed to push the remaining U.S. presence out of eastern Syria.

#### Understanding the SDF Decision to Enter Deir ez-Zor

The SDF's current role in this region requires an understanding of the origin of its entry into Deir ez-Zor. The United States has often blamed the Kurdish-linked local authorities for not providing enough services, and for not giving enough autonomy to locals in Deir ez-Zor. Participants in the uprising and other residents have expressed similar grievances, both before and during this summer's escalation.

For its part, however, the SDF never planned to be in Deir ez-Zor, and was initially forced to enter it out of necessity to protect Kurdish core areas from ISIS. Before folding into the umbrella group of the SDF, the People's Protection Units (YPG) were [mostly interested \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html) in linking up the Kurdish enclaves on the northern border areas of the country. But during the Kobani battle in 2014-2015, they formed an alliance with the United States against ISIS via the SDF. As a result, the United States pushed the SDF into Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor as a strategic move, and the SDF obliged in order to preempt the possibility of the United States endorsing a concurrent Turkish-proposed alternative. This included the 2017 proposal that Turkish-backed Syrian forces and Turkish troops develop a corridor from Tel Abyad to Raqqa city, which would have severed YPG-controlled areas in the process.

Consequently, the SDF entered Raqqa and, albeit reluctantly, Deir ez-Zor. Capturing Raqqa secured the vital road connecting Kobani and Hasakah province. On the other hand, the rationale behind the Deir ez-Zor campaign was less apparent, though the area's oil fields contributed to bolstering the income of the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES). Before the military campaign, the SDF formed the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council in 2017 to administer local affairs. During a subsequent campaign (2017-2019), the SDF slowly took the eastern bank of Deir ez-Zor from ISIS with the support of [Abu Khawla \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/syrias-kurds-struggle-contain-backlash-after-detaining-allied-arab-militia-leader\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/syrias-kurds-struggle-contain-backlash-after-detaining-allied-arab-militia-leader) (Ahmad al-Khubayl) from the Bakir clan, from which ISIS had [heavily recruited \(https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/felix-legrand-on-deir-ez-zour-tribal\)](https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/felix-legrand-on-deir-ez-zour-tribal) previously.

The absence of Kurds in Deir ez-Zor presented a challenge for the SDF in locating suitable local partners, since many tribal leaders preferred to remain neutral. A lack of alternatives led the SDF to appoint Abu Khawla as the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council (DZMC) in 2016, despite being widely unpopular and viewed as corrupt locally.

The SDF was not the only body to establish a local organization; Turkey also [established \(https://www.impact-csr.org/reports/Civil\\_Society\\_DZ\\_EN.pdf\)](https://www.impact-csr.org/reports/Civil_Society_DZ_EN.pdf) a rival Deir ez-Zor Provincial Council. Moreover, several rebel factions hailing from Deir ez-Zor operated and continue to operate within areas of Syria under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) control, including the U.S.-[sanctioned \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292) Ahrar al-Sharqiya group. However, Turkey's geographical distance from Deir ez-Zor has limited a more substantial influence there. In contrast, Iran and the Syrian regime were better positioned on the western bank of Deir ez-Zor to attempt to incite unrest in the region. However, their influence remained somewhat limited, since the population of Deir ez-Zor is mainly hostile to Damascus.

But there were also signs this tribal neutrality or tacit acceptance of SDF governance was conditioned on a continued U.S. presence. In the wake of the Turkish operation in October 2019 against the SDF, concerns in Deir ez-Zor escalated, leading to increased hesitance among Arab tribal leaders to support the SDF. The U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria in October 2019, as well as former President Donald Trump's temporary pullout from the region, contributed to a growing sense of skepticism among Arabs in the area regarding the U.S.-SDF alliance. They feared that the United States might withdraw sooner or later from Syria entirely.

Moreover, the new SDF-linked administration faced numerous governance obstacles. Tribes in Deir ez-Zor preferred not to be ruled by a Kurdish-led force and wanted to administer Deir ez-Zor's oil resources instead of the SDF. And as with most of Syria, Deir ez-Zor suffers from a lack of services and jobs. This too led to complaints against the AANES, although the United States funds civil society organizations in Deir ez-Zor in part to help address these issues. [Protests \(https://www.syriahr.com/en/282673/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1698415062.3987259864807128906250\)](https://www.syriahr.com/en/282673/?doing_wp_cron=1698415062.3987259864807128906250) in Deir ez-Zor also emerged last year after Abu Khawla's brother was accused of killing two girls. Abu Khawla tried to gain more power and appointed himself as an [amir \(https://npasyria.com/en/35578/\)](https://npasyria.com/en/35578/) (prince) in 2019, although having no tribal lineage.

Nonetheless, the SDF successfully maintained its influence in Deir ez-Zor during its several years of governance since the majority of Deir ez-Zor tribes favored the SDF over the Syrian government and Iranian proxies, leading many tribes to either remain neutral or work with the SDF.

#### Causes of Conflict

Ultimately, the choice of Abu Khawla to serve as the local face of the SDF would help spark local unrest, including the uprising in late August. The SDF wanted to remove Abu Khawla prior to their final decision to do so in the summer of 2023, but had been reluctant due to the lack of alternatives. On August 27, the SDF finally moved to arrest Abu Khawla in Hasakah after they suspected him of plotting to [remove \(https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria/\)](https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria/) the SDF from Deir ez-Zor with support from Damascus and Iran. He also allegedly created a force separate from the SDF with around 400-600 men. Following his arrest, his brother Jalal al-Khakil then led an [armed rebellion \(https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria/\)](https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria/), centered around Suwar and Izbeh, threatening to execute SDF captives.

Separate from this rebellion, local resentment against Kurdish rule and civilian casualties during SDF's operation against Abu Khawla's supporters triggered a revolt against the SDF. On August 31, the situation escalated when local Akeidat tribal head Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl joined the rebellion and became the figurehead of the 'Arab Tribal Forces' militant group, making the town of Dhiban the center of this revolt. The revolt did not support Abu Khawla, as evidenced by a leaked older audio message in which Abu Khawla had also [threatened](https://twitter.com/DalgashRasoul5/status/1697236244286033924) (<https://twitter.com/DalgashRasoul5/status/1697236244286033924>) Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl. Nor is his push for more local governance new; in 2020, he also [called](https://twitter.com/EvaKahan/status/1304165285658791941) (<https://twitter.com/EvaKahan/status/1304165285658791941>) for local administration transfer to the tribes in Deir ez-Zor. Here again the oil fields play a role; families near Dhiban initially profited from crude oil during the Syrian uprising in 2011, but their earnings declined after the SDF takeover—another likely motivation for Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl.

The conflict was further complicated by the involvement of other actors: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed factions originating from Deir ez-Zor, such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Jaysh al-Sharqiya—under cover of the concurrent Arab tribal revolt—[launched](https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-hts-expands-in-manbij-under-the-cover-of-arab-tribes/) (<https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-hts-expands-in-manbij-under-the-cover-of-arab-tribes/>) attacks on the SDF near Manbij and in the Hasakah province after a Turkish greenlight. Lacking Turkish air support due to the desire to maintain a 2019 ceasefire with Russia, however, the SDF was able to repel these efforts.

Overall, the resulting multifaceted clashes [lasted](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/32518-SDF-to-offer-amnesty-to-Deir-ez-Zor-fighters) (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/32518-SDF-to-offer-amnesty-to-Deir-ez-Zor-fighters>) from August 27 until September 6, [resulting](https://www.syriahr.com/en/312064/) (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/312064/>) in 91 fatalities. These pressures caused the SDF to initially [withdraw](https://www.syriahr.com/en/309344/) (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/309344/>) from most areas in Deir ez-Zor on August 29 in order to avoid being encircled. The SDF [coordinated](https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/felix-legrand-on-deir-ez-zour-tribal?r=1idvj&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web%23details) ([https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/felix-legrand-on-deir-ez-zour-tribal?r=1idvj&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web%23details](https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/felix-legrand-on-deir-ez-zour-tribal?r=1idvj&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web%23details)) this withdrawal with eastern rural clan leaders near Hajin, who did not join the revolt. SDF forces then quickly regained territory, despite a lack of U.S. air support, and subsequently overpowered the tribal militias involved in the uprising. The SDF-linked Arab commander Abu Omar Idlibi [thanked](https://twitter.com/abo_omar_idleb/status/1698318637017292946) ([https://twitter.com/abo\\_omar\\_idleb/status/1698318637017292946](https://twitter.com/abo_omar_idleb/status/1698318637017292946)) Al-Agidat and Al-Baggara clans for preventing further bloodshed in Deir ez-Zor—especially Sheikh Hajim Al-Bashir (leader of the Baggara tribe), who [called](https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zors-tribes-reach-breaking-point) (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zors-tribes-reach-breaking-point>) for a ceasefire, and Sheikh Jamil Al-Hifl (Ibrahim Hifl's cousin).

Despite his earlier request for the United States to engage in direct negotiations with him rather than the SDF, the United States was apparently not interested in creating a new tribal-led entity in Deir ez-Zor and underlined their continued support for the SDF. Instead, the United States [engaged](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/?utm_source=dvr.it&utm_medium=) ([https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/?utm\\_source=dvr.it&utm\\_medium=](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/?utm_source=dvr.it&utm_medium=)) with Qatar-based Musab Al-Hifl in Erbil, Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl's brother to cool down the situation. U.S. officials likewise met other with tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor itself.

In fact, despite the existing tensions over SDF governance decisions in Deir ez-Zor, the first revolt was limited to less than 30 percent of the SDF-held areas of Deir ez-Zor. Moreover, only two out of the twelve clans of the Akeidat tribe joined—the Bu Chamil clan of Sheikh Hifl and the Bakir clan of Abu Khawla. It is unlikely that the insurgency would have failed had all the tribes supported it. "If the tribes had really all agreed to go against the SDF, then they (the SDF) would not still be in Deir Ezzor," Omar Abu Layla, the executive director of Deir Ezzor 24, earlier [told](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230904-what-s-happening-in-east-syria-s-deir-ezzor-province) (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230904-what-s-happening-in-east-syria-s-deir-ezzor-province>) AFP.

#### Regime and Iranian involvement

Nevertheless, Iran and the regime sought to capitalize on the moment and continue to do so. On September 7, a [video](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=279322558186845) (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=279322558186845>) was published by Sons of the Jazeera and Euphrates Movement showing Hashim al-Sattam, commander of Iranian-backed Akeidat Lions battalion in regime-held Deir ez-Zor, in tribal clothes crossing the river with his men to fight SDF. The Iranian-backed Baggara tribal leader Nawaf al-Bashir also [announced](https://npasyria.com/en/104592/) (<https://npasyria.com/en/104592/>) the establishment of the "Hashemite Tribes Regiment" to fight the SDF.

It was also clear that Damascus sought to play a role in supporting the rebellion: Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl reportedly [fled](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/volcano-arab-grievances-syrias-deir-ezzor-pit-us-allies-against-each-other) (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/volcano-arab-grievances-syrias-deir-ezzor-pit-us-allies-against-each-other>) to the regime-controlled western bank of the Euphrates, and continued to call for attacks on SDF forces. The U.S.-led coalition also [warned](https://twitter.com/SOJTF_LEVANT/status/1707107844217323919) ([https://twitter.com/SOJTF\\_LEVANT/status/1707107844217323919](https://twitter.com/SOJTF_LEVANT/status/1707107844217323919)) Arab leaders on September 27 to resist the influence of 'malign actors', an indirect reference to Iran and Damascus. According to [Al-Quds Al-Arabi](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/)

(<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/>), Hifl moved to the Mahkan near Mayadeen after the SDF besieged Dhiban.

*Al-Quds Al-Arabi* likewise [reported](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/)

(<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1/>) that Damascus later hosted hundreds of tribal fighters and families from Dhiban, reportedly also supplying them with weapons after they ran out of weapons and ammunition. Mayadeen, which had been recently [shelled](https://www.sana.sy/?p=1990309) (<https://www.sana.sy/?p=1990309>) by the SDF, became the center of weapons for tribal forces.

#### Current state of the conflict

Hifl's tribal forces now continue to carry cross-river attacks on SDF forces. During an [incursion](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/arab-tribes-renew-clashes-with-sdf-in-eastern-deir-ezzor) (<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/arab-tribes-renew-clashes-with-sdf-in-eastern-deir-ezzor>) of gunmen from the regime-held territories on September 25, clashes briefly renewed until the SDF expelled the tribal gunmen. On October 18, Hifl released a [video](https://haznews.net/%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252584-%2525D8%2525B8%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252586%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A5%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252587%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AF/) (<https://haznews.net/%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252584-%2525D8%2525B8%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252586%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AE-%2525D8%2525A5%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252587%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587%2525D9%252581%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AF/>) claiming there would be a new 'painful strike' against the SDF. And on October 26, the pro-regime Facebook page Sons of the Jazeera and Euphrates Movement reported that Hifl [met](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0MzPeMrVyV2Dpt1qWhmfBnuW2bLsLFYBuuxYYFS1dEvTnudbXG7Wjgxa1ESPpmwl&id=61550873970471) ([https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0MzPeMrVyV2Dpt1qWhmfBnuW2bLsLFYBuuxYYFS1dEvTnudbXG7Wjgxa1ESPpmwl&id=61550873970471](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0MzPeMrVyV2Dpt1qWhmfBnuW2bLsLFYBuuxYYFS1dEvTnudbXG7Wjgxa1ESPpmwl&id=61550873970471)) with tribal leaders to prepare a new attack.

In response to the initial conflict and long held grievances, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council [held](https://hawarnews.com/en/intellectuals-deir-ez-zor-confirm-that-security-enhancement-conference-is-to-avoid-previous-hurdles) (<https://hawarnews.com/en/intellectuals-deir-ez-zor-confirm-that-security-enhancement-conference-is-to-avoid-previous-hurdles>) a public conference on Deir ez-Zor on October 22 with an ambitious plan to discuss restructuring of military and civil councils and address local grievances. The SDF also offered an [amnesty](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/32704-SDF-offers-amnesty-to-Deir-ez-Zor-gunmen) (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/32704-SDF-offers-amnesty-to-Deir-ez-Zor-gunmen>) for tribal fighters.

There were also reports that the United States is attempting to mediate between the Qatar-based Akidat tribal leader Sheikh Musab Al-Hifl and the SDF (amidst unconfirmed reports he would visit (<https://syrianobserver.com/news/86168/sdf-prevents-rebel-leader-from-entering-his-town-in-deir-ez-zor.html>) Syria). It's crucial for the SDF to handle the situation with Sheikh Musab Hifl due to the symbolic importance of the Shaikhly family, especially with Ibrahim Hifl under regime control. Musab, being older and the official leader of the tribe, is viewed as more balanced by the SDF, and containing the situation will require the SDF to compromise with him.

On October 30, a new attack was carried out by Hifl's supporters. The SDF [said \(https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/10/deir-ez-zor-our-forces-thwart-syrian-regime-backed-mercenary-attack-eliminating19-mercenaries/\)](https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/10/deir-ez-zor-our-forces-thwart-syrian-regime-backed-mercenary-attack-eliminating19-mercenaries/) the attack was carried out from Syrian government-controlled areas near Mayadeen. Moreover, Marwan Al-Fadel, a figure in the Syrian government-backed militia "Osoud Al-Sharqiya" (Eastern Lions) was reportedly injured. The local news website Sada Al Sharqieh also [confirmed \(https://twitter.com/Sada\\_AlSharqieh/status/1718615413284536590\)](https://twitter.com/Sada_AlSharqieh/status/1718615413284536590) that the Eastern Lions joined the assault on the SDF. This indicates that various armed groups supported by Damascus have joined the rebellion under the guise of 'Arab Tribal Forces,' mirroring Turkish-backed groups that did the same in northern Syria.

The recent tribal insurgency in Deir ez-Zor, ignited by local grievances, presents a formidable challenge for both the United States and the SDF in the region. It is likely that Hifl's tribal forces will continue to carry out hit-and-run attacks in Deir ez-Zor, although it is unlikely that they could gain control over areas held by the SDF. Moreover, the tribal revolt's growing dependence on weapons and financial support from Iran and Damascus could potentially hinder Sheikh Ibrahim Hifl's tribal forces from engaging in future negotiations with the SDF and the United States.

Damascus and Iran have a heightened interest in exploiting the tribal unrest in Deir ez-Zor to exert additional pressure in the region, particularly amidst the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. Iranian-backed groups have also increased their attacks on U.S. forces in northeast Syria, [carrying out \(https://twitter.com/jm\\_szuba/status/1724505115812364622?s=48&t=L99IkTsjTpUFYjPjt84zNg\)](https://twitter.com/jm_szuba/status/1724505115812364622?s=48&t=L99IkTsjTpUFYjPjt84zNg) at least 28 attacks in Syria on U.S. bases. So far, the United States has responded three times, carrying out airstrikes on Iran-backed armed groups in Deir ez-Zor (on Oct. 26, Nov. 8, and Nov. 13).

The main action the United States can take now is to establish a clear policy beyond the military mission against ISIS. This policy should focus on supporting good governance practices to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS and its ideology while enhancing stability in the region. However, such a move remains challenging as long as the United States does not offer future guarantees to the SDF regarding its future presence in Syria. As long as the U.S. presence remains uncertain, other actors will exploit the situation and grievances of the local population. ❖

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