



Consequences and context of assassinating prominent al-Akidat Tribe sheikhs

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Studies- Position Assessing

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Introduction:

On August 2, 2020, unknown shooters on motorcycles opened fire at a car boarding sheikhs from the al-Akidat Tribe. The shooters assassinated Sheikh Muttashar al-Hafal and his escort. The assassination stirred protests and demonstrations in the Thiban, al-Hawayej, and al-Shahil areas. Demonstrators held the International Coalition backed- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control east of the Euphrates river area, responsible for al-Hafal assassination's. Prior to al-Hafal assassination, unknown shooters assassinated the spokesman for the al-Akidat Tribe, and the Mukhtar of the village of al-Dahla. What distinguishes these assassinations is that they targeted societal dignitaries that do not represent political parties. An important thing is that people did not directly accuse Daesh of these assassinations, especially as the organization is usually accused of such incidents¹. On July 30, 2020, Daesh claimed responsibility for assassination the spokesman for the al-Akidat Tribe. This makes the extremist Daesh organization accusable, as the SDF in cooperation with people of the area² launches security and military campaigns to eliminate Daesh groups. Myles Caggins, the spokesman for the International Coalition did not rule out Daesh responsibility for these assassinations³.

After al-Hafal's assassination, people of the al-Akidat Tribe that is one of the largest tribes in Syria and extends to areas in Iraq, issued firm statements demanding the revealing of perpetrators. The statements demanded sustaining security and caring for the area. Iran and the Assad regime exploited the assassination attempting to induce tribal sheikhs of al-Akidat and other tribes to infiltrate the area.

¹ Here we refer to a tweet by the writer Hasan Hasan about Sheikh al-Hafal assassination. He talks about this point. Click the [link](#)

² Daesh announced responsibility for assassinating the spokesman of the tribe. Daesh accused the spokesman of being a prominent head of apostasy. The assassination is a part of what Daesh called the exhaustion battle. For more details click the [link](#).

³ From the statement of Myles Caggins the official spokesman for the International Coalition to al-Arabia Net website. For more details, click the [link](#).

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Context of al-Hafal's assassination:

Despite its military defeat in mid March 2019, Daesh is still able to launch limited attacks in areas in Deir Ezzor even after a year and a half. Daesh still has pockets in al-Badiya. In its tactics, Daesh calls its activeness in areas east of the Euphrates river “separated wolves” as the organization orders its members who conduct assassinations against people in the civil administration of the Deir Ezzor Civil Council or fighters in the SDF' Deir Ezzor Military Council. Targeting societal dignitaries who are neutral about political agenda, like assassinating sheikhs of al-Akidat Tribe that is influential in areas east of the Euphrates, motivated people to doubt the attributing of the assassinations to Daesh initially. Sequence and nature of events show that the context of the assassination belongs to Daesh, especially as the International Coalition backed SDF' military operations against Daesh resulted in arresting many Daesh commanders and dealing a severe blow to them. On July 4, 2020, the SDF launched the Deterrence of Terrorism Campaign I against Daesh, and on July 17, the SDF launched the the Deterrence of Terrorism Campaign II.



Sheikh Mutsher Al-Hafal is on the left, and Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil al-Hafal, who was the target of the operation but survived, is on the right.

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Active sides in Deir Ezzor whether tribal people or the Syrian Opposition, Turkey, Assad regime, Iran, and Russia hold the SDF responsible for consequences of these assassinations in the context that the SDF and the International Coalition before are responsible for whatever happening in their areas. Except for tribal people in the area, the other sides try to accuse the SDF of responsibility for the assassinations themselves, which helped stirring incidents that followed sheikh al-Hafal and his escort assassination.

Sheikh al-Hafal and his escort assassination was not the first of its kind, as assassinations against figures of the Deir Ezzor Civil Council and SDF fighters. Dozens of people were assassinated in different incidents⁴. The assassinations bore the Daesh mark as the organization deploys cells in different areas after expelling Daesh from its last stronghold in al-Baghouz in March 2019. It seems that the recent assassinations against tribal dignitaries bear different dimensions as multiple sides are blamed for the assassinations consequences. People of the area blame the SDF for the assassinations, especially as the SDF controls the area since eliminating the Daesh last stronghold. Other people accused the Assad regime and Iran of responsibility for the assassinations⁵ trying to reshuffle the cards and make significant security cavities in the area to control it.

Before Sheikh Muttashar al-Hafal and his escort Da'ar Mukhlef al-Khalaf' assassination and sheikh Ibraheem al-Hafal injury and others, different assassinations occurred. On July 30, 2020, unknown shooters assassinated Suleiman al-Hamadah the spokesman for the al-Akidat Tribe. The next day at Eid al-Adha dawn, unknown shooters assassinated Ali al-Wais the Mukhtar of the village of al-Dahla. The assassinations occurred in SDF-controlled areas. The place in which Sheikh Muttashar and his escort were assassinated was close to an SDF checkpoint.

⁴ The most recent of which was an attempt to assassinate Muhammad al-Aziz manager of the Autonomous Administration' Deir Ezzor Civil Council ' Agriculture Committee. For more details, click the [link](#).

⁵ Source told Deir Ezzor 24 Network that the Assad regime ordered its force to receive people coming from areas east of the Euphrates river and cancel sentences of those who have earlier sentences. For more details, click the [link](#).

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Sheikh Muttsher al-Hafal's escort, "Da'ar al-Mikhliif". He is an elder of Al-Bukhalaf tribe in Diban town east of Deir Ezzor

Reactions to Sheikh al-Hafal assassination:

The assassination incident that targeted tribal sheikhs of the al-Akidat Tribe that is the largest tribe in Deir Ezzor and Syria as a whole, and claimed the lives of Sheikh Muttashar al-Hafal and his escort, and was about to claim the live of the tribe leader Ibraheem al-Hafal, is one the most affecting assassinations as it changed incidents course in Deir Ezzor after liberating it from Daesh in March 2019. Tribal and civil sides condemned the assassination. The United States (US) Embassy condemned the assassination.

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On the societal perspective, demonstrations occurred in areas in Deir Ezzor, especially in SDF-controlled city of al-Bussairah and towns of al-Shahail, Thiban, and al-Hawayej in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside. Demonstrators blocked roads and burnt tires; however, during some demonstrations, clashes erupted between demonstrators and the SDF that withdrew from the towns and fortified its checkpoints⁶.

After the assassination, the U.S Embassy in Damascus posted a statement in Arabic and English on Facebook. The statement condemned the assassination and emphasized that violence against civilians is unacceptable and hinders a permanent political settlement of conflict in Syria in accordance to the United Nations Security Council resolution 2254⁷. Myles Caggins the official spokesman for the International Coalition delivered statements after the assassination. Caggins emphasized that the International Coalition is committed to sustaining long-term stability in Deir Ezzor.⁸

The SDF issued a statement blaming Daesh for assassinating tribal dignitaries. The statement referred to a series of assassinations without mentioning the victims' names. The statement read, "Over the recent days, Daesh terrorist cells targeted societal figures and tribal dignitaries in the area." The SDF held Daesh responsible for accusing the SDF of the assassinations. The statement emphasized that the assassinations are in parallel with Daesh cells' attempts to attack the SDF headquarters by car bombs and suicidal attacks.

The al-Akidat Tribe gatherings inside and outside Syria, especially those in Turkey and opposition-held areas issued statements some of whom sought destabilizing the area hoping to stir the people of the area against the SDF. The tribe issued its formal statement following a meeting that the General Administration of the tribe called for. On August 11, 2020, Sheikh Mus'ab al-Hafal called for the meeting in the town of Thiban in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside. Tribe sheikhs, tribal figures, and people from al-Akidat attended the meeting. The statement that addressed the International Coalition included different terms such as⁹

⁶ For more details, click the following links ([link1](#) – [link2](#) – [link3](#))

⁷ For reviewing the text of the statement, click the [link](#).

⁸ One of Myles Kagenz' statements about the massacre of al-Shaitat. For reviewing the statement, click the [link](#).

⁹ For reviewing the most important points of the statement, click the [link](#).

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- 1- Forming a committee of experts and objective people from the al-Akidat Tribe to investigate the recent assassinations.
- 2- Sustaining security and preparing a security plan to stabilize the area and investigate recent assassinations against tribal dignitaries, and detecting perpetrators and bringing them to justice.
- 3- Activating the role of Arab efficient people and security officials to run their own areas.
- 4- Demanding the International Coalition and all active powers to advance the political settlement in Syria.
- 5- Releasing prisoners from SDF prisons, and women and children detained in refugee camps.

The statement held the International Coalition responsible for what is happening in areas east of the Euphrates river, being the active power in the area, referring to the International Coalition backing the SDF and the Autonomous Administration 'Civil Council. The statement accused the SDF of not starting a serious investigation of the incident. The statement gave the International Coalition a month starting from the date of the statement to respond to the term of the statement

The Assad regime exploited the incidents that followed the assassinations by promoting an agenda to destabilize areas east of the Euphrates river. The Assad regime ordered its forces to receive all people coming from areas east of the Euphrates river and quashing sentences of those who have pre-sentences. Extremist figures such as Abdullah al-Muhaisani the Shari'a Mufti of the former al-Nusra Front to comment on the matter by inciting videos to spread confusion in areas east of the Euphrates river.¹⁰

¹⁰ Omar abu Laila the executive manager of the Deir Ezzor 24 Network tweeted commenting on a video in which al-Muhaisani calls residents of Deir Ezzor to revolt against the SDF (Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaisani addresses tribes in Deir Ezzor and urges them to conduct armed actions, but he forgot that tribes in Deir Ezzor know his malicious agenda and constant lying to Syrians.) To watch the video, click the [link](#).

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On August 16, 2020, the International Coalition and the US Department of State held meetings with different tribal leaders in Deir Ezzor, and commanders of the Deir Ezzor Civil Council and Mazloom Abdi the SDF general commander. The US Department of State' Political Office supervised and followed up the meetings. These efforts aim at stabilizing the area, especially after different sides tried to destabilize it. These sides intensified their pace of work in the area for factors¹¹ such as:

- 1- Exploiting protests in areas east of the Euphrates river about services, arrests, and fate of Daesh members' wives and children. The recent of these protests were demonstrations and sit-ins regarding the Autonomous Administration imposing an educational curriculum.
- 2- Daesh' attempt to play a role in destabilizing the area, especially after the SDF and International Coalition dealt Daesh a severe blow in security campaigns.
- 3- Fueling the situation in the area by people from Deir Ezzor residing in Turkey or opposition' areas.
- 4- Assad regime's and Iran attempt to create or benefit from security cavities in areas east of the Euphrates river hoping to control these areas.
- 5- Announcing an oil agreement between the SDF and US companies, and people of the Deir Ezzor countryside dissatisfaction, especially amidst poor economic conditions.

Conclusion and recommendations:

Different forces share power in Deir Ezzor. These forces are; the U.S as an international force, and the SDF as a local force, east of the Euphrates, whereas in west of the Euphrates Russia as an international force, Iran as a regional one, Assad forces, and other active and influential forces that are not presented on the ground like Turkey, Qatar, and Saudia Arabia. Daesh has pockets in the Syrian Badiya and its cells conduct limited attacks and assassinations in Deir Ezzor. This intersection of forces complicates the situation in Deir Ezzor, so it is difficult to specify perpetrators, especially of cases threatening stability in the areas controlled by one of these forces. Despite the Daesh mark is almost clear, meetings that the International Coalition run under the supervision of the U.S Department would calm the situation.

¹¹ For more details, click the [link](#).

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As Deir Ezzor is a strategic and economic area for all these forces, their priority is the increasing of earnings on the ground and neglecting the economic and developmental sides and rehabilitating infrastructure that has been destroyed since defeating Daesh in March 2019. In areas east of the Euphrates river, residents feel dissatisfied and complain about neglecting the economic situation of the area, especially after the SDF signed contracts with U.S companies.

Below, we mention recommendations that are mainly directed to active sides in Deir Ezzor, especially the International Coalition, the U.S, the SDF, and tribal people.

- 1- Allowing tribal people to play a genuine and active role in military and security forces in the area, and replacing members of the Deir Ezzor Military Council who are unaccepted by the majority of the people of the area.
- 2- Getting efficient people in the area involved in running civil affairs because they know its need the most.
- 3- Not postponing crucial matters under names of calming the situation without resorting to real solutions that satisfy tribal people.
- 4- Resorting to peaceful means in demonstrations and sit-ins and not attacking military headquarters and blocking roads.
- 5- Sustaining security with long-term and serious steps and not only with wide military campaigns that give no concrete results, as the SDF arrests people some of whom were proved innocent.
- 6- Guarding prominent societal and tribal dignitaries as long as it is difficult to preserve security in the area, which is shown by recent incidents.
- 7- Coming up with results after ongoing meetings between the International Coalition, tribal people, the SDF, and Deir Ezzor Civil Council. The results should include results of investigating Sheikh Muttashar' and his escort assassination.
- 8- Strengthening relations between the International Coalition, its field allies and people of the area. The relations should be based on a steady and long term basis. The role of Deir Ezzor should not be limited to the fact of being an economic reservoir alone.
- 9- Listening to people's rightful demands and not delaying response under the pretext that those who stir demonstrations are Daesh members or those affiliated with the Assad regime, Turkey, or others.