

Profile: Arab Tribal and Clan Forces

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight: Profiles \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles\)](#)

or see Part 1: [How to Use Militia Spotlight: Profiles \(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles\)](#)

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The Arab Tribal and Clan Forces are a new unit of Deir al-Zour Arab militiamen raised by the Iran-backed Ougaidat tribal leader, Ibrahim al-Hifl, to form an unbroken corridor of Iran-backed tribal fighters between DeZ and Aleppo.

Name: Quwwat al-Qabail wa al-Ashaer al-Arabiya (Arab Tribal and Clan Forces, or ATCF).

Type of movement: Tier 3 *fasail* (armed group) engaged in kinetic military and paramilitary actions in Syria, particularly in the eastern region, including Deir al-Zour province. Primarily focused on combating the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with activities aimed at reinforcing Arab tribal power and opposing U.S. and Kurdish influence.

History:

- On September 20, 2023, Sheikh of the Ougaidat tribe, Ibrahim al-Hifl, officially [announced \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF\)](#) the formation of an “Army of Arab Tribal Forces” to fight against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) amid the ongoing clashes between the SDF and disgruntled Arab tribesmen in Deir al-Zour province. He called on members of the Ougaidat tribe for financial support and requested assistance from the Baggara tribe, another influential tribe in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.
- Previously, on [August 31 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sdfs-insurgency-challenge-deir-ez-zor\)](#), al-Hifl joined the Arab tribal rebellion and became the figurehead of the ‘Arab Tribal Forces’ militant group, making the town of Dhiban the center of this revolt.
- Al-Hifl’s Arab Tribal Forces did not support Ahmad al-Khubayl, better known as Abu Khalwa, even though Abu Khalwa is from the Baqir clan of the Ougaidat tribe. In an [audio message \(https://twitter.com/DalgashRasoul5/status/1697236244286033924\)](#), leaked during the uprising, Abu Khawla threatened Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl.
- In 2020, al-Hifl also [called \(https://twitter.com/EvaKahan/status/1304165285658791941\)](#) for local administration to be transferred to the tribes in Deir al-Zour, likely due to the SDF’s control of the profits generated by the oil fields.
- Operation Inherent Resolve reported in their [Quarterly Report \(https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003392203/-1/-1/OIR_Q1_DEC2023_GOLD_508.PDF\)](#) to Congress for the period from October to December of 2023 that tribal fighters have emerged as a “full-fledged resistance movement” that is receiving explicit support from the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies on the western side of the Euphrates River, where resistance fighters resupply, rearm and launch attacks across the river in SDF-controlled villages on the eastern side.
- On September 3, 2023, ATCF [took control \(https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-](#)



Arab Tribal and Clan Forces logo

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[%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89/](#)) of areas from the SDF in the countryside of Raqqa and Al-Hasakah in northern and northeastern Syria. In the process, they managed to take control of the villages of Al-Mohsenli, Al-Mahmudiyah, and Arab Hassan, and Manbij. A few days later, they managed to take Al-Tarki, and Tal Tawil near Tal Tamr.

Objective:

- The Arab Tribal and Clan Forces' primary objective (<https://www.jusoor.co/ar/details/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84>) is to combat the SDF and strengthen Arab tribal control east of the Euphrates. A secondary objective is to strengthen Iran's grip in this area and push U.S. forces out of Syria. Areas under SDF control are generally inaccessible to Iranian proxies in the so-called "axis of resistance," so gaining a foothold in these zones would enable the IRGC to establish a northern land corridor leading to Aleppo.

Chain of command:

- Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl (Abu Khalil):** The leader of the Ougaidat tribes, from the dominant Albu Kamel sub-tribe's chieftom family, al-Hifl. He also leads The Sons of Jazira and Euphrates Movement (/node/18451) and has influence over Lions of the Ougaidat Brigade as well as many other Arab tribal militias in Eastern Syria. The SDF labeled him as "head of the sedition" in 2019 following his call for an Arab tribal uprising against them. In 2020, he survived an assassination attempt in al-Hawayij, Deir al-Zour, that resulted in his cousin's death; he attributed the attack to the SDF. He has urged the U.S.-led international coalition to back a proposal for establishing a military council of Syrian tribal elders in the east to replace the SDF there. This council, intended to communicate directly with the coalition, aims to enhance regional security, secure the release of tribal Arab prisoners from SDF/Kurdish detention, and curb Kurdish military activities in the area. Since late August 2023, Sheikh Ibrahim has lived under a kind of protective house arrest by the Assad regime in the Mayadeen neighborhood of Makhban.



Figure 1: Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl (Abu Khalil)

(/sites/default/files/2024-04/Sheikh%20Ibrahim%20al-Hifl%20%28Abu%20Khalil%29.jpg)

- Lebanese Hezbollah/Hajj Abu Ali:** In early February, 150 fighters from Hezbollah-controlled military positions in Central Syria remobilized (<https://npasyria.com/en/110750/>) to Eastern Syria to join Arab tribal militias to fight the SDF. Hajj Abu Ali of Lebanese Hezbollah oversees the operations of the Arab Tribal Forces. Hajj Abu Ali, a Lebanese national and LH leader, is responsible for the direction and distribution of new fighters arriving in Deir al-Zour province. Abu Ali is reportedly in charge of the Iranian-held zone near al-Baloum roundabout in al-Mayadeen.
- Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps:** Abu Ali is coordinating with Hajj Abbas, an Iranian who is the commander of the IRGC in Albu Kamal. Hajj Abbas is responsible for liaising with Regiment 47 (see subordinate units) and deploying local fighters to the opposite side of the river, while also monitoring the situation in Albu Kamal. The IRGC oversees combat training for Arab tribal militia personnel in preparation for conducting operations in the region east of the Euphrates River.
- Assad regime:**
 - The Syrian Army significantly contributes (<https://deirezor24.net/en/how-iran-and-assad-penetrated-the-ranks-of-so-called-tribal-fighters/>) to the operational assistance of tribal militia forces in Eastern Syria, including the movement and deployment of militia members throughout the area. It also guarantees the delivery of vital supplies such as ammunition, sustenance, and military gear to these groups. Furthermore, tribal militias, such as the Arab Tribal and Clan Forces, are actively involved in recruiting from the towns and villages of Eastern Syria. These recruitment activities are aimed not only at expanding their own forces but also at providing manpower for the military and intelligence operations of the Syrian regime.
 - On February 10, 2024, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl was observed (<https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2024/2/10/%D8%B8%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%81%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85>) participating in a ceremonial event at the Damascus guesthouse belonging to Sheikh Farhan al-Marsoumi, the sheikh of the al-Marasma tribe. This assembly was reportedly orchestrated by the Assad regime with the objective of enabling al-Hifl to establish and strengthen alliances and connections with other Arab tribes. Additionally, it is noted that al-Marsoumi maintains significant business ties with both the Assad regime and the IRGC.

Affiliate relationships:

- Son of Jazira and Euphrates Movement:** The Telegram channel associated with the Sons of Jazira and Euphrates Movement (/node/18451) actively disseminates information regarding the operations of the Arab Tribal and Clan Forces. It offers commendations, expresses support, and shares updates on their progress while also providing insights into the tribal makeup of the ATCF. Given that al-Hifl presides over both of these tribal militias (Sons of Jazira and Euphrates Movement and ATCF), the channel frequently publishes statements attributed to him, sometimes in his capacity as the leader of the Sons of Jazira and Euphrates, and other times as the head of the ATCF. Additionally, the channel systematically issues calls to Arab tribal members within the Syrian Democratic Forces to abandon the SDF and integrate into tribal militias such as the ATCF, indicating a strategic effort to bolster their ranks through defections. The Sons of Jazira Movement has an active track record (/node/18441) of

attacking U.S. and SDF units.

- **Liwa al-Baqir:** Muntasir al-Hussein, a prominent figure within [Liwa al-Baqir \(/node/18453\)](#), plays a crucial role in spearheading an extensive recruitment drive for the ATCF. This campaign targets thousands of minors into the ranks of the ATCF, targeting the communities of Deir al-Zour, Albu Kamal, al-Mayadin, Ayyash, Shumaytiyah, and al-Tebni. al-Hussein also supervises their training and preparation for crossing to the opposing riverbank. Notably, within the ATCF, the Baggara clan emerges as the second-largest contingent in terms of personnel strength, following the Ougaidat, and constitutes the majority of Liwa al-Baqir's composition. The Aleppo-based Liwa al-Baqir has attacked U.S. and SDF units and has developed a uniquely close relationship with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Assad regime.
- **Other tribal militias:** The ATCF, alongside the [Hashemite Tribes Regiment \(/node/18597\)](#), the [Lions of the Ougaidat Brigade \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade\)](#) and various other Arab tribal militias within Eastern Syria, often coordinate to initiate joint military offensives and campaigns. Their unified goal is to oust U.S. forces from Eastern Syria and reclaim Arab sovereignty from the SDF. These militias not only collaborate closely in combat operations but also engage in comprehensive joint training programs. They utilize identical transportation pathways, rely on the same supply lines, and collectively manage numerous checkpoints across the region. Additionally, these groups are involved in recruiting efforts on behalf of the Assad regime's military and intelligence entities.
- **Liwa Fatemiyoun:** The ATCF actively [engages \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9\)](#) in recruitment efforts throughout Eastern Syria, notably in Deir al-Zour, in a collaborative effort with Liwa Fatemiyoun, an Afghan militia operating in Syria under the support of the IRGC. These entities not only share operational zones, including control over various checkpoints but also coordinate closely in military operations. Additionally, their recruitment initiatives are not limited to their own forces; they also supply personnel to both the National Defense Forces (NDF) and the Syrian Army.

Subordinate relationships:

- **Regiments 47 and 137:** Abu Issa al-Mashhadani, commander of Regiment 47 in Albu Kamal, is charged with the mobilization of local fighters in his regiment, with a key focus on ensuring their security throughout the operation. Additionally, Atallah al-Hamoud, also known as Abu Awad al-Mashhadani, and serving as the deputy leader of Regiment 47, has been appointed to manage the operations involving the newly arrived batch of fighters. Following initial training led by al-Hussien, these troops are set to undergo further preparation at the training camps of Regiment 47 situated on the outskirts of Albu Kamal and at the facilities of Regiment 137 near the Deir al-Zour Airport, spanning an estimated duration of 15 to 20 days.
- **Al-Saiqa Forces:** These are the special forces of the Arab Tribal and Clan forces. They oversee the process of securing the crossing of fighters from the countryside of Albu Kamal. It is supervised by Amer Abu al-Fadel.
- The group maintains an active official Facebook page with about 9.7K followers where they frequently post on the activities of the group in general and that of al-Hifl in particular. They also maintain two very active official Telegram channels with about 3.4K and 4.2K subscribers each with multiple other fan-based Telegram channels dedicated to them.



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