

Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics July-September 2023

SUMMARY

The Carter Center's latest quarterly review examines the emergence of protests in the southern Syrian governorate of As-Sweida and the outbreak of conflict in the northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Both events detail Syrian civilians' ongoing frustration and dissatisfaction with the government of Syria (GoS) and the interconnectedness of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian conflict might seem stalled, but it is far from resolved. The lack of any tangible political process to address the grievances and drivers of the conflict leads to persistent instability and continued violence. This has dire implications for the international community's desire to stave off a new wave of refugees and prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State group (IS).

Security-Related: Did the GoS reach an agreement to

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- 236 protest events were reported, primarily in As-Sweida Governorate, after the GoS announced a reduction in fuel subsidies.
- Violence broke out in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local tribes after the SDF arrested the head of its Deir-ez-Zor security operations.

- The armed forces of the GoS forcibly removed the commander of the GoS-backed National Defense Force militia in Al-Hassakah city, Al-Hassakah Governorate, after the commander attacked a prominent tribal leader.⁴

Conflict Events in Syria (Q1 2023 vs. Q2 2023)			
Region/Governorate	Q2	Q3	Change (%)
Northwest	1,369	1,628	+ 259 (19%)
Aleppo	604	830	+226 (37%)

*Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of Sept. 30, 2023.
NSAG stands for Non-State Armed Groups.*

Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of Oct. 1, 2023. Note:

international media attention, with support from the Syrian opposition, the United States, and other nations, marking the largest protests in the governorate since 2011.¹⁰

Notably, the demonstrations in As-Sweida were supported by the Druze religious leadership¹¹ as well as various Druze armed groups.¹² The Men of Dignity, one of the largest and most powerful of the Druze militias, stated their support for the demonstrations and called for the resignation of members of the government, albeit they did not directly call for the removal of Assad.¹³ Some Druze factions that had fought alongside the GoS also issued statements criticizing the government for disregarding people's needs and echoing the need for major internal changes within the GoS.¹⁴

The protests have remained peaceful and encountered relatively little resistance from the GoS and its allies, except for one incident on Sept. 14 when Baath Party members fired upon demonstrators in As-Sweida city.¹⁵ It appears that the GoS has chosen to largely disregard the protests, with few reports on the demonstration being mentioned in the pro-GoS media.¹⁶ At the same time, there are attempts by protest leaders to better coordinate the political movement stemming from these demonstrations to advocate for their demands more effectively.¹⁷ As these protests persist and gain international traction, the looming question revolves around how the GoS will react and what lies ahead for the movement.¹⁸

Clashes in Deir-ez-Zor

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controls most of northeast Syria. While the SDF's predecessor organizations, like the People's Protection Units (YPG), controlled parts of Al-Hassakah and Ar-Raqqa governorates during the war, the mostly tribal Arab region of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate was only obtained during the anti-IS campaign in 2019. Deir-ez-Zor Governorate was an opposition stronghold prior to its takeover by IS. This proved to be a problem for the SDF, which lacked strong networks within the governorate. The SDF turned to Deir-ez-Zor native Ahmad al-Khubayl, better known as Abu Khawla, to garner support from the Arab tribes. Abu Khawla was himself a Deir-ez-Zor tribesman from the Al-Baqir clan of the Akaidat tribe. After the defeat of IS, the

¹⁰ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=21809>

¹¹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=21721>

¹² <https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-protests-in-al-suwayda-interview>

¹³ https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-protests-in-al-suwayda-ii-rijal?utm_source=post-email-

SDF controlled the northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and largely delegated authority to Abu Khawla and the SDF-created Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC). Abu Khawla's role

airstrikes, in coordination with GoS and SDF artillery bombardment, later forced the retreat of the SNA tribesmen, restoring the status quo in northwest Syria. Additionally, there were reports of opposition-aligned tribesmen from Idlib Governorate infiltrating into Turkish-held territory in northwest Syria.

Commander-in-Chief of the SDF Mazloum Abdi acknowledged there were shortcomings with the armed group's governance in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and pledged to try to address all tribal grievances.²⁶ The SDF justified its dismantling of the DMC due to alleged plans that Abu Khawla was collaborating with the GoS and Iran.²⁷ In addition, Abdi accused the GoS and Iran of sending fighters to assist the DMC during the clashes.

The clashes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate prompted a significant international response. The U.S. military mission in the region emphasized its support for the SDF and called for a halt to any fighting, arguing that the instability would only strengthen IS.²⁸ GoS Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad praised the clashes as part of a "struggle against the [U.S.] occupation and its militias."²⁹ Turkish President Recep Erdogan issued a statement in support of the Arab Tribes "retaking their lands" from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)/YPG.³⁰ Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan commented that until the U.S. halts its support for the YPG/SDF, conflicts like those in Deir-ez-Zor are "just the beginning."³¹ Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov commented that Russia was committed to restoring order and fighting terrorism in accordance with the 2019 Sochi Accords.³²

While the SDF managed to regain control of northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, the situation remains volatile. On Sept. 20, former DMC commander Ibrahim al-Hifl announced the creation of a new tribal force that would fight against the SDF.³³ Since Sept. 10, there have been at least 36 reported attacks against SDF forces in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, indicating the beginning of a potential insurgency in the region.

The conflict in Deir-ez-Zor highlights the continued volatility and interconnectedness of the Syrian conflict. What began as a local clash due to internal problems in the SDF led to a large-scale escalation across northern Syria, involving nearly every major international actor active in the Syrian conflict. The long-term impact of these clashes is still being assessed, and it is challenging to fully gauge what impact it will have on the anti-IS campaign and the stability for Syrian civilians. Outside of Deir-ez-Zor, the

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