



SHIFTING SANDS IN EASTERN SYRIA

Sinan Hatahet



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Abstract: Observers are increasingly focusing their attention on the race for Deir Ezzor as the battle against ISIS in Raqqa draws to its conclusion. Local and regional actors have long presumed the existence of a Russian-American agreement on how divide the region into two zones of influence along the Euphrates valley. Yet, recent events reveal considerable divergences between the strategies of the two global forces. The Euphrates valley links Turkey, Syria and Iraq, and has witnessed increased local competition over its oil rich resources throughout the last seven years. It was largely under the control of the mainstream opposition before ISIS expelled them to the west of the country, and now both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime are racing to capture the terrorist group's former territory. As ISIS steadily loses ground in eastern Syria, many challenges arise: dealing with the residual effects of ISIS, handling the reconstruction of region, ensuring the safe return of IDPs and refugees, and many other pressing matters. This paper attempts to identify the dynamics that govern eastern Syria, the tribal scene, and the challenges SDF and Damascus are facing in their conquest of the east.



If there is one natural law the Syrian War keeps proving over and over again, it is that there are no permanent negotiated agreements between competing forces with unresolved conflicts of interests. In the Levantine context, the conflicts between global and regional powers lie elsewhere, but whether they are competing over an elusive regional hegemony or in order to expand their sphere of influence, these powers are settling their disputes in Syria.

For months now, it has been widely assumed

Yet a quick iteration of major events over the last year reveals that Moscow and Washington still suffer from the heavy legacy of mutual mistrust and suspicion

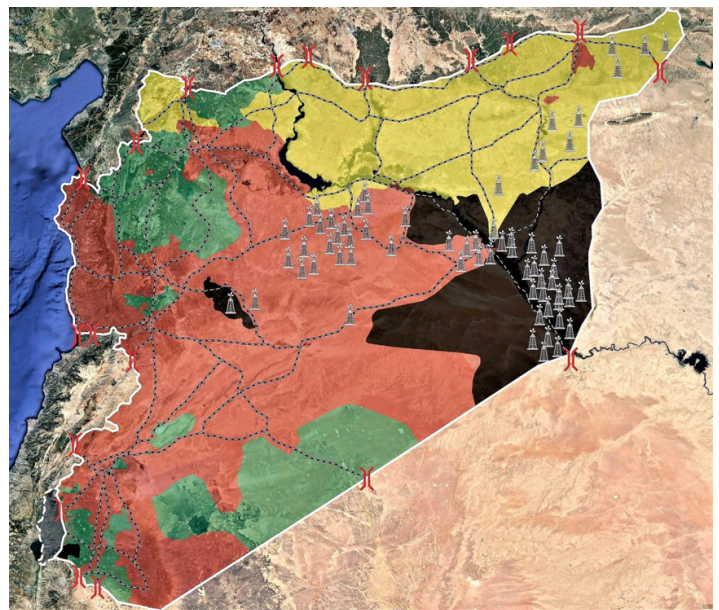
by regional and local actors that the Russians and Americans have come to an arrangement over Syria. The outcomes of such an agreement, they believe, include a tacit American toleration of Assad remaining in power during a transitional period after the war, coordination of the powers' efforts to defeat ISIS and other terrorist organizations, and a line along the Euphrates Valley separating an American sphere of influence to its east and a Russian zone to its west. Yet a quick iteration of major events over the last year reveals that Moscow and Washington still suffer from the heavy legacy of mutual mistrust and suspicion.

Eastern Syria is an excellent case study of how Russia and the U.S. are dealing with the complex network of regional and local interests. The Euphrates valley links Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and hosts ISIS's capital. In Syria, there has been increased competition for control of the river between the Syrian opposition, the PYD-led "Syrian Democratic Forces", ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front, loyalist forces, and Iranian-backed militias. This paper attempts to identify the dynamics that govern eastern Syria, and how the final chapter of the war against ISIS could unravel.

The Economic Geography

The Euphrates irrigates a relatively barren part of Syria, where the cultivable floodplain is no more than a few kilometers wide. Below the Euphrates Dam, the reduced flow is supplemented by the Balikh and Al Khabur rivers. From its confluence with Al Khabur down to Al Bukamal, the Euphrates flows through a broad agricultural province.

The economic life of the Euphrates basin heavily depends on the river, even though oil revenues have also played a dominant role since ISIS took control. Outside cities and towns, the local population practice stock breeding and agriculture. But the traditional pattern of village life has suffered severe disruptions due to ISIS's disastrous inefficient governance. The river is high at the wrong time of year for most crops, and agriculture in consequence heavily depends on rainfall and wells for irrigation. The lack of water in previously state-irrigated land has encouraged many farmers to drill unregulated wells. This in return means increased pumping, which is costly under normal circumstances but has become even more so since the coalition destroyed most of the oil facilities, making it more difficult to obtain the much-needed fuel to power the pumps.



Map 1 Map of oil fields in Syria (courtesy of Omran Center for Strategic Studies)



Outside cities and towns, the local population practice stock breeding and agriculture. But the traditional pattern of village life has suffered severe disruptions due to ISIS's disastrous inefficient governance

As zones of influence begin taking shape, with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positioned to take control of the eastern bank of the Euphrates and the regime and its allies the western bank, Damascus would inherit the bulk of the region's human capital, but the SDF would receive its more lucrative economic ventures. The major and most populated cities of the Euphrates—Deir Ezzor, Al-Muhassan, Al-Mayadin and Al-Bukamal—arose on its western bank (Al-Shamiya), mainly due to its relatively higher ground. However, the eastern bank (Al-Jazeera) remains more economically viable for the following reasons: larger agricultural lands thanks to the Al Khabur river and a higher concentration of wells, larger and richer oil fields, and pre-existing state-built industrial complexes (sugar, cotton, and natural gas factories).

The Local Population

Eastern Syria is mainly populated by tribal communities, and numerous parties have sought to politically recruit their leaders. Nonetheless, tribal leaders in Syria do not enjoy the same level of authority their equivalents in western Iraq enjoy. After years of a regime-led policy to promote loyal sheikhs over traditional sheikhdoms, the historical leadership has lost its ability to mobilize.¹ Sheikhs loyal to the Baath Party, on the other hand, failed to accumulate sufficient legitimacy to establish a sustainable new tribal order. In consequence, as the Syrian conflict has raged, members of the same tribe—sometime brothers and cousins—have often joined competing parties.

While tribal identity has remained important, the authority of tribal leaders in Deir Ezzor

has been significantly eroded. No particular sheikh seem to be able to monopolize authority within his alleged constituency, and the members of tribes are inclined to act on their personal perceived interests rather than following a weak sheikh's orders. The need for security, along with opportunities for political and economic gain, has pushed tribal communities to turn inwards, weakening broader tribal relationships. It is important to take into account the following dynamics in dealing with the tribal communities along the Euphrates Valley:

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1. The lack of state support and failed governance regime has created grievances among the local population. Moreover, loyalty to the regime was rewarded through better access to bureaucracy, mainly in the state apparatus.² Naturally, regime loyalists abused their authority and used it to settle scores with old foes. Hence, local and tribal conflicts of interests have translated into a deep mistrust of the state and the regime.

2. The urban population at large participated in the peaceful demonstrations at the beginning of the uprising. Activists and civilians were suppressed by the regime with the help of loyalists from rural areas, feeding pre-existing urban–rural tensions. Moreover, the province did not enjoy the same level of sympathy from the regime that other regions did, and this in its turn has fed sentiments of detachment from the rest of the country.

3. As the armed conflict against the regime intensified, the rural population established



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"Oil Brigades" to take advantage of the weaknesses of the state and took control of oil fields in their respective territories.³ These groups were later on banished by ISIS after it expanded its authority over large parts of Deir Ezzor and Al-Hassaka provinces. Nonetheless, some kept their newly acquired privileges in exchange for swearing allegiance to ISIS.

4. Regime and loyalist forces were expelled from most of the rural areas in 2012 and 2013, but managed to maintain their bases in the city of Deir Ezzor.⁴ The urban population seeking the liberation of their cities felt deceived by "Oil Brigades" which grew comfortable thanks to their abundant oil revenues. The inhabitants of cities were severely impacted by urban warfare and have been displaced in large numbers out of their homes.

5. ISIS led a consolidation campaign to subordinate all armed groups. Groups which resisted were crushed, and non-compliant individuals were persecuted and systematically targeted.⁵ ISIS depended on a network of local informants, most of them known to the public, creating further mistrust and more grievances.

Today, as ISIS steadily loses ground in eastern Syria, those forced into exile or those who have watched their friends and family members killed by the regime or terrorist groups, seek retribution and justice for their communities. The desire for revenge, combined with the absence of a strong, central authority to settle disputes, has set the stage for a chaotic and unstable post-war

scene in the east of the country.⁶ Moreover, the mission to ease tribal tensions and reconcile local populations gets even more challenging with the lack of a convincing political transition.

Under ISIS rules, most of the tribal communities in the province chose to acclimatize themselves within the state-like order the terrorist organization established in their areas. Many of their members joined ISIS for economic reasons, or simply because it was the only available way to fight against Assad. This arrangement, however, has not translated into a deep entrenched loyalty. Very aware of this reality, ISIS focused its efforts on indoctrinating younger generations rather than adults. Facing an uncertain fate with ISIS, and intensified Russian and U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, many chose to seek refuge elsewhere. Whether they choose to stay in Syria or eventually leave the country, they once again have to accommodate themselves to a new authoritarian party—either the SDF or the regime.

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The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were established the Deir Ezzor military council (DMC) on December 8, 2016, and appointed Ahmad Al-Khbeil (a.k.a Abu Khawla Al-Deiri) at the head of the council.⁷ This announcement was roundly criticized by the local population in Deir Ezzor, firstly because of genuine mistrust of the SDF, and secondly for the nomination of the contested Abu Khawla, an ex-oil brigadier who enjoys very little support out of his clan of Bakir.⁸ Regionally, the announcement went unnoticed or was simply ignored: Deir Ezzor seemed too far from SDF strongholds in the north of the



country, and the council legitimacy appeared too thin to attract much local support.

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Meanwhile, the council established a base near Al Shaddadi city and started to recruit young male IDPs from Deir Ezzor living in Hassaka, and ex-FSA (Free Syrian Army) fighters who had fled ISIS territories in 2014.⁹ There are no firm estimates for the number of fighters that joined the council, but it received a considerable boost after 800 fighters left the Ahmad Al-Jarba led "Syrian Elite Forces" and fully integrated into SDF's ranks.¹⁰ These forces consisted of seven units from the Al-Baggara and Al-Shaitat tribes stationed in the eastern Raqqa and southern Hasaka country sides, among them Yasser Al-Fayyad, a young but largely respected leader from the Al-Baggara tribe.

Three days after the regime announced it had broken the siege on his forces in Deir Ezzor, the SDF launched its "Al-Jazeera Storm" campaign with the stated aim of expelling ISIS from all areas north and east of the Euphrates.¹¹ In the course of few days, a Fayyad-led force rapidly advanced and captured the fortified Industrial City to the north of Deir Ezzor city, and successfully captured the Conoco gas field to the east of the valley a few days later.¹²

Despite his successful and swift progress, Yasser Al-Fayyad was arrested by the SDF military police, accusing him of a "lack of military discipline".¹³ Al-Baggara DMC fighters denied these charges, and accused the SDF of preventing Euphrates Shield and other FSA fighters from joining the fight against ISIS. The young commander was reportedly freed

a few days later, but threatened to freeze his participation in the anti-ISIS campaign if his fighters' conditions did not improve. It is crucially important to understand the following dynamics in order to assess the SDF's potential in Deir Ezzor:

1. The appointment of a contested Arab commander such as Abu Khawla Al-Deiri at the head of the DMC is a deliberate attempt to maintain the YPG's strong grip over the council. The rise of an Al-Fayyad like commander under his command does not only question his authority and legitimacy, but it could also lead to the possible partial or full emancipation of the DMC from SDF.
2. The quick SDF response to the Syrian Army's progress on the western Euphrates bank (Al-Shamiya) demonstrates a clear lack of trust in Russia/Regime intentions in observing the presumed delineation line along the Euphrates. This mistrust was further expressed by a statement made by Abu-Khawla, in which he said that the DMC would not allow the regime forces to cross the river to the eastern bank (Al-Jazeera).¹⁴
3. A host of former Deir Ezzor FSA groups, including Ousoud Al Sharqiya and Maghawir Al-Thawra, have manifested their interest in liberating their lands from ISIS. The U.S.-led international coalition, has required them to collaborate with the SDF in response. The latter, however, asked them to dissolve and to join the DMC on an individual capacity following a vetting process, a demand judged unacceptable by these opposition groups.¹⁵ Faced with the categorical denial of access to the Khabur valley, a number of FSA fighters are expected to defect and join the DMC.
4. The Deir Ezzor provincial council in exile, which is opposed to ISIS, has denounced both the regime and SDF plans to control the province. The SDF, as in Raqqa, is expected to create loyal civil councils and to



Moscow's airstrikes came after Russia accused the SDF of hindering regime advances in the area. It is not the first time that the two sides have exchanged fire in eastern Syria

ban mainstream opposition figures from effectively representing their constituencies. The failure to reconcile these councils will exacerbate the legitimacy problem among the local population, which is particularly problematic for pro-regime and refugees' communities.

5. The SDF is publicly associated with deadly American airstrikes and massive displacement. Yet, despite local sentiments of mistrust in the SDF intentions and often because of the lack of a better alternative, the group seems to be the lesser evil. Local tolerance for the SDF, however, is conditioned on the promise of handing over governance to local representatives.

As the SDF advances along the eastern bank there are two major risks it could face. First, the risk of confrontation with regime forces. On September 25, the SDF said that Russian Air Forces had targeted their positions near the Conoco gas field.¹⁶ Moscow's airstrikes came after Russia accused the SDF of hindering regime advances in the area. It is not the first time that the two sides have exchanged fire in eastern Syria. These attacks undermine the earlier presumption that the U.S. and Russia have reached an agreement over the oil-rich zone in Al-Jazeera sector. Second, as the situation stabilizes, the further the DMC get from SDF HQ in Shaddadi in Southern Hassaqa, the more likely Arab commanders & fighters fighting in the council rank will be tempted to create their own entity. Such a movement could be encouraged by the mainstream opposition, as well as Turkey and even Russia. Furthermore, it could be sustained by oil extraction, enabling the local population to claim a certain form of autonomy.

The Regime Forces

On July 14, 2017, loyalist forces launched an offensive in the south of Raqqa province, advancing south of the town of Resafa and coming within 70 kilometers of Sukhnah after reaching the administrative border of Homs province.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Russian Air Forces launched a large-scale aerial campaign against ISIS in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Homs provinces to assist the regime and allied forces' progress. Loyalist forces advanced over three main axes: Palmyra–Soukhna to take control of the Deir Ezzor–Homs highway, Humaymah to prevent mainstream opposition forces in the Syrian Desert from entering the border town of Bukamal, and Resafa–Madan along the Euphrates Valley and the presumed US–Russian delineation line.

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Iranian-backed militias, such as the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade, Ahbab Zeineb, the Desert Eagles, Al Nujabaa Forces and others have been particularly active on ISIS fronts in the Syrian desert over the first two axes.¹⁸ Whereas, the Republican Guard, Tiger Forces, Syrian Army Russian-backed 5th corps and Hezbollah have advanced along the Euphrates downstream to break the ISIS siege on Deir Ezzor.¹⁹

By September 4, loyalist forces were within shooting range of Deir Ezzor, and the siege on the city was broken the next day when Tiger Forces reached the 137th Brigade base on the western outskirts of the city. On October 1, ISIS retaliated and launched a counteroffensive, recapturing the city of al-Qaryatayn in Homs province, killing 217



regime troops and reportedly capturing two Russian officers.²⁰

It is important to take into account the following dynamics governing the Syrian desert in order to assess the regime's mission in the area:

1. Tribal leaders continue to play an important role as intermediaries in local reconciliation and recruitment processes. Damascus—sensitive to such dynamics—has recently multiplied its efforts to reactivate its old tribal networks. The regime and the IRGC are employing financial incentives to attract new leaders, and are promising amnesties in exchange for them joining the Syrian Army and local NDF formations.

2. In its previous military campaigns against mainstream opposition, the regime implemented what it called "the ants crawling" military strategy. This strategy consisted of using aviation to weaken the opposition's resistance, taking control of highlands, sweeping connecting plains, and then marching on to the next military objective. This strategy allowed loyalist forces to preserve their gains and to besiege the opposition on multiple occasions. The geography in Eastern Syria, with its large plains, few mountains, and long supply routes will not allow regime forces to implement a similar strategy. Instead, Damascus has become heavily reliant on Russian air power completely destroying the dispersed settlements along the Euphrates before claiming their capture. Nonetheless, the regime forces struggle to protect their supply routes, and thus have been left out in the open on multiple occasions, allowing ISIS to strike back.

3. ISIS members are accustomed to the Syrian Desert, they employ local guides, and control smuggling routes in and out of the region. Recent reports suggest that ISIS

has divided the remainder of its forces into small agile and rapid deployment units. The reconfiguration allows them to move behind regime lines and successfully target them with short and medium range weapons. Moreover, ISIS has built a network of local brokers across the desert and its outskirts. This network is currently providing them with essential military equipment thanks to their abundant financial resources.

4. The local population is highly suspicious of the intentions of Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah, which are both major actors in the regime's latest campaign. These IRGC-mobilized and financed groups are predominately composed of Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Iraqi groups are specifically problematic because of their human rights abuses in western Iraq, to whom many local communities in Deir Ezzor feel strongly connected. Their participation further feeds ISIS rhetoric and strikes a deep fear within civilians.

Refugees and IDPs from eastern Syria still retain vivid memories of the human rights abuses committed by regime forces at the beginning of the uprising. Zahreddine's statement confirms their worst fears and has set the stage for further resistance

In a TV interview following the end of ISIS siege on Deir Ezzor, Issam Zahreddine, Major General of the Syrian Republican Guard said: "To those who fled from Syria to another country, I beg you not to ever return, because even if the government forgives you, we will never forgive or forget. If you know what is good for you, none of you will return."²¹ Refugees and IDPs from eastern Syria still retain vivid memories of the human rights abuses committed by regime forces at the beginning of the uprising. Zahreddine's statement confirms their worst fears and has set the stage for further resistance. The daily



massacres of civilians fleeing bombarded cities are a constant reminder of the fate that awaits them if the regime maintains its control over their cities. Faced with such fatalism, living in SDF controlled territory, even with stigmatization for imaginary empathy for ISIS, seems to be the only available alternative for civilians.

Conclusion

ISIS is preparing to undermine any attempts to replace it in eastern Syria, and the challenges for post-war stabilization, reconstruction and governance are considerable. Yet, the persistent U.N. incapacity to broker a convincing and sustainable national political transition has not hindered international and regional efforts to militarily defeat ISIS. Yet, it is crucial to empower grassroots organizations and local governance bodies in order for these efforts not to be in vain.

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It is difficult to envisage an efficient counter-extremism strategy in Syria that does not provide a form of justice for the victims, a rehabilitation process for local youth recruited by ISIS, a representative governance organization, or reliable security forces. Proposing viable solutions for these issues should not wait until the effective end of ISIS.

The forces engaged in expelling ISIS from the region should be composed of local communities in order to prevent the establishment of a weak illegitimate post-ISIS order. Any form of authoritarianism will be widely rejected by the populace, and

would delay the stabilization of the region. Similarly, local administration councils should maintain their independence, and should receive international support for the establishment of local law enforcement and counter-terrorist forces.

Tribal affiliation remains an important characteristic of Deir Ezzor local identity: it is a source of pride and belonging that provides its members with a minimum sense of security. Nonetheless, tribes have long lost their ability to operate a command-and-control structure. Indeed, the regime over the last 40 years has deliberately prevented any prominent sheikh from exercising authority outside its realm.

The absence of central authority brought about by the early events of the Syrian conflict pushed tribal communities to turn inwards, and members of the same tribe often joined competing parties. When ISIS took control of the Euphrates basin in 2014, many of the opposition affiliated fighters fled their towns while the rest of the local population had to accommodate to the new order ISIS imposed on the region. As ISIS steadily loses ground in eastern Syria and new zones of influence take shape, with the SDF positioned to take control of the Euphrates western bank and the regime the eastern bank, local populace faces a hard choice between two entities they deeply mistrust.

Similarly, local administration councils should maintain their independence, and should receive international support for the establishment of local law enforcement and counter-terrorist forces

The local population still maintains a very vivid memory of the human rights abuses regime forces committed at the beginning



of the uprising. The daily massacres of civilians fleeing the region are a constant reminder of the fate that awaits them if the regime returns. Faced with such fatalism, living in SDF-controlled territory seems to be the only available alternative for civilians despite local sentiments of mistrust of the group. This choice, however, could very well be temporary, if the SDF extends its authority to local administration and governance.



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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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Observers are increasingly focusing their attention on the race for Deir Ezzor as the battle against ISIS in Raqqa draws to its conclusion. Local and regional actors have long presumed the existence of a Russian-American agreement on how to divide the region into two zones of influence along the Euphrates valley. Yet, recent events reveal considerable divergences between the strategies of the two global forces. The Euphrates valley links Turkey, Syria and Iraq, and has witnessed increased local competition over its oil rich resources throughout the last seven years. It was largely under the control of the mainstream opposition before ISIS expelled them to the west of the country, and now both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime are racing to capture the terrorist group's former territory. As ISIS steadily loses ground in eastern Syria, many challenges arise: dealing with the residual effects of ISIS, handling the reconstruction of the region, ensuring the safe return of IDPs and refugees, and many other pressing matters. This paper attempts to identify the dynamics that govern eastern Syria, the tribal scene, and the challenges SDF and Damascus are facing in their conquest of the east.