

The tribal situation in Deir Ezzor

its reality and future



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The tribal situation in Deir Ezzor, its reality and future

Al-Akidat and Al-Baqara (1)

Important:

The research below was carried out by Sam Development Organization in cooperation with Deir Ezzor 24 Network and its field sources. The research relied on communication with several specialized tribal sources in the region and knowledgeable sources in genealogy and tribal history, which contributed to the crystallization of the first part of the research in its last form, knowing that other parts of the research, more specialized in the tribal community in Deir Ezzor province and its composition, will be released soon.

Executive Summary

This research is based on an attempt to understand the tribes situation in the tribal environment and society of the Syrian Deir Ezzor, which has been at the forefront of the conflict among the various regional, international and local forces. It also talks about the reality and future of tribes through understanding the tribal situation in Deir Ezzor. Then, it highlights the relationship of the tribes with the various regional, international and local forces, where Deir Ezzor seems to be the crosspoint, through which other events in the Syrian conflict meet, as all parties have been trying to control it.

The tribes and the tribal situation are seen by all powers as a "regressive" force, and so deal with them pragmatically, without trying to understand this situation, leave the theoretical premises before dealing with it, and know the nature of the region, which threatens that the tribal situation might turn into a problem. At the end, the research tries to provide some suggestions and recommendations for the influential powers there.

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Introduction

Tribalism as a community was always present in Deir Ezzor, and it is hardly possible to talk about a non-tribal society there, as tribes have deep roots in the region that go back hundreds of years. The successive dominating forces in the modern times have tried to take advantage of the tribal weight there, from the Ottomans to the Frenchies, the successive Syrian governments after gaining independence, the Baath Party rule, especially after the coup of Assad Sr. in what he called the "corrective movement", and up to Assad Jr.

The various forces have realized the importance of the tribes, and dealt with them in different ways, sometimes they worked to weaken them in order not to be a competitor to power, other times they resorted to giving them some advantages, such as turning a blind eye to their smuggling operations in the border areas, also turning a blind eye to their weapons. In order to balance this equation, they worked to incite enmity among the tribes, sometimes by granting advantages to a tribe and denying the others.

The Baath Party understood this situation very well and tried to take advantage of it, trying to coordinate with tribal elders of secondary, sometimes from minor tribes, by giving them positions in the party, nominating them to the parliament, or appointing some of them to administrative positions as governors and security officers, this was in the beginning, then it tried to reach out to the most important tribal figures, who have social and tribal weight, where almost hardly a parliament is formed without the presence of the most important tribal figures.

The various parties in the Syrian conflict, starting from the Syrian regime, the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the international and regional powers such as the international coalition represented by the United States, Iran and Russia have also realized the importance of tribes, so each one of these powers tried to attract them to its side because of their role and influence on human mass, whether in stability or tipping the scales in its areas of influence.

This research attempts to explain the tribal situation in Deir Ezzor, the relationship of the tribes with the various forces, and the composition of these tribes, and in the end, it gives recommendations to the parties concerned, in order to ensure the speciality of these tribes as distinct human groups, with different culture, language and rich heritage that should be dealt with logically. These forces should not be used as tools for implementing some agendas, but rather treated from the logic of the public interest and maintaining their speciality, and not just to be given theoretic recommendations arrogantly.

The historical facts have shown that the modern state as a Western concept could not establish an inclusive concept and a comprehensive national identity outside the western societies, because in the West it was about historical throes, while here it is about a super-institutional structure, that could not provide a hybrid experience appropriate to the different social reality.

This research does not promote the tribal culture, it just focuses on this speciality and warns against using it as a tool, as it has been happening for long decades of the modern history. It provides a set of information that can be returned to, so as not to exceed it or try to use it as a means.¹

¹ Some opinions were based indirectly on the words of Dr. Hisham Dawood, a researcher in social anthropology at the French National Center for Scientific Research, on a TV show "Gulf Hour", in which he talked about (the role of the tribes and clans in the crisis conflict in the Gulf region) in a dialogue with journalist Iman Al Hammoud,

Formal definitions and terms:

Clan and tribe:

Clan: Here is a definition of researcher Abbas al-Azzawi, in which he differentiated between the concepts of clan and tribe, according to him clan consists of several branches or families that live together as known for all, some times the branches might branch off into more sub-branches, based on the passage of time and reproduction, where their numbers increase over time, then what was called as a branch or family turns into a (clan), which people sometimes might go easy in calling it a tribe.

As for tribe, according to al-Azzawi, the Arab community is composed of several clans, but when gaining more weight and large number of members in their formation, then they are called (tribes), but people sometimes might go easy in calling the clan a tribe, which is not different from the clan except in the general leadership, where the leaders of the clans follow the head of the tribe, and it may be true to say that the tribe is an extended clan, as it is not different in its rule from the clan but with greater power.

Here the responsibility is general only in great matters, where they support each other, the same for the head of the tribe, who represents the leaders of clans when dealing with the government.²

Clan and tribe in this research: Due to the overlap between the concepts of clan and tribe for the non-specialists, and even for scholars in areas not of historical nature, the words "clan" and "tribe" give the same meaning, so the word "tribe" will be used formally in this research to indicate this social system.

Tribalism: is a mentality or a (political) trend that seeks to transform the tribe into a kind of political party in the face of other tribes, referring to it in all the social and political relations. With this mentality or transformation, tribalism becomes a form of ideology that is referred to in everything, such as the formation of governments, parliament, municipality, unions, and judiciary, as well as in public civil and military jobs, and perhaps in the investments and businesses in the private sector, just like other ideologies, such Nationalism, Communism, and Islamism.³

² Encyclopaedia of the Tribes of Iraq - P1 - Abbas Al Azzawi, electronic version, Masaha Horra (free space) site, in "Service of Researchers", Last visit: 5/1/2020, p. 61-64.

³ The "Kuwaiti" Al-Rai newspaper "Kuwaiti", article entitled: There is a big difference between Tribe and Tribalism, Hosni Ayesh, date of publication: 3 January 2012, electronic version, last visit 6/1/2020.

The tribes of Deir Ezzor: make up the social structure of Deir Ezzor province and its countryside, but the tribes in Deir Ezzor transcend geography, extend to Iraq, and some of them have relationships with tribes in the Arabian Gulf countries and other Syrian provinces such as Raqqa and Hasaka. The most important tribes in Deir Ezzor are: Al-Akidat and al-Bakkara, and other tribes). The focus in this research will be on these two tribes.

Shi'ism: We should note that the word "Shi'a" does not necessary indicate positive or negative meaning. It only means adhering to a belief.⁴

While "Spreading Shiism" refers formally to the movement that works to spread the Shiite faith in new places, where the Shiites have no presence before.⁵

⁴ Shi'a and Shi'ism: the evolution of the term and its connotations, article, published site, last visit 10 January 2020. Link.

⁵ In this context, the Moroccan researcher Muntaser Hamada said, (The failure was the fate of "Exporting the Revolution" project to see Iran's collective involvement in the alternative project, entitled "Exporting Shiism", which has been very successful in a way no one of the decision makers in the Arab World has expected).

The Arab dilemma in interacting with the strategies of "exporting Shiism", Montaser Hamada, from a file on "Shiism in the Arab World.

Deir Ezzor, historical and geographical narrative

Deir Ezzor province is located in eastern Syria on the border with Iraq, about 450 kilometers northeast of the capital city of Damascus. The Euphrates river runs through it, and the center of the province is Deir Ezzor city.⁶

The province covers an area of more than 33,000 square kilometer. It is the second largest province in Syria in terms of area, after Homs province.

Most of its people are Arab, and is connected to other cities and provinces with a network of railway lines in addition to a local airport. It has a university of al-Furat. The people of Deir Ezzor have been known for working in agriculture and trade, due to the province location on the Euphrates River, and also on a trade route.

The province has a dry desert continental climate, with low annual rainfall and low temperatures in winter, and high temperatures in summer, which some how are tempered by the Euphrates River.

Deir Ezzor still preserves its old traditional stone roofed markets, such as: the grain market, al-Hal, the merchants market, the ironworks market, the copperworks market, the jewellery market, etc

Historically, the region was successively ruled by the Babylonian, Assyrians, Chaldeans, the Persians, Macedonians, the Romans, and the Arabs. The region became an administrative center under the Ottoman administration in 1867 until the Ottomans withdrew from it in 1918, and in 1919, it was subjected to the British occupation but was soon liberated in the same year after a popular revolution, then occupied by the French in 1921, but its people revolted again to liberate the region from the French colonial rule, and at last the people of Deir Ezzor participated in the revolution against Bashar al-Assad's regime, where demonstrations started in its city on April 15, 2011, against the regime.

Deir Ezzor is known for its large oil fields such as Al-Tanak, al-Omar, and Al-Ward in addition to Conoco gas plant, most of which were dominated Daesh, that controlled them after battling with the "Syrian opposition."⁷

Deir Ezzor province has a population of about 1,239,000 people, according to the census conducted in 2011 by the Central census bureau, 545,000 of whom live in the city. Deir Ezzor come in the sixth place among the Syrian provinces in terms of population after Aleppo, Damascus and its countryside, Homs and Hama according to the same census.

⁶ An illustrative map from Google Maps.

⁷ Information published on Wikipedia, and can also be found on different sites with more details, for example, on the BBC Arabic website, under the title "Get to know Deir Ezzor",

According to 2011 census, the percentage of male population reached 51%. The population growth rate in the province is estimated at 32.4 per 1,000 between 2000 and 2010, which is a very high rate, compared to other Syrian provinces and regions.⁸

The province is divided into three areas: Deir Ezzor-Al-Mayadeen-Al-Bukamal, and these areas are divided into several cities, including Deir Ezzor "the center of the province," Al-Mayadeen, Al-Quriyah, Al-Bukamal, Hajin, 11 districts and 128 villages.

Tribalism and the Community Structure in Deir Ezzor

Although Syria has been considered for some decades, since its independence and the end of the French mandate, whose effects are still seen in Deir Ezzor, through the suspension bridge, is a modern state, particularly in terms of its adoption - albeit formally - the republican system of a secular socialist nature, but it has preserved its traditional social structures, especially the tribal structure in the communities of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and other regions.

As a cohesive and solid community structure, tribalism has passed through various changes, which have hit the region, particularly after World War II, where the declaration of new political entities in the geography of the tribes after dividing it into many regions has influenced the tribal structure, but this structure did not collapse, and remained unchanged, although the nature of the relationship between the political authorities and the tribes is unstable, for example, the political parties that describe themselves as "progressive" parties such as the Communist Party, and the nationalist parties such as Baath Party, which declared its hostility and contempt of the societal structures, that it described in its literature

as "reactionary" forces, have not found it easy to penetrate the tribal structure, where since the 1963 coup, the ruling Baath Party in Syria have considered "the national identity the only identity in the Arab countries... and have struggled against all other sectarian, religious and tribal affiliations."⁹

⁸ General census about Deir Ezzor, on different areas

⁹ Article 15 from the Constitution of the Socialist Baath Party, from an old copy published by Ibrahim Obeid, which he said that it has been in his possession since 1954

The researcher Abdullah Hanna described how Jalal al-Sayyed, a founder of the Baath Party and a member of al-Khurshan tribe in Deir Ezzor, "entered into politics through the Arab Baath Party against tribalism in Deir Ezzor" and explained how al-Sayyed was able to get the support of the head of al-Khurshan tribe although he wasn't one of the tribe elders. He was able to win in the parliament election in 1949 as a member on behalf of al-Khurshan, becoming the first Baathist member in the parliament, but Hanna added: "So the updated structure of the Baath Party in Deir Ezzor was influenced by the tribal situation... and this explains how the tribal structure began to overlap with the modern party structure."¹⁰

Due to the tribal situation in Deir Ezzor, the political parties tried to penetrate them to have supporters among these vast human communities, which have influence over vast geographical areas, but what happened was the opposite, in order for the parties to penetrate into those tribal structures and gain their support, they kept the tribal loyalties and their relations without criticizing them in great and radical manner, just as the ruling Baath Party, which had the necessary tools to pressure them, did. As a result of these policies, the tribal affiliations continued even if their form changed among the tribes members themselves, where the "Political groups, regardless of their political views, are often formed through traditional social channels, and the last factor in particular has been largely responsible for the continued existence of sectarian, regional and tribal affiliations."¹¹

¹⁰ Pages from the history of political parties in Syria in the 20th century and their social atmosphere, Abdullah Hanna, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, i1 2018, Doha, Qatar, p. 82.

¹¹ The Struggle for Power in Syria/Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, Dr. Nicholas Van Damme, Madbouli Library, Cairo, Egypt, i1 1995, p. 37.

The tribes in Deir Ezzor and their distribution

Al-Akidat tribe¹²

Al-Akidat tribe is the largest tribe in Deir Ezzor. It consists of several major and sub tribes, most notably Al-Bujamal, Al-Bujamel, Al-Shaitat, as well as al-Bakkir, Shuwait, Baqir, Bukhabour, Qaraan, Buhasan, Burahma, Al-Damim, Al-Hassoun, al-Bumreih and Mashahida. (Al-Mashahida is one of the tribes that have alliance with Al-Akidat, but it is an independent tribe.)

They live in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside on both sides of the Euphrates River, Shamiyah and Jazeera (west and east of the Euphrates River), up to Al-Bukamal city, and in the northern Deir Ezzor countryside from Al-Bussairah town in the south to Al-Suwar area in the north.

The tribal depth of Al-Akidat extends to the countrysides of Homs, Damascus and Aleppo, as well as Iraq and other Arab countries. At the beginning of the 20th century, they were half-nomads, but now they settled in with some of them still emigrate seasonally.

As for the tribe name, some say that their great grandfather, grew up in Najd in Okda town in Ha'il in the Arabian Peninsula, while others said that they were given this name as it has the meaning of "Akkad okdah" (made a decision) to unite the tribes with one voice, as is said by the Bedouins, where each tribe has one cry to unite and give support, and this cry is in the name of a woman from the tribe, so they can be called as "brothers of Hadla", "Brothers of Jawza" and other cries, that each tribe uses to unite its members against any invader, or uses it to announce war and fight.

Tribes and other areas, most notably al-Bukhabour tribe, whose members mostly live in the west of the Euphrates (Al-Shamiyah) have contributed to the fight against the French colonial forces. Al-Bukhabour tribe consists of Bou meit, Bou Omar, and Bou hulihil, and these branches live in several neighboring villages in the west of the Euphrates, such as Muhassan city, Al-Buamir town, and Al-Mureiyah. Al-Bukhabour tribe has a well-known history of resistance against the French colonial forces, and the most prominent incident to be mentioned is the burning of French aircraft at Deir Ezzor military airport in the early 20th century. Al-Bukhabour has had a large presence in the Syrian revolution since 2011, where they were present in most geographical areas of Deir Ezzor, especially Deir Ezzor city center. They participated heavily in the peaceful movement since the beginning, and dozens of them were killed in the battles against Assad regime in Deir

Ezzor city, most notably Al-Russafa battle, in which the elite fighters of Muhassan city and its villages were martyred.

Al-Bakkir (al-Anabiza) from Al-Akidat contributed to the fight against the French colonial forces. Al-Bujamel members, from Al-Akidat, in the northern countryside are about 600,000 people according to approximate informal tribal census. Al-Akidat tribe participated in the peaceful demonstrations at the first of the revolution against Assad regime through its young men, then they participated in the establishment of the "Free Army", and their first brigade was "Jaafar al-Tayyar." The young men of the tribe didn't join Daesh, according to field researchers testimonies, for example, there are about 100 armed men with the extreme militant group, while they engaged in the fight against it, especially after the Syrian democratic forces, backed by the international coalition, took control of the northern countryside, where more than eighty percent of them engaged in these battles.

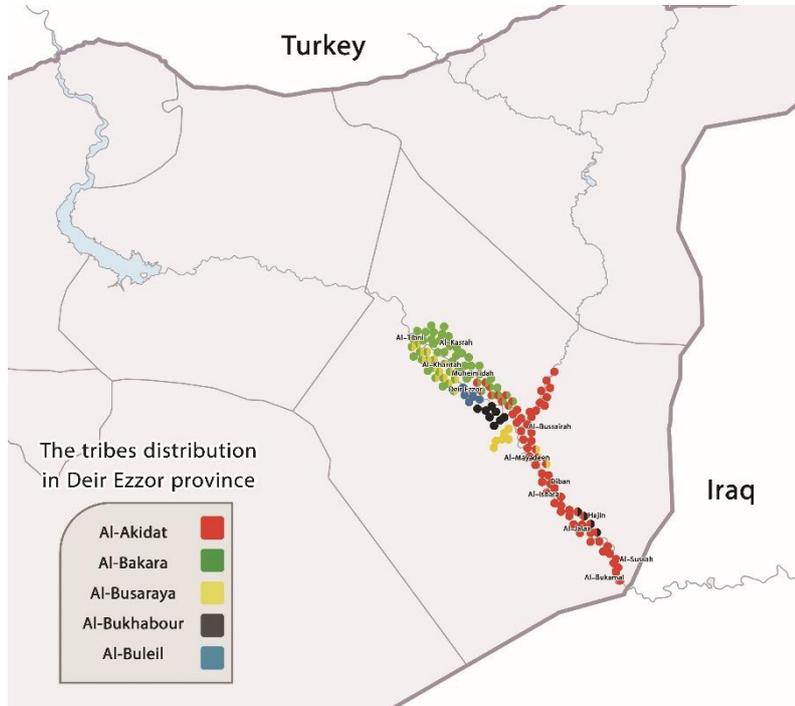
Al-Shaitat tribe members, in their three major cities (Abu Hamam, Granij and Al-Kashkiyah) are about 150,000, according to unofficial census. More than 1500 members of this tribe joined the Syrian democratic forces until their areas were liberated from the organization, and most of them left the ranks of "SDF" after the fighting ended, but about 500 fighters of them remained with SDF.

¹² The information was collected from local tribal sources, through field researchers, and the information were crossed with each other from several sources, for example it can be referred to in a research entitled "Tribesmen in Deir Ezzor" by Faisal Dahmouh, a well-known publication of Justice for Life organization, it can be found on the link. Another research is entitled "Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project", a research published in English by Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barbandi, Nidal Bitar, and translated by Marwan Zakaria, in Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies

Al-Bakara tribe¹³

Al-Bakara tribe is one of the largest tribes in Syria and the second largest in Deir Ezzor, It consists of a group of tribes. It also has a tribal depth in Iraq and Jordan as well. It has members of about 700,000 to 800,000 according to unofficial tribal census, more than 450,000 people of them live in the western countryside.

Sheikh Hajim al-Bashir is the sheikh of the tribe in the western countryside, and some of its elders are (Najm al-Salman, Khalaf al-Asaad, Mohammed



Abdullah al-Jeilat and Oweyed Al-Some of the tribes that belong to Al-Bakara tribe are Al-Abed, Al-Obaid, Dhana Sultan, Maaraa, Bou Shalhoom, Ma'rrah, Al-Busultan, Obeidat, Al-Mashahoor, al-Jalamiya, Bou Musaab, Bou Ma'ayesh, Eliyan, Hamad Obeid, Bou Arab, Bou Bardan.

They live in the western Deir Ezzor countryside (Jazeera) from Deir Ezzor city to Al-Kasrah area, and in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside, from Deir Ezzor city to Khsham town.

In Al-Kasrah area in the western Deir Ezzor countryside, they are distributed in the following villages:

Zughir Jazeera, Al-Ali, Safira, Jazrat Al-Buhamid, Hawayej Dhiab, Hawayej Al-Bumasaa, Asawa, Al-Husseiniyah, Muheimidah, while in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside, they are distributed in villages of Jedid Bakara, Marrat, Mazloun, Tabiya, Al-Dahla.

¹³ The information was collected from local sources through field researchers, and from different readings, including those we mentioned in the previous footnote.

Like other tribes in Syria, Al-Bakara participated in the fight against the French colonial forces during their mandate to Syria. The members of this tribe also participated in peaceful demonstrations since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, especially in the areas of Al-Kasrah, Al-Hissan, Muheimidah and al-Kuber, in addition to their participation in the armed opposition. Some of their battalions in the "Free Army" are Badr martyrs, Ahrar al-Bakara and al-Haq soldiers, who participated in the control of the western Deir Ezzor countryside areas (Jazeera) under the leadership of their former Sheikh Nawaf Ragheb al-Bashir.

When Daesh was controlling the region, not many of its members have joined the armed group, where some tribal figures point to no more than 200 armed men, while pointing out to the involvement of nearly 7,000 fighters in the fight along with the Syrian democratic forces, with support of the international Coalition, against Daesh.

Some of the other tribes who live in Deir Ezzor are: Al-Busaraya tribe: Its members live in the villages of Aiyash, Al-Bughayliya, Al-Kharitah, Al-Shumeitayah, Al-Masrab, Al-Anba, Al-Buweitayah and al-Tarif in the western Deir Ezzor countryside, in Buqruss town in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside, and in Al-Shoula village in the south-western Deir Ezzor countryside.

Al-Bukhabour tribe: of which al-Buhalil lives in Muhassan town, al-Bumeyait in Al-Mureiyah village, and al-Buamir in Al-Abd village.

Al-Buleil tribe: its members live in al-Toub and al-Kataa villages.

Tribes in Deir Ezzor and their relationship with the military forces

(Formations and factions of the "Free Army", "Daesh", Assad regime, The Syrian Democratic Forces "SDF")

Formations and factions of the "Free Army"¹⁴

Since the beginning of the protests, the tribesmen of Deir Ezzor participated in the peaceful movement against Assad security and political regime, and after the protests moved towards armament, they contributed to the establishment of the "Free Army" and had a great role in controlling large areas of Deir Ezzor.

The tribesmen often maintained their speciality in these formations, where most of them participated through fighting in their areas, trying to remove

the military control of Assad forces, secure their places of residence and obtain oil and gas incomings by controlling wells in their surroundings and benefiting from them economically to support and strengthen their tribes.

The formations and factions of the "Free Army" participated in many battles against Assad regime, and some of these formations are:

Al-Qadisiyah Brigade, which was formed in Al-Bussairah city by Ibrahim Al-Attiyah, aka Abu Bakr, from Al-Bakir tribe, who participated in many battles in both the countryside and the city of Deir Ezzor.

Al-Ahwaz Brigade, which was established by Fahed Al-Abdullah, who was killed in Al-Halabiyah battle, to be succeeded in the brigade command by Ismail Al-Abdullah, who was later killed by an explosive device planted in his car by Daesh on January 16, 2019. This brigade was the first to fight Daesh in Breiha village.

The western Euphrates, which is known as Al-Shamiyah, had a prominent role in the fight against Assad regime, in the areas between al-Bukamal and the outskirts of Deir Ezzor, where many battalions and brigades of the Free Army were formed, the most prominent of which, as we mentioned, was Allahu Akbar brigade in Al-Bukamal, while Jaafar al-Tayyar brigade had a large presence in Sbikhan, and Basha'er al-Nasser was formed in Al-Ishara from the tribesmen of the area, and other brigades and battalions were also formed in Al-Quriyah, Mahkan, Al-Mayadeen and most of the cities and towns of the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside "Al-Shamiyah."

Hattin Military Army: It was formed by Col. Mohammed al-Affish from al-Shalahma tribe.

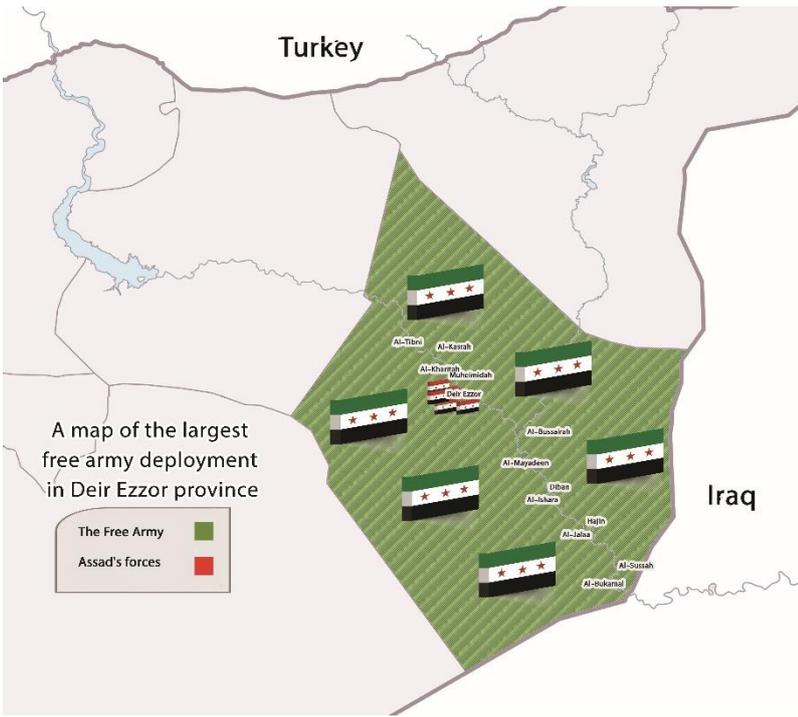
Amr Ibn Maied Yakrob al-Zubeidi battalion: It was formed by al-Kaliyeen tribe, Yusuf Jarallah, It took part in taking control of many areas from Assad regime.

Bilal al-Habshi Brigades: It was formed by Fahad al-Assman, with the participation of Major Ahmed al-Kalash, who formed Maawiya brigades, and later became the official spokesman for al-Qadisiyah Brigade.

Al-Qadisiyah Brigade, al-Ahwaz Brigade and Zilzal Al-Bakir army were formed later to attract al-Bakir members in Hariza, al-Tawamiya and the villages on the western Al-Suwar line.

Al-Siddiq Brigades were formed by Yousef al-Dahla, known as Abu Al-Siddiq. It participated in battles against Assad's forces, "the battles of the factories, the 7-km checkpoint and the political security."

Maawiya battalions were formed by Lt. Nimr Abu Khedher. They participated in what was known as the "Battle for the Liberation of the Industry Institute in Deir Ezzor" against the Syrian regime. They also participated in standing up to Daesh, which killed Nimr after arresting him. We can also mention Al-Qassas Battalions.



Young people from Al-Shaitat tribe and Al-Shahil established Jaafar al-Tayyar Brigade, the first brigades to be formed in the "Free Army". They also formed Ibn al-Qayem Brigade, in addition to several other brigades, namely, al-Umma Brigade, al-Hamza Battalion, al-Shaitat rebels Battalion, Ahfad Aiysha battalion, Martyr Ahmed al-Zakir Battalion, al-Eisrah Army, and al-Jihad wa al-Binaa Front. They also helped to form the 3rd Infantry Division. Their fighters number was estimated then at 3,500.

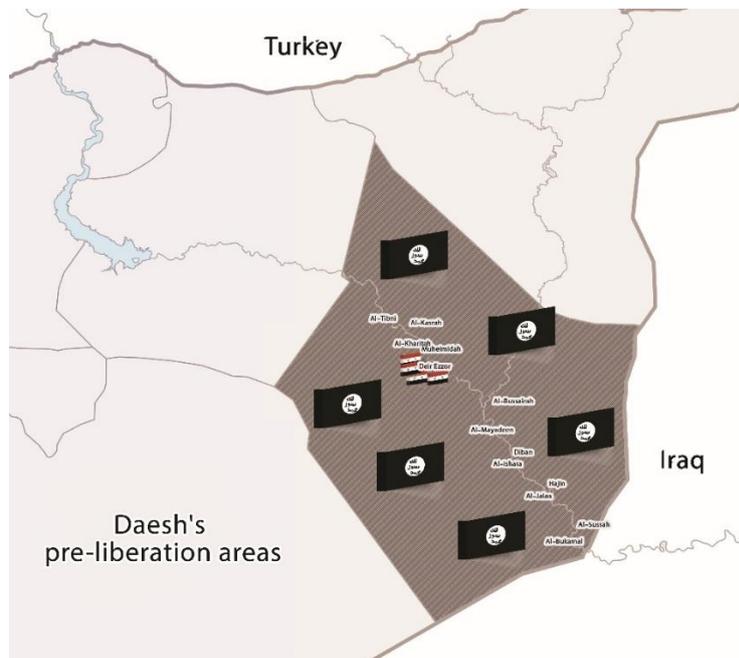
Al-Bakara tribe also participated in forming battalions in the Free Army, such as Badr Martyrs' Battalion, Ahrar al-Bakara, and Al-Haq soldiers, which later became military brigades in the Free Army. Since the beginning of their formation, these factions fought battles against Assad regime, and took control of Dero oil center, several police stations in the western countryside, and the center of Al-Kasrah area. They also participated in taking control of the 113rd Brigade, and attacked the rocket base in Al-Kuber, and several checkpoints such as Al-Halabiyah roundabout and the factories checkpoints. The fighters number in each military formation was estimated at 150 to 200 fighters.

¹⁴ The information were collected from field researchers who obtained the information from the people of the region.

Daesh

The entry of Daesh into the tribal areas had a major impact on the changing of the power balance, because the organization wanted to dominate everything; the sources of wealth, the administrative and military centers and everything, which has its effects on the ground, after the tribes took control of sources that enable them to live a decent life, these are the oil sources, which Assad regime was controlling alone while people in these tribal areas were living in poverty.

Militarily, the tribes were divided into battalions, some of which were affiliated with the "Free Army", others with Assad's army, and fewer number with Daesh. The tribesmen believe that the extremist



organization has marginalized the tribes, and that (the most important reason for its failure and other jihadist organizations in attracting the tribes to their side, is that Daesh tried to dominate the tribes and dismantle their structure, which is some thing the tribesmen can't accept, as they feel proud of their blood ties, that they consider the main factor in the stability of their local communities).¹⁵

While others believe that (Daesh, due to its experience in Iraq, and the presence of some tribesmen in its ranks, was best able to read the map of the military factions and the fragmented tribal reality in the east, and was the most party using money to build secret and open military-tribal alliances).¹⁶

Al-Shaitat tribesmen say, for example, that only about 100 people from the tribe joined Daesh, and if we know that Al-Shaitat have members of about 150,000 people according to tribal census, then we will deduce that this number represent less than 1 percent.

¹⁵ An article entitled (Daesh and the tribes of Deir Ezzor, rebellion and containment), Mohammed Hassan, al-Jumhuriya website, last visit 5/2/2020

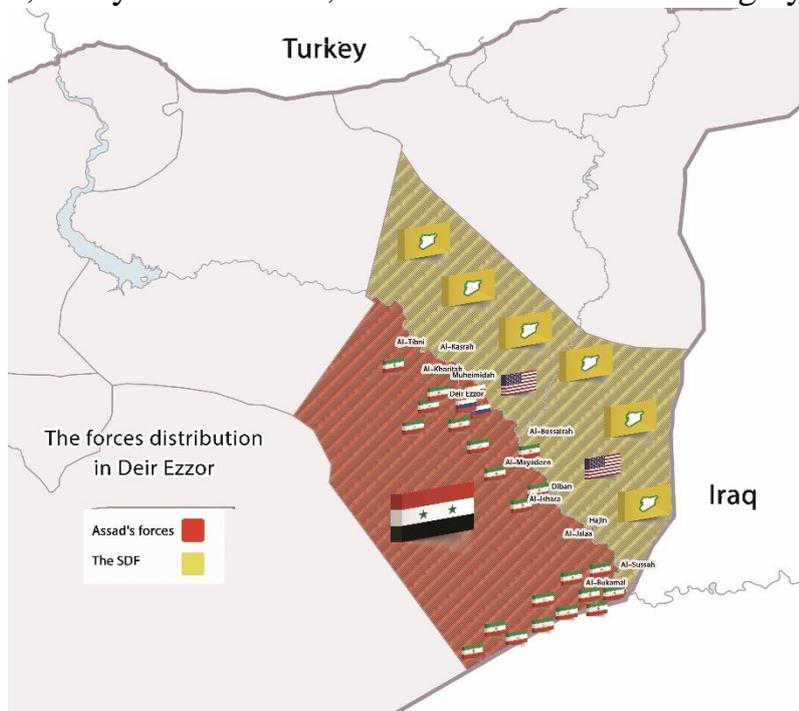
¹⁶ A research entitled "Tribesmen in Deir Ezzor" by Faisal Dahmouh al-Mashahoor, published through "Justice for Life" organization

The Syrian democratic forces "SDF"

When the Syrian democratic forces announced the launch of Al-Jazeera Storm campaign on September 10, 2018 with the support of the international coalition, many tribal forces, that reached more than eighty percent, joined the Syrian democratic forces. The tribes played a role in liberating al-Jazeera line from Daesh, and nearly 1,500 fighters from Al-Shaitat

participated in the battles against the organization, and some of the most prominent leaders were Mohammed al-Jabr "Abu Jabr

al-Shaiti," Abu Hadesha, aka Khabet al-Shaiti, and Abu al-Harith al-Shaiti, and great number of al-Bakara tribe members are still serving among the Syrian democratic forces. In general, the tribes members number in the Syrian democratic forces reached 7,000 fighters.



After defeating Daesh in its last stronghold in al-Baghuz in March, the Syrian democratic forces took control of large areas of Deir Ezzor province, east of the Euphrates River, which divides Deir Ezzor into two parts, eastern part, which is under their control, and western part under the control of the Syrian regime, in addition to the towns of Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadeen. The Syrian democratic forces (acknowledge in its private meetings that it's very difficult to control Deir Ezzor, which has 18,000 fighters in Kasrah, Hajin, Al-Suwar and Shaddadi, most of them Arabs).¹⁷

¹⁷ The SDF's Deir Ezzor challenge, an Article in English, Vladimir Van, translated by Souz Hajj Younis, published by Wilayati News site

The Syrian democratic forces are trying to work with the various tribal forces, but understanding the tribal map and dealing with it seems more difficult in practice, especially since not all tribal leaders are present in those areas liberated from Daesh, where there are some leaders in Turkey and others in areas controlled by Assad regime, and it seems that (the Autonomous Administration has chosen to work with the tribal elders, instead of coordinating with the educated and professional people).¹⁸

The Tribes in Deir Ezzor and Shiism

Deir Ezzor and its countrysides are inhabited mainly by Arabs, who belong to the Sunni moderate sect, and as for the spreading of Shiism, it is not a completely new movement, where in 1982, Jamil Al-Assad established al-Murtaza association (and invited the Sheikhs of Syrian tribes to the association's headquarter in Qardaha city, and asked them to cooperate in its missionary activities. Yasin Ma'youf was appointed head of the association's branch in Hatlah village... which 10 per cent of its inhabitants, whose number is estimated at 30,000 people, embraced the Shiite faith)¹⁹. The association was closed in the mid-1980s in an order by Hafez al-Assad.

In Deir Ezzor city, Hatlah town and the nearby villages, at least six Husseiniyas have recently been built. There are also many Husseiniyas in the surrounding villages. The lands on which the Husseiniyas were built are bought with large sums as an incentive for landowners to sell their lands.

According to Prof. Dr. Al-Sindawi, the most important area that converted to the Shiite faith is Hatlah town, near Deir Ezzor city, whose inhabitants belong to Al-Bubadran tribe, which is linked by an alliance with al-Bakara tribe, as they are cousins, Al-Bubadran claims that their great grandfather is Muhammad al-Baqir, from the family of Messenger Muhammad, peace be upon him, which facilitated the Shiite mission there.²⁰

¹⁸ The Kurdish-Arab struggle for influence in northeastern Syria, Elisabeth Tsurkov, Issam al-Hasan, Carnegie Center in the Middle East

¹⁹ Research entitled "The Time of Shi'a: Facts and statistics on Shi'ism in Syria" by Prof. Dr. Khaled Sindawi, last visit on 5/2/2020

²⁰ More detailed information can be found in Dr. Al-Sindawi's last research, from which three episodes have been published.

The Iranian and Russian-backed Assad's forces, which control the western areas of the Euphrates River, have a big role in facilitating the Iranian mission to establish an ideological control, and to have a public support in those areas, helping it to extend its influence on the land route from Tehran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. As there have been geopolitical obstacles to this project, the safest way for Iran was to resort to the plan of exporting Shiism, especially in areas that have already been worked on. This might be possible but difficult, since the Sunni tribes, which are known for adopting moderate Islam, can't accept the idea of embracing the Shiite faith.

The returning migrants from the Gulf countries, especially those returning from Saudi Arabia, played a role in confronting Shiism and hardening the tribal and societal position against it, trying to spread the salafist ideology instead, but Assad regime's lenient stance towards Shiism, and its refusal of Salafist ideology have undermined the spread of the salafist ideology, while the Shiism movement couldn't make large success due to the difficulty in infiltrating the tribes, and changing their convictions.

The international forces polarization (Iran- America- Russia) in Deir Ezzor

The recent war against Daesh in Deir Ezzor, in which many forces were involved, and the recent military "al-Jazeera Storm" campaign, that was launched by the Syrian democratic forces with direct and intensive support of the international coalition, especially the United States, played a role in attracting many international forces to Deir Ezzor, mainly the United States and the international coalition in the eastern Euphrates, and Russia and Iran supporting Assad's forces in the western Euphrates.

The visit of al-Quds Force commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani to Al-Bukamal city, was a turning point in the U.S.-Iran conflict in Deir Ezzor, where Iran has recently expanded its activities to areas east of the Euphrates, and has been working to attract the young people in those areas, and split the ranks of Arab tribes on both sides of the Euphrates River in an effort to prevent Arab tribes from being on the side of the U.S.-Kurdish alliance in the region, where some statistics indicate that (there are approximately 2,000 fighters belonging mainly to Fatimiyeon brigade and Al-Baqir Brigade, which is led by the tribal figure Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bashir).²¹

²¹ An American War against Iran's Cells in Deir Ezzor, Abdullah Raja, article published in the Emirati Al-Bayan newspaper

It seems that the U.S. is keeping its forces in Syria, especially in Deir Ezzor, due to two main reasons, the first of which is to stop the Iranian expansion and cut off its land routes that connect Tehran to Beirut, where the killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani appears to have been part of this effort, among other objectives, also to secure an economic resource to its allies, the Syrian democratic forces, and get oil to finance the military operations against Daesh.

The change in the power map at the end of 2019, including the Turkish-American and Turkish-Russian understandings, played a role in changing positions of control, the most important of which was the Russians move towards areas where they had no presence before, such as some areas in northern and eastern Syria, and their entry to bases evacuated by the U.S. forces after President Trump's decision to withdraw his troops from Syria.

Russian forces have also established new headquarters in the area at the crossroads of Al-Bukamal, Deir Ezzor and Al-Mayadeen cities, to control the movement into and out of al-Mayadeen and Deir Ezzor cities, while Iranian forces have captured some additional headquarters and some farms on the bank of the Euphrates between al-Baloam and Nazlat al-Mashroua.

While there are silent consensus and undeclared agreements between the Russian and U.S. forces on areas of influence, the Iranian expansion is not welcomed, which seems to be clear through the repeated and precision Israeli bombings on Iranian positions in their areas of concentration.

Tribalism against the power balances and the future of the tribal issue in Deir Ezzor

The tribal situation is deeply rooted in the society of Deir Ezzor, so if any thing to affect it, it will be just on the superstructure level, where the Influential forces are military forces with greater power than the helpless societies, that seem to be powerless to take any actions or measures to protect their strategic interests, however it is very difficult for these forces to penetrate the tribal infrastructure.

The tribes in Deir Ezzor try to work according to the logic of their tribes interest, but the local polarizations (Assad regime, the Syrian democratic forces, and regional and international powers (the United States, the

international Coalition, Russia, Iran) prevent them from playing their roles as they want.

What is certain is that all the forces that control or influence Deir Ezzor cannot marginalize the tribes as they make up the basic infrastructure of the society there. Forces like Iran has tried to penetrate the tribal society through spreading Shiism, and Assad regime has worked to gain tribal loyalties by supporting some tribal elders and enticing them with money, while the Syrian democratic forces have tried to deal with the tribes as a matter of reality without being convinced of the tribal structure, as they consider it a reactionary structure.

The Iraqi experience is clear to all, with regard to the role played by the tribes whether positively or negatively, which is a relative matter that depends on the evaluation of the experience from many angles, especially the tribes weapons file, and as the events are still going on, the tribes will have a major role whether in maintaining stability, or in fuelling conflict against any power, especially with the gains they have made.

One of the main factors to the success of any power to control Deir Ezzor is maintaining stability, which will not be achieved without granting the tribes greater freedom to move and exercise real local authority, so the dominant forces are aware of this fact and are always forced to deal with it.

The issue of stability, economic balance and reconstruction of the region are some of the most important issues facing Deir Ezzor and standing in the way of any progress. They are difficult issues because the region is controlled by various forces with different agendas, so the tribes, especially the dominant circles, have to work in this minefield in a way that ensures their survival.

We have to note that the tribal issue is not a societal situation different from the civil one, but it is rather about the general structure and a description of the formal reality at least, and this is clear through the cultural and civil movement of Deir Ezzor society and the educated, academics, and intellectuals class, who in their towns and villages belong to their tribes, to whom they are tied socially with certain customs and traditions, and different with them in many things, not away from the tribal values that have gained flexibility over time, and become pragmatic in some cases.

Conclusion/ Recommendations and suggestions

We can conclude many things from the points covered in this research, which may have different meaning according to the angle of address an direction, because the tribal issue is a broad one, with socio-political dimensions, so it is not sufficient to study it without resorting to means of anthropology, and because the research is about the tribal situation in Deir Ezzor at a critical time and at a crossroads, where the events are still on fire, it will have a lot of dimensions and a lot of accelerated changes that casts a shadow over many positions and changes in the balance of control.

According to writer Abdullah al-Ghadawi, the tribal role, particularly in the eastern Euphrates, has become a focal point in the political projects and a historic opportunity for the the tribal forces in the Syrian Jazeera to establish, in cooperation with the International Coalition, a pure environment free from the extremist thoughts.²²

When looking closely at the reality of tribalism in Deir Ezzor, it is so easy to realize that these community structures are from the mainstream of the Syrian society, and therefore cannot be described as reactionary or progressive, but they can be dismantled at the theoretical level by trying to harmonize the options of the reformation and stability of the region through supporting sensitive issues such as freedoms and democracies with tribal options, as they cannot be ignored.

So there is Tribalism, but it is not rigid or framed. It is a flexible entity that can be good, and can be otherwise, and this flexibility can be beneficial to its members with regard to the economic and political stability.

There are "progressive" models hostile to tribalism and "reactionary" ideas, but they have turned into dictatorships such as the Baath regime with its Syrian and Iraqi parts, while there are tribal "reactionary" models that have been able to establish empires of social welfare, such as the Gulf states, here it is not about following examples but rather about reaching an idea that the tribal situation is a societal structure different from its theoretical notion, and the roles played by the tribes are different from what they used to be, as they are now characterized by a great deal of flexibility and pragmatism.

²² About Deir Ezzor and the role of the tribes, an opinion article, Abdullah al-Ghahawi, the International Policy center

Suggestions and recommendations for the stakeholders and different powers:

- The Tribal forces are not newly established, so in all their changes, they represent a real societal structure.
- Tribalism today is a reality and all the forces and stakeholders should deal with it within the logic of respect, and the principle of rights and duties, in addition to remove the negative aspects that might harm the security and safety of people or undermine their stability, in a way do not contradict with their fundamental rights.
- The controlling forces must stop treating the tribes and Tribalism as a means to carry out their agendas, and try to work on the concerns and problems of this society.
- Deir Ezzor is an economic reservoir, therefore it is a target to many rivals, who must not jump over the human mass that own these riches.
- working on development projects in Deir Ezzor, especially the rehabilitation of infrastructure.
- stop dealing just with the tribal elders alone as if they were the only representative of people in the region, and to pay attention to the competent and civil actors tribesmen in order to serve the common interest of all the people of the region and meet their basic needs, which these actors can help achieving them better.
- Not to use the tribes to spread or undermine a religious sect or intellectual current, and to focus on promoting education, especially in the areas where infrastructure has been destroyed, particularly in the education sector.
- The failure in dealing with the tribal issue in the neighboring countries should not be repeated in Deir Ezzor governorate and north-eastern Syria, and should be a lesson to understand how to deal with the society components, and understand them in the right way outside the school mindsets, that contain a lot of fallacies about these components.
- All people in conflict-affected areas have basic priorities. They need safety, basic services and economic sufficiency, and those who help them achieve these things will be able to win the support of all the people of the region in all aspects.

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