



The Evolving Russian-Syrian Pressure Campaign in Northeast Syria

OE Watch Commentary: Per Arabic-language media reporting, joint Russian-Syrian efforts are underway to extend their influence in northeast Syria at the expense of the US and its allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). For Damascus, a key component of these efforts involves mobilizing “popular resistance” against the US and the SDF, primarily by exploiting Arab-Kurdish fault lines in Deir Ezzor and Hasakah provinces. Recent popular resistance actions described in the article in northeast Syria include protests and blockades, the formation of Arab tribal militias, and an ongoing campaign highlighting the misdeeds of the US and its SDF allies. According to the accompanying article from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, the coming months may see direct attacks against American interests and personnel that will be “attributed to unknown persons or to ISIS,” as the Syrian government seeks to exploit the upcoming US elections in order to put further pressure on areas beyond its control in the country’s northeast.

As seen in another article from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, the evolving Russian-Syrian pressure campaign has also leveraged rifts within Syria’s main Kurdish political party, the Democratic Union Party (YPG), between the pro-US faction led by SDF commander Mazloum Abdi and loyalists to the Turkish-based leadership of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Cemîl Bayik, often described as the PKK’s operational leader, has become the public face of the anti-Abdi camp and is naturally being courted by Damascus.

In the third accompanying article, Moscow recently hosted leaders of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the SDF’s political counterpart, to sign a “memorandum of understanding” with the head of the “People’s Will,” a “tolerated opposition” Syrian political party led by a Syrian Kurdish politician named Qadri Jamil. Jamil has lived in Moscow for much of the past decade and is emerging as a key fulcrum for Russian influence in northeast Syria. The Syrian and Turkish governments have both reacted tepidly to the agreement, though for different reasons. Some commentary interprets the agreement as a hedge by the YPG’s pro-US camp, encouraged both by US policy uncertainty and by the evolving Russian-Syrian pressure campaign in northeast Syria.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...during the coming period, the regime may try to increase pressure on the Americans in coordination with Russia...”

Source:

“The Syrian Regime East of the Euphrates: Using the Tribes Against the Americans and the SDF,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 20 August 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y27j5qwd>

النظام السوري شرقي الفرات: استمالة العشائر ضد الأميركيين و”قسد

In the context of its exploitation of these incidents, the regime encouraged some residents of Hasakah province to organize protests in front of the Hasakah city Justice Palace and the Qamishli Cultural Center denouncing “the American aggression” at its forces’ checkpoint in the countryside of Qamishli... The regime is also trying to win over the Arab tribes east of the Euphrates, taking advantage of the state of popular frustration against the SDF and its practices, such as random arrests, recruitment of youth in its ranks, and its monopolizing of oil wealth and leadership in areas with an Arab majority, backed by American support...

The Al Bouassi clan in al-Hasakah province also announced its readiness to join the uprising of the al-Akaidat and al-Bakara clans in the eastern villages of Deir Al-Zour countryside, against the American forces and the SDF... On August 9, the al-Akaidat tribe announced the formation of a military wing in coordination with regime forces, after the assassination of Mutashhar Al-Hafl, one of its most prominent sheikhs at the beginning of the month...

These efforts on the part of the regime are carried out in coordination with the Russian side, which began to penetrate east of the Euphrates with the start of the most recent Turkish military operation there last year. This came in conjunction with a Russian move to control the Qamishli airport and other areas under the regime’s control, and to bring aid to the region. The Russian expansion east of the Euphrates came after a decline in the Iranian role in the region after the killing of the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, which paved the way for the Russians to co-opt some tribal sheikhs in the Tayy and Harb regions and the tribes of Bani Sab’a, Al-Buassi, Albu Rashid and Al-Ghanamah. The Russians put forward plans to recruit members of the tribes into irregular military battalions, with the aim of pulling the popular and tribal rug from under the feet of the Americans in that region.

In a statement to al-Araby al-Jadid, political analyst Shadi Abdullah said that the Syrian regime is trying to take advantage of developments east of the Euphrates and of the presidential elections in the United States to increase pressure on the American presence in the region... According to the political analyst, “during the coming period, the regime may try to increase pressure on the Americans in coordination with Russia. It is not unlikely that we will witness bombing operations on American sites or patrols attributed to unknown persons or to ISIS, that will kill American soldiers with the aim of pressuring Washington and get it to think again about withdrawing from Syria, or at least from the oil wells that the regime is in dire need of now, in light of the suffocating economic crisis.”



Continued: The Evolving Russian-Syrian Pressure Campaign in Northeast Syria



Qadri Jamil (2012).

Source: kassioun newspaper, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qadri_Jamil_%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A_%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84.jpg, / CGBY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)

Source:

الأكراد يطبعون مع قدري جميل.. إرضاء روسيا أم مناكفة الأميركيين؟
 “Kurds Normalize with Qadri Jamil... Pleasing Russia or Opposing the Americans?” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 1 September 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4nqgp9y>

The Kurdish delegation included Ilham Ahmed, the head of the SDC executive body, its deputy Hikmat Al-Habib, Sanharib Barsoum, head of the council's Syriac Union, in addition to Sihanouk Dibo... There has been an increase in talks recently about factions pushing some towards Russia and the regime, while other insist on continuing the full alliance with the United States. In a statement to al-Modon, the writer Hoshink Osei said, “Despite the preponderance of the PYD's relations with the Americans, its links with the Russians have not been cut off”... Many believe that there is a sharp division within the “Democratic Union” (PYD), which has long been considered the Syrian wing of the PKK, as party leaders in Syria, headed by Mazloum Abdi, the military leader of the SDF, head toward disengagement from the PKK, with American support...

Source:

سوريا: مذكرة تفاهم بين حليفي روسيا وأميركا.. ما هي دلالاتها؟
 “Syria: Memorandum of Understanding Between Allies of Russia and America... What are its Implications?” *180post.com*, 3 September 2020. <https://180post.com/archives/12707>

Were it not that the Kurdish delegation that signed the memorandum of understanding was led by Ilham Ahmed, who is known for her proximity to General Mazloum Abdi, commander in chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the godfather of the Kurdish alliance with Washington, some of them could say that the signing of the memorandum comes in the context of Kurdish-Kurdish differences and reflects the desire of a wing inside the SDC or the SDF to restore balance to the relationship with Moscow after it was severely disrupted by the Kurdish push towards Washington led by Mazloum Abdi... The Kurdish leadership, led by General Mazloum Abdi, may have sensed this Russian desire and found no objection to it, especially as it has its own concerns in the lead up to the US election...

But the memorandum's messages are not limited to the Russian and American sides. Ankara undoubtedly is concerned by this memorandum, not because its bitter Kurdish opponents signed it, but because the way the memorandum may be politically employed in ways that are of disadvantage with Ankara's expansionist policy... Ankara's statements do not represent a final position of opposition until it becomes clear whether the path of how the understanding and memoranda are employed is in its interests.

...Damascus is expected to avoid rejecting the memorandum in order to not disturb the Russian ally and also to not lose the terms it agrees with. At the same time to highlight the memorandum as a document that rejects the idea of the occupation, which reinforces Damascus's new path in the east Euphrates, represented by attempts to launch popular resistance against the American occupation forces.