

# Field Developments in Eastern Syria

- **Causes of the Tribal Uprising**
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Case Report  
10 September 2023



A report by the Information Management Unit (IMU)  
at Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)



## Field Developments In Eastern Syria

In 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the International Coalition, took control of Deir ez-Zor<sup>1</sup> governorate after fierce battles with DAESH. Despite the participation of all the region's people from the Arab component in the battles against DAESH, the SDF did not involve the Arab component in administrating their areas. Instead, they began to dismantle or assimilate Arab fighter factions within their military formations. This meant that Arab fighters should be managed by Kurdish fighters who assumed key government and army positions. The international coalition, led by the United States, considered the SDF its partner in combating terrorism in the region. DAESH committed massacres in Deir ez-Zor governorate (killing hundreds of young men from Al-Shaitat clan) and displaced dozens of cities and towns in Hajin sub-district.

Deir ez-Zor governorate did not stabilize after the SDF took control of it, as the arrest operations continued, targeting the locals under the pretext that they were sleeper cells of DAESH. These arrests targeted all opponents of SDF policies in the region.

On 27 August 2023, the SDF arrested the Deir ez-Zor Military Council commander, Ahmed al-Khabeel, known as Abu Khawla, which sparked clashes between the SDF and Arab tribal fighters. However, it is generally agreed upon that the arrest of the leader of the Deir al-Zour Military Council ignited the war. Still, it is not the primary cause of the uprising.

Today, the city of Thiban witnesses fierce clashes between the SDF and tribal fighters in an attempt by the SDF to storm it. They believe that the capture of this city and the arrest of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl (Sheikh of the Al-Akidat tribe) will end the uprising of the tribal members. Ibrahim al-Hufl has taken the lead in uniting the tribes in the fight against the SDF, and he has been joined by several tribal sheiks and their leaders in the region. The regime forces and Iran attempted to intervene and play a role in the scene. Sheikh Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bashir (leader of the Iran-backed Lions of the Tribes militia) declared his support for the Arab tribal revolution despite his presence in regime-controlled areas. However, all Arab tribes refused to engage with Sheikh Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bashir. Several towns are currently witnessing attempts by the SDF to invade them, such as the towns of Al-Tayyana and Shiheil. The Arab tribes are trying to pressure the SDF to reduce their military activities in Deir ez-Zor by opening new fronts to fight against them in the eastern countryside of Aleppo.

The military operations resulted in the death of 18 civilians, including two children, and the injury of 12 civilians. Additionally, 8,928 civilians were displaced because of the military operations.

### 1. The Causes of the Tribal Uprising in Deir ez-Zor

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<sup>1</sup> To access the Assistance Coordination Unit's introductory report on Deir ez-Zor region, please visit the following link:  
[https://acu-sy.org/imu\\_reports/eastern-deir-ez-zor-governorate-thematic-2022/](https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/eastern-deir-ez-zor-governorate-thematic-2022/)

What is happening now in the Deir ez-Zor governorate is the tribal revolution of the Arab tribes against the SDF for cumulative reasons, the most important of which is the tribes' unwillingness for the Kurdish forces to dominate the region's governance.

- The SDF's arbitrary arrests under the accusations of the locals being sleeper cells for DAESH is a contributing factor.
- The unclear stance of the SDF regarding the Syrian regime and the Iranian presence in the region is also a contributing factor. The SDF tends to lean towards closer ties with the Syrian regime during every crisis they face.
- Another significant factor is the neglect of service provision in Deir Al-Zor governorate compared to the quality of services provided in predominantly Kurdish areas in Al-Hasakah governorate. Even though the majority of oil wells are located in Deir Al-Zor governorate, services are entirely lacking in areas like Thiban, Hajin, and Susat. In contrast, services are considered weak in the areas of Basira and Sur, and they are rated as average in Kasra subdistrict.
- The Kurdish curriculum imposed by the SDF in its controlled areas, which the residents of Deir Al-Zor governate completely reject, is another factor.
- The SDF's conscription campaigns in the area
- Confiscating all the wealth of the oil-rich region and failing to provide services in Deir ez-Zor province
- The SDF's repressive policy in response to any movement by the region's residents demanding improved humanitarian conditions, their disregard for the tribal nature of the region, and several accusations of assassinating tribal leaders and prominent figures who oppose them in the area is another factor.
- The absence of any relief or medical organizations in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor
- The security chaos in the Deir ez-Zor region, organized crime, and the lack of SDF intervention in case of problems in the area

## 2. International Positions on Developments in Deir ez-Zor Governorate

The United States closely monitors the battles with extreme caution as it does not desire to bring about any change in the region. It cannot engage in military action to support the SDF against the uprising tribes. Instead, it is trying to pressure the SDF to negotiate with the Arab tribes and resolve the dispute away from the fighting. Some believe the United States wanted to involve the Arab component in the region's administration since the SDF took control of it, but the SDF refused.

The sequence of events shows that the United States is concerned about the SDF's lack of a clear stance on the Iranian presence in the region or rapprochement with the Syrian regime. The SDF has not taken any concrete steps in line with American recommendations that could reassure Turkey and secure its borders.

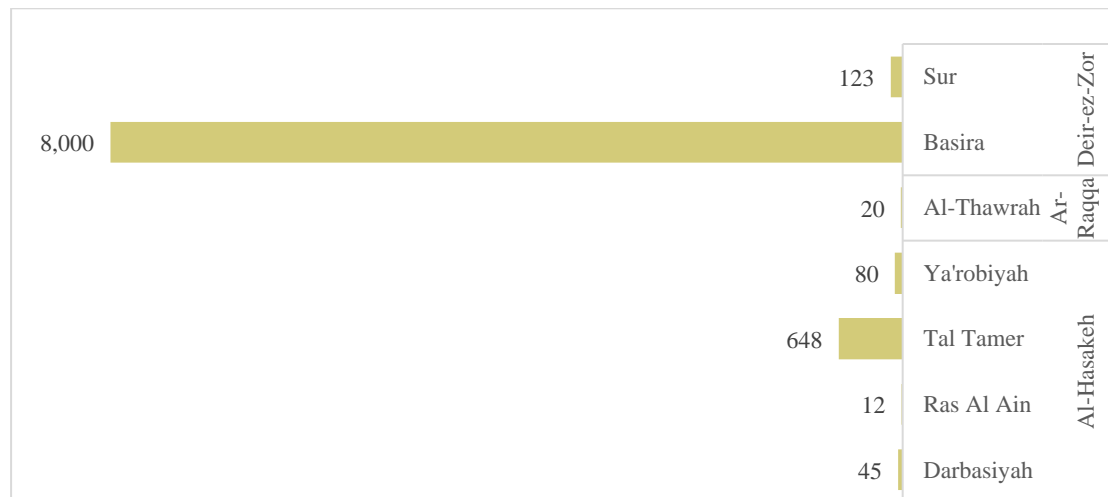
Iran is attempting to mobilize the tribes aligned with it on the other side of the river to achieve an Iranian breach east of the Euphrates, intending to gain control of Deir ez-Zor governate through the Arab tribes loyal to it. This is part of its project known as the "Popular Resistance against the Americans." The control of the tribes over Deir ez-Zor region will allow Iran to carry out a military operation to take control of the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor later on unless the tribes have the means to prevent this.

### 3. Humanitarian Situation and Displacement

A total of 8,928 civilians have been displaced due to the ongoing events in eastern Syria. Most of the IDPs are from Basira, which has witnessed military operations and a massive campaign of arrests by the SDF. It is worth noting that reports from the city of Thiban indicate daily shelling and clashes, although obtaining precise statistics on the number of displaced individuals is challenging. Also, a total of 648 civilians have been displaced from Tal Tamr sub-district in Al-Hasakah governorate due to the ongoing military operations in the area.

The eastern rural areas of Deir ez-Zor are experiencing the closure of shops, especially in the city of Thiban and the towns of Tayyana and Shiheil. Shops have also been closed in the areas of Basira and Sur, with partial openings noted in Basira at the time of the report's preparation.

The eastern rural areas of Deir ez-Zor suffer from a lack of bread and interruptions in water and electricity supply in some cities and towns. Arab tribes in some cities and towns have formed civil bodies to protect service and government facilities and to attempt to maintain their operation.



### 4. Sequence of Events

#### 17 August 2023

The media spokesperson for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), "Farhad al-Sham," affirmed that the SDF will not engage in any military operation against Iran in Syria. He also denied reports suggesting the possibility of clashes with Iranian militias west of the Euphrates River in the event of US pressure on the SDF.

#### 27 August 2023

The southern neighborhoods of Al-Hasakah City witnessed a heavy security presence. This coincided with heavy security deployment by the Asayish. A curfew was imposed in all neighborhoods of the city in the evening. Special forces from the SDF raided the homes of military leaders in the Deir ez-Zor Military Council and arrested some of them.

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF besieged Tal Al-Fadin in the Sur sub-district, where the leadership of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council is located. An exchange of fire occurred between the two parties, which ended with the SDF arresting the Deir ez-Zor Military Council's leaders, Ahmed Al-Khabil, also known as Abu Khawla, and his deputy, Khalil Al-Wahsh.

### 28 August 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, clashes erupted between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Deir ez-Zor Military Council forces in the town of Rabida. These clashes resulted in the death of 2 fighters from the Deir ez-Zor Military Council and the injury of another fighter. A gunshot injured a civilian woman as a result of the clashes.

### 29 August 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, violent clashes erupted between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the residents of Breiha, part of Basira sub-district. Clashes also occurred in the town of Shiheil, where the locals took control of an SDF checkpoint. The people clashed with an SDF checkpoint in the town of Hreijiyeh, which is part of Sur sub-district. This resulted in killing of eight civilians from the area and several SDF fighters. Clashes also took place between the SDF forces and the people in the city of Thiban. Tribe members and Deir ez-Zor Military Council fighters attacked the SDF forces in the city of Basira, and the SDF fighters responded by shelling the city with mortar shells. Clashes also took place near the Al-Azba oil field between the SDF and the tribe members. And tribe members targeted an SDF military convoy in the town of Jdidet Bikara. The SDF forces shelled the town of Al-Azba, east of Deir ez-Zor city, with heavy artillery.

### 30 August 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, clashes erupted between tribal members and the SDF forces stationed at the Al-Barid checkpoint in the village of Daman, resulting in the death of three civilians, including a child and eight SDF members. Sur sub-district witnessed a large displacement movement for fear of clashes. The SDF took control of the town of Al-Azba and began a search and arrest campaign.

A delegation from the Al-Baggara tribe, led by Sheikh Hajim Al-Bashir and accompanied by some local leaders, headed to the SDF leaders in the region. Sheikh Hajim talked about the current situation in the region and the need to stop fighting in the region and not infringe on the people of the Arab regions. The military leaders pledged to implement a ceasefire and return to normal life.

### 31 August 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, clashes took place between tribe members and the SDF forces stationed in Basira Mountain and the towns of Shiheil, Barsham, and Dranj. Tribe members took control of the checkpoints

of the towns of Mhemideh and Elhisan and expelled the SDF members from them. The tribe members also destroyed an SDF armored vehicle in the town of Shiheil.

A meeting was held in the house of Sheikh "Ibrahim al-Hufl" in the Thiban sub-district, and a statement was issued from the meeting, which gave the SDF a period of 12 hours to withdraw its forces from the region and hand over the leadership of the region to the Arab component. A number of SDF members surrendered themselves to Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl, who pledged to bring them to their families safely. Al Baqarah tribe blocked the road for the SDF forces in the town of Mhemideh.

### 01 September 2023

In the northeastern countryside of Aleppo, clashes erupted along the front lines between the SDF and the National Army forces (the Turkish-backed opposition). After battles with the SDF, the National Army forces took control of the town of Abu Hayj in Al-Bab sub-district. The tribe members also took control of the Arab Hassan Hill on the Menbij front. Russian aircraft bombed the town of Mahsanli in Jarablus sub-district, killing an entire family. Tribal fighters took control of the town of Halawanji. Columns from the Hadidi and Jamalana Hashemite tribes entered the lines of engagement with the SDF in Menbij sub-district.

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, violent clashes took place between tribe members and SDF forces in the town of Jasmi in Sur sub-district and the military base of SDF in Basira Mountain. The commander of the General Security (affiliated with SDF) in Sosa City communicated with the tribe members to seek a safe exit for him and his members. One of the notables secured the exit of the fighters. SDF fighters also withdrew from Hajin City completely without any fighting. All SDF fighters withdrew from Thiban sub-district towards Al-Omar Oilfield, where the IC forces are stationed. The SDF stationed in Basira Mountain shelled the area with mortar shells.

The notables and the people of Hajin City met and formed a security committee to protect the public properties and institutions and organize markets. It was also agreed to follow up the work of institutions to the fullest, including the municipality, stations, and services in general.

### 02 September 2023

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, clashes erupted along the lines of contact between the SDF and the forces of the National Army (the Turkish-backed opposition). The forces of the National Army and the Arab tribes took control of three Mahmoudiyah towns after violent clashes with SDF forces. The regime forces shelled with heavy artillery Tadaf sub-district, which displaced dozens of families. The clans took control of the strategic Syriatel hill in the countryside of Menbij sub-district, and the Russian aircraft bombed the hill after the clans took control of it.

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF shelled Sabhatown with mortar shells, and SDF snipers deployed on rooftops. Military reinforcements consisting of four columns of SDF military vehicles arrived at Al-Omar Oilfield from Al-Hasakeh governorate. SDF began to besiege Basira sub-district and search houses to search for tribal fighters. There were clashes between SDF forces and tribal fighters. As a result, three people, including a woman

and her daughter, were injured in Basira market due to being targeted by an SDF sniper. There was no movement at all within Basira sub-district amid water and electricity cuts and the exhaustion of food and vegetables from the markets.

The notables and the people of Al-Bagouz town met and formed a security committee to protect public properties and institutions and organize the markets. It was also agreed to follow up the institutions' work and abolish all armed manifestations in the city.

Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl (the sheik of the Akidat clan) announced the general mobilization of the tribe members after he refused to negotiate with the SDF. The sheik of the Baggara clan also refused to negotiate with the SDF except with the presence of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl in the negotiation.

### 03 September 2023

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, clashes erupted along the lines of contact between the SDF and the forces of the National Army. The SDF shelled the town of Hadra with artillery and mortars. Clashes also occurred between the two parties in Arab Hassan, Mahsanli, Umm Adaseh, Al-Zanqal, and Al-Tukhar. A large displacement movement of people from the villages of the lines of contact began towards the city of Menbij and the village of Shweiha, and some of the displaced people settled in the farms and slept under the trees. Russian aircraft bombed the village of Arab Hassan amid reports of tribe members taking control of the village.

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF began a campaign of arrests in Basira city, coinciding with a power outage, water cut, lack of bread, and the closure of all shops. A civilian was killed, and another tribe member was injured due to the bombing of a drone. The SDF began a search and arrest campaign in Al-Zar town. In Kasra sub-district, three SDF members were killed in the towns of Hawayej Bumasaa and Mhemideh after an attack on their posts. In Sur sub-district, the SDF carried out a campaign of arrests in the towns of Jasimi, Moeijel, Bseitine, and Eastern Gharibeh, arrested more than ten tribe members, and confiscated some weapons.

In the northern countryside of Al-Hasakeh, clashes took place between SDF and tribal fighters in the town of Tal Tawil in Tal Tamir sub-district. There were casualties on both sides amid reports of tribe members taking control of the Tal Tawil and Taraki towns in Tal Tamir sub-district.

In the northern countryside of Raqqa, the forces of the Arab tribes and the National Army took control of the towns of Sakir and Al-Tarwaziya in the Ain Issa sub-district.

Sheikh Nawaf Abdulaziz Al-Muslat, the sheik of the Jubur-Qahtaniyah tribe, declared the general mobilization against the SDF. The members of Al Sheetat tribes announced their support for the Arab tribes in their fight against the SDF.

Deputy Assistant Minister of National Defense Goldrich and Interior Management Office Commander Major General Faul in northeastern Syria met with SDF, the Democratic Development Center, and tribal leaders from Deir ez-Zor.

According to the website of the US Embassy in Damascus, they agreed on the need to address the grievances of the people of Deir ez-Zor, the risks of outsiders intervening in Deir ez-Zor, the need to avoid civilian casualties, and the need to stop the escalation of violence as soon as possible. Das Goldrich and MG Fowl stressed on the importance of the strong partnership of the United States with the SDF in efforts to fight Daesh. The clans participating in the meeting were not confirmed, and no statement was issued by those clans to indicate the meeting results.

#### 04 September 2023

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, clashes erupted along the lines of contact between the SDF and the forces of the National Army (the Turkish-backed opposition). Tribal fighters took control of the town of Um Jلود in the countryside of Menbij.

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF took control of Shiheil town and deployed snipers on the roofs of buildings. Clashes between SDF and tribe members continue on the outskirts of the town.

In Sur sub-district, water trucks began to enter, and some shops started working.

Huge SDF military columns headed towards Thiban sub-district, and IC aircraft were seen flying over the sub-district, specifically over the column. Some believe that the IC aircraft's flight was to prevent SDF columns from heading to Thiban. The SDF carried out two attempts to storm Thiban, where Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl (the sheik of the Akidat clan) lives, whom it considered the leader of the Arab clans that stood in against the SDF, but the two failed. SDF bombed Thiban city with drones, killing and injuring dozens of civilians.

#### 05 September 2023

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, the SDF targeted the town of Qabasin with missile strikes from launchers.

The Kayar of Tay clan announced its readiness to support the members of the clans in their war against the SDF.

#### 06 September 2023

In the northern countryside of Aleppo, Olashli town and Al-Ajmi towns came under rocket fire from ground launchers from joint positions of the SDF and regime forces.

In the eastern countryside of Aleppo, the towns of Al-Buwayjij and Al-Bughaz in Menbij sub-district witnessed intermittent clashes and shelling exchanges between tribal forces and the SDF.

#### 07 September 2023

In the eastern countryside of Aleppo, the towns of Al-Bughaz and Arab Hasan, located in Menbij sub-district, witnessed intense clashes between tribal fighters and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Elements of the regime also joined the fighting on the side of the SDF. SDF and regime forces shelled the towns of Baldaq, Al-Yaqoubiyeh, Al-Awlashli, and Saboyran. SDF and regime forces launched rocket attacks from ground-based launchers on the Barshaya camp near the town of Qabasin, resulting in a child's death and three civilian injuries. Additionally, SDF carried out rocket attacks from ground-based launchers on the town of Mahsanli, in Jarabulus sub-district, leading to one civilian's death and five others' injuries.



In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF continued its shelling of the city of Thiban, where tribal fighters are stationed. Meanwhile, clashes erupted on the outskirts of the city of Thiban, as well as in the towns of Tayyana and Shiheil.

### 08 September 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took control of the city of Thiban and carried out a series of arrests in the cities of Basira and Thiban, as well as in the towns of Zir, Jdidet Bikara, Moeijel, and Jasmi.

In the northern countryside of Al-Hasakeh, the SDF carried out heavy artillery shelling on the towns of Ateeq Al-Hawa, Dadah, Tal Abbud, Tal Elward, and Msheirfeh in Ras Al Ain sub-district. Additionally, the city of Tal Tamer and the towns of Al-Arish, Abu Rasin, and Um Elkeif witnessed intense clashes between SDF and tribal forces along with the Syrian National Army.

In northern rural Aleppo, fierce clashes erupted between the SDF and tribal forces in the towns of Al-Toukhar, Awon Al-Dadat, and Kaljibrin.

The commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Mazloun Abdi, pledged to meet the demands of the Arab tribes in eastern Syria and rectify the mistakes that he said were made in managing the region in an effort to defuse tensions after days of fighting in Deir ez-Zor. Abdi said he met with tribal leaders and would respect their request to release dozens of local fighters who rose up against the SDF and were arrested following security operations carried out by the SDF in Deir ez-Zor. Abdi stated, "We have decided to issue a general amnesty for those involved, and we have already released half of the detainees, and we will release the rest." Abdi also promised to host a wide-ranging meeting with Arab tribal leaders and other representatives from Deir ez-Zor to address longstanding grievances. He pledged to restructure both the civilian council under the Autonomous Administration that is governing the region and the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, which is affiliated with the SDF, to make them more representative of all tribes and components in Deir ez-Zor.

Abdi added, "We are open to all criticisms and will study them all and overcome them. The result will be a stronger return of the SDF with all its components," emphasizing that the SDF will not withdraw from the region. He accused the Syrian regime of fomenting unrest, stating that its forces had arrested fighters linked to Damascus who had joined the tribal rebels and that they would not be released through a general amnesty. He also said that he had invited Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl, the leader of Akidat clan, to sit down and negotiate and resolve outstanding issues, but the latter did not respond.

Military operations are still active in the areas extending east of the Euphrates River in Deir ez-Zor governance for the 12th consecutive day between the tribal forces of the region and the SDF. Meanwhile, the SDF entered the city of Thiban and the towns of Al-Jurzi and Abu Hardoub and set up checkpoints within them.

### 09 September 2023

In eastern rural Deir ez-Zor, the SDF killed a child named Ahmed Ismail al-Khater by shooting him. The tribe members then attacked an SDF checkpoint in the town of Sabha.

In the northern Al-Hasakeh countryside, the SDF began fortifying the town of Markada in anticipation of any attacks by tribal fighters, as Markada serves as a crucial link between Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh governances.

### 10 September 2023

In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF carried out a series of arrests in the city of Basira and the towns of Bahra and Al-Baghuz. Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hufl, the leader of Akidat clan, announced the continuation of the fight against the SDF in an audio message circulated on social media.

### Conclusion

Even if the region calms down, it is assumed that the Arab clans will seek to form institutional and organizational structures and form a unified leadership that communicates with the IC and determines the region's future. Natural disasters have shown the unification of the Arab clans and their ability to support their people, starting with the humanitarian aid convoys that left the east of Deir ez-Zor to the west when the devastating earthquake hit the region. Then, the Deir ez-Zor clans sent water tanks in response to the water scarcity in Al-Hasakeh Governorate. Currently, all Arab clans rise up in support of the people of Deir ez-Zor, a phenomenon of social cohesion that must not be suppressed.



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