



## What is happening in territory secured by the Syrian Democratic Forces (Raqqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hasaka)

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### Background

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established in 2015. They are estimated to number between 60,000 and 80,000 fighters. These fighters come from more than 30 militias and include Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Chechens, Syriacs and Turkmen. The People’s Protection Units (YPG) (contributing an estimated 36,000) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) (contributing an estimated 24,000) are described as the ‘backbone’ of the force. YPG and YPJ fighters are mainly Kurds, but also include other ethnicities. While most of the SDF’s top commanders are from the YPG, the Military Council, which is the SDF’s highest authority, is made up of members from all contributing groups. The [U.S. arms, feeds, pays the salaries](#) and provides transport for the SDF and its local affiliates (e.g. the Manbij Military Council). The US-led coalition also trains, advises and supports the SDF’s offensives against ISIS, with the U.S. having four bases in Hasaka, six bases in Aleppo, two bases in Raqqqa, and many ‘moving’ positions.

In an effort to localise military and security, the SDF was instrumental in helping establish the Manbij Military Council, Deir Ezzor Military Council, Al-Bab Military Council and Jarablus Military Council, as well as internal security for manning

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checkpoints and dealing with traffic, crime etc. (i.e. police), intelligence, military discipline units and so on. This means that in Arab-majority areas, local military and security personnel are mainly Arab. For instance, some US commanders claimed that the force responsible for liberating Raqqa included 25,000 Arabs or 75 percent of the total force.

By May 2018, with US-led coalition support, the SDF had liberated [32.8 percent](#) of Syrian territory in the provinces of Aleppo (west of the Euphrates River), and Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ezzor (east of the Euphrates). This territory includes Syria's main hydroelectric dams, its richest oil and gas reserves, and some of Syria's most productive agricultural land. Hierarchically organised multi-ethnic committees made up of local residents are in charge of administration at the commune, district, town, and regional level. For instance, the Manbij Civilian Council and Raqqa Civilian Council administer the towns of Manbij and Raqqa.

In the Kurdish-majority districts these administrative structures form part of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Afrin was part of the Federation before Turkey invaded and occupied the district in early 2018. At the end of 2016, a 'social contract' for the Federation was approved, and on 22 September 2017, commune elections were held in Afrin, Kobani and Jizere, in which there were 12,421 candidates for 3,732 positions. Voter turnout was 70 percent. On 1 December 2017, 6,000 candidates from over 30 parties and coalitions ran in elections for district and town councils. Turnout was 69 percent. The Democratic Nation Solidarity List, which includes the ruling Democratic Union Party (PYD), won 4,621 seats. The Kurdish National Alliance, Syrian National Alliance, Democratic Unity, and independent candidates won the remaining 411 seats. The Barzani-linked Kurdistan National Council (KNC or ENKS) boycotted the elections. Elections [were not held](#) in Arab-majority Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa. An election for a parliament to oversee the Federation was scheduled for January 2018, but was delayed to allow time for representatives in these Sunni Arab-majority areas to decide whether they wanted to participate and join the Federation. It is proposed that the parliament be 80 percent elected members and 20 percent technocrats and specialists. In the meantime, the Syrian Democratic Council oversees the Federation.

In 2018, there have been discussions about the Sunni Arab-majority regions forming their own Federation,<sup>1</sup> but on July 16, the same day as President Putin and President Trump met in Helsinki, the Syrian Democratic Council met with representatives of local councils and some opposition groups in Tabqa to discuss a unified administration of the territory secured by the SDF, and a platform on which to negotiate with the Assad regime. One of the outcomes was a demand to have [international mediators](#) at any negotiations. These developments especially assume significance in light of the proposed talks on constitution for Syria.

[There are three to 3.6 million Kurds in Syria, or 12.5 to 15 percent](#) of the total population. The Kurds and their allies in the north are asking for autonomy within a

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<sup>1</sup> On a visit to Raqqa in May, Saudi Minister of State Thamer al-Sabhan proposed a Sunni Arab Federation to cover Manbij, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

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federated Syria. If they succeed in convincing Sunni Arabs east of the Euphrates to join the Federation, it would cover 40 percent of Syria. Russia has consistently promoted a federal system for Syria. The U.S. and some Opposition leaders support some form of decentralisation. Other Opposition groups, the Assad regime, Iran and Turkey strongly reject federalism, although the Assad regime sends mixed signals about accepting some form of local autonomy.

Currently, the main sources of revenue for the administrations come from the U.S. and Europe, including donations from organisations, churches and individuals, and the [Hasaka oil fields](#), as the Deir Ezzor fields are not yet operational. The oil is transported in convoys of up to 50 trucks to antiquated oil refineries. The refined products serve the territory and excess is sold to the Assad regime. Although spokespeople say the Federation can be self-sustaining, Turkey's invasion of Afrin proved that international protection, mediation and support are critical. Federation spokespeople argue that defeating ISIS ideology can only be achieved by rebuilding infrastructure, services and industry, all of which would provide local employment.

In the meantime, key to stabilisation is removing IEDs, justice and reconciliation. In the Federation, two male judges and a female judge preside over each court case. By May 2018, the courts had processed 1,500 individuals suspected of having links with ISIS. In contrast to Iraq, the death sentence is banned, a life sentence is 20 years, and [most](#) who are found guilty are sentenced to five to seven years in prison. One hundred and thirty three individuals have been released. Judges make decisions in view of reconciling with Arab tribes who lived under ISIS. They take into account the age of an individual when they joined ISIS, and whether they surrendered voluntarily. Prison is seen as a re-education process, this re-education involving PYD ideology based on the principles of democratic con/federalism, women's rights and environmental protection. However, there are no defence lawyers, no right of appeal and no legal codes. The courts only deal with Syrians, not an estimated 400 foreign ISIS fighters held in detention or, according to Human Rights Watch, the 800 women and 1,200 children of ISIS fighters living in camps. The Syrian Democratic Council has asked the U.S. for help to develop legal codes, but this help has yet to materialise. Federation spokespeople say they would prefer the countries of origin to take back their citizens, but most countries have been reluctant to do this, except for Russia and Indonesia. In Turkey-occupied Afrin, many ISIS prisoners have 'vanished'.

Federation leaders have been criticised for not mending relations with Turkey and for not building international support for their administrations. This has not been for lack of trying. By 2018, with ISIS largely defeated, the Federation faces huge challenges. Iranian, Syrian and Arab media report increased resentment towards the SDF and US-led coalition forces in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. There have been no reports of resentment among the civilian population towards local councils, although there have been attempted and successful assassinations of some council members. These have been attributed to proxies of Turkey. However, there are factors inherent in the current administrations that could cause tensions in the future. This brief report outlines the factors behind the resentment, how the resentment has manifested, and to what extent.

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## **Factors contributing to resentment among Sunni Arab tribes towards US-led coalition forces and the SDF**

Sunni Arab-Kurdish relations are complicated by traditional inter-Arab divisions, Arabs changing allegiance, and Arabs being divided about whether to side with the US-led coalition and SDF, the Assad regime, Turkey, or ISIS. The following factors have contributed to an unknown number of Sunni Arabs distrusting and resenting the US-led coalition and the SDF.

### **Trauma and nationalism among Sunni Arabs**

Whether people stayed living under ISIS, or escaped to camps or other countries, they have been traumatised by five years of ISIS rule. Trauma is on going. There is the threat of IEDs, which are daily killing people who return home. There are bodies still being recovered from the rubble or found in mass graves. For instance, between [January and May](#) 2018, 900 corpses, many of women and children, were found in mass graves inside Raqqa city. People are tired of war. They fear a future war if the US-led coalition does not protect them or the SDF does not negotiate with the Assad regime.

Sunni Arabs are a majority of the population in Syria, but have been [politically marginalised](#) for decades. While an unknown number fear what will happen if the current military and administrative arrangements are dismantled, an equally unknown number resent having to choose between the Alawite (Shia) Assad regime, who many opposed before and after 2011, and the Kurdish-led SDF and the local administrations associated with the Syrian Democratic Council.

The wish for an alternative path could have increased since the U.S. began pushing for the Gulf States to contribute to the security of Sunni-Arab majority areas in Syria. On May 29, [a delegation from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan](#) met with YPG at Qamishli, and Arab forces (e.g. Senadid, al-Nukhba and the Raqqa Revolutionaries) at a U.S. base near Kobani to discuss recruiting a Sunni Arab force. Recruitment offices were established in Hasaka and Qamishli to enlist people for a salary of \$200 a month (i.e. more than what many in the YPG are paid). If Gulf State forces are deployed in the area, and if these countries recruit Sunni Arabs to form an militia independent of the SDF, then inter-ethnic tensions, and tensions between Sunni Arab militias, could escalate.

### **Distrust and Resentment towards the USA**

The existing security and military arrangements in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor rely on the protection and material support of the US-led coalition, but Sunni Arabs are becoming increasingly distrustful of U.S. intentions. Contributing factors include a widespread view that the U.S. allowed the rise of ISIS. Some see the US-led coalition as an occupying force. Others distrust a U.S. administration that is divided about whether to stay or leave Syria, and sends mixed signals regarding the future of President Assad. Also no external party has publicly stated its support for the existing

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administrative arrangements in eastern Syria. This lack of guaranteed support makes the existing structures vulnerable to outside forces, chief among them being the Assad regime and Turkey.

A critical turning point for some Sunni Arabs was when the U.S. made an agreement with Turkey over Manbij in June 2018. Details of the agreement are unclear, such as whether Turkish forces will be allowed inside Manbij city, and whether Turkey will be allowed to change the composition of the existing military and civilian councils, but there is a widespread view among Arabs, Kurds and others that the Manbij agreement is a betrayal of the existing Arab-majority civilian and military councils.

Distrust of the U.S. is also influenced by other perceived U.S. betrayals of its allies, even if these allies are not Sunni Arabs. Betrayals include the U.S. withdrawing support for the Syrian Opposition, the U.S. 'allowing' Iran and Iraq to militarily take Kirkuk, the U.S. acquiescing to Turkey's invasion and occupation of Afrin, and the U.S. acquiescing to the Assad regime's offensive on the southwest de-escalation zone, which, along with Russia and Jordan, the U.S. had agreed to monitor and protect. If the U.S. and its European and Gulf State allies do not help develop the existing autonomous structures east of the Euphrates, then the only alternative is to negotiate with the Assad regime.

## The Assad Regime

With the Assad Regime's string of military victories in eastern Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and Daraa, and military threat to all remaining territory outside its 'control', an increasing number of Sunni Arabs consider it is in their interests to support the regime despite many opposing the regime before and after 2011. This view was reinforced on May 31, when [Assad](#) reiterated that the SDF had two options: negotiate or be removed by force. There have been numerous incidences of pro-Assad forces attacking the SDF and coalition forces in Deir Ezzor, especially where Assad and coalition forces are fighting ISIS in close proximity to each other.<sup>2</sup> People are desperate to stop the war.

The Assad regime has been fostering support east of the Euphrates. The regime has established a propaganda unit to promote the message that the US-led coalition force is an occupying force, that the U.S. intends to break up Syria, and that any local

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<sup>2</sup> For example on December 24, regime forces launched a third artillery attack on SDF positions in one week, while the largest confrontation occurred on February 7, when [two tactical units consisting of 550 Russian military contractors employed by Wagner](#) initiated an unprovoked attack on a SDF headquarters, where U.S. coalition advisors were based, eight kilometres east of the Euphrates River de-confliction line, and near the Khusham oil fields. In response, the U.S. initiated a three-hour attack that killed or injured at least 300 Russian military contractors, as well as others. This was followed by an incident on [February 10](#), when U.S.-led coalition forces blew up a Russian-made T-72 battle tank, and a third incident in the same area on [March 22](#), when 'dozens' of Syrian army soldiers, Iran-backed militants and Russian mercenaries came under U.S.-led coalition fire after they crossed the Euphrates River with tanks and other armoured vehicles. On [April 29](#), the Syrian army and Iran-backed militants again crossed the Euphrates River and took four villages near the Iraqi border, but the [SDF launched a counteroffensive](#), and with [US air support](#) retook the villages hours later. Six SDF fighters were killed in the fight.

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forces that the US-led coalition supports are 'traitors'. The Assad Regime is also actively recruiting members of Sunni Arab tribes into a pro-regime militia. For instance, on June 2, [70 Sunni Arab tribal leaders](#) from Deir Ezzor and Hasaka met in Aleppo province to discuss forming a '[resistance front](#)', which would fight alongside the Syrian Army to remove Turkey and US-led coalition forces from Syria. These tribal leaders claimed that if the SDF did not negotiate with the regime, then they would also fight the SDF. On July 7, another meeting of [55 leaders of Arab and Kurdish tribes](#) in Aleppo resulted in a declaration of support for the Syrian Army to confront Turkish aggression and US-led coalition forces.

Another reason why an increasing number of Sunni Arabs in the east are supporting the Assad regime is that on June 10, 2018, i.e. six days after Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met and afterwards announced that the US and Turkey had agreed on a path forward for Manbij, the [Syrian Democratic Council](#) claimed it was ready to have unconditional talks with the Assad regime. On July 3, Arab and Syrian media outlets reported that [preliminary negotiations](#) in Damascus and Qamishli resulted in Kurds having given up any claim for autonomy. The reports alleged that negotiated outcomes included joint checkpoints in Hasaka province, military service in the YPG being considered analogous to military service in the Syrian armed forces, the Kurdish language being incorporated into Syria's educational system, and a Kurd being appointed the State's [Minister of Oil](#). In return, the YPG had to remove [all YPG flags and images of Abdullah Ocalan](#), and the Kurds had to hand over all oil and gas fields and border crossings with Turkey and Iraq. Syrian Kurdish [spokespeople](#) denied negotiations had taken place, but YPG flags and posters of Abdullah Ocalan were [taken down](#) in Qamishli and Hasaka. That during this period the SDF was arresting pro-regime agitators, and that on July 7, the YPG [banned regime forces](#) in Hasaka city from passing through their checkpoints after (pro-regime) National Defence Unit personnel arrested some YPG fighters, supports the contention that any negotiations have been preliminary and no outcomes have been agreed upon. A major concern is that if 'negotiations' in eastern Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and Daraa are an indication, then the Assad regime will demand nothing less than total surrender.

Syrian Kurdish journalist [Abdel Raheem Said](#) concluded that some Sunni Arab tribes have been convinced to support the Assad regime because of Assad's string of victories, the SDF's loss of Afrin to Turkey, and the US – Turkey roadmap for Manbij perceived to have betrayed the people of Manbij.

### **Support for a Sunni Arab caliphate**

An unknown number of people among a deeply religious and historically marginalised Sunni Arab population in Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ezzor are sympathetic towards establishing a Sunni Arab caliphate in Syria. Among them are varying degrees of support for ISIS. ISIS still controls some towns and villages, particularly near the border with Iraq, where offensives are ongoing. In other areas, ISIS sleeper cells remain embedded in the population, and ISIS smuggles fighters and officials into SDF-secured territory. Except in the desert, this could not happen without the help or silence of ISIS sympathisers among the population.

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After the U.S. called an operational pause on fighting ISIS due to many in the SDF withdrawing to defend Afrin from Turkey in March, ISIS attacks increased. In most cases, ISIS attacks appear to target the SDF, rather than civilians, but the threat of ISIS attacks is a continued source of trauma. If more civilians are targeted then some could blame the SDF for not providing enough security, although it will be shown later that a SDF recruitment campaign is a source of resentment.

Ongoing offensives include the fight to liberate the strategic town of [Dashisha](#), and surrounding villages, near the border with Iraq between June 3 and June 17. The SDF killed [274 ISIS fighters](#) and captured thirteen. Three SDF fighters were killed and 20 wounded. Apart from offensives there have been isolated attacks attributed to ISIS.

#### ISIS attacks

- On November 5, an ISIS attack at a SDF checkpoint near al-Jaffra oil field in Deir Ezzor killed 200 civilians travelling in a bus convoy as they tried to escape the war zone.
- On December 21, regime forces and ISIS simultaneously shelled SDF in villages near Abu Kamal and the border with Iraq.
- On March 4, a senior Kurdish official told [Patrick Cockburn](#) that ISIS attacks had killed 170 YPG fighters in the previous six weeks.
- On June 5, [four men](#) attacked a SDF position in Raqqa. The SDF killed three of them, claiming they were probably linked to ISIS.
- On June 12, a roadside bomb killed a SDF fighter at a checkpoint outside Raqqa city.
- On [June 22](#), ISIS launched its first attack on Raqqa city, exploding a roadside bomb and destroying two vehicles. ISIS claimed it killed all SDF fighters travelling in the vehicles.
- On June 24, [local security forces](#) in Raqqa city declared a two-day curfew as there was intelligence that ISIS had entered the city with the intention of launching attacks.
- After numerous attempts, ISIS retook the [Sayyad and Dahash oil fields](#) in northern Deir Ezzor on July 9.
- On [July 6](#), an ISIS car bomb killed 11 SDF fighters and [seven civilians](#), including [three Kurdish officials](#), and wounded another 20 people in the town of [Busaira](#) in eastern Deir Ezzor.

#### Factors related to the Syrian Democratic Forces

By all accounts people were grateful that the SDF liberated them from ISIS, and that the SDF provided safe passages to move civilians out of a war zone during the fighting. As time passes, multiple factors that reflect on the SDF's structure and actions have caused some level of resentment.

The most critical turning point regarding distrust of the SDF was Turkey defeating the YPG, YPJ and SDF in Afrin on 18 March 2018, following a two-month fight. Arabs

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realised that the SDF could not win against the Assad regime or Turkey without US-led coalition support.

The SDF is not a unified force. Some of its fighters have fought the Assad regime, some support the regime, some do not agree with federalism, and some contributors (e.g. the Arab Elite Force) have split from the SDF alliance. Among some militias, there is a perception (and in some cases, a reality) that Arabs are discriminated against within the SDF. They consider the highly experienced Kurdish YPG commanders want control of all strategies and tactics, and do not allow Arabs to advance in rank. For instance, on May 8, [60 Arab fighters](#) from the al-Shaitat tribe handed over their weapons and withdrew from the SDF, saying they rejected the ethnic discrimination within the SDF.

To add to the confusion in a complex war, members of the YPG and YPJ co-ordinated with Russia and Syrian officials to oversee the formation of a council to govern eastern Deir Ezzor in November – December 2017. It is predicted that divisions within the SDF are likely to increase once the threat of ISIS and US-led coalition support decreases.

Resentment also comes from the SDF preventing people from returning home until IEDs are cleared. However, the most significant source of resentment is the result of the SDF conscripting men born between 1988 and 2000 for military and local security forces. The recruits may have already served in the Syrian military and are expected to put their lives in danger for between USD\$50 and \$200 per month, depending on their unit. Perhaps not taken into account by Sunni Arabs who oppose conscription, is that west of the Euphrates, the regime is also conscripting locals into the National Defence Forces (NDF).

An additional source of resentment is that the SDF is making an increasing number of arrests of those suspected of links with ISIS, Turkey or the Assad Regime. The arrests are a result of increased attacks by ISIS, and increased activity by the regime, the Turkish state and 'unknown assailants'. In some police actions, there have been civilian casualties if reports from *Fars News* are accurate. All except two of the following examples are from this Iranian newsagency.

#### Arrests

- In [early June](#) the SDF arrested 58 people in Hasaka when they attempted to go to Aleppo city for a pro-regime conference about liberating Syria from U.S. and Turkish occupation.
- On June 24, the SDF arrested 100 people suspected of ISIS links after unknown assailants attacked the SDF near the Concoco gas field, al-Amr oil field and several SDF [bases](#) in Deir Ezzor Province.
- In June, the [Deir Ezzor Military Council](#) began an operation to arrest individuals and clear villages of arms and IEDs as a result of ISIS and al-Qaida sleeper cells using IEDs and motorcycle bombs to kill civilians. Members of the council also wanted to gather intelligence on the activities of the Assad regime.



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- In late June, after [Syrian flags](#) were distributed across Raqqa city, the SDF went on high alert, implemented a curfew, installed checkpoints and detained people suspected of links with the Assad regime.
- By July 7, the SDF had arrested [150 civilians](#) in Raqqa city for allegedly supporting the Assad regime.
- In early July, the SDF conducted a 'massive' number of [arrests of Assad regime sympathisers](#) in Deir Ezzor.
- In the first week of July, the [Deir Ezzor Military Council](#) arrested ISIS fighters and uncovered weapons caches.
- After unknown assailants killed [two SDF fighters](#) in the village of al-Zer, east of the town of al-Basira on July 18, the SDF waged an arrest campaign in the village, and imposed a curfew.

The SDF has also arrested protesters, these arrests being covered in another section.

Yet another source of resentment is that the SDF is forcing militias outside the SDF to disarm. For instance, on [May 4](#), there was a clash between the SDF and Arab Elite Forces<sup>3</sup> after the Arab Elite Forces refused to hand over weapons. The [clash](#) injured the wife of an Arab Elite Force commander and two Kurdish fighters. The Arab Council, representing the majority of tribes in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hasaka, condemned the SDF 'aggression'. In another incident that occurred over three days, as a result of tensions between Arab forces over recruitment issues in Raqqa city, the SDF and Raqqa Internal Security Forces declared a curfew in the city on June 23, and proceeded to besiege Thuwar al-Raqqa's headquarters. The next day, the SDF arrested between 90 and 200 [militants](#). By 25 June all of Thuwar al-Raqqa's militants had been disarmed and its leadership had reconciled with the [SDF](#).

### **Factors related to the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria**

Community assemblies and local councils are subject to the laws formulated by the Syrian Democratic Council, the dominant party being the Kurdish-led PYD. The PYD and its allies have established a secular system of governance, when an unknown number of Sunni Arabs want a government based on Sharia law. New laws ban child marriage and polygamy, which increased under ISIS, and demand that all committees and organisations have a male and female co-chair and that all councils have a minimum female representation of 40 percent. Such laws are confronting for a traditional patriarchal society, and could cause tensions in the future.

Another cause for distrust is that no internal or external stakeholder officially recognises the Federation. Even if negotiations with the Assad regime or another Syrian government allow the Federation to exist, its viability will be jeopardised if Turkey and the Assad regime keep their borders closed.

Yet another source of tension is that the PYD has shown less tolerance for political pluralism than its tolerance of different ethnicities and religions. Even among Kurds,

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<sup>3</sup> The Arab Elite forces had fought in Raqqa against ISIS but had resisted pressure to come under SDF command and withdrew from the offensive.

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the coalition of parties led by the PYD, called the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), and the Barzani-backed coalition, the Kurdish National Council (KNC or ENKS), have not been able to work together. Yet, since March 18, 2018, these coalitions agree that human rights abuses are being committed in Afrin under Turkey's occupation, and both are united in their call for Turkey and Turkey-backed militias to withdraw from Afrin. On [May 20](#), representatives of TEV-DEM went to Erbil to discuss a reconciliation process that would include releasing KNC prisoners (suspected of having worked for Turkey), re-opening KNC offices in northern Syria, and allowing the free movement of KNC officials between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Free movement of people and goods are essential for the survival of the Federation.

Many [analysts](#) consider that normalisation between TEV-DEM and the KNC will be difficult because of rivalry between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), complicated by the KRG's reliance on Turkey for oil exports, food and other imports, and Turkish companies operating in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There is also an assumption that PYD will require the KNC to work within the PYD's ideological framework of democratic federalism, which the KNC may resist. The Federation will suffer if the PYD and the KNC cannot establish ways to advance their common interests. The [US is in a position to mediate](#). If they can find a way of working together, it would be a great step forward for the Federation.

### **A lack of resources to clear IEDs and rebuild destroyed villages and towns**

A major factor that causes resentment among the population is the lack of resources to clear IEDs and rebuild destroyed villages and towns so internally displaced people can return home. The Assad regime and Turkey separately claim they are the only way forward in terms of reconstruction. For instance, 80 percent of Raqqa city was destroyed in the four-month campaign that ended in October 2017. On 17 April 2018, [Russia's Ambassador to the UN](#) argued in an open meeting of the UN Security Council that reconstruction could only begin after the Assad regime assumed control of Raqqa. Others consider this would deter Gulf States from investing in reconstruction. After liberation the under-resourced Raqqa Civilian Council organised volunteers into 14 committees, each tasked with specific duties. A private U.S. company, Tetra Tech, trained 120 SDF members to demine – not nearly enough to undertake the enormous task, especially as they did not have armoured bulldozers or reinforced rock crushers, and demining stopped in May-June because of a lack of funds. IEDs were killing an average of [50 civilians a week](#) in Raqqa city alone, with the injured being treated in makeshift clinics. The lack of resources is slowing the pace of reconstruction of basic services like water and electricity, as well as the provision of healthcare and education, despite the administration's emphasis on education. Nevertheless, by mid-June 2018, the UN estimated that [138,000 people](#) had returned to Raqqa city, out of a pre-war population of about 200,000 people.



## Factors that may assume more importance in the future

### Turkey

The Turkish state considers the increased military and political status of Syrian Kurds to be a national security threat to Turkey because the PYD follows the ideology of PKK and the YPG/YPJ have benefitted from PKK military training. Fundamentally, Turkey's leaders fear that the Syrian Kurds' demand for autonomy may inspire Kurds in Turkey to increase their demands for autonomy. As a result, the Turkish state, including the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), uses every means to undermine the Federation. Activities include military attacks, propaganda, holding meetings with Syrian Arab and Kurdish leaders in Turkey, establishing an alternative Turkey-backed Raqqa administration, and getting SDF personnel to defect or surrender (e.g. a Turkman SDF leader, Talal Silo, surrendered or defected to the Turkish Army in November 2017).

An additional source of Sunni-Kurd tension east of the Euphrates is that Turkey supports opposition militias in Aleppo, to which some Sunni Arabs from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor have contributed. These people often share Turkey's support for an Islamist government and Turkey's opposition to autonomy and federalism. They may even have participated in the invasion and occupation of Afrin.

One of the most coercive tools of the Turkish state is the use of proxies to assassinate Syrian Kurdish military and civilian leaders, the latter having played a significant role in mediation and negotiations between Kurds and Arabs and between these and the US-led coalition. For example, the assassination of Raqqa Civil Council co-chair and member of the Syrian Democratic Council, [Omar Alloush](#), in Tal Abyad on 14 March 2018 was a huge loss to the Federation. A proxy militia, *Harakat al-Qiyam*, established in mid-2017 and linked to MIT, claimed responsibility for Alloush's murder, and a string of other attempted and successful assassinations of leading Kurdish figures since late 2017.

Finally, Turkey's constant threats to military invade and expand its territory of occupation has everyone worried. If the US-led coalition cannot protect the people, then the people will look to the Assad regime for protection. Given that (pro)-regime forces are already overextended, this may not be forthcoming, or sufficient. When negotiations for regime recognition of the Federation begin in earnest, the use of SDF to secure territory the territory from ISIS and Turkey may prove a significant bargaining tool.

### Iran

Iran also wants to undermine the existing security and administrative structures established east of the Euphrates so the Assad regime can take control of the entire country. An Iran-linked Aleppo-based militia, *Liwa al-Baqir*, has trained and formed a [Popular Resistance](#), principally for the purpose of spreading propaganda intended to exploit Arab and Kurdish differences. In [April](#), this militia announced the launch of military and jihadist activities against the US-led occupation and its allied forces. Iran

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has also purchased [property](#) in parts of Deir ez-Zor west of the Euphrates, and has distributed this land to Syrian and foreign militants that answer to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

## How resentment has manifested, and an indication of its extent

Resentment against the SDF has manifested in protests, which have occasionally turned violent, and attacks on the SDF by unknown assailants.

### Protests and Clashes

Protests against the SDF have increased since April, particularly in Raqqa city and western parts of Raqqa province (i.e. close to regime-held areas). Many protesters appear to be regime supporters. Most protests are about the SDF's recruitment campaign. In the following list of eight or nine protests, if *Fars News* reports are accurate, clashes between the SDF and civilians occurred in three, and arrests were made in another two protests. Except for two possible exceptions, there were less than 100 participants in each protest.

- In [April](#) and May there were several protests attended by 'dozens' in Raqqa city, demanding the departure of U.S. forces and the SDF.
- On May 15, there was [a protest](#) against the SDF recruiting men for a local security force in the village of al-Jarniyeh in western Raqqa. The SDF arrested seven protesters.
- On [May 29](#), a protest in Deir Ezzor occurred after the SDF was accused of beating a civilian. When some protesters set fire to an oil well, the SDF opened fire and a dozen civilians were wounded.
- In [early June](#), the SDF opened fire on a group of protesters calling for the SDF to leave Raqqa city. Either in this protest, or in another protest, 80 people gathered in the centre of Raqqa city to protest against conscription. They called for the release of young men who had been recruited.
- In late June, after the SDF arrested a number of regime supporters, 'tens' of people protested the presence of SDF in al-Salhabiyeh in Western Raqqa.
- On [July 4](#), a march was held in Raqqa city in support of the Syrian Army. Those in attendance were affiliated to Qawat al-Sanadid, recruited from the Shamer tribe. This militia had joined the SDF in 2015 to fight ISIS, but has since joined pro-government troops.
- On July 10, [forty families](#) in the village of Tal al-Saman north of Raqqa city held a protest, calling for the release of young men, either arrested or recruited by the SDF.
- On July 10, [people in Tabqa](#) protested the SDF recruitment campaign. Military police associated with the SDF allegedly opened fire and made 'tens' of arrests in Tabqa and in the villages of Ratla, Kasrah Fraj and Kasrah Jomaah.

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## Attacks by unknown assailants

Another indication of resentment is that the SDF has been subject to attacks by 'unknown assailants'. Below is a list of those identified in media sources (mainly *Fars News*).

- Between May 31 and June 9, unknown assassins and booby traps killed [nearly 50 SDF fighters](#) in the al-Shaddadi area, although given that the SDF was fighting ISIS in this area, the attacks were most likely perpetrated by ISIS.
- In [early June](#), unknown attackers fired on SDF fighters in the village of al-Karamah in eastern Raqqa, killing one and injuring nine fighters.
- On June 4, a [huge explosion](#) occurred outside Ayn Issa, a town where [200 US and 75 French](#) military servicemen are based.
- On July 2, [two SDF fighters were killed](#) and a number wounded at a checkpoint in the town of [Karama](#) in eastern Raqqa, when assailants opened fire.
- On [July 3](#), unknown assailants killed Khalaf Turki al-Khabil, a key commander in the Deir Ezzor Military Council.
- On [July 4](#), ISIS detonated a roadside bomb when two U.S. armoured vehicles passed near Suwar. U.S. and SDF personnel were travelling in the vehicles. A U.S. spokesperson denied there were any U.S. casualties. Other reports suggested two to four U.S. servicemen were killed and [another](#) report claimed 'several' U.S. and SDF troops were killed.
- Around July 7, a number of SDF fighters were killed or wounded by a bomb-laden vehicle at the entrance of [al-Jarniyeh](#) village in Western Raqqa.
- In the [following week](#), a senior SDF commander, [Abu Jasim](#), was killed in a bomb blast in Raqqa city and a number of SDF fighters were injured in an attack on a checkpoint in the town of al-Mansoureh in western Raqqa.

## Conclusion

In a complex war environment there are a multitude of factors that contribute to distrust and resentment. Yet, everything is relative and the level of distrust and resentment east of the Euphrates appears less than what is occurring in Idlib, Afrin and the Azaz – Jarablus – al-Bab triangle that are under the control of Islamist extremist militias and Turkey. East of the Euphrates, protests have been far less in number and less well attended than those occurring in Turkish-occupied territory, where several thousand regularly gather in protest against Turkey's occupation and Turkey-backed militias looting property, and harassing and shooting civilians. The number of attacks and assassinations by unknown assailants east of the Euphrates, despite the multitude of possible perpetrators, are nowhere near the number of attacks and assassinations caused by inter-militia rivalry in Idlib and Aleppo. Nor have tensions within the SDF resulted in the almost daily in-fighting between Turkey-backed Islamist extremists in Aleppo. Nevertheless, if peace is to prevail in eastern Syria the factors contributing to resentment and distrust must be addressed.

If ISIS ideology is to be defeated and if Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ezzor east of the Euphrates, (as well as Afrin and Manbij west of the Euphrates), are to become

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peaceful and prosperous, the international community will need to protect these territories from external aggression, especially if negotiations with the Assad regime or transitional government break down. If negotiations proceed, there is a need for international mediators and moderators. Whether or not negotiations are successful, the international community will also need to invest resources and expertise over a considerable time frame to develop pluralist, inclusive local governing structures and security forces, reconciliation mechanisms, an independent judiciary, trauma counselling, and essential infrastructure including roads, electricity, water, healthcare, housing, and schools, as well as industry such as agriculture, food processing factories and oil refineries, all of which could provide non-sectarian business and employment opportunities. This investment may be less expensive than on-going war. If the private sector is involved, such endeavours may prove profitable for all concerned.