

Iran is Attempting to Push the United States out of Syria via Hasakah Province

by [Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](#), [Samer al-Ahmad \(/experts/samer-al-ahmad\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](#)

Rena Netjes is an Arabist and independent researcher. She focuses mainly on northern Syria, SDF-held northeast Syria and opposition-held northwest Syria. She has been to the different parts of northern Syria six times in recent years for field research.

[Samer al-Ahmad \(/experts/samer-al-ahmad\)](#)

Samer Al-Ahmad is a Syrian researcher with a Master's degree in International Relations. He focuses primarily on developments in Eastern Syria. Currently, he is working as a researcher at the Omran Center for Studies, where he continues to explore and analyze regional dynamics.



Using multiple militias and operating units, Tehran aims to drive the Americans out of eastern Syria, fill the resulting security vacuum, and assert indirect control.

Iran is intensifying efforts to expel U.S. forces from northeastern Syria and Iraq, leveraging Hezbollah and various militias. With its strategic network, Tehran targets U.S. bases, aiming to oust Americans, occupy the security void, and extend its indirect control akin to its influence in Iraq. Although it has momentarily advised its militias to stand down, this pause is strategic, serving a broader campaign to assert dominance in eastern Syria.

The "Islamic Resistance in Iraq," an Iran-backed militia network in Iraq and Syria established during the Gaza war, has escalated its attacks on American forces over the past several months. This escalation became especially visible when a drone strike on January 28 killed three U.S. soldiers and injured 47 at Tower 22, a U.S. military outpost in Jordan, marking a significant escalation. These attacks have aimed to undermine security and expand Iranian influence in eastern Syria, but paused temporarily following robust American responses. Reuters disclosed on February 18 that Esmail Qaani, Iran's [Quds Force \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/) commander, secured a halt in attacks on U.S. troops in Baghdad the day after the Tower 22 attack, signaling Tehran's desire to avoid wider conflict.

Meanwhile, in northeast Syria, the focus of Iranian-backed militias has shifted from U.S. troops to attacking SDF forces— and local Arabs—with new weapons arriving in Qamishli and trainees moving to areas near Damascus and Homs. Moreover, a readiness to remobilize against coalition forces if tensions escalate with Hezbollah in Lebanon

remains. Preparations by these militias, fueled by the Gaza conflict, led to over 170 missile and drone attacks from October 17 to the end of January, targeting coalition bases across several locations. Despite speculation that some attacks, like the Tower 22 base strike, might not have been due to direct Iranian orders, the overarching goal remains an effort to pressure the United States to withdraw from the region,

In Northeast Syria, this includes leveraging the strategic city of Qamishli on the Syrian-Turkish border. The Iranian-backed militias have utilized control overlaps in areas like Qamishli—where Assad's regime and the SDF converge—to broaden their influence. Since 2012, the Assad regime has maintained a stronghold in Qamishli and al-Hasaka by aligning with the PYD, a Syrian political organization **affiliate (<https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>)** d with Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to suppress alternative Syrian Kurdish revolutionary aspirations, whereas other Kurdish parties joined the broader Syrian opposition against Assad. The PYD—and its militia the YPG—now head the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), with the PKK's guidance influencing the YPG's leadership in eastern Syria.

These leaders helm the American-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), consisting of mainly Arab fighters. Despite collaborating with the United States in the east of the country, the PYD/YPG also cooperates with Assad and Iran in western Syria, especially in **Tal Rifaat (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-syrian-idps-tal-rifaat-also-want-go-home>)**, and increasingly in **al-Hasaka governorate (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/carpet-weaving-east-euphrates-iranian-proxy-groups-expand-their-influence-syrias>)**, demonstrating a complex web of alliances and influences in the region. There is also a large **Russian army base (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1XP0YI/>)** at the Qamishli airport southwest of the city. Several sources have independently asserted to the authors that the Iranian-backed militia leaders in Qamishli operate from this Russian base at Qamishli airport, where they have located their headquarters, operating on the assumption that the American coalition won't target a Russian base. Meanwhile, several bases of the American-led international coalition are also located in the Qamishli area. ISIS likewise remains active in Qamishli's southern areas, with al-Hasaka province being a significant site for their attacks in 2023.

The Spread of Iranian-Backed Militias

Iranian influence in northeastern Syria has grown since 2015, notably with Hezbollah establishing commando units in Qamishli from tribal groups supportive of the Syrian regime supervised by Hezbollah leader Wissam al-Taweel, nicknamed Haj Jawad. He was killed in an Israeli raid in southern Lebanon in January 2024. In 2021 Haj Mahdi initiated "task forces", funded by Hezbollah and the IRGC, focusing on recruiting and training from local and displaced Syrian populations—and placing them under mostly non-Syrian commanders—and emphasizing the use of advanced weaponry and drones. In addition to Haj Mahdi, there are Iraqi commanders interspersed with Syrians from the tribal population of the area and from the Shiite towns of Fu'a and Kefraya in Idlib, or Nubul and Zahra north of Aleppo. These forces operate from Qamishli, extending to al-Hasaka, where Haj Mahdi has established a new militia Saraya al-Khursani, enhancing Iran's military foothold. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq coordinates these efforts and claims the resulting attacks in Syria.

Following a tribal revolt against the SDF in Eastern Deir Ezzor, Iranian and Iraqi leaders engaged with local clans for recruitment under the **"Sons of the Jazira and Euphrates Movement," (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-sons-jazira-and-euphrates-movement>)** aiming to bolster forces against coalition and SDF positions. This initiative capitalizes on local discontent with YPG leadership over the SDF, particularly among Arab communities in Deir Ezzor and al-Hasaka, offering financial incentives for support against YPG dominance.

In December and January, security groups including the Iraqi Saraya al-Khurasani and other task forces were

deployed in SDF-controlled areas, notably south of al-Hasaka, to monitor coalition movements and base locations, reporting to the operations room in regime-held al-Mayadeen in Deir Ezzor. This coordination is directed by Abu Fatima Al-Iraqi, a key figure from the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, who operates from al-Mayadeen but went into hiding in Iraq towards the end of January.

Room for a Reinvigorated American Presence

In the eyes of the local population, American forces have appeared timid in the face of IRGC-instigated attacks. Many among the mainly Arab population in al-Hasaka and to the south to Deir Ezzor fear expansion of Iranian-controlled operations and the transformation of this entire eastern Syrian region into an area of intense conflict. They also worry about their children amid a wave of Shia proselytizing—as has already occurred in Damascus, traditionally a bastion of Sunni Islam.

Arab communities in al-Hasaka and Deir Ezzor provinces will therefore respond positively to a stepped-up American role. Rather than withdraw completely, the Americans should instead adjust their strategy and move away from depending solely on the YPG to lead the SDF. The PYD/YPG is a faction among Syria's Kurds, but is also hated by many other Syrian Kurds for their repressive practices. The PYD/YPG is by no means representative of the population of northeastern Syria; estimates indicate that only about 30 percent of the 2.6 million are Kurds, while 70 percent are Arabs.

The Americans choice of leaders to lead the counter-ISIS effort is at the heart of the problem. Washington needs to pressure the YPG to halt its tactical cooperation with Iranian-backed groups in al-Hasaka province in areas like Qamishli. This will likely also mean that Washington will have to press the YPG to cut its ties with the PKK, a very tall order. Yet achieving this would reduce the sharp tension between the Autonomous Administration and Turkey that would ease one of the big difficulties in the American forces' operating environment.

But just getting U.S. "partners" in the PYD/YPG to stop cooperating with the Iranian-backed groups in al-Hasaka province and break with the PKK won't be nearly enough. In a strategy that resembles the 2007 mobilization of Arab communities in western Iraq against al-Qaida, Washington needs to replace PKK-cadres managing governance and security operations in the Arab towns south of Qamishli with notables and community leaders empowered to take important decisions.

Washington also needs to intervene to ensure that revenues from oilfields in these Arab areas are used to develop local basic services, like hospitals, schools, electricity, instead of allowing those oil revenues to benefit primarily the PKK-controlled and predominantly Kurdish Self Administration well to the north in Qamishli. The PYD/YPG will resist mightily—as it has during its attempts to forcefully quell resistance the Arab communities under the Americans' watchful yet un-interventionist gaze. The Americans' passive stance during this period has opened the way for Iranian to entice individuals from those communities to help Iran, and it is likely only its reentry to address serious local concerns that further Iranian entrenchment can be avoided. ❖

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