

## Jane's Intelligence Review

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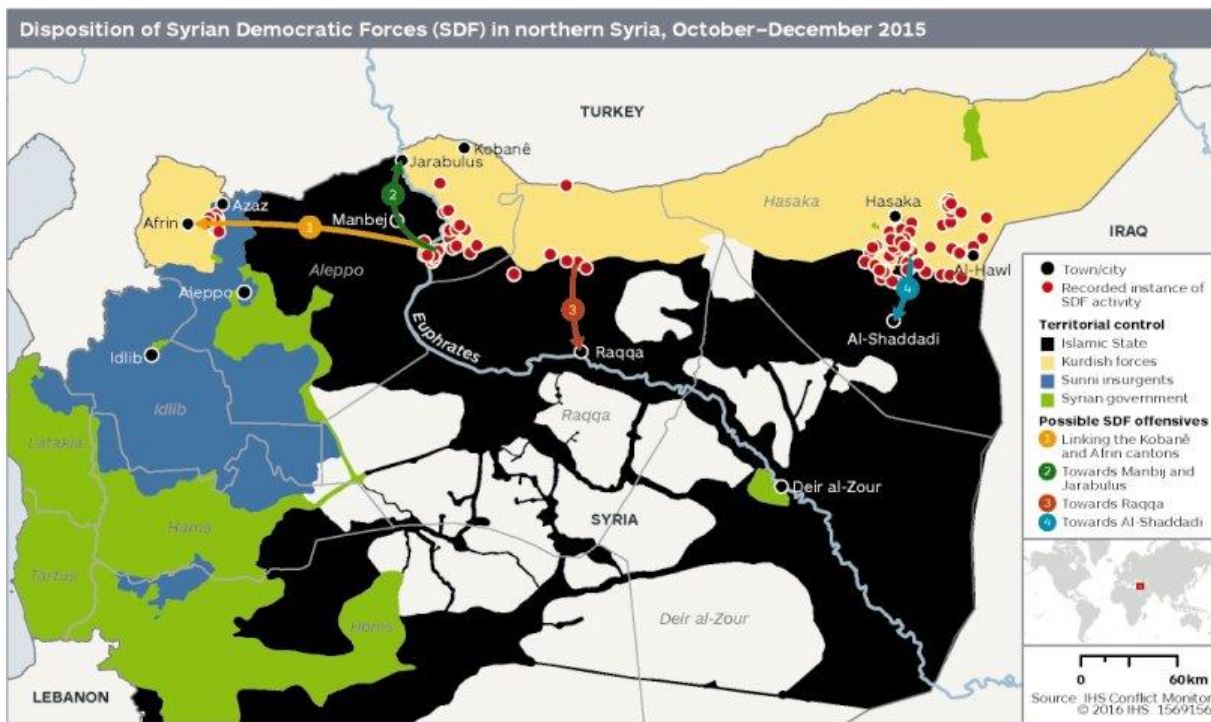
# SDF plays central role in Syrian civil war

**The Syrian Democratic Forces constitute the main ground partner for the Western air campaign against the Islamic State. *Jonathan Spyer* embedded with SDF units in northern Syria in December to assess their combat ability and why the West is aligning with them.**

A statement announcing the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was issued at a press conference in Hasaka on 15 October 2015. It stated, "Due to accelerated conditions in both the political and the military development and the sensitive phases our country has gone through, there must be an establishment of a unified national military force [for] all Syrians consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and all others living in the geographical locations of Syria. The Syrian Democratic Force is to launch a self-governing Syria."

Thirteen organisations were signatories to the announcement. Among these, the most significant in terms of numerical strength were the Kurdish People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel: YPG) and Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin: YPJ); the Sanadid militia of the Arab al-Shammar tribe; the (Christian) Syriac Military Council; and the Burkat al-Furan, Thuwar Raqqa, and Shams al-Shamal groups. The latter four are remnants of the non-jihadist Arab Sunni rebellion in northern Syria, and the remainder of the 13 organisations listed in the announcement were similar, smaller examples of groups of this type.

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Disposition of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, October-December 2015. (IHS) 1569156

## Fighting back

The announcement of the formation of the SDF followed a visit by US officials to northern Syria in early October. They met and vetted the Arab forces to be aligned with the emergent alliance in a process facilitated by the YPG. There were likely numerous motivations for the Western, Kurdish, and Arab forces behind the establishment of the SDF.

Washington has successfully partnered with the YPG since October 2014, when US air power and Kurdish ground forces first re-established the Kobanê enclave, and then drove Islamic State forces east across a large swathe of territory, culminating in the liberation of Ain Issa, 50 km north of the Islamic State 'capital' in Raqqa city, on 23 June 2015, subsequently uniting the Jazira and Kobanê cantons into a single unit.

The US clearly wishes to continue this partnership, while avoiding accusations of a preference for the Kurds and their ambitions over those of Syrian Arabs. The SDF initiative, with its leavening of Arab fighters, enables this. Kurdish motivations are similar. Kemal Amuda, a YPG officer in Hasaka, told *IHS Jane's*, "The Kurdish idea is not acceptable to the world, so it's better to show that there are others here, so if people want to help Syria, they are not helping Kurds alone."



A fighter of the Shams al-Shamal militia at a front line position at Ja'ada, on the east bank of the Euphrates. (Jonathan Spyer)

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### **Component militias**

The YPG was founded by the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat: PYD) in Syria in 2004, which itself is the Syrian franchise of the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê: PKK), based in Turkey and Iraq. The YPG and its female component, the YPJ, are the armed forces of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, the governing body of the two Kurdish cantons in northern Syria designated by the Kurds as Rojava. The PYD is a component part of that Committee.

The YPG is one of the most powerful military forces in northern Syria and has partnered successfully with US and Western air power against the Islamic State. Its fighters constitute the great majority of the forces designated under the banner of the SDF.

Jaysh al-Sanadid (Army of the Brave) is a militia formed by the Bedouin Shammar tribe. The Shammars are located throughout the Middle East, with their largest branch in Iraq. The relatively small Syrian branch of the tribe lives in the Yarubiya and Jeza'a areas, under the control of the Kurds.

The Shammar are long-time opponents of the Saudi monarchy and of the Wahhabi trend in Sunni Islam to which the monarchy adheres. They also have a long tradition of co-operation with the Kurds. Sheikh Humaydi Daham al-Hadi, leader of the Shammar in Syria, who also serves as the co-president of the Jazira canton, told *IHS Jane's*, "The first ISIS [Islamic State] for us is the Wahhabis."





*Sanadid, YPG, and YPJ fighters at the funeral in Ja'ada of three Sanadid members killed fighting the Islamic State. The 30-40,000 fighters of the Kurdish YPG and YPJ constitute the large majority of this force. (Jonathan Spyer)*

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Sanadid itself claims to have 9,000 fighters, although outside estimates (including an assessment by PYD co-chair Salih Muslim in a *Washington Post* interview) consider the number to be lower, perhaps 3,000. Bandar al-Hamidi, son of Sheikh Humaydi, is the military commander of the Sanadid.

Founded in early 2013 and led by Gewargis Hanna, the Syriac Military Council (Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo: MFS) is the military wing of the Syriac Union Party, representing the Christian Syriac people of Syria. The movement regards Syriacs as a separate ethnic identity from Arabs and Kurds.

The MFS has around 2,000 fighters, and has co-operated closely with the YPG since its foundation. Indeed, it has formally been aligned with the YPG since January 2014. MSF spokesman Gabriel Kino told *IHS Jane's*, "All the SDF groups have been co-operating for a period of time, so it was natural to create a unified force."

Thuwar Raqqa, the fighters of which probably number in the low hundreds (although the movement's spokesman claimed 5,200, a number dismissed by other sources) emerged as one of a number of Sunni Arab rebel groups fighting the Assad government in the Raqqa area in late 2012. In late 2013, it aligned with the Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra to fight against the Islamic State in the Raqqa area. Following the Islamic State's defeat of Jabhat al-Nusra and its opponents in Raqqa in January 2014, the group sought refuge in the Kurdish-controlled Kobanê enclave.

In April 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra announced that Thuwar Raqqa was no longer part of its organisation. Yet a legacy of mistrust appears to remain between the YPG and Thuwar Raqqa,

with a number of YPG fighters telling *IHS Jane's* privately that they did not regard the movement as a partner. Indeed, a YPG attack on a Thuwar Raqqa checkpoint took place in early December 2015, for which the YPG later apologised.



*A YPG commander speaks on 18 December at the funeral of three fighters of the Sanadid militia. The YPG is one of the most powerful military forces in northern Syria. (Jonathan Spyer)*

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## **Actions and deployments**

The YPG and its allies, fighting under the banner of the SDF for the first time, launched the al-Hawl offensive on 31 October 2015. The offensive was launched with the expulsion of Islamic State forces from the city of Al-Hawl on 13 November and concluded with the taking of the Al-Hawl oilfield on 16 November.

Having captured 196 villages and an area of 1,362 square kilometres, according to SDF spokesman Colonel Talal al-Silu, the SDF was then situated around 30 km from the town of Al-Shaddadi. YPG officials and field commanders interviewed by *IHS Jane's* stated that this area was the main focus for the next phase of their war against the Islamic State. Al-Shaddadi is the command center for the Islamic State throughout eastern Syria, and also serves also as a key point for cross-border communication to Nineveh province in Iraq.

Tribal loyalties and Kurdish-Arab rivalries are of significance in this part of eastern Syria. To date, only the Shammar tribe have made a clear alliance with the Kurds in this area. Rumours unconfirmed by *IHS Jane's* suggest an imminent pledge to the SDF by the Shaitat tribe, and an organised effort is clearly under way by the Kurdish YPG and Asayish to improve relations with traditionally anti-Kurdish tribes such as the Sharabia and Bagara in this area.



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## **Western engagement**

A US airdrop of 50 tonnes of arms and ammunition to allied groups in northern Syria took place on 12 October, immediately before the announcement of the formation of the SDF. The airdrop consisted of 112 pallets containing ammunition for M-16 and Kalashnikov-type assault rifles, mortar rounds, and grenades, but not anti-armour or higher-calibre weaponry.

SDF officers interviewed by *IHS Jane's* expressed frustration at the nature of the weapons provided by the US in this airdrop. Lawand Qamishlo, a YPG spokesman in Hasaka, said that the force needed "better weapons systems - especially to defend against car bombs. We need anti-tank weapons, and armoured vehicles, to be effective." Col Silu, the spokesperson for the SDF - himself a Turkmen and a member of Jaysh al-Thuwar - similarly told *IHS Jane's* that the new force needed "TOW missiles [and] anti-tank systems" in order to perform effectively.



*Adnan Abu Amjad, second-in-command of the Shams al-Shamal organisation, looking down a telescopic sight on a PK-type machine gun, on 18 December 2015. (Jonathan Spyer)*

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According to other YPG commanders talking to *IHS Jane's*, the responsibility for targeting air strikes by US forces on behalf of the SDF is in the hands of YPG commanders, who radio the co-ordinates of the location they need to be targeted by air strikes to a control room staffed by YPG. The co-ordinates are then sent to the coalition. Sanadid and Shams al-Shamal commanders told *IHS Jane's* they were not part of this control room, which was the responsibility of the YPG alone.

YPG members who were interviewed denied any knowledge of direct engagement by US forces present in Syria in combat against the Islamic State. It appears most likely that the small number of Western forces on the ground are engaged in a training and advisory role. As Col Silu put it, "The Americans are not present on the ground. We co-ordinate the air strikes, and we decide

where to go next." *IHS Jane's* nevertheless assesses that it is most likely that Western special forces are present on the ground and have engaged against the Islamic State, but that SDF/YPG personnel would be under instructions to make no reference to this.

The SDF framework solidifies the limited US-Kurdish partnership against the Islamic State in Syria, but potential strains in this relationship are discernible. The Syrian Kurdish leadership views the SDF as the military component of a larger political initiative intended to recast the Kurdish cantons as the natural leaders for all those elements favouring a federal, secular, and democratic Syria.

In this regard, the little-reported Democratic Syria Conference that took place in Derik in Hasaka Province on 8-9 December merits examination. The conference concluded with the announcement of the establishment of a 42-member 'Syrian Democratic Assembly'. Hediya Yusif, co-president of the Jazira canton, told *IHS Jane's* .

However, the Western coalition's relationship to this initiative is not clear. It has largely been ignored in media coverage of the Syria conflict, yet if armed groups associated with the initiative are to play a crucial role in challenging the Islamic State in northern Syria, then the political - and not solely military - nature of the initiative will be important. The political ambitions of Syria's Kurds, and the more limited ambitions of the Western coalition regarding the SDF, may be a cause for tension in coming months.



*A local teenager celebrates with fighters after his village was liberated on 8 November from the Islamic State. The SDF framework solidifies the limited US-Kurdish partnership against the Islamic State in Syria. (PA)*

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## Outlook

The SDF may opt for any one of four potential offensives in early 2016: a push westwards to seek to unite the Afrin and Jazira cantons; a more limited push west of the Euphrates toward Manbej and Jarabulus; an assault on Raqqa; or the continuation of its line of advance towards Al-Shaddadi.

One westwards offensive option would aim to link the Jazira/Kobanê and Afrin cantons through action west of the Euphrates against the Islamic State and south of Afrin, also against the Islamic State. Such an offensive would take place without the involvement of US air power, and against the wishes of both the US and Turkey. Rather, it would require a shifting of diplomacy towards an alliance with Russia and the Assad government in order to offset Turkish opposition.

Another possible, more limited option for an offensive option west of the Euphrates would be for the SDF to seek to consolidate its gains in Tishreen by advancing northwards in the area west of the river, towards Manbej and eventually Jarabulus. This option would have the advantage (over the more ambitious westward offensive) that it would be less likely to trigger a determined Turkish response and less likely to lead to a rupture with the US-led coalition. The SDF banner could play an important role in this regard, enabling the YPG to contend that this action did not violate Turkish red lines because the force engaged was not a purely Kurdish one.

The third option would be a push towards Raqqa. By early 2016, SDF groups were situated approximately 50 km from the city. Yet such an assault also appeared not to be imminent. Taking Raqqa would be costly in terms of fighters, since the Islamic State is prepared for such an assault and would be expected to assemble all available forces to resist it.

More significantly, SDF commanders interviewed by *IHS Jane's* noted that for this assault to be successfully carried out, a number of other objectives would first need to be secured - such as the capture of Al-Shaddadi in order to first cut the city off from supply lines to Turkey and to Islamic State holdings in Iraq.

The fourth option for the SDF would be to continue its current line of advance, south of the Al-Hawl area and in the direction of the town of Al-Shaddadi. At the time of writing, the SDF was situated just south of Al-Hawl and approximately 30 km from Al-Shaddadi. An operation to push further southwards and take Al-Shaddadi would serve to cut the alternative road that the Islamic State built from Raqqa to its holdings in Iraq, after the taking of Highway 47 by the Iraqi Peshmerga during its Sinjar offensive in November 2015 made such a road necessary.





*The strategically key dam of Tishreen on the Euphrates river in Syria. The SDF crossed the dam in early 2016 but has not yet pushed west of the river. (PA)*

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