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2.4. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The SDF according to its commander Mazloum Abdi comprise about 100 000 members.433 They are a military alliance in which the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) has an prominent component. Alongside the YPG there are regional military councils such as the Deir Ez-Zor Military Council, Manbij Council, and Raqqa Council, whose primary task is to protect their own areas.434 For more information on the structure of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), see section 1.4.3 of the EUAA COI Report Syria – Security Situation (October 2024).

As HTS-led factions captured Aleppo in late November 2024, the SNA launched a simultaneous operation in Aleppo province, leading to clashes with the SDF west of the Euphrates River.435 Meanwhile, the SDF took the withdrawal of Syrian government forces and their pro-Iran allies as an opportunity to expand its territories in Deir Ez-Zor.436 Facing military pressure from Turkish-backed forces and forces allied with the new authorities in Damascus, the SDF withdrew from several towns on the Euphrates in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. According to an SDF spokesperson, the aim was to preserve Kurdish areas further east and prevent an SNA breakthrough at the Tishreen Dam.437 This resulted in the loss of control of several cities to the SNA, such as Manbij and Tall Rifaat.438 Apart from direct clashes, the SDF also launched drone attacks on SNA positions,439 described as a newly emerging capability.440

During the reference period, the SDF were faced with defections from Arab SDF members.441 A conscript from a base in the Al-Shaddadi area cited by Syria TV reported that the SDF had halted the discharge of military service recruits as about 80 recruits had fled the base, while a source close to the SDF stated that the desertion rate of military service conscripts following the ouster of Bashar Al-Assad had reached more than 90% in some areas of southern Hasaka governorate and rural Deir Ez-Zor.442 Furthermore, several commanders from the Deir Ez-Zor Military Council defected and crossed the Euphrates to flee to areas under the control of the MOA.443 Several sources reported of clashes between tribal militias and SDF in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, 444 with tribal fighters driving the SDF out of several locations along the Euphrates river in eastern Deir Ez-Zor.445

Mazloum Abdi in January 2025 stated that one of their main demands was a decentralised administration, allowing the SDF to integrate into the Defence Ministry as a unified military bloc. However, interim defence minister Murhaf Abu Qasra rejected this proposal.446 As of the end of January 2025, the negotiations between the SDF and the Transitional Administration seemed to be stalled,447 one reason being the uncertain stance of the new US administration.448 The one day National Dialogue conference organised by the Transitional Administration on 25 February,

449 while assembling 600 people from across Syria did not extend invitations to SDF figures.450 Moreover, Türkiye reportedly disrupted negotiations between the Ministry of Defence and the SDF, insisting on a complete dismantling of the SDF and rejecting attempts at compromise, such as a proposed relocation of PKK-affiliated fighters to Iraq or Iran.451 In March 2025, however, SDF leaders signed a deal with the government to integrate their armed forces and civilian institutions into the new Syrian government. The agreement mandates a complete cessation of hostilities and requires the SDF to cede control of border posts, the airport, and key oil and gas fields. It also acknowledges the Kurdish minority as an integral part of Syria and ensures their political representation and participation.452 The agreement emerged amid increasing uncertainty over the U.S. role in the region453 and diplomatic efforts by several Western countries advocating for the SDF's integration into the new Syrian state,454 with experts suggesting the SDF likely recognized its weakening negotiating position.455 The practical implementation of this agreement could not be monitored within the scope of this report.

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