

Local Unrest Threatens to Undermine Primary US Partner Force in Northeast Syria



Featuring Eva Kahan, John Dunford and Jason Zhou

SEPTEMBER 6, 2020

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the local US partner force in northeast Syria, is facing intense pressure from ISIS, the Syrian Regime, and Turkey. The SDF's already-fraught relations with local Arab tribes have deteriorated significantly, especially in Deir ez-Zour Province. These issues came to a head in August when the assassination of several tribal sheikhs triggered a tribal backlash against the SDF. In this episode of Overwatch, Eva Kahan, John Dunford, and Jason Zhou discuss the escalating situation in Deir ez-Zour and what it means for US national security.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. The Syrian Democratic Forces, commonly known as the SDF, are the local U.S. partner force in Northeast Syria and liberated the area from ISIS in 2019. No part of Syria is calm, but the situation in Northeast Syria became exceptionally chaotic in July 2020 when the SDF began to face intense pressure from a number of actors, including ISIS, the Syrian regime and Turkey. The SDF's already fraught relations with local Arab tribes have deteriorated significantly, especially in Dier ez-Zor Province. These issues came to a head in August when the assassination of several tribal sheikhs triggered a tribal backlash against the SDF. Eva Kahan, John Dunford and Jason Zhou are with me today to discuss the escalating situation in Deir ez-Zor and what it means for U.S. national security. Thank you all for being here today.

Jason Zhou:

Thanks for having me, Jacob.

John Dunford:

Thanks, Jacob. Happy to be here.

Jacob:

Let's start with the broad view and get some background in this area. What is the U.S. Policy in Dier ez- Zor?

Jason:

Sure. I can take this question. The U.S. Policy in Syria overall has three main legs. We're trying to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We're trying to expel Iranian proxies from Syria, and we're also trying to facilitate in negotiated settlements to the Syrian civil war. The U.S. presence in Deir ez-Zor province facilitates two of those main objectives in Syria. The main purpose is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS alongside our partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces, providing training, and assisting with intelligence, and providing other assistance to their missions against Syria.

There's also a component in which the U.S. presence in Northeast Syria helps as a leverage point against the Assad regime to help incentivize them to drive at a negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil war. There are other vaguer instruments that we are using to pursue that negotiated settlement, but U.S. presence in Northeast Syria is a leverage point that we can use for that.

Jacob:

I see. What happened to kick off all of this chaos in Northeast Syria in Deir ez-Zor?

Eva Kahan:

Thanks Jacob. I can talk a little bit about this. As Jason mentioned, there is a consistent ISIS presence in North-

east Syria, and ISIS has been conducting an assassination campaign that targets both members of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF who are the U.S. partner force, as well as local leaders in tribes, particularly tribes that work with the SDF. ISIS assassinated three high ranking tribal leaders between July 31st and August 2nd, most notably Mutshar al-Hifil, one of the members of the leading Hifil clan in the Akidat tribe, which is one of the largest tribes in Deir ez-Zor Province.

And tribal leaders reacted to this assassination very strongly, not only condemning those who conducted the assassination, but insinuating that the SDF had neglected to protect tribal leaders, partially because the assassination may have been conducted close to an SDF checkpoint that was unmanned at the time of the attack. ISIS was likely responsible for this attack, but didn't claim it, which also allowed tribal leadership across Deir ez-Zor to blame the attack on both the SDF and regime-run assassination cells throughout Deir ez-Zor. Regime run media, and also Turkish-backed media exacerbated this information campaign, accusing the SDF of neglecting to protect the tribes and encouraging the tribes to rebel against the SDF. The Akidat tribe carried out a series of protests most notably on August 4th, which became violent, possibly because of the presence of regime or ISIS provocateurs in the crowds of peaceful protestors, and ultimately led to a breakdown within the Akidat tribe of three different camps with various demands for the SDF, that have now entered into a series of negotiations with the SDF.

Jacob:

Could you identify the specific factions within the Akidat and how their priorities differ from one another?

Eva:

Definitely. Since August 2nd, we've seen three main factions emerge from the Akidat tribe, and among them, we have supporters of the regime, the SDF, and then an attempt at tribal independence, which I can go into in more detail. A faction of the leading Hifil clan led by Assad Said il-Hefil who was likely already collaborating with the regime prior to August 2020, held a meeting on August 9th in which it announced the establishment of a Akidat Army, which would support the return of the regime to Eastern Deir ez-Zor. This meeting, however, was held in regime-held Western Deir ez-Zor City. And it's unclear how much support it can leverage from Eastern Deir ez-Zor, which the SDF actually controls. Secondly, a clan also within the Akidat called the Bakir clan has announced its continued support for the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, which is a part of the forces that support the SDF, led by the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, Ahmed Abu Khoula who is also a leading member of the Bakir clan.

The Bakir clan asked the SDF for some of the same negotiation points that many of the tribes have been lobbying for in their protests, but has also asked the SDF to actually expand its military campaign, and take back some villages that were seized by the regime in 2019. Lastly, there is a faction of the Hifil clan led by Ibrahim al-Hifil who actually survived the assassination attempt that killed Mutshar al-Hifil which has begun to call for independent tribal administration of Deir ez-Zor Province. This tribal independence faction still wants the military support of the SDF, but has asked for a release of innocent political prisoners from Arab tribes, large scale release of women and children from the refugee camp in Hasakah, and has demanded essentially autonomy, in so far as civilian governance goes. The other major tribe that we're watching as these factions break down and put pressure on the SDF to negotiate with them is the Bakara tribe, of whom a major leader Nawaf al-Bashir has been working with Iranian-backed militias for several years.

The Bakara tribe led a small scale revolt on August 16th in the town, Jdid Bakara, in which they expelled SDF leadership and seized SDF weapons. The U.S.-led coalition and SDF leadership met with the Bakara in order to get these weapons back on August 17th, and failed to do so. The SDF may be facing both a movement for autonomy within SDF held territory and multiple different groups that are attempting a military revolt against the SDF

from regime held Western Deir ez-Zor and SDF-held Eastern Deir ez-Zor.

Jacob:

What interests do the pro-regime actors have in Northeast Syria? And what means do they have of achieving them?

John:

Hey Jacob, I can take this one. As Eva noted, Deir ez-Zor is a province that is divided between regime and SDF control. Because of this, we have a number of pro-regime forces that are positioned in close proximity along the Euphrates River to both U.S. and SDF forces. These pro-regime forces include Syrian regime military units, and national defense forces brushing back Syrian militias as well as uniformed Russian military police, and then also a host of different Iranian-backed militias, both Syrian militias, as well as foreign Iranian-backed militias. Now these different groups within the pro-regime coalition have a host of interest in Deir ez-Zor. For example, Russia has economic interests in the area South of Deir ez-Zor, and the Central Syrian Desert, particularly in the oil fields and phosphate mines that are present there. Iran is very interested in maintaining its freedom of movement along the Syrian-Iraqi border, which serves as a key node in Iran's ground supply lines into Syria. The regime itself has major economic interests in controlling the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor that are under regime control currently, as well as expanding control into the oil fields that the SDF currently controls. Now all of these factions have one common goal, which is to pressure the U.S. and the SDF presence in Eastern Syria. And the way they go about doing that is through a number of means. First being, is outreach to the local population, and building ties with some of the tribes that Eva noted before.

For Iran, this has been building ties with members of the Baggara tribe that now feeds tribesmen into some of the Iranian-backed militias in Deir ez-Zor. Russia has taken up similar efforts in recruiting some tribal fighters into their own Russian-backed militia networks. And so outside this recruitment we also have Russia engaged in information operations that are designed to exaggerate SDF abuses of the local population and harsh SDF responses to protests. The regime itself is conducting similar messaging by taking some of the sheikhs in Deir ez-Zor that are already approaching and using them to share talking points, and messages about the SDF presence and the U.S. presence, that are designed again to undermine the SDF's control. And the last thing we're seeing is actual kinetic activity, including two recent rocket and mortar strikes near U.S. and SDF forces at Conoco oil fields in Eastern Deir ez-Zor. Conoco was famously the site of a major Russian private military contractor attack on anti-ISIS coalition forces in February 2018.

Eva:

Adding to that briefly, Jacob, it's also notable that U.S. and Russian forces are co-located in Northeastern Hasakah province. And while we've seen kinetic activity by a regime-sponsored militias in Southern Deir ez-Zor, we've also seen a potential escalation in clashes between Russian and American forces, most notably in the encounter between a Russian and American patrol in Hasakah province on August 25th, in which a Russian patrolling vehicle rammed an American vehicle, causing four potential coalition concussions. And so, this type of kinetic escalation might be integrated into the overall pro-regime, escalation against U.S. and SDF presence in Eastern Syria.

Jacob:

What are Turkey's interests in Northeast Syria? And what means do they have to achieve them?

Eva:

Thanks Jacob, I can take this. Turkey is fundamentally interested in restricting the activity and mobility of the SDF, which Turkey sees as connected to the U.S. designated terrorist group, the PKK, which operates against the

Turkish State in Turkey. To that end, Turkey is interested in undermining the SDF's ability to maintain stability and continue governing Eastern Syria. And to that end, Turkey also sponsors anti-SDF insurgent groups, most notably the revolutionaries in the land of Deir ez-Zor, which we've seen claim several false attacks or unconfirmed attacks against the SDF over the past few weeks. And which claims to be part of the Syrian National Army, which is a Turkish-sponsored Syrian Force, although the Syrian National Army has actually disavowed the group.

Turkey is also conducting information operations against the SDF through Turkish think tanks, and likely fake news producing information centers that spin out pro-Turkish propaganda about what's happening in Deir ez-Zor. Although these campaigns likely are not coordinated with the pro-regime counter SDF campaigns, they achieve the same ends and have actually escalated anti-SDF sentiment among the Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor.

Jacob:

Given the chaos in the area and the mix of competing actors, how is ISIS behaving in the Deir ez-Zor area?

Jason:

Thank you, Jacob, for that question. ISIS is one of the actors that has the most to benefit from the circumstances that are going on in Deir ez-Zor Province. We've already seen ISIS conduct high value targeting in Deir ez-Zor Province, after the tribal unrest that has occurred. For instance, we saw a motorcycle borne IED attack against the head of the Hagen Civil Council later in August. And we would expect ISIS to continue expanding its insurgency in SDF-held Deir ez-Zor Province to take advantage of any security gaps that occur, and any sort of fracturing that occurs within the SDF, and between the SDF and the tribes.

ISIS is actually also even more capable on the other side of the Euphrates River in regime-held Deir ez-Zor Province, and in the Central Syrian Desert, where ISIS has been able to conduct regular combined arms tax against pro-regime positions and convoys, and where ISIS also was able to kill a Russian Major General in an attack in late August. And we could see ISIS begin to infiltrate some of these cells that are located on the regime side and try to get them into the SDF-held portion of Deir ez-Zor Province, and use that to further resource and invigorate its campaign against the SDF.

Jacob:

What is the worst possible outcome of these overlapping ISIS and regime campaigns against the SDF in Northeast Syria?

Eva:

I can talk a little bit about that. One of our biggest concerns, particularly with regards to the negotiations mentioned earlier is that the tribes either will not come to an agreement with the SDF, or will not accept what the SDF puts on the table, particularly in terms of devolving governance authority to the tribes. Several tribe members have already refused to negotiate with the SDF, and directed all of their concerns to the U.S.-run coalition. And the SDF has only offered what we see as tactical concessions, so small prisoner releases rather than an overarching government devolution plan.

The counter SDF protests have also escalated, particularly in the instance mentioned earlier of the SDF being both expelled from the town and having their arms seized. And this could be a prelude to tribes taking up arms against the SDF, and forming an independent tribal militia that supplants both the SDF security authority, as well as their governing authority in Deir ez-Zor Province. In this case, ISIS would likely exploit these security gaps, and may actually be able to gain a territorial foothold in Deir ez-Zor Province, something that we haven't seen since the defeat of ISIS in March 2019. Lastly, Russian-backed pro-regime militias are likely to take advantage of

this situation, and may attempt to escalate a campaign to retake Eastern Deir ez-Zor with tribal assistance. The vision for how this would lay out, depends on tribes as they have actually done previously demanding international assistance in order to protect them from what they see as cruelties and overreach by the SDF.

Eva:

Russia could offer to supply this assistance and move units onto the Eastern side of the Euphrates under the guise of supporting these tribes, which could help the regime stage for a more long ranging campaign to retake Eastern Deir ez-Zor. We've already seen, as John mentioned, pro-regime militias moving towards Deir ez-Zor, and it's possible that we'll see more of that in the coming weeks.

Jacob:

What is then the most likely outcome barring significant escalation by pro-regime forces?

Eva:

It's possible that we don't see Russian-backed militias taking advantage of this situation. However, it's still likely that not all of the tribes who had previously been working with the SDF will return to the SDF's fold, following the negotiated agreement. The SDF tribal alliance might not entirely collapse, but it is likely to maintain some fractions that we've seen exhibited in this most recent round of protests. And to that end, this incomplete support of the SDF is likely to enable further protests, and to reinforce the activity of both ISIS and pro-regime militias to destabilize the SDF and make it harder for the SDF to fully and enduringly defeat ISIS. We've already seen without a major territorial gain, ISIS having more claims in Deir ez-Zor, conducting more opened attacks, including as Jason mentioned, a motorcycle born IED attack and attempting to further their social control over the population, including extorting people for Zakat, which is the ISIS form of taxes. We've also seen, as John mentioned, more pro-regime insurgent attacks, and far more false claims of pro-regime insurgent attacks. And that campaign to gain a reputation of activity among these pro-regime insurgent groups is likely to continue escalating even with a halfway tribal SDF agreement.

Jacob:

What recommendations do you have for U.S. Policy makers and leaders watching this region?

Eva:

The most important role that U.S. policymakers can play is that of the honest broker sponsoring tribal SDF negotiations, particularly those which move real power and governing authority towards the tribes. Tribes have repeatedly announced that they will not be satisfied with a halfway agreement that gets them tactical concessions, but doesn't change the governing structure of Deir ez-Zor, and the SDF has seemed relatively stubborn to move on this point.

The coalition is still seen as a sponsor of the tribes as well as of the SDF, and as one of the only actors capable of maintaining a credible counter ISIS campaign in the area. The coalition should be taking up as much space as we can within the information space, announcing our legitimate counter ISIS campaigns and denying the fake news that's being put out by other actors in the area. Lastly, pro-regime actors are taking advantage of uncertainty in Eastern Syria, as to whether the U.S. is committed to this mission. We're seeing mentioned within Russian state media, as well as Turkish and pro-regime media, that the U.S. commitment to the area is unstable, and that tribes would be better off moving to a sponsor who is more committed to this mission. The more that U.S. policymakers can signal within the Syrian space, that we will be able to guarantee the SDF's following through on a negotiated agreement, the more credible that agreement will be, and the better we can maintain the trust and Alliance of these Arab tribes.

John:

And yeah, can I just add one more point to these excellent recommendations that Eva has provided. I would also just point out that the coalition as the main supporter and trainer of the SDF has an opportunity here to help improve the SDF's targeting encounter ISIS operations. One of the main grievances that tribes have pointed out is that at times the SDF has inducted mass arrests without consideration for who exactly is actually a member of ISIS or who is, can they truly verify as a member of ISIS.

And if the coalition can help to improve the targeting of these and make sure that the amount of mass arrests is as small as possible, and that only the people that we're fairly confident are ISIS members are being arrested. Then that would also go, I think, a pretty decent way in helping to gain and maintain the support of the tribes.

Jacob:

And what should observers be watching for? What inflection points might we see in this part of Syria in the next few weeks?

Eva:

The pro-independence tribal faction set us a nice timeline for their negotiations. They demanded that the SDF fulfilled their demands by September 11th. And so, we as observers are going to be watching carefully to see if the SDF is able to announce a negotiation and maintain the buy-in of the tribes with whom they're negotiating by that September 11th deadline. It's likely that if no negotiation is reached by that time, the situation will continue to deteriorate, and more tribes may jump onto the tribal independence vote.

Next, we are continuing to monitor the Russian information space, because Russian state media is going to great lengths to exacerbate the situation in Deir ez-Zor. And it's possible that this media narrative will be used to stage for future Russian, either negotiation attempts with the SDF, or attempts to stage a military intervention in Eastern Deir ez-Zor. Lastly, some of the smaller either insurgent groups or tribal militias may attempt to either claim more extraordinary attacks or cement their presence in the general field of various militias in Deir ez-Zor. We're watching for evidence say of actual mobilization by the Akidat army or confirmed attacks by some of the pro-regime or pro-Turkish militias.

Jacob:

Thank you all so much for being here.

Eva:

Thank you so much, Jacob.

John:

Thank you, Jacob. Thanks everyone.

Jason:

Thank you, Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

Contact us: For press inquiries, email press@understandingwar.org