

Struggle for Syria's future centres around Euphrates river

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With the Islamic State defeated in Baghouz, attention will turn to the multiple competing forces ranged around the Euphrates river in Syria's Deir al-Zour governorate. *Derek Henry Flood* embeds with local forces in Deir al-Zour to assess the dynamics

Key Points

- Differing strategic concerns among the Kurdish and Arab constituent militias of the SDF mean that its coherence as a fighting force after defeating the Islamic State's state-building project may be in jeopardy.
- Although Kurdish forces have shown a willingness to negotiate with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Arab factions view government forces – supported by Russia and Iran-backed Shia militias – as an imminent battlefield adversary.
- *Jane's* visited five front-line Arab SDF positions in March 2019 that were facing pro-government forces, but none were equipped with heavy weapons or armour, indicating no preparations for an imminent engagement.

By mid-March 2019, Deir al-Zour governorate in eastern Syria was on the cusp of a new confrontation after the ouster of Islamic State forces. The governorate is roughly bisected from northwest to southeast by the Euphrates river valley, which also serves as the deconfliction (or contact) line between – west of the river – the armed forces of the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad and allied Shia militias and Russian forces, and – east of the river – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their Western military backers.

Deir al-Zour province is notable in Syria for its hydrocarbon production and agricultural land. Despite this natural value driving military competition on the ground, development of the region was not prioritised by successive governments. After years of power shifts – from the government, to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), to the Islamist militant Jabhat al-Nusra, to the Islamic State, and finally to the SDF – much of its infrastructure has been devastated.

During a visit to the region on 2–3 March 2019, *Jane's* observed that multiple acres of former compounds of foreign energy concerns had been left vacant after looting by retreating Islamic State fighters and coalition airstrikes. Pro-Western Deiri fighters escorted *Jane's* to a compound formerly operated by oil services company Schlumberger Limited, with little remaining but concrete block walls and steel remnants.

Deir al-Zour Military Council

The Syrian government aims to expel the SDF and its local ally, the Deir al-Zour Military Council (Majlis Deir ez-Zor al-Askari), from the oil and gas assets that they control; Damascus needs these resources to replenish state funds and purportedly for reconstruction efforts. The protection of energy deposits was a motivating factor for government troops to remain inside Deir al-Zour city, resupplied by airdrop, even as it was encircled and besieged by the Islamic State.



Deir al-Zour Military Council fighters, photographed here on 3 March, told Jane's that they were capable of fighting Syrian government-aligned forces should diplomatic negotiations fail to resolve the fate of seven government-occupied villages along the eastern bank of the Euphrates. (Derek Henry Flood)

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Jane's embedded with a contingent of fighters from the Deir al-Zour Military Council at the invitation of the force's deputy commander, Abu Islam. The Deir al-Zour Military Council has an estimated 14,300 fighters under arms, led by Ahmed Hamed Khabil, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Khawla al-Deiri. It is comprised of fighters from the Baggara and Egaidat tribal confederations. With a Sunni Arab background, the Council projects an outwardly secular image that espouses Syrian patriotism but is anti-Baathist, and represents a renewal of tribal identity after years of co-option, subversion, or subjugation of uncooperative tribes by the Islamic State.

Abu Islam and his fighters described themselves as Syrian patriots motivated by al-Thawra (meaning the ideals of the 2011 'revolution' that began the civil war), but eschewed regional identity politics that they felt were being artificially imposed on the SDF. Abu Islam told

Jane's on 3 March, "If they ask us we will go to Idlib. And we will go to Efrin." He continued, "We thank the Americans for their support in fighting [the Islamic State], but if we have to we are prepared to face the government without them [US forces] if they leave us."

Abu Islam and another Deiri fighter, Abu Azam, noted mixed messages between the White House and Pentagon, but were greatly concerned about a US troop withdrawal or significant drawdown. Nevertheless, they were less concerned about an incursion by Turkish troops in northern Syria than the prospect of the government and allied Shia militias crossing the Euphrates in the east to reverse the Deir al-Zour Military Council's gains against Islamic State militants.

The final battle to dismantle the Islamic State's territorial 'caliphate' took place in the small village of Baghouz, bordering Iraq's Anbar governorate, as the vast Deir al-Zour governorate was facing multiple security challenges. Islamic State militants retreated into the local populace as the SDF's Jazeera Storm (Cizre) campaign to end Islamic State governance moved south along the eastern flank of the middle Euphrates river valley. The start of Jazeera Storm was announced on 9 September 2017 by the Deir al-Zour Military Council via various social media platforms, while the SDF's operations to dislodge the Islamic State from Raqqa were still under way.

After the end of the Islamic State's state-building project, the Deir al-Zour militia is seeking to secure areas east of the Euphrates, but will remain vulnerable to attacks by Islamist militants. It is also facing at least five Shia militias supported or raised by Iran, as well as Russian security forces that include Military Police from the Sufi Muslim North Caucasus republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. On 10 February, Russian state news agency TASS reported that all of the Chechen personnel were returned home from Aleppo governorate, but Deiri militia suggested to *Jane's* that North Caucasians may still be present in government-held areas of Deir al-Zour.

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