Governing After ISIS:
What's Next for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, John Dunford, and Nicholas Heras

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), America's local partner in northeastern Syria, was instrumental in the fight against ISIS and is working to fill the vacuum it left behind. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella, new Middle East Portfolio Manager Nicholas Heras, and Syria Research Assistant John Dunford discuss the structure and behavior of the SDF, the group's relationship with the US military, the unique challenges it faces in governing, and its efforts to prevent the resurgence of ISIS within local populations.

Kim Kagan:
This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

Jenny Cafarella:
My name is Jenny Cafarella. I'm the research director here at the Institute for the Study of War, and today I am joined by two Syria experts with incredible knowledge of the local situation in Syria and, in particular, with respect to the structure and behavior of the American local partner in northeastern Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces. First, we have John Dunford, who has been looking very closely at this part of Syria for his entire time here at ISW and is our resident expert in what's happening on the ground and how it's evolving. Joined by me as well is Nicholas Heras, who has joined us from the Center for a New American Security, recently joining our ISW team and bringing with him his incredible wealth of knowledge, including his on-the-ground experience in northeastern Syria and his long experience analyzing not only Syria but the specific issue which we're going to talk about today, which is local stabilization in governance in areas that we've recaptured with our local partner from the Islamic State.

So first, I'm going to turn over to you, John, for an overview of, what is the Syrian Democratic Forces and its governance structure, and how did it come to be over the course of this conflict?

John Dunford:
Thank you, Jenny. The US-led Defeat-ISIS campaign enabled the growth of its local partner from a group of small militias into the military and governing body in northeast Syria. The US' Defeat-ISIS campaign in Syria relied on a by, with, and through approach. This approach called for the US to work with a local ground partner to clear ISIS from much of northeast Syria. The intent of this approach was to limit the necessity for a large US ground presence. However, this approach requires the development of a strong ground partner. The US' ground partner, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, has now evolved from a local Kurdish militia to an umbrella of different ethnic militias, as well as a governing body in northeast Syria.

Today, the SDF is comprised of three different wings. The political wing, or the Syrian Democratic Council, formed in December 2015. The Syrian Democratic Council has been… is currently involved in negotiations with both Russia and the Assad regime on the future of northeast Syria. The SDF's governing body, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, now currently oversees the governance and parts of the stabilization of northeast Syria. Then there's the military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces, or the SDF. The SDF itself as an organization formed in October 2015. Prior to October 2015, the US provided air support and some material support to the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG. US air support helped the YPG break the ISIS siege of the Kurdish border town of Kobani beginning in September 2014. The YPG had risen to prominence in the northeast following the Syrian regime's withdrawal to withdraw the majority of its forces from the

northeast to the western Syrian coast beginning in July 2012. The YPG itself's predecessor had actually formed much earlier on in March 2004 and ran as a group underground until the start of the war in 2012.

John Dunford:

The YPG formed partnerships with local Free Syrian Army groups after breaking the Siege of Kobani at the start of 2015. These partnerships were important for allowing the YPG to clear and hold non-Kurdish areas of the northeast. The YPG and these groups solidified their relationship through the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces in October 2015. The YPG, as the most military-effective force, has remained the core component of the SDF and its leadership. The current leader of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, is a former YPG commander. Since October 2015, the SDF with US support has fought in multiple military campaigns against ISIS across the Arab and Kurdish areas of the northeast. As the SDF has cleared these areas, it has established local governing councils to govern the local population. The SDF in total created seven large councils. These councils are referred to as the Afrin region for the northwest of the northern Syria; the Euphrates region, which covered Kobani and much of northern Raqqa province; the Jazira region, which covered Hasakah province; the Raqqa Civil Council; the Democratic Civil Administration of Manbij; the Democratic Civil Administration of Tabqa; and the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council. Each council is run by an executive branch with male and female co-chairs. These individuals oversee the activities of various committees, such as internal security committees, education, and health committees. These councils also oversee a series of smaller governing bodies down to the town, village, and neighborhood level. The aim of this system is to promote a bottom-up democracy from the neighborhood level up to the top to cover regional areas.

The SDF has succeeded in cornering ISIS in its final stronghold in eastern Syria by the fall of 2014. During this time, the SDF formed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. This body was intended to unite the various local councils established by the SDF throughout the Defeat-ISIS campaign under a single governing body. This body attempted to synchronize policies and procedures for the seven major councils operating in the northeast. This body also runs the foreign relations for the SDF, so it's a key interlocutor with both European and US officials on the issue of stabilization in the northeast moving forward.

Jenny Cafarella:

The SDF deserves a lot of credit, not only for the incredible bravery and capability that they demonstrated in the fight against the Islamic State, but also for recognizing very early on that it needed to provide a answer for how to fill the vacuum left behind by the Islamic State. And frankly, the SDF acknowledged the scale of the problem with that vacuum far earlier in many respects than US policy did. The United States was waging a military-focused campaign in Syria with the SDF and hadn't really thought through what would need to come after the military defeat of the Islamic State. So, John, thank you for providing the rundown of how in sort of an evolving process, the SDF took terrain with American support and then began establishing local governance systems in areas recaptured, and then later began to knit those local systems into something greater, into a wider governing project that actually could provide some coherence and, ideally, greater effectiveness of governance to replace the Islamic State as a sort of day-to-day governing entity.

The military mission against the Islamic State to recapture terrain has ended, as you noted. And the US has now sort of struggled to figure out, how do we support governance in the post-liberation phase? Nick, why don't you take us through, how has the US conceptualized that requirement, which is usually regarded as stabilization, and how should the United States conceptualize that requirement as we relate both to the SDF but also to the wider American interests in this theater?

Nicholas Heras:

Well, thank you very much, Jenny. And this is an excellent discussion and set-up from both you and John, what is an important component of not only the counter-ISIS campaign but for how the United States views military engagements and the aftermath of military engagements across the world. Phase four stabilization requires that certain key effects are produced. These effects are related to security, governance, administration, access to humanitarian assistance, or, in areas where the local situation is further stabilized, support for economic recovery. Stabilization operations have become more common over the course of the late 20th and 21st century, and particularly as United States has been involved in campaigns and in contexts where there is significant social, political, and security vacuums that have been formed.

The way the US should think about the effects of its stabilization operations are as follows. The US should seek to build the capacity of local partners that can operate representative and responsive governance, administration, security, and rule of law structures that make the local population feel as if they are bought into a process that governs their everyday lives. Fundamentally, there will continue to be threats that emanate from regions that have had tremendous social, political, and security vacuums if the local population doesn't believe the authority that follows a group such as the Islamic State is representative to them and is responsive to their needs in a manner that is better than what the Islamic State provided.

Another key effect should be the provision of basic services and dispute resolutions for the local population if they feel as if their needs are not being met. This is a challenge that is often forgotten in the discourse about stabilization operations. Much of the focus is, where did the explosion go off today, are there more insurgents that are trying to attack local forces? But fundamentally, a local population is less likely to support and enable or cooperate with insurgents such as the remnants of the Islamic State in eastern Syria if they feel as if they have the ability to provide for their families, that they have a future, that they have a proactive sense of how they can be involved in their local affairs. And if they don't feel that way, do they have pathways for dispute in that current situation, whether it's the right to assembly, whether there are formal structures that've been established for them to request improvements in governance administration. All these are very important effects that need to be achieved. And they're especially important in a context such as eastern Syria, where there has been a tremendous vacuum since the withdrawal of the Assad regime from that region in 2012 and the challenges that have been faced by the local population in that area that had led to the rise of ISIS, ISIS' brutal system administration, and these lingering questions about who will be the enduring authority for that area.

Jenny Cafarella:

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Nick. And I think you've provided a good overview of many of the lessons that the United States military has learned, and the United States government more broadly, through our own experience and the experience of some of our allies and partners in how to actually prevent these problems from resurging. Right? The US military is the best in the world at defeating organizations like the Islamic State, but preventing the Islamic State from coming back has continued to be a core challenge at the heart of US foreign policy and American security challenges and, unfortunately, will remain at the heart of these challenges. As you mentioned, the Islamic State has been defeated as a land owner, but it's still present in many of these communities, is still attempting to convince these communities that only the Islamic State can represent them, or just trying outright to coerce these civilians into, at minimum, being passive and allowing ISIS, the Islamic State, to operate within their communities or, most dangerously, to rejoin the Islamic State to fight against the SDF. In some respects, the SDF benefits from the fact that in order to win popular support, in some regards, the bar is ISIS' brutality. So the SDF has to be better than ISIS, but that's a pretty low bar to try to shoot for. I think it's commendable that the SDF has tried to be something far greater than ISIS, not merely good enough.

Jenny Cafarella:

But they've had a hard time with that because good governance is difficult in any environment, much less in such a fractured environment as a non-state actor continually challenged and provoked by the Islamic State. So can you take us through some of the areas in which the SDF has done well and some challenges that the SDF is still facing as they try to build this kind of governance that actually is responsive to the population and can be a vector to prevent ISIS from returning at the scale, at minimum, that it had been present before the US intervened?

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you very much, Jenny. And I think a great launching point for this discussion is the excellent history that John provided of the development of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Council, the SDC, because in a lot of ways, as you pointed out, the sheer size of the territory that the SDF is required to administer shapes some of the challenges that it faces. We think that approximately a third or a little bit less than a third of Syria and most of the post-ISIS areas of Syria are under the jurisdiction and the administration requirements of the SDF. And as John highlighted, in fact, the SDF developed as, essentially, an alliance of local militias and some attached political parties that along the way essentially are asked and tasked with building an airplane in flight and an airplane in flight with a lot of flak.

And the major, we can say, successes that they have had to this point are that, because of the sort of heterogeneous or the multi-communal, diverse population nature of northern-eastern Syria, the SDF has had good practice. It's not perfect, but it's had good practice in developing a sort of ad hoc governance and also security force system that's developed in a manner that emphasizes with local security, whether it's a military council like the Deir ez-Zor military council, the Manbij military council, whether it's the subordinate units of the SDF for local security, such as the HAT, or counter-terror forces, and some of these other forces. The SDF has had some success in trying to meet the security needs and, at the basic level, at the basic local level, some of the administrative and provision of service needs of a diverse population, ethnically diverse, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrian Christians, Chechens, Circassians, others, religiously diverse, Sunnis, Christians, other populations, as well as with different structures of power in those local communities.

There has been a, there's also been SDF success in providing for freedom of religion, as has been mentioned, gender inclusivity. Famously, as John has mentioned, the SDF at the level of local councils has mandated that there be a man and a woman that are in charge of them. There are thousands of women that have been mobilized into various different local security forces throughout the SDF zone. And also the SDF has had some success in empowering historically disenfranchised communities, such as the descendants of what we would call the slave caste of certain Arab tribes, as well as descendants of essentially serfs that are part of the Kurdish population's former land-owning class. However, there are also some challenges that the SDF needs to confront and overcome. One of the greatest challenges is how does the SDF, the SDC, and the Autonomous Administration provide for greater inclusivity when it comes to political parties? And this ties to one of the major challenges, which is because of the development of the SDF from a militia force that's influenced by a political party, the Democratic Union Party, or the PYD, that is part of a broader political movement led by Abdullah Öcalan, who is the spiritual father of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or the PKK, which has its area of strength in Eastern Turkey and Northern Iraq. PKK is a designated terrorist organization by the United States and Turkey. The PKK had a long history prior to the signing of the 1990 Adana Accord between Hafez al-Assad and Turkey of having a stronghold in northern Syria, that there's still a shadow governance that has been established whereby if they're not necessarily PKK decision-makers themselves, but are people that are part of the Öcalanist movement, that is still present throughout the areas that are administered by the SDF whereby you have local councils, local councils make decisions, but there's a sort of quiet hand that is present.

Nicholas Heras:

And this quiet hand is mostly drawn from people, male and female, who are influenced by the Öcalanist movements, whether the PKK or others. So that is a challenge because that leads to another challenge, which is there are some communities in the area administered by the SDF, particularly in places that are Arab majority, tribally organized, and until recently under ISIS, such as Deir ez-Zor, whereby they don't want that, the local population doesn't want that. The local population doesn't want that hidden hand of … they're called kadros that are tied to the Öcalanist movement. They feel disenfranchised. They feel as if they aren't in control of local resources such as oil and, in some cases, farmland. And they are uneasy with the administrative structure that's being developed by the SDF. And that creates opportunities for ISIS to try to build local support.

Another challenge that the SDF faces is there is a question as within certain communities, such as within the Kurds, is there inclusivity within the level of political parties? There have been longstanding disputes between the PYD and the Kurdistan National Council, the KNC, and other parties. And there are some real questions about, can the system, as it's been developed, tolerate over time multiple political affiliations, can it reduce the power of the kadros that are tied to the Öcalanist movement, and can it create a system that provides space for some skeptical local communities, such as Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor, to have more say over their local affairs?

Jenny Cafarella:

Thanks so much, Nick. And you've teed up a number of incredibly important issues that the United States faces in trying to navigate this complexity and to get towards greater stability, to remove some of the immediate risks of fueling an ISIS resurgence, but also the thought process that the United States now needs to go through from a policy perspective to acknowledge that this is the structure that we now have in place. And hindsight can be 20/20. Perhaps in the United States should have constrained a little bit more of the establishment of the shadow governance and prevented some of these problematic vulnerabilities from emerging, but we have the situation that we have. And the SDF, as we've mentioned, has also done a lot of good in empowering local communities, protecting minorities, providing security. And so we don't have time to chat through today what the US should do, how we should balance these requirements moving forward. But we certainly are going to get into this in following podcasts, and I absolutely look forward to continuing this discussion. It is timely. The United States still doesn't have an answer for this. The fact that we still have US military forces deployed in Syria, though, gives us a continued opportunity. There's still a ton that the United States can do to prevent the ISIS resurgence from succeeding. It is underway, but it's far from given that it will succeed. So much more to follow from us here at the Institute for the Study of War.

Kim Kagan:

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