

Syria's Eastern Front: The Iraq Factor

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Jul 6, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

The United States should use its close relations with Iraq's Sunni Arab tribes to reduce the risk of spillover from Syria.

For most of the first sixteen months of the Syrian uprising, the eastern border governorate of Deir al-Zour witnessed lower levels of violence than the main western battlegrounds in Homs, Idlib, Hama, Deraa, and Damascus. Since late May, however, escalating regime bombardment has shifted Deir al-Zour to the front lines, accentuating the Iraqi factor in the uprising and opening new options for the antigovernment rebels and their foreign backers. Yet many factors are restraining Iraq's Sunni Arab tribes from fully backing the Syrian uprising, not least Baghdad's opposition to foreign intervention in the conflict. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's potential role is also cause for concern.

THE WAR IN SYRIA'S EAST

Despite being located some 280 miles from Damascus, Deir al-Zour is a key strategic outpost for the Assad regime. The governorate contains oil fields and pipeline infrastructure that feed western Syria's refineries and power stations. Most notably, the Iraq-Syria pipeline passes through the province -- although it is currently nonoperational, it may become the artery for rejuvenated oil flows between the two countries as well as Iraqi gas flows to the Arab Gas Pipeline, both of which would generate lucrative transit fees and political leverage for Damascus.

Since the 2005 Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon, Assad regime officials have increasingly taxed smuggling activity on the Iraqi border as a way to replace illicit revenues they previously harvested in Lebanon. Mid-level intelligence and military personnel draw significant incomes from smuggling syndicates that cross the border carrying livestock, cigarettes, and consumer electronics, as well as drugs, weapons, and terrorists.

Despite being a center of Syria's oil industry, Deir al-Zour is one of the country's poorest and least-developed governorates. According to the UN Development Programme and Food and Agriculture Organization, the

governorate suffers from just about every negative economic indicator: high unemployment, extreme poverty, high illiteracy, high infant mortality, above-average population growth, poor roads, and inadequate electrical, sewage, water, and irrigation systems. The central government has not helped eastern Syria in any of its touted economic reform programs -- in fact, regime mismanagement of vital irrigation projects has hobbled the region's agricultural sector.

The majority of Deir al-Zour's 1.2 million inhabitants are Sunni Arabs with strong tribal, cultural, and linguistic links to Iraq. Many are resentful of the distant government in Damascus, which is culturally and religiously alien to them. Since the uprising began, the regime has sought to limit the size of protests in the governorate by pressuring senior tribal leaders (many of whom live in Damascus and Aleppo) and recruiting some tribal fighters into pro-government *shabbiha* paramilitaries. Although these measures slowed the uprising's spread in the east, local *mukhtars* (junior neighborhood-level leaders) and younger tribal figures have gradually gained power and led local tribes to join the movement.

THE ROLE OF IRAQI TRIBES

The Iraqi-Syrian desert between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is known as the Jazirah (meaning island), and its people have traditionally paid little attention to the border imposed in 1920. Local tribes have historically maintained stronger cultural, ethnic, familial, and economic ties with each other than with their respective capitals. There are two key subdivisions of cross-border tribes:

- *Jazirah tribes.* The Shammar confederation is the largest cross-border tribal unit between the two rivers, and its members dominate smuggling in the area. Their position on the Syrian uprising is complex. On the one hand, the Shammar instinctively want to support their Syrian cousins and could gain tremendously from a friendly Sunni-led government in Damascus. On the other hand, both Baghdad and the Assad regime are intensely courting them. On May 30, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki concluded a long period of wooing by holding a special cabinet session in Ninawa province, the Shammar heartland, offering the tribesmen jobs in the security forces as well as the most traditional of incentives: government-funded irrigation of tribal farmlands. Maliki and the Shammar share a mutual enemy -- the Kurds, who have led the effort to unseat the prime minister in recent months and have a deep historical schism with the Shammar. Reflecting this divide, the Assad regime has used some Shammar sub-tribes in Syria as armed militias to suppress Kurdish activism in the northeast. Thus far, the Shammar have been following Baghdad's advice not to add fuel to the fire in Syria, at least publicly and rhetorically. On May 7, tribal leader Sheikh Abdullah al-Yawer al-Shammari told Agence France-Presse, "Enough bloodshed...As Iraqis, we are unprepared to fight for anyone."
- *Euphrates Valley tribes.* The more densely populated Euphrates River Valley has connected Syrian and Iraqi tribes for hundreds of years, with Syrian locals along the river speaking an Iraqi rather than Syrian dialect. During the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, the tribes and mosques of Deir al-Zour provided significant numbers of fighters, weapons, and other forms of support to insurgents in Anbar province. Today, news reports indicate that Iraqi tribes, primarily in the Euphrates Valley, are now reversing the flow by sending weapons and even some fighters to support their Syrian cousins in Deir al-Zour.

In addition, Saudi and Qatari funding has reportedly accelerated Iraqi assistance to rebels in eastern Syria. In February and March, Qatari prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani and Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal publicly called for the arming of oppositionists in the Free Syrian Army. And a February 22 *Wall Street Journal* report was one of many articles to allege Gulf intervention, stating that tribal leaders "from Nineveh and Anbar are being asked by Gulf Arab officials or through intermediaries such as Jordan-based Iraqi businessmen to support the Syrian opposition."

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Although Iraqi tribal support may help Syria's eastern rebels, giving them a line of supply and a protected "rear area," it also raises some concerns. Gulf donors have strong ties to the pivotal Iraqi Shammar confederation as well as excellent capacity to boost Iraqi assistance to the Syrian opposition. Yet U.S. policymakers should weigh the repercussions that direct foreign appeals to Iraqi tribal leaders might have on future Iraqi-Gulf relations, on Baghdad's relationship with local Sunni Arab stakeholders, and on Iraq's own cohesion.

The role of affiliate group al-Qaeda in Iraq is also a concern, though some positive indicators are apparent. Syrian rebels in Deir al-Zour seem keen to limit the organization's involvement in their province, where al-Qaeda threatened and even killed local sheikhs during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Many of the Iraqi tribes providing support to their Syrian relatives are also focused on reducing al-Qaeda involvement. The more desperate the Syrian rebels become, however, the more likely they are to accept the organization's help. In a May 24 BBC interview, one Sunni rebel stated, "I tell the UN and the UN Security Council, the Syrian people can't take it anymore...If no-one helps us, we will turn to the devil himself."

To reduce blowback in Iraqi and regional affairs, the United States should monitor the situation by taking advantage of the close relationships it has forged with many senior Sunni Arab tribal leaders along the Iraq-Syria border since 2003. Only by maintaining a detailed understanding of cross-border dynamics can Washington hope to strengthen the Syrian opposition while denying al-Qaeda affiliates a greater role in either country.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)