



[Years of the U.S. Ignoring Warnings of the Kurdish SDF's Behavior in Syria and the Battles with the Tribes](#)

By Jacob Van Veldhuizen

The ongoing battle between the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Force (SDF) and local Arab militias in the Deir ez-Zor region of Syria highlights a common shortcoming of American foreign policy. This is the failure to consider and plan for the potential future effects of policies. This is especially evident in this particular crisis.

There were many mistakes made by the United States in the lead-up to this conflict, but two particular choices stand out. The first is the choice of leadership for the local military council in the Deir ez-Zor Province. In 2017, Abu Khawla was chosen by the U.S. to lead the local military council. Khawla was chosen because he was the only one willing and positioned to lead the council. He is widely unpopular in the area due to his activities as a warlord before the Syrian uprising. According to local sources, the U.S. either had no better option or no desire to find an alternative. The clan Khawla belonged to had a relatively large number of members supporting the Islamic State. Other non-jihadist forces in the area preferred to work with Turkey rather than the Kurds.

The second mistake was the failure of the United States to take the grievances of the Arab tribesmen seriously and consider how they would respond to being governed by Kurdish forces. Grievances from the local population about the rampant corruption, poor governance, and daily misdeeds of the SDF were either ignored or downplayed. The allegations of the Kurdish administration misappropriating funds to support the PKK also seemed to have been ignored. According to locals, the Kurds have no real interest in governance. No effort was made to remedy these legitimate grievances. There also seemed to be no consideration given to the cultural differences between the Kurdish leadership and Arab tribesmen. The SDF is a secular entity with Marxist values that clash with the more traditional views of the local populace. There is also an ethnic dimension, but this is far overshadowed by the economic and ideological aspects of the conflict. Despite this policy's many flaws, this approach proved very effective. By 2019, the Islamic State was effectively defeated. The focus shifted to countering potential sleeper cells.

Fighting broke out on August 27, when news emerged that the Kurdish forces had arrested Khawla during a meeting he had been invited to the SDF. His brother led an armed rebellion in response. The fighting between the two groups spiraled into a larger rebellion of tribesmen dissatisfied with Kurdish rule. There are varying reports, but at least 90 people have been killed in the fighting, including 9 civilians. Skirmishes between the SDF and the Arab clans in the Deir er-Zor Province continue to spread across Kurdish-held areas of Northeast Syria.

Originally, the SDF accused Khawla of drug trafficking, mismanaging security, and exploiting his position for personal interests. According to reports on the ground, the reason for Khawla's arrest was the discovery of a plan by Khawla to expel the Kurds from the area in coordination with other actors in the area. It is of note that some of those involved in the scheme have connections to the regime in Damascus.

The involvement of Damascus indicates that this crisis will be exploited by the Assad regime. Though it does not appear that they had a hand in the initial outbreak of fighting, it is clear that they are inflaming the situation. Regime forces and groups loyal to Assad have also been active in the fighting, using artillery to harass both sides. Misinformation is also rampant, with misleading videos, statements, and blatant falsehoods being spread through social media. All of this creates the perfect opportunity for Assad to weaken his enemies by pitting them against each other to later sweep and mop up what is left. Now that the instability has gained momentum, Assad will do everything in his power to continue and escalate the conflict.

U.S. policymaking mirrors the decision-making of an old nursery rhyme. In the rhyme, an old woman swallows a fly. She then swallows a spider to catch the fly. She then swallows a bird to catch the spider, and so on. This chain continues until eventually, the woman dies. The U.S. is the woman. Policymakers continue to create new threats to counter old threats that were created to counter even older threats. One recent example includes U.S. support of the Mujahadeen to counter the Soviets. From the Mujahadeen sprouted the Taliban. Another is the current rise of China, which the United States helped industrialize after the USSR-China schism to counter the Soviet Union. Now the United States is supporting India to counter China. These cycles exist in many facets of American foreign policy. Though it can be argued that what is evident in hindsight may not have been evident at the time of policy implementation, it is also clear that the American policymakers failed to consider the potential fallout of these policies and create contingencies. The United States is capable of creating these. The Department of Defense is the largest employer in the world with a \$2 Trillion budget. This is only one of the departments involved in policy making.

This opposition must be taken seriously. It is not a fluke that will simply disappear with time. Now that the situation has escalated finding solutions will be difficult. One option is to simply create a governing system that better represents the local Arab population. Unfortunately, it may be too late to implement this option as fighting has already started. So far, the U.S. has continued to voice support for the SDF and will likely continue to do so. The United States is in a difficult situation and must consider its next steps carefully. This situation has the potential to lead to the complete disintegration of the Kurdish regime in Northeast Syria. A sudden power vacuum like this would open the door for all kinds of nefarious groups to seize power in the region, including the Assad regime.