

# DEIR AZZOUR

## Tribal Mapping Project

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## About the Authors



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reporter with NPR and as an interpreter to McClatchy in Lebanon, and he has written widely in Arabic journals, including al-Safir and al-Hayat, and for websites as well. His last report on Syrian-Palestinian refugees was published in the Journal of Palestine Studies. Betare also worked as a program coordinator for the Arab NGO Network for Development, focusing on building the capacity of Syrian civil society to defend human rights. He has addressed numerous gatherings about the plight of Syrian-Palestinians, including the annual World Bank meeting in 2013, at the U.N. headquarters in New York City, at different U.N. agencies in Tokyo, and a variety of universities around the United States.

## About the Project-Implementing Organizations

**The Middle East Security Program in the Center for a New American Security** conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in this turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability in the region, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security Program draws on a team with deep government and nongovernment experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.

**People Demand Change Inc.** was established in early 2013 by Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff and Bassam Barabandi in response to the seismic changes taking place in the MENA region. PDC's mission is to develop a better, more streamlined model for providing aid and support – on a long-term basis – to civil society actors in the MENA region. PDC works to expand and strengthen civil society through the provision of aid and support that are both skills-oriented and humanitarian in nature. It strives to assist local communities to procure the resources, training, and capital needed to reconstruct responsibly and sustainably toward a free, democratic Middle East and North Africa. PDC aids this transformation by developing long-term relationships with key communities and populations within the region, working with them in a collaborative and culturally competent fashion that considers the changing dynamics of this region over time. PDC has previous experience working across the MENA region, including in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Turkey, with a focus on conflict-prone and fragile states.

### Cover Photo

Map construction and design/ Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, PDC, and Melody Cook, CNAS

## The Project

The objective of this project is to provide the most comprehensive, publicly available tribal mapping of Deir Azzour governorate, which is a governorate in eastern Syria that border Iraq, where Arab tribes make up the clear majority of the local population. Deir Azzour is the new administrative center for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) since the Salafi-jihadi organization lost control over its capital in Iraq, Mosul, and it began losing its hold over its Syrian capital of Raqqa.

This project was conducted by the Middle East Security Program in the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), under the direction of Nicholas A. Heras; and People Demand Change Inc. (PDC), under the direction of Bassam Barabandi and Nidal Betare.

From November 2016 to September 2017, the project implementers leveraged a network of Syrians from Deir Azzour, both those currently residing in the governorate in areas under ISIS' control and those displaced to other areas of Syria, to collect the data for the mapping.

This project has two parts: (1) a series of maps depicting the major tribal groups in Deir Azzour and (2) a report based on the implementers' interviews with their network in Deir Azzour that assesses the current state of play in ISIS-controlled areas. The project provides policymakers, international organizations, and the interested public with a reference point for the socio-political terrain in Deir Azzour that will be encountered by any force that seeks to defeat and displace ISIS.

Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, Executive Director of PDC, and Melody Cook, Creative Director of CNAS, drew the tribal maps. The project implementers would like to thank Hassan Hassan, Senior Fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy and a native of the Albu Kamal area in Deir Azzour, for his review of the draft assessment report and the Deir Azzour tribal maps. The project implementers would also like to thank the network of researchers from Deir Azzour who collected the data that was used for the creation of the maps and helped inform the analysis of this report.

## About Deir Azzour

Syria's Deir Azzour governorate encompasses the two most important remaining *wilayat* (provinces) of ISIS' would-be caliphate, Wilayat al-Furat/Wilayat al-Badiya and Wilayat al-Khayr, in an area that runs south into Iraq on the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) in eastern Syria. These two provinces, Wilayat al-Khayr/Wilayat al-Badiya (from the areas west of the city of Deir Azzour down the MERV to the area of Albu Kamal) and Wilayat al-Furat (the area of Albu Kamal in Syria to the area of Qa'im in Iraq), will be the next target of the U.S.-led coalition's campaign. This area of the MERV is also the current target of forces loyal to the Bashar al-Assad government, which maintains a significant presence in the governorate via control over the Deir Azzour Airport and a large part of the city of Deir Azzour. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition, mainly through its constituent organization the Deir Azzour Military Council, is also advancing toward the city of Deir Azzour.

An ISIS-led siege of Assad-held areas of Deir Azzour, which houses an estimated 200,000 people including internally displaced persons (IDPs) from rural areas of the governorate, has been a major (and relatively underreported) humanitarian crisis in the Syrian civil war. Further, the population of Deir Azzour is highly vulnerable, as the Assad government and its allies as well as the U.S.-led coalition prepare to conduct separate campaigns against ISIS in the governorate. In advance of these military campaigns, local activists report that tens of thousands of people have fled the governorate, some paying thousands of dollars in bribes to local ISIS officers who are from Deir Azzour to avoid arrest, impressment, torture, and in some extreme cases execution for seeking to leave ISIS-controlled areas.

Deir Azzour is in the strategic eastern region of the country, on the border with Iraq, and the governorate is approximately 500 kilometers (311 miles) from Damascus. Deir Azzour borders Hasakah governorate to the northeast, Raqqa governorate to the northwest, and Homs governorate to the west and south. Deir Azzour encompasses approximately 33,060 square kilometers (20,543 square miles).

Before the uprising against the Assad government in 2011, an estimated 1.7 million people lived in Deir Azzour. Over the course of the Syrian civil war, however, this figure has likely fallen dramatically, according to residents of the governorate who have witnessed the displacement of much of the population in several villages. The weakening of the local economics and social

networks in the villages of the Deir Azzour countryside had begun before 2011. Many smaller villages in the governorate became bedroom communities as their residents sought economic opportunity in Deir Azzour city, or their year-round populations significantly lowered as residents, particularly young men, moved to cities in western Syria such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, or outside of Syria, particularly in Lebanon and the Arab Gulf countries.

The major features of the Deir Azzour's terrain are the Euphrates River, which flows across the governorate from Raqqa into Iraq, and the Syrian Desert, which buffers the Euphrates on either bank. Residents refer to the areas above the northern bank of the Euphrates as "al-Jazeera" and those below the southern bank of the river as "al-Shamiyya." Another river, the Khabour, flows down from Hasakah governorate and joins the Euphrates in Deir Azzour at the large town of al-Bu-sayrah. However, the Khabour is now mainly a dried-out riverbed because of the nearly decade-long drought that devastated much of Syria between 2003 and 2010 (Deir Azzour and Hasakah were hard-hit) and the effects of poor water management by the Assad government and disruptions caused by the civil war.

Without the Euphrates, and to a far lesser degree the Khabour, the terrain of Deir Azzour would be desert, as within the narrow belt hugging the Euphrates the soil is highly fertile and supports Deir Azzour's primarily agricultural economy. This agro-economy includes the cultivation of a wide range of crops, particularly wheat, cotton, sugar beets, and corn, and the raising of poultry and livestock, particularly cattle and sheep. The movement of goods, both lawful and illicit, particularly into and out of Iraq, is another major component of the local economy in Deir Azzour.

Deir Azzour is also where most of Syria's oil resources are, with at least eight major oil fields scattered throughout the governorate, particularly concentrated on the al-Jazeera side of the Euphrates moving toward the Syrian-Iraqi border. The oil resources in Deir Azzour were deemed commercially viable in the early 1980s, but from then until the uprising in 2011, the local population was rarely recruited to work in the governorate's oil industry. The Assad government also did not invest the oil revenues taken from those fields into the infrastructure or use the money to build the local economy in the governorate, another source of tension between residents and Damascus.

After the capture in 2012 of most of Deir Azzour by armed opposition forces, which were mainly mobilized from local tribal militias, control over the governorate's

oil resources was a significant source of conflict among the local armed groups and tribes. Some of the locally mobilized armed groups, particularly Liwa Jafaar al-Tiyar, which was a branch of the Jaysh al-Islam organization headquartered in Damascus' eastern suburbs, served the interests of actors outside of the governorate and provided them with revenue that enhanced their power in their local areas outside of Deir Azzour. ISIS, since it came to act as a statelike authority with a near monopoly on the use of military force in large areas of the governorate in the summer of 2014, had largely managed to stop the tribal conflicts over oil resources. However, since 2015, the U.S.-led coalition air campaign has systematically targeted ISIS-controlled oil infrastructure, which has sharply reduced production and export of local oil supplies and subsequently reduced profits from the sale of Deir Azzour oil.

## The Nature of ISIS Rule Over the Tribes in Deir Azzour

The exact population of tribal groups in the governorate is an issue of contention, with tribes inflating, and their rivals deflating, the number who belong to any one tribal group. Due to its own political concerns, the Assad government has not published a public census or a record of the size of the various tribal groups of Deir Azzour, and the members themselves are generally unreliable estimators of their population. Tribalism remains an important form of identity and can also be an effective form of social (and military) mobilization in Deir Azzour, depending on the tribal group. However, not all tribal groups in the governorate are able to operate as a command-and-control structure, with a paramount sheikh to provide authority to direct tribesmen.

In Deir Azzour, the major confederation is the 'Egaidat, which, depending on the source, either originated in the city of Ougaida, in what is now the northern region of modern Saudi Arabia, and migrated to present-day Deir Azzour between the 18th and 19th centuries, or alternatively, was formed in the 19th century as an alliance of tribal groups that had migrated to this area of the Euphrates in the Syrian Desert. Within the 'Egaidat confederation in Deir Azzour, the most important tribes are the Bu Kamal, the Shuwayt, Shaytat, Bakir, Bu Kamil, Mashahda, Bu Khabour, Qaraan, and Bu Hassan.

Some of these tribes of the 'Egaidat also have important subtribes, which for all intents and purposes act as independent tribal groups that dominate their own villages in the governorate. These include the Hasoon, Bu

Mareeh, and Damim of the Bu Kamal, the Abu Azaddeen of the Bu Kamil, the al-Khanfoor of the Shaytat, and the Mishrif of the Bakir. There also are powerful lineages within the 'Egaidat, where the traditional sheikhly families of the confederation are chosen, particularly the al-Hifl of the Bu Kamil tribe from the village of Dhiban, the Nijris of the Bu Hassan tribe of the village of Sweidan al-Shammiyya, and the al-Dandal of the Hasoon tribe of the village of al-Sweiyah. The history of the 'Egaidat has several instances of intermarriage, both between the sheikhly families and among ordinary tribesmen, between the tribes and subtribes of this confederation, which further blends distinctions among the tribes.

In addition to the 'Egaidat confederation, other tribal confederations are present in Deir Azzour, the most important of which are the Baggara, the Abeed, and the Kul'ayeen, and the Abu Saraya. Of these other confederations, the Baggara are the most numerous, and the Bu Badran, Bu Arab, and Bu Ma'yash tribes of the Baggara are the most prominent. There are powerful lineages within the Baggara confederation in Deir Azzour, the most prominent being the al-Bashir of the Bu Arab tribe. Other Baggara tribes in the governorate include the Abed Jadir and Abed Karim. Other confederations that are more numerous in other areas of Syria such as Hasakah governorate, or in Iraq and on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the Shammar, Tayy, Jabbour, Zubayd, al-Rifaa'i, and Dulaim are also present in Deir Azzour and dominate some of the villages in the governorate. The Shammar confederation tribe in Deir Azzour is the Abu Layl, the Tayy confederation tribe in Deir Azzour is the Bu 'Issa, the Jabbour confederation tribe in Deir Azzour is the Jughayfa, the Zubayd confederation tribe in Deir Azzour is the Juhaysh, and the al-Rifaa'i confederation tribe in Deir Azzour is the Sheikh Issa. Notably, the Jughayfa have a history of combating al Qaeda and ISIS in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Syria.

There are also other minor tribes present in Deir Azzour, generally mixed with the tribes of the larger confederations but also in some instances dominating their own villages. These minor tribes are the Zubari, the Bak'ayn, the Siyaad, the Marasma, and the Marashda. The Zubari and the Bak'ayn are descended from the 'Egaidat and the Abeed respectively but hold a distinct identity that makes them into their own tribes.

The Syrian Ba'ath Party has traditionally sought to undermine the independence of the country's tribes through intimidation, infiltration, and dependence, and Deir Azzour was a special area of attention for this effort. These aggressive policies continued under both Assad governments and were exacerbated by decades of

economic stagnation and the near-total collapse of the rural economy of regions in Deir Azzour between 2003 and 2010 due to drought, corrupt use of water resources, and mismanagement of croplands. Because of these efforts, at the time that the uprising against the Assad government began in the governorate in 2011, many tribal leaders lost the levers of influence, especially money and favors that they could grant to tribesmen from the state.

Another important dynamic in the period before 2011 saw the Assad government allowing Shia clerics, financially supported by Iran, to proselytize in villages near Deir Azzour city, particularly al-Busayrah, Hatla, and Jadid Baggara. Iran views Deir Azzour as a strategic region of Syria, influence over which would allow it to establish a socio-political belt of influence from Deir Azzour to Raqqa, and on to western Syria into Lebanon. Starting in the 1980s, Jamil al-Assad, brother of the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, in partnership with the Iranians established the al-Murtada association. The al-Murtada association sought to open *husseiniyas* (Shia religious centers) throughout Syria, although its activities in Deir Azzour were generally limited by Hafez al-Assad's security forces due to resistance from local Sunni sheikhs in the governorate.

Iranian missionaries focused their proselytizing efforts on tribes that claimed lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, and a particularly successful target of these efforts were some of the tribes of the Baggara confederation, which claimed their lineage from a descendant of the prophet, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir. In the 2000s, with the approval of Bashar al-Assad, the Iranians again sought to convert Sunni tribes around Deir Azzour city to Shiism. After the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the subsequent capture of the suburbs of Deir Azzour by the armed opposition, a significant population of Shia Baggara left Deir Azzour for areas under the control of the Assad government in western Syria, particularly Damascus.

This proselytizing effort created a socio-political legacy that the Assad government may seek to advantage if it returns to control these villages after ISIS. Nawaf al-Bashir, one of the most prominent sheikhs within the Baggara confederation in Syria, was a prominent member of the Syrian opposition who has recently been recruited by Iran to enlist tribal support for the Assad government in Deir Azzour. He is in the process of establishing a tribally based force from the Shia Baggara in Deir Azzour. Some of the Baggara tribal groups that have converted to Shiism, and have ties to Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, may be settled in these villages. Iranian mobilized, predominantly foreign Shia armed groups that are

fighting alongside forces loyal to the Assad government. This resettlement would be predicated on the argument that the local population was historically Shia and that it was sectarian cleansing that forced those inhabitants out, despite the presence of Sunni members of the tribe who also lived there, creating the condition for endemic sectarian conflict in some key villages near Deir Azzour city.

These socio-political conditions, in the post-2011 period, caused many of the tribal leaders in Deir Azzour to have difficulty asserting authority over the youth of their tribes. The defection of former army officers to be leaders of the armed opposition in the governorate, and the subsequent mobilization of local tribal youth into these armed groups, further eroded the authority of tribal leaders. In the post-2011 period, while tribal identity has remained important and residents of the governorate still recognize their tribal affiliation as an important source of identity, the authority of tribal leaders in Deir Azzour has eroded significantly.

The military and social organization of ISIS has capitalized on the pragmatism of these weakened Arab tribal groups in Deir Azzour to assertively co-opt the governorate's generally undernetworked tribal militias, those armed groups that were not displaced in the fighting between ISIS and other components of the armed opposition in the governorate in the summer of 2014. Aware of the damage that the resistance of tribally organized and directed militias can do in Deir Azzour, ISIS has been especially concerned with being seen to be associated with both providing order and social welfare as part of its governance in Syria, as well as being feared as a harsh and vengeful enforcer of its rule.

Since 2014, ISIS has increasingly co-opted the local population of Deir Azzour into its socio-political system, engaging with the local population, particularly the various tribes of the governorate. Although some tribes – such as the branches of the Shaytat – are associated with rebellion against ISIS, most of the tribal groups in the governorate have chosen to accommodate themselves to the reality of ISIS as the statelike entity in their areas. Prior to the summer of 2014, the presence of leaders in ISIS in Deir Azzour from the Bakir and Abu Azaddeen tribes of the 'Egaidat confederation encouraged hundreds of youth from these tribes to join ISIS. Most of the fighters from these tribes who joined ISIS did so for economic reasons: ISIS paid higher salaries for them to fight against the Assad government in battles in the areas in and around Deir Azzour. The presence of hundreds of fighters from these tribes in ISIS does not mean that the tribes, as a whole, support ISIS. Over more than three years of ISIS rule in Deir Azzour, hundreds of youth from most of the

tribes of Deir Azzour have been recruited into ISIS, and demobilizing these young ISIS fighters is challenge that most all the tribes of Deir Azzour will share.

Since ISIS achieved near-total domination of the governorate in summer 2014, it has established a pervasive system of governance that seeks co-optation of the local population in society, politics, and the economy. The result of ISIS' broad, and where necessary tailored, engagement with the tribes of the governorate, and the generally weak nature of both tribal leadership and the ability for tribal groups to mobilize, is that there is no particular tribal group that is positioned to challenge ISIS. However, the siloed nature of these pockets of resistance with no supply line to a supportive benefactor would make it difficult without continuous and sustained military and humanitarian aid.

ISIS has also utilized the managed, forced displacement of whole villages for a specified period as punishment for resisting its rule, which occurred more frequently as the Salafi-jihadi organization moved to consolidate its control over Deir Azzour in the latter part of 2014 into early 2015. After early 2015, ISIS targeted displacement of the families of fighters from the local population who were caught resisting it. The displacement of a village would coincide with a list of actions that would have to be taken by the village, and if the village was associated with a tribal group, that tribal group, to return home and to be in ISIS' good graces. These actions included public denouncement of members of the village or tribal group who fought or resisted ISIS, agreement to swear allegiance to ISIS, agreement to allow ISIS checkpoints outside the village, and the donation of weapons from each family of the village to ISIS. These conditions, particularly denouncing members of the village and tribe and the forced donation of weapons, were particularly demoralizing for the residents and served to send a message from ISIS that there was no higher authority than it in the governorate.

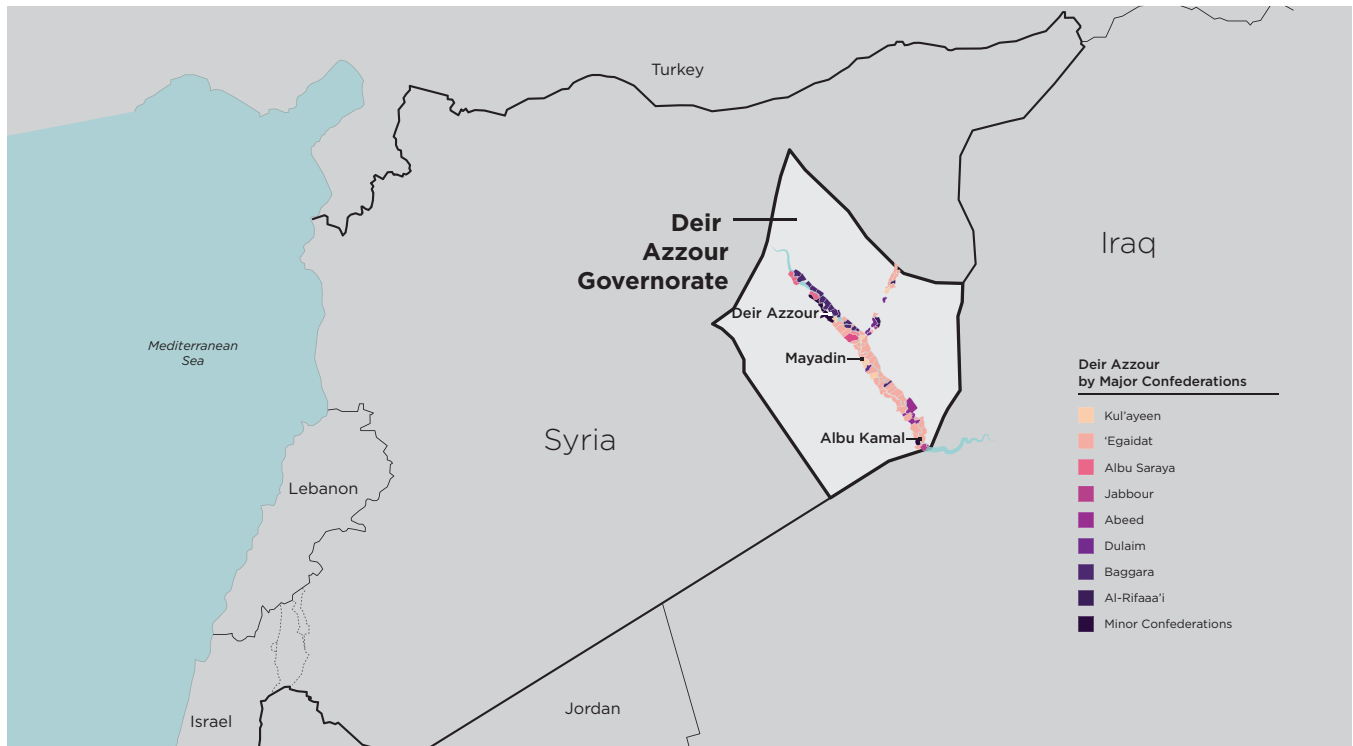
The Salafi-jihadi organization has also maintained an internal security force composed of seasoned foreign fighters to enforce its rule in the governorate. ISIS' foreign fighter cadres in Deir Azzour are generally but not exclusively from other ethnic Arab countries, and includes a sizable cadre of jihadists from the Caucasus and Central Asia including Uighurs. In the city of Mayadin it has a reserve battalion of Chechen fighters, estimated by local

sources to number 800, who serve as a praetorian guard for some of the senior ISIS leaders who have withdrawn to the area between Mayadin and Abu Kamal. This creates an atmosphere in which the people of Deir Azzour are hesitant to confront ISIS for fear of becoming IDPs or refugees. Internal displacement within Deir Azzour, particularly to the cities of Deir Azzour, Mayadin, Abu Kamal, and the large town of al-Busayrah, from smaller settlements in the governorate has left a deep impression on the socio-politics of the governorate. The city of Deir Azzour was the site of refuge for most of the governorate's IDPs, which had drawn a sharper difference between the city and the rest of the governorate. This displacement, combined with the general poverty of the governorate before 2011 and the destruction and stagnation caused by the conflict, has created an enormous humanitarian challenge and deep social, political, and economic anxiety throughout the governorate.

ISIS has sought to build its own base of power by offering economic incentives to poorer villages, providing municipal services in the cities, and establishing a system of law and order that has replaced the tribal and militia conflicts that proliferated before summer 2014. ISIS has also built on the radicalization project directed at Deir Azzour's youth, particularly in the countryside in the poorer villages, by Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS has replaced Jabhat al-Nusra's program with a more pervasive system of indoctrination that includes curriculum in schools, the after-school "Cubs of the Caliphate" camps focusing on preteens, paying of salaries for youth fighters from co-opted armed groups, and underwriting of the economies of poorer villages. ISIS has also aggressively sought to refashion tribal affiliation, not to replace it suddenly and completely, but to situate tribalism as a subordinate identity to the Islamic doctrine of its governance system. Like the Ba'ath Party before it, ISIS has sought to establish the leadership of tribes based upon its incorporation into the ISIS system and to privilege younger leaders who have fought with or supported ISIS over the notable, sheikhly families that have traditionally served as the base of tribal authority.

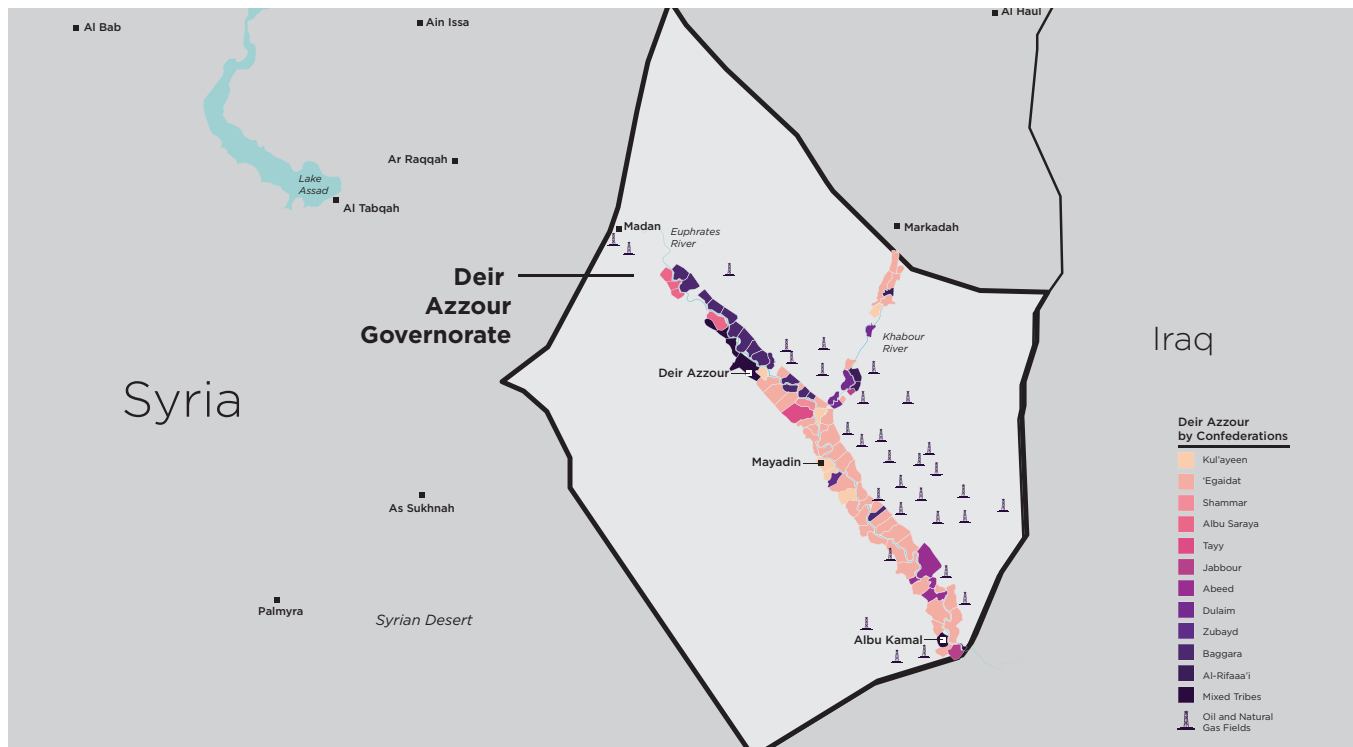
What follows are a series of maps depicting the major Arab tribal confederations of Deir Azzour, including their tribes, sub-tribes, their most prominent sheikhly families if they have them, and the districts that they control in the governorate.

### The Place of Deir Azzour in the Middle East



Deir Azzour is Syria's strategic eastern province on the border with Iraq. The majority of the population there are Arab tribes.

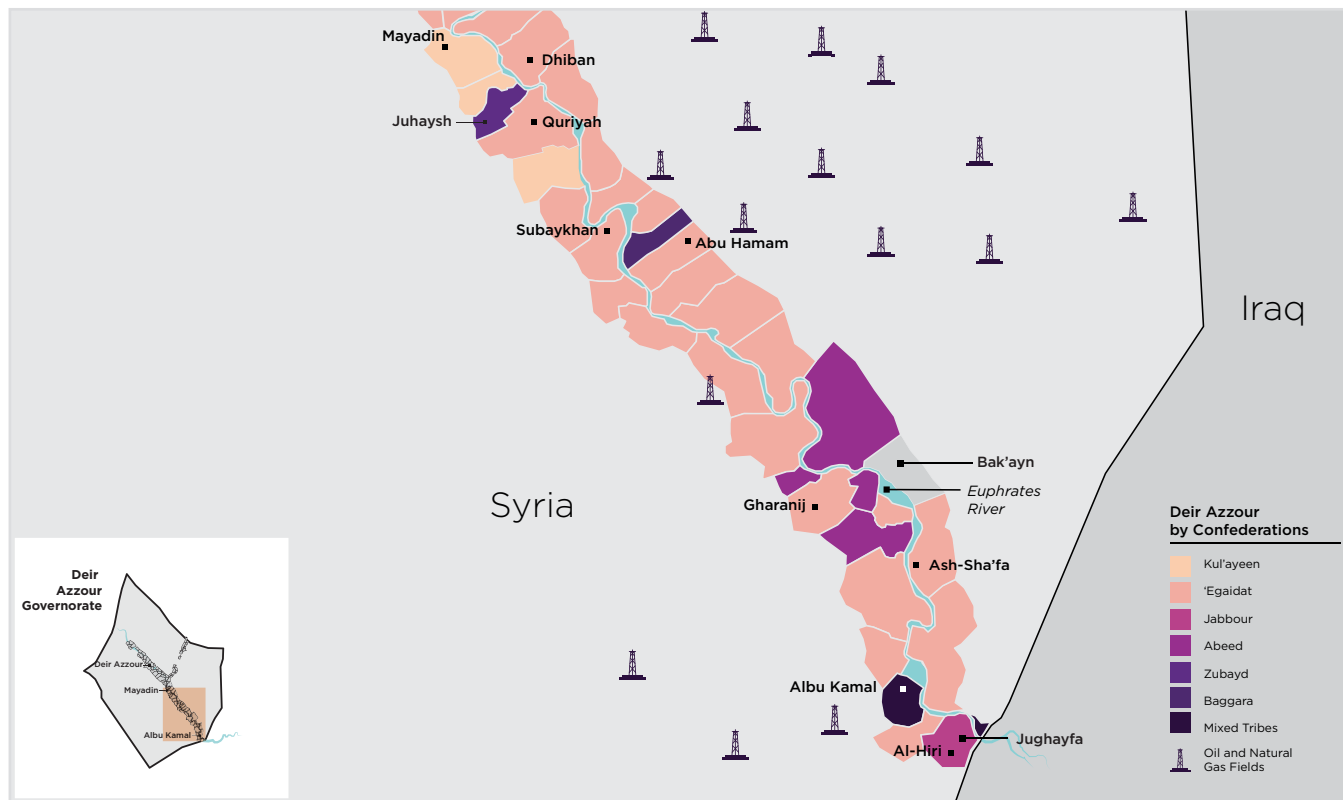
### The Arab Tribal Confederations of Deir Azzour



Deir Azzour has several tribal confederations, the most powerful are the 'Egaidat and the Baggara.



### The Middle Euphrates from Mayadin to Albu Kamal



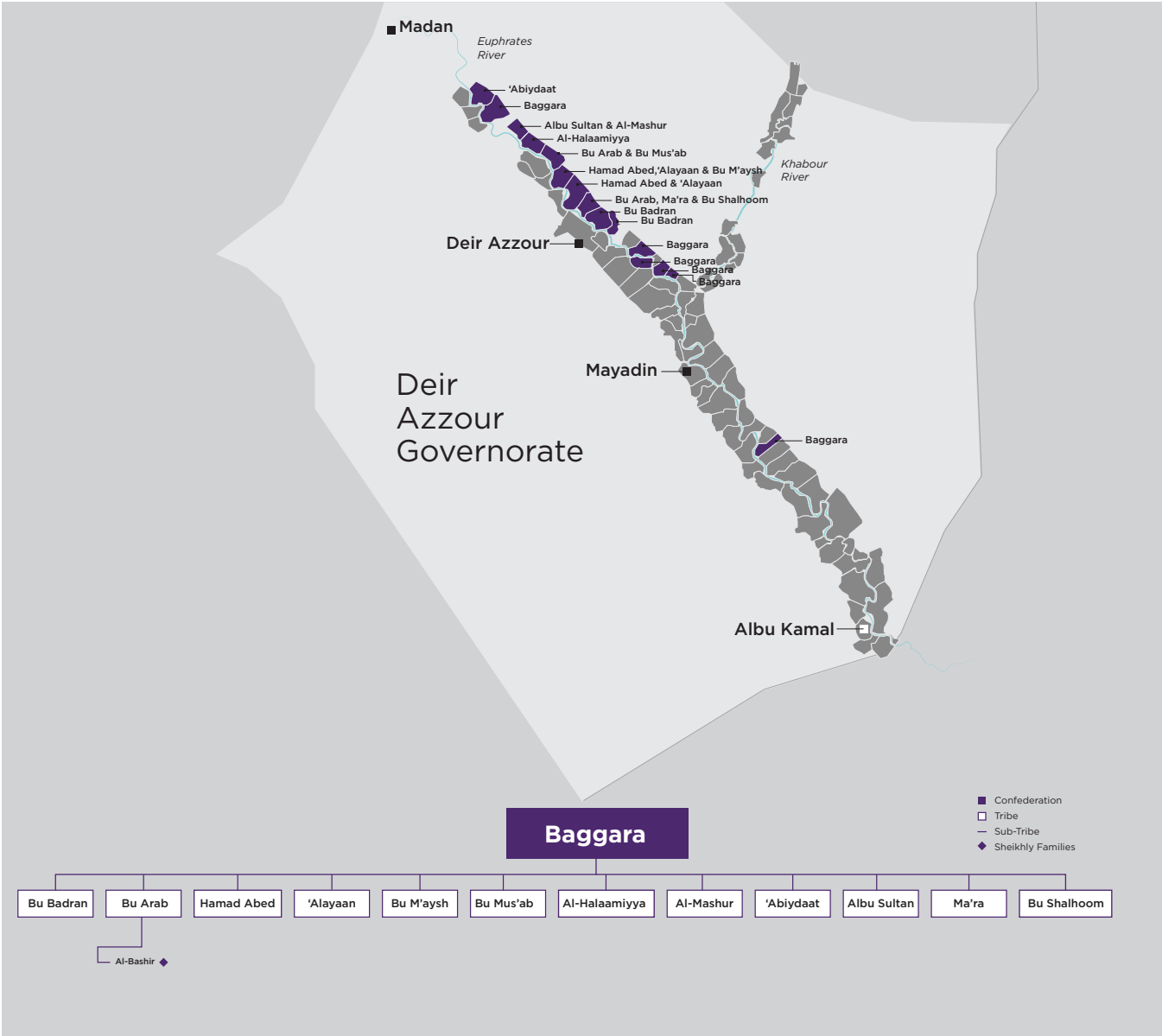
The center of gravity for ISIS in Syria and Iraq is now in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Most of this area is located between the city of Mayadin and the Syrian-Iraqi border south of the city of Albu Kamal.

**'Egaidat Confederation**



The 'Egaidat tribal confederation is the most powerful in Deir Azzour. It is composed of several tribes and sub-tribes, the most powerful tribes are the Bu Kamal, Shuwyat, Shaytat, Bakir, Mashahda, Bu Khabour, Qaraan, Bu Kamil, and Bu Hassan.

### Baggara Confederation



The Baggara confederation is the second most powerful in Deir Azzour. It is composed of several tribes, including the Bu Badran, Bu Arab, and Bu Ma'yash. Most of the confederation is Sunni, however a significant minority is Shia.

### Abeed Confederation



The Abeed confederation is located strategically in the heart of ISIS territory between the cities of Mayadin and Albu Kamal. It includes the al-Biq'aan, al-Majaawada, Bu Hardan, and Albu Sh'abaan tribes.

### Kul'ayeen Confederation



The Kul'ayeen confederation includes the Albu Khalil, Waysaat, and Albu Mustafa tribes. It dominates several strategic areas in Deir Azzour, particularly in and around the city of Mayadin, where ISIS has established its new headquarters in Syria.

## The State of the Armed Opposition to ISIS in Deir Azzour

To date, armed opposition against ISIS in the areas it controls inside of Deir Azzour has been unsuccessful, and neither local tribal rebellions inside Deir Azzour, such as that of the branches of the Shaytat tribe of the ‘Egaidat confederation around Mayadin, nor armed opposition groups now located outside the governorate, such as the U.S.-trained Maghawir al-Thawra around Albu Kamal, have succeeded against ISIS. Although there are periodic incidents of armed opposition against ISIS inside of Deir Azzour, such as the underground White Shroud militant movement, the pervasiveness of ISIS’ security regime and its active recruitment of teenagers, an important source of the militia groups in the governorate, has allowed ISIS to generally prevent revolts against it from the local tribes. It is for this reason that attempts to engineer a large, armed opposition campaign against ISIS composed of exiled local militias, or to spark a general tribal revolution against it, have failed. For all intents and purposes, from Mayadin to Albu Kamal, where ISIS has relocated its formerly Raqqa-based leadership, the muscle of the revolution, youth, remains a source of manpower for ISIS.

Before summer 2014, ISIS shared influence and authority over the predominantly tribal population of Deir Azzour with several other armed opposition organizations. Most prominent among these was the official al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, while various other tribally organized militias ranged from the militant Islamist organization Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (commonly known as Ahrar al-Sham) to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its affiliated militias. ISIS cooperation with these factions, particularly in Deir Azzour, was driven by a motivation to prevent the pre-existing tribal conflicts held by the members of its local affiliates from erupting into more widespread conflict between ISIS and the other armed opposition factions in the area.

Toward the middle of 2014, when open conflict between ISIS and the armed moderate opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra occurred, there was a brief period when the inevitability of a complete ISIS takeover of the governorate became clear. In this period, Deir Azzour FSA units lobbied the U.S. government – specifically asking Samantha Power directly – to persuade then-President Barack Obama to provide the needed support to forestall the impending fall of the governorate to ISIS. By late June 2014, ISIS was trucking in heavy weapons, tanks, Humvees, and flak guns looted from the Iraqi army in Mosul and wider areas of Iraq they took control

of, to bring to bear against the opposition forces in Deir Azzour. In a last-ditch effort to fend off ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham and any unaffiliated, local tribal militias opposed to ISIS formed the “Mujahidin Shurah Council,” an umbrella military organization to fight ISIS. Ultimately, this coordination was too late; the firepower ISIS brought from Iraq was too great to overcome without outside support, which never materialized.

During the 2012–2014 period, there were attempts by the governorate’s ‘Egaidat and Baggara confederations, and powerful tribes that belong to the ‘Egaidat confederation, particularly the Mashahda, Bakir, and Shaytat, to establish their own, umbrella armed opposition organizations mobilized on a unified idea of tribal identity. These attempts failed, and the armed opposition movement in Deir Azzour was driven generally by localism, as smaller, municipality-based armed groups proliferated. Some of these more powerful, tribally based militia organizations of the ‘Egaidat confederation, such as those belonging to the Bakir, subordinated themselves to ISIS and continue to fight for the Salafi-jihadi organization against the Assad government near Deir Azzour city. Others, such as the Shaytat and the Mashahda, sought to mobilize against ISIS.

Liwa Ahrar al-Mashahda was active in and around Albu Kamal. After ISIS beat the armed opposition there, some members of this tribe ended up in the “New Syrian Army,” now called Maghawir al-Thawra, which works closely with the U.S.-led coalition. It is estimated that currently 100 fighters in Maghawir al-Thawra are members of the Mashahda tribe from the area around the city of Albu Kamal in Deir Azzour. The “Shaytat Rebellion,” centered on the village of Abu Hamam near the city of Mayadin, was an example of a tribe, and its subtribes, collectively deciding to defend a sizable and near-contiguous area of Deir Azzour against ISIS. This is what distinguished the Shaytat resistance to ISIS in summer 2014, because it was a rebellion of tribe nearly *en masse* in a specific territory, over multiple villages, and it was therefore the closest thing to a mass tribal rebellion that ISIS has faced since it rose to power in Deir Azzour. That is why ISIS acted so swiftly and brutally to crush it.

Another organization, Usud al-Sharqiyya, was formed from several Deir Azzour governorate FSA affiliates that had been defeated by ISIS and displaced from the governorate to the relatively isolated eastern Qalamoun region of Homs governorate, in central-western Syria. In the announcement of the formation of Usud al-Sharqiyya, it stated that it was partly motivated by a desire to avenge the ISIS attacks on the Shaytat. This group

has approximately 250 fighters that are natives of Deir Azzour, and it is believed that a significant part of this force, 100 fighters, is seeking to join the SDF. There are currently problems within Usud al-Sharqiyya, which are caused by the mishmash of groups with different ideas about how to get back to Deir Azzour.

However, recent challenges that are emerging inside of Deir Azzour, and the response ISIS has chosen to address these challenges, could undermine the security regime that it has established in the governorate when the displacement force arrives. The pressure applied on ISIS by the separate campaigns waged by the Assad regime and the U.S.-led coalition is forcing ISIS into a policy of mandatory conscription for all able-bodied men, regardless of their tribe, throughout Deir Azzour. Although most of these conscripted men will likely not be front-line fighters and are instead being drafted to perform tasks to prepare defenses, the uncertainty that this policy is causing is leading to population displacement out of the governorate, particularly of young men. Based on the interviews with local activists and residents of Deir Azzour, especially in its core area of administration from the cities of Mayadin to Albu Kamal, ISIS' new conscription effort may be creating the conditions for its own downfall. The displaced youth, many of whom were part of local militias before summer 2014, are heading toward SDF-controlled areas of Syria or have already fled to Turkey, where they offer an additional pool of manpower for a campaign on Deir Azzour for the U.S.-led coalition.

Sources estimate that there are 5,000 fighters from Deir Azzour that remain active in the Syrian civil war and that are not currently part of the forces loyal either to ISIS or the Assad government. A cadre of these fighters are part of the SDF and its allied organizations and the rest are either divided up among several armed opposition groups that are in northwestern Syria, or are independent fighters without a group that they are attached to. Sources also estimate that around 450 fighters from this second cadre are part of an organization called Ajnad al-Sharqiyya and belong to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham organization, which is dominated by the Syrian al Qaeda affiliate (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra but rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham).

The first cadre of fighters from Deir Azzour are part of the SDF and its allied force Quwat al-Nukhba. There are no firm estimates for the number of fighters from Deir Azzour that are part of the SDF and Quwat al-Nukhba. The Deir Azzour Military Council, which is currently part of the SDF, will likely receive the fighters from Deir Azzour that join the SDF for the campaign against ISIS.

The second cadre of fighters from Deir Azzour, are divided into different armed opposition groups, or are independent fighters not part of a group, and are mainly located in Idlib, Aleppo, and Raqqa governorates. Most of these fighters from Deir Azzour are part of organizations that are in the northern and eastern areas of Aleppo governorate. One of these groups is the newly-formed and growing Liwa Tahrir Deir Azzour, which currently has an estimated 250 fighters that fought with different FSA groups from in and around Deir Azzour city. Other groups are Ahrar al-Sharqiyya, which has an estimated 350 fighters; Dira' al-Sharqiyya, which has an estimated 120 fighters; and Firqa Sultan al-Murad and Liwa al-Hamza, which have approximately 100 fighters each. Another organization, Ibnaa al-Sharqiyya, has an estimated 150 fighters, and is currently located in Idlib governorate. Sources estimate that an additional 500 fighters from Deir Azzour are independent, mostly located in Idlib governorate, and that the SDF is actively seeking to recruit these fighters to join it.

## Future Courses of Action

ISIS has created a system that filled the governance vacuum in Deir Azzour and that has managed to effectively, if at times brutally, govern Deir Azzour since the middle of 2014. The force that will displace ISIS will need to quickly and carefully replace the system that ISIS built. ISIS is preparing to undermine any attempts to replace it in Deir Azzour, and the challenges for its successor to control and stabilize the governorate will be numerous.

The force that displaces ISIS from the governorate should be composed of fighters from multiple tribes, and it should not be dependent on only a few armed groups that had been displaced from Deir Azzour with designs to establish an authoritarian system after ISIS. It should be noted that after more than half a decade of independence from the Assad government in most of the governorate, the local population would likely be resistant to it. The populace is also highly suspicious of the intentions of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Lebanese Hezbollah, both major allies of the Assad government, and the armed groups mobilized by the IRGC to support the Assad government's war effort. These IRGC-mobilized groups are predominately composed of Shiite fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The groups from Iraq are especially problematic because their use in western Iraq led to the local population there, which has strong kinship ties in many Deir Azzour communities suffering human rights abuses.

Local councils established to govern and administer the areas of Deir Azzour that are captured from ISIS should be independent, supported by local security and police forces that are mobilized from the local population and not from communities that are foreign to the governorate. These local councils should refrain from imposing an ideology on the population of Deir Azzour and should instead move as quickly as possible to allow the people of the governorate to govern themselves according to laws established by their own councils.

The force that displaces ISIS from Deir Azzour governorate, and seeks to stabilize it and prevent the return of ISIS or al Qaeda, should pursue the following courses of action:

1. Establish a security force for each municipality that is liberated from ISIS, preferably mobilized from the people of the area.
2. Establish local councils proportionate to the population in each area liberated from ISIS and ensure that they are representative of the population, without privileging armed groups or tribes with overrepresentation in any council.
3. Establish an independent judiciary body, not connected to any one local militia or tribal group, to oversee the investigation into crimes committed by ISIS in the governorate and the prosecution of those crimes under provincial law established by local councils, and not under tribal law or Sharia.
4. Establish a rehabilitation (deradicalization) program for local youths who were targeted by ISIS to prevent them from becoming potential sleeper agents for its attempts to re-establish itself in Deir Azzour.
5. Establish organizations that hire local people to provide services that have been disrupted by more than a half-decade of conflict, most immediately agricultural, oil, water, and transportation infrastructure.
6. Establish a border security force to seal the border with Iraq and reduce the flow of fighters from the western Iraqi desert into Deir Azzour, in order to support the new governance and security forces seeking to stabilize the governorate.



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