



Tensions Between Anti-ISIS Allies in the Euphrates Valley

OE Watch Commentary: According to local reports from eastern Syria, tensions are on the rise between the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), on the one hand, and the Syrian Elite Forces (SEF), the armed wing of the Saudi and UAE-backed Syria's Tomorrow Movement, on the other. Although nominal allies against ISIS, the groups have had fraught relations since the Battle of Raqqa last year. With ISIS nearly eliminated from eastern Syria and local factions reassessing the strategic landscape, the accompanying excerpted articles and statements explain how competition for control on the ground is likely to intensify in this strategically delicate region.

The latest tensions revolve around what, under different circumstances, might have remained a local affair: an argument and shootout in the village of Abu Hammam between a patrol from the SDF and an armed group linked to the SEF. Abu Hammam is part of the Shaitat tribal areas and is located along the Euphrates River Valley, about halfway between the city of Deir Ezzor and the Syria-Iraq border. It was the site of one of the Syrian conflict's bloodiest single events, the 2014 massacre of hundreds of males at the hands of ISIS fighters. Divisions and resentments are acute, given that many ISIS members were residents of nearby communities.

The SDF's version of events, excerpted in the accompanying official statement, holds that local residents called in a group of troublemakers, accusing them of stealing and selling weapons. The SDF patrol sent to investigate came under fire from a group labelled as an example of "irresponsible factions" who use the SEF name, but whose true aim is "to create strife and instability in the area." Whenever asked by local residents, the statement adds, the SDF will "act against those who carry out illicit activities as well as against ISIS sleeper cells." According to the excerpted passage from the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a SDF member threatened an envoy seeking to mediate the clashes in Abu Hammam with "[telling] the Americans to bomb" the home of the suspect involved in the shootout and "saying he was in thrall to ISIS." As the only non-loyalist force to have defeated ISIS on the Syrian battlefield, the SDF benefits from raising the specter of chaos and an ISIS resurgence in Arab-majority areas under its control.

The "Arab Council in the Jazeera and Euphrates," an influential body linked to the SEF's parent organization (The Syria's Tomorrow Movement), issued a statement of its own regarding events in Abu Hammam. The statement makes clear that the group involved is affiliated with the SEF and asks "the SDF to clarify the reasons for which it launched an attack on the only Arab formation east of the Euphrates that is not part of the SDF." The SDF's actions, the statement continues, threaten "strife between Arabs and Kurds and further Syrian bloodshed" while also "[opening] the door to many doubts and questions regarding malicious intent toward Arabs in their own lands and territory." The emphasis on ethnic difference should come as no surprise, given that this is one of Syria's more homogenous Sunni Arab regions. Continued SDF control over nearby oil fields would give this narrative further traction, as the SEF and related organizations tout their local roots and magnify the threat of outsider Kurdish hegemony over the Sunni Arab-majority Euphrates River Valley.

Local feuds, the legacy of ISIS, control over resources, and ethnic divisions are not the only factors driving potential conflict in this part of Syria. The fourth accompanying article, from the Syrian opposition news site *Orient News*, argues that expectations of a reconfigured strategic landscape may be driving the actions of both the SDF and the SEF, whether they be the expectation of Turkish deployments along Kurdish-controlled border areas with Syria, expectation of a Saudi-led "Arab Force" being deployed to the region, or a combination of the two. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

"...likely ethnic, tribal and political complications in the coming stage among Washington's allies east of the Euphrates..."

Source:

تصريح حول الاحداث التي حصلت في قرية أبو حمام في ريف دير الزور
"Statements Regarding Events in Abu Hammam Village in Rural Deir Ezzor," SDF Website, 4 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/8AP8UT>

Yesterday 3 May 2018, SDF forces received information from residents of Abu Hammam village of a group of thieves and weapons dealers in the area. Based on this a patrol was dispatched to the village to investigate. When it arrived to the village entrance it was fired upon and responded, with one of the patrol members injured. The patrol retreated and the next morning at 0530 a larger patrol was deployed to arrest five of the gang members who had fired. They appear to have used the name of the Syria Elite Forces (SEF) in their weapons dealing and theft... We in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) assert that there is no reason for us to target the Syria Elite Forces (SEF)... We also call on leaders of the SEF to follow up on cases in which their name is used by irresponsible factions whose aim is to create strife and instability in the area, especially given that some tribal leaders in the area have called on the SDF to act against those who carry out illicit activities as well as against ISIS sleeper cells.

Source:

اقتتال بين حلفاء واشنطن يكشف الغام شرق نهر الفرات
"Infighting between Washington's Allies Demonstrates the 'Landmines' East of the Euphrates River," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/zzSU5w>
(translation via: http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/34198/Fighting_Between_U_S_Allies_Reveals_Mines_East_the_Euphrates)

... many indicators of the likely ethnic, tribal and political complications in the coming stage among Washington's allies east of the Euphrates – especially as the US administration searches for measures to fill the vacuum after its forces pull out once the Islamic State (ISIS) is eliminated. The possibility of deploying Arab forces in the corner between Syria, Turkey and Iraq has been raised...

"The following day, one of the Arab notables went and delivered the car to the leaders [in the SDF] but one of them threatened the mediator that he would tell the Americans to bomb Abu Emad's headquarters, saying he was in thrall to ISIS"...

The German Press Agency quoted a member of the Arab council as saying that "the main reason for the dispute was that the Kurdish units that control the decision-making rejected the presence of any Arab faction in the area because they comprise a danger for them, especially in light of the Arab tribal members refusing to join the SDF, and heading toward the Elite Forces in an area where there are no Kurds at all."



Continued: Tensions Between Anti-ISIS Allies in the Euphrates Valley

Source: المجلس العربي في الجزيرة والفرات يدين إعتداء قسد على قوات النخبة
“The Arab Council in the Jazeera and Euphrates Condemns the SDF’s Attack on the Elite Forces,” *Tomorrow’s Syria Movement*, 4 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/ittaVN>

... in light of the unfortunate actions of a patrol group made up of more than 50 members of the SDF, in which they attacked the home of a members of the Syrian Elite Forces (SEF) on the evening of Thursday 5 May in the village of Abu Hammam, eastern rural Deir Ezzor, requesting that the SEF group hand over all their weapons, which led to injuries on both sides... hold the SDF responsible for these dangerous actions that threatened strife between Arabs and Kurds and further Syrian bloodshed, leaving the Jazeera and Euphrates area open to many different possibilities. The Arab Council calls on the powers on the ground, primarily the United States and Russia, to halt the danger of what is happening in a region where there are only Arabs... The Arab Council in the Jazeera and Euphrates strongly condemns this attack and also asks the SDF to clarify the reasons for which it launched an attack on the only Arab formation east of the Euphrates that is not part of the SDF, given that this escalation opens the door to many doubts and questions regarding malicious intent toward Arabs in their own lands and territory.

Source: هل بدأت قسد بتصفية وجود حليفها الجربا في دير الزور؟
“Has the SDF Begun to Eliminate the Presence of its Ally Jarba in Deir Ezzor?” *Orient News*, 8 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/KHuFze>

The SDF’s main fear comes from talk of a “preliminary” agreement between the US and Turkey for the Turkish Army and Free Syrian Army to enter 30 kilometers inside of Syrian territory east of the Euphrates, from the city of Tal Abyad all the way to the border with Iraq. Based on this, the SDF hopes to eliminate any Arab formation that may threaten it... the SDF’s current goal is to control the oil fields of Deir Ezzor without being challenged by local residents, for whom the SEF is the sole military force capable of challenging the SDF... “Jarba has misread the message regarding talk about Arab forces coming to the area. He is trying to pre-empt events by opening a front with the SDF, so that the forces that are eventually deployed will side with him and hence he will reap the benefits of starting this conflict. It is here that Jarba has misunderstood the message, since the Arab forces that are to be deployed would do so based on a decision by the US and should not be expected to clash with the US’s SDF allies... Here we must ask whether Jarba, who is known neither for the clarity of his alliances nor his clear political stances, may use these clashes as a maneuver to bring Arab forces to the area and thus gain the lion’s share and put himself in a top position. Or is he preparing to be an alternative to the regime in the area based on future alliances made by agreement and coordination with Moscow?”



A Guardian Armored Personnel Carrier of the SDF during the Raqqa offensive (02/17).
Source: By Zana Omar [Public domain], https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SDF_Guardian_Armored_Personnel_Carrier_2.png.