



Warning: Russia Escalates in Eastern Syria

September 9, 2020

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Key Takeaway: Russia is scaling up pressure against US forces in eastern Syria. Russia invigorated its effort to provoke fractures within the US local partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in early August through information operations tailored to sow doubt about the SDF's reliability and the United States' commitment to Syria. Russia and other pro-regime actors simultaneously scaled up a campaign of harassment of US forces, including rocket attacks on facilities housing US forces and a confrontation with a US patrol on August 25 that concussed four US soldiers.¹ These incidents could indicate that Russia is using kinetic activity to bolster the effect of its information operations in accordance with emerging Russian hybrid warfare doctrine, which ISW will examine in depth in a forthcoming report. The intended target of Russia's information operation, local tribal elements loosely aligned with the SDF, could perceive the United States' inability to prevent such attacks as a sign of weakness. In one of the most dangerous scenarios, Russia may further escalate kinetically to provoke a crisis that causes local tribal elements to desert the SDF with the eventual objective of forcing US policymakers to reconsider the US commitment to Syria.

Tripwire

Russian state media conducted a sophisticated information operation against the SDF on August 4. Russia propagated two narratives in the Syrian information space in early August that exploited, amplified, and exaggerated existing causes of tribal unrest to produce greater pressure on the SDF.

1. *Tribal liberation.* Russian state media outlet Sputnik News Arabic ran a story that exaggerated a local clash between tribal protesters and the SDF, skewing details to portray the incident as the start of a "liberation" battle against the SDF.² To evidence the story, the outlet published a video, the original source of which is unclear, of tribesmen waving guns and burning tires on an unidentified street, allegedly celebrating this "liberation."³ Sputnik News claimed that the video showed tribesmen capturing SDF members, which it did not and which likely never occurred.⁴ A Facebook page that claims to speak for the leading Aqidat tribe posted the same video along with a caption encouraging other tribes to defect from the SDF and continue this "battle."⁵ The statement was crafted to emphasize tribal freedom and independence rather than calling narrowly for a pivot to Russia, the Assad regime, or Turkey. The page was infrequently active since 2014 until posts spiked in July 2020. The main owner of the page is likely a member of the Aqidat tribe based in Qatar. Kremlin-run news outlet RT replicated and amplified this announcement about "the liberation of Deir ez-Zour" and tribal "control over villages" without confirming or denying its message.⁶ The narrative of tribal liberation spread widely, propagated by pro-Assad and pro-Turkish actors as well as many people who were previously supportive of the SDF.⁷
2. *SDF abuse of protesters.* RT and Sputnik News also published stories accusing the SDF of shooting at peaceful protesters in Hawayij on August 4.⁸ Turkish and pro-regime social media accounts reshared and exaggerated these stories, claiming that the SDF shot women and used coalition aircraft to terrify the populace.⁹ Security forces did fire at local citizens but may have been deliberately provoked. The SDF accused ISIS cells of

beginning the violent engagement on August 4 and arrested alleged provocateurs on August 7 for starting the shooting.¹⁰

The success of this information operation demonstrated that narratives of SDF abuse of power and tribal “liberation” resonate across a range of communities with differing political goals. Russian state media ran a similar follow-on campaign, propagating a story of tribal “expulsion” and arrest of SDF members in Jadid Aqidat in eastern Deir ez-Zour on September 8, 2020.¹¹

Screenshots showing reposted video evidence of “tribal liberation”

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| <p><i>Original RT video captioned, “Video of tribal control over “SDF” bases in rural Deir ez-Zour,” August 4, 2020¹</i></p>  | <p><i>Aqidat Tribe Facebook page, caption is an extended declaration of battle on the SDF from the “free sons of the tribes,” August 4, 2020¹</i></p>  | <p><i>Pro-Assad Al Alam channel post titled, “Video: Tribes control SDF bases in Hawayij in rural Deir ez-Zour,” August 4, 2020¹</i></p>  | <p><i>Pro-Opposition Orient TV titled, “Deir ez-Zour revolts... Aqidat tribe expels SDF from several towns and tribes announce their readiness,” August 5, 2020¹</i></p>  |
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Harassment incidents and low-level attacks targeting US forces increased after the information operation. Pro-regime forces operating a checkpoint in Deir ez-Zour fired on a US and SDF joint patrol on August 17. US Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) spokesperson stated that US and SDF forces returned fire in self-defense.¹² A rocket attack and mortar attack later targeted US forces near Conoco oil field on August 18 and 29, respectively.¹³ Pro-regime insurgents had not attacked US forces at this rate before August 4, 2020, and last claimed an unconfirmed rocket attack on US forces in Raqqa province on April 13, 2018.¹⁴

A flurry of attack claims from relatively new anti-SDF insurgent groups bolstered Russia’s information operation. These claims include the checkpoint shooting and the rocket and mortar attacks on US forces near the Conoco oil field, but also include claims of attacks that ISW could not independently verify occurred. These groups may have gained access to new resources in August 2020 by exploiting gaps in SDF security as tribal unrest increased in Deir ez-Zour.¹⁵ However, the claims in multiple cases appear likely to be false. These groups have likely accelerated information operations to portray the SDF as weak and under constant attack. ISW cannot assess at this time whether Russia is involved in these operations.

- A new Iraqi Shi’a militia named Ashab al Kahf, which declared its formation in March 2020, claimed the mortar attack on Conoco oil field on August 29. This group has claimed attacks that were first claimed and likely committed by other Shi’a militias in Iraq, and this claim may also be an attempt to take credit for another group’s activity.¹⁶
- A pro-Assad insurgent group, the Popular Resistance on the Eastern Front (PREF), claimed the August 18 rocket attack on US forces near Conoco oil field, claiming it was retribution for the checkpoint shootout

on August 17.¹⁷ The group also claimed 17 unconfirmed attacks on SDF forces between August 8 and September 1.¹⁸

- Another pro-Assad insurgent group, the Popular Resistance in the Syrian Desert (PRSD), expanded its media presence and claimed the August 18 rocket attack on US forces near Conoco oil field. The group also claimed another unconfirmed attack on US forces and four unconfirmed attacks on SDF forces between August 15 and September 1.¹⁹
- The Revolutionaries in the Land of Deir ez-Zour (RLDZ), an insurgent group that claims linkages to Turkish proxy forces in northern Syria, claimed an unconfirmed attack that the group says killed nine SDF members in eastern Deir ez-Zour and called for tribes to rebel against the SDF on August 4.²⁰ The RLDZ also claimed an attack that killed a Russian major general on August 18 that was more likely conducted by ISIS. Some of RLDZ's claims might be true, but at least some of them are likely part of a deliberate information operation.

| Insurgent Group | Likely Sponsor | Likely Base | Attacks Claimed (Date, Type, Location) | Verification of Attack |
|--|----------------|---|---|---|
| Ashab al Kahf | Iran | Iraq | August 29: Rocket attack targeting US troops near Conoco Oil Field | Verified Attack (likely mortars, not rockets) |
| Popular Resistance on the Eastern Front (PREF) ²¹ | Assad or Iran | Deir ez-Zour and Hasakah, Syria | August 17: Small-arms fire targeting joint US-SDF patrol | Verified Attack |
| | | | August 18: Rocket attack targeting US troops near Conoco Oil Field | Verified Attack |
| | | | August 8 – September 1: 17 attacks on SDF - From Arisha, Hasakah Province to Busayrah, central eastern Deir ez-Zour - IED, Sniper, and small-arms fire | Unconfirmed |
| Popular Resistance in the Syrian Desert (PRSD) | Assad | Syria – Central Syrian Desert and Eastern Syria | August 18: Rocket attack targeting US troops near Conoco Oil Field | Verified Attack |
| | | | August 27: Attack on US convoy near Shaddadi; method unclear | Unconfirmed |
| | | | August 15 – September 1: 4 attacks on SDF - From Shaddadi, southern Hasakah to Jizra, western Raqqa, and Baghouz, eastern Deir ez-Zour - MBIED, machine gun, IED, and small-arms fire | Unconfirmed |
| Revolutionaries in the Land of Deir ez-Zour (RLDZ) | Turkey | Syria – Deir ez-Zour | August 4: Attack on SDF; method unclear; claimed to kill nine SDF members. | Unconfirmed |

Russian forces also escalated against a US patrol in Hasakah to reinforce Russia's information operation. A Russian armored vehicle deliberately crashed into an US patrol in Malikiyah, Hasakah Province, on August 25. Russian state media widely broadcast the incident and claimed that US forces refused to deconflict, causing the incident.²² Russian military forums distributed videos showing the encounter, which show a Russian helicopter flying threateningly close to US vehicles and US forces withdrawing from the area. The Russian-language Telegram channel WarJournal initially released a video of the clash taken by someone in a nearby crowd of Hasakah residents.²³ Russian nationalist website Rusvesna.su published a higher-definition video on August 26 taken by the Russian driver and included the Russian state media's narrative.²⁴ The video spread quickly on social media. The US Department of Defense acknowledged that US forces retreated in order to deescalate, allowing Kremlin-run

media to spin this encounter as a Russian victory.²⁵ US media covered the incident extensively, noting that four US soldiers may have sustained concussions and questioning the importance of their mission in eastern Syria.²⁶ This media reaction advanced Russia's effort to undermine US popular support for the mission in Syria, which was likely one of the intended effects of Russia's escalation.

Pattern

Pro-Assad forces seek to constrain and ultimately eject US forces from eastern Syria. Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime expanded their presence in eastern Syria beginning in mid-2017. Pro-Assad forces reclaimed land from ISIS, including oil and gas infrastructure, in western and southern Deir ez-Zour by exploiting US military pressure on ISIS in eastern Deir ez-Zour.²⁷ Pro-Assad forces conducted multiple probing attacks on US forces to test US responses in 2017, targeting the US Tanf garrison with ground forces, including artillery and a tank, and targeting an SDF force near Raqqa with an airstrike in June 2017.²⁸ The United States responded decisively to these incidents at the tactical level, signaling resolve and compelling pro-Assad forces to recalibrate. In the sharpest escalation to date, hundreds of Russian Wagner Group contractors, pro-regime militia fighters and likely Lebanese Hezbollah forces assaulted an SDF position near the Conoco oil field on February 7, 2018.²⁹ Co-located US forces conducted force protection strikes that halted the pro-regime advance and imposed significant casualties, killing as many as 300 Wagner members.³⁰ The cost of the attack deterred Russia from repeating this tactic but did not deter lower level escalation. Lebanese Hezbollah and a regime militia attacked SDF-held positions again on April 29th, 2018, forcing the SDF to abandon three villages northwest of Deir ez-Zour city for several hours.³¹ US forces performed self-defense strikes against Assad forces approaching the Tanf garrison held by US partner force Maghawir al Thawra on June 21, 2018, and possibly on other occasions.³²

Russia shifted to a more indirect approach after its February 2018 defeat, attempting to siphon tribal support away from the SDF. Russia scaled up outreach to tribal elements in eastern Syria, for example hosting Shammar tribe sheikh Humaydi Daham al Jardba, who leads an SDF force in Hasakah Province, at Hmeimim Airbase on February 19, 2019.³³ US policy inadvertently aided Russia's effort when President Donald Trump threatened to withdraw US troops from Syria in October 2019, ceding a major opportunity for Russia to step in.³⁴ Nawaf Abd al Aziz al Muslat, a likely Russian-backed tribal leader in the Jubour tribe, convened a meeting of tribal leaders in Tell Tamr, Hasakah to discuss the creation of an independent tribal militia to combat the SDF two weeks after President Trump's statement.³⁵ Syria Direct, which leverages local Syrian sources, reported that participants in the meeting called for Russian Military Police to fill the gap left by departing US troops.³⁶ Russian state media also scaled up Arabic language coverage of eastern Syria that portrays Russian negotiators as allies of the tribes, advocates the return of SDF-held oilfields to local stakeholders, and depicts SDF security forces as neglectful and abusive.³⁷ These efforts shaped the narrative around tribal opposition to the SDF but were not able to cause significant tribal defections before Russian efforts escalated in August 2020.

Iran, the Assad regime, and Turkey also scaled up their own information operations and tribal outreach with a similar broad purpose: to undermine the SDF and recruit tribal support away from its military and governance structures. Iran and other pro-Assad forces have attempted to recruit tribes to defect from the SDF and join parallel pro-regime forces. Iran worked closely with the Baqara tribe to recruit tribesmen into Liwa al-Baqir, and other Iranian-backed militias.³⁸ Iran or other pro-Assad forces solicited defections from SDF leadership and the pro-SDF Civil Council in early 2019.³⁹ Iran also established new Shi'a mosques and Iranian cultural centers in Deir ez-Zour to expand its social outreach.⁴⁰ Turkey has also conducted tribal outreach and hosted tribal leaders for meetings, although these efforts have mainly focused on tribes of northwestern Syria.⁴¹ Iranian-backed tribal organizations have failed to recruit significant support on the eastern bank of the Euphrates due to the Assad regime and Iran's limited financial capacity under the pressure of US sanctions, as well as Israeli airstrikes which have maintained pressure on Iranian maneuver and resourcing in Syria. Russian and Iranian efforts have been alternately aligned and competitive as the two Assad backers compete over control of resources within Deir ez-Zour and ground lines of communication between Syria and Iraq.⁴² Turkish efforts have also failed due to lack of contact with tribes of eastern Syria. Finally, each actor has sponsored insurgent groups to carry out small-scale attacks against the SDF and tribes collaborating with the SDF and lobbied for tribal support in the information space. For example, Turkey likely sponsored a separate insurgent group that sought to eliminate members of SDF

leadership starting in late 2017 in addition to the RLDZ.⁴³ These attacks have degraded the security situation of eastern Syria and contributed to tribal resentment against the SDF.

Timing

A crisis of confidence in the SDF in Deir ez-Zour reached a new threshold in July as a result of the overlapping destabilizing efforts of ISIS, Turkey, and pro-Assad actors. The SDF has carried out anti-ISIS operations in Arab areas to try and meet the tribes' demands for improved security, but these operations have themselves generated tribal pushback to the SDF. ISIS is conducting an assassination campaign that by July 15, 2020, had triggered a tribal mobilization demanding better security from the SDF.⁴⁴ Arab tribes in SDF-controlled eastern Syria conducted large-scale protests in April and May 2019 focused on service provision, but these protests shifted significantly to focus on population security in July 2020.⁴⁵ Pro-Assad insurgent groups, including the PREF and likely regime-sponsored assassination cells, conduct attacks that worsen the impact of ISIS's destabilizing campaign.⁴⁶ The SDF conducted a broad anti-ISIS operation in the area where ISIS and regime attacks are concentrated, between Busayrah, Shuheil, Zir, and Ibriha, from July 17-20 in response to tribal demands for improved security.⁴⁷ The SDF again received backlash. Tribes from Busayrah and nearby Hawayij protested the SDF throughout the operation, accusing the SDF of conducting sweeping arrests of activists.⁴⁸ Pro-Turkish and pro-Assad media exploited the unrest to advance information operations against the SDF, fueling the protests. For example, pro-Turkish information outlets accused SDF units of livestock theft in Shuheil under the hashtag "Return_Our_Sheep" on July 20.⁴⁹ Pro-regime media also spread a statement allegedly sent to them by Deir ez-Zour tribes calling on the international community for protection on July 20.⁵⁰ The SDF's failure in the information space further eroded trust in the SDF despite its efforts to provide security for these communities. Russian media was not significantly involved in the information space as this crisis began in late July but began to advance its information campaign roughly two weeks later, likely after taking time to prepare its response.

Russia exploited a tipping point on August 2, when gunmen assassinated a prominent tribal leader, Mutashar al Hifl.⁵¹ ISIS is most likely responsible for the assassination, but the tribal backlash against the SDF that ensued afterwards created a window of opportunity for Russia to scale up its campaign. Several tribal leaders accused the SDF of orchestrating Mutashar al Hifl's assassination or deliberately neglecting to protect him.⁵² Leaders of the Aqidat tribe who reacted to the assassination are broadly divided into three camps that alternately support the Assad regime, a tribal independence movement, or the SDF.⁵³ Some pro-independence tribal leaders rejected SDF governance in Deir ez-Zour after the incident, an escalation in their responses to date that aligns with the efforts of pro-regime tribal leaders to undermine the SDF.⁵⁴ A fractured group of pro-independence clans demanded on August 11 that the SDF devolve administration to the tribes by September 11.⁵⁵ This faction and/or its clans may attempt to expel the SDF by force and establish liberated self-rule if the SDF does not meet their terms, severely disrupting counter-ISIS operations.

Assessment

A major push by Russia or other pro-Assad actors in the next few weeks could seriously threaten the US effort to de-escalate tribal unrest in northeast Syria. US forces in Syria and their SDF partners are attempting to mitigate this crisis and likely secured an agreement to maintain the support of the pro-SDF Bakir clan of the Aqidat tribe at a large tribal meeting on August 13.⁵⁶ The SDF, with US support, may be negotiating further agreements with the pro-independence movement. These negotiations will continue to face significant push-back from the extremes of the tribal independence camp and, more notably, pro-regime actors working to exacerbate tribal-SDF tensions and erode the negotiating position of US forces. Russian-backed forces could use the cover of a tribal insurgency to instigate further attacks on US forces, forcing the US to calibrate a response to both domestic and Syrian audiences that depicts US forces as neither overinvolved nor under-committed. US forces are constrained by a limited mission set that allows them to support SDF anti-ISIS operations, conduct show of force patrols, and engage in limited social outreach but does not enable them to play larger role in stabilization. The US does not maintain a significant civilian or diplomatic presence on the ground, which limits US influence and its ability to provide clarifying information to the local population.

US policy may be more vulnerable to this pressure during the tense US presidential election. President Trump may feel pressured to again announce a withdrawal of US forces from Syria in order to help his reelection campaign.⁵⁷ US media outlets frequently portray the presence of US troops in Syria as posing an undue risk to those soldiers' lives.⁵⁸ Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden highlighted this risk at a campaign event by criticizing President Trump for failing to "lift one finger" in response to service member injuries in the ramming incident on August 25.⁵⁹ This line of argument may drive President Trump to announce a troop withdrawal in order to reduce risk to his campaign.

Russia is moving military reinforcements southeast to Deir ez Zour under the cover of anti-ISIS operations that, in the most dangerous scenario, could support tribal secession on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced the start of a counter-ISIS operation named "White Desert" on August 26 after the assassination of Russian Major General Vyacheslav Gladkikh west of Mayadeen on August 18.⁶⁰ Russia conducted extensive air operations against ISIS targets in the Central Syrian Desert and moved Russian-backed SAA 5th Corps units from Raqqa Province to Deir ez-Zour City on August 21.⁶¹ Russian-backed forces have withdrawn from much of the Deir ez-Zour countryside and concentrated in cities, possibly in preparation for larger-scale clearing operations. The Russian Ministry of Defense also announced plans to build a new cross-Euphrates bridge capable of moving military vehicles at Shmaytiyah north of Deir ez-Zour on August 26.⁶² The bridge is unnecessary to fight ISIS in regime-held areas, but may help Russian forces stage cross-river operations against the SDF. Russian forces operate an additional cross-river bridge for civilian trade at Mare'iyah, which was built in October 2019 after all previous bridges were destroyed by flooding.⁶³ If pro-independence or pro-regime tribes continue to reject negotiated agreements with the SDF, Russian-backed pro-regime forces may cross to the eastern bank in order to "protect" the local population from continued SDF rule. At minimum, Russia will use the bridge's construction to posture as a valuable partner for Assad in his future attempts to pressure the SDF. Iranian-backed militias may also posture to attack or pressure the SDF in southeastern Deir ez-Zour independently.⁶⁴ Iranian military officials attempted to recruit and arm an anti-SDF "Tribal Army" in Deir ez-Zour on August 26, although it is unclear whether any tribes agreed to join said army.⁶⁵ Iranian force posture in Deir ez-Zour is likely designed to compete with Russian-backed force expansion as well as to confront the SDF.⁶⁶

Russia may leverage the tribal pressure and possibly its own military pressure to attempt to compel senior SDF leadership to accept a new deal in Syria that constrains US forces or ejects them. Russia has already begun to sponsor new negotiations between Russian clients in the regime-tolerated opposition and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the SDF's political wing. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov brokered a meeting between Ilham Ahmed, the co-chair of the SDC, and leader Qadri Jameel, a member of the regime-tolerated Syrian Communist "People's Will" party, in Moscow on August 31.⁶⁷ The two leaders announced an agreement that bolsters the SDC's longstanding effort to gain inclusion in the Syrian diplomatic process.⁶⁸ SDC-regime negotiations have been stalled since August 2019 aside from a temporary resumption after the US indicated it might withdraw in October 2019. This meeting alone will not lead to the SDC's inclusion into the Geneva-based Syrian peace process, but Russia may intend to build on this agreement to normalize the SDC within the Syrian diplomatic process under Russian patronage. This could give Russia leverage over both the SDC and the Assad regime, which wants access to the resources of eastern Syria.⁶⁹ Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov may have promoted SDC-regime engagement in his first visit to Syria since 2012 on September 7, 2020.⁷⁰ Russia also seeks to supplant the US diplomatic position as the SDC's main partner. The SDF will continue to balance relationships with both the US and Russia in order to retain US support as long as possible but will continue to hedge against the possibility of a US withdrawal. Russian information operations that affect the SDF's perception of US reliability could advantage Russia in this competition.

Russia's information campaign in northeast Syria is not fully calibrated and could be vulnerable to disruption. Russian state media advanced contradictory narratives regarding a prominent Facebook page that covers tribal matters in eastern Syria, demonstrating a failure to fully align their messaging. In a single article, RT cited the page's posts as evidence of tribal rejection of the SDF but also claimed that a separate post on the page that contradicted Russia's desired narrative was illegitimate.⁷¹ This inconsistency in Russian messaging may demonstrate

that Russian state media is still adapting to this new information environment and may be vulnerable to a focused coalition information effort.

Implications

America's role in eastern Syria is vital. American forces are training and advising the SDF, the only competent exclusively counter-ISIS force in Deir ez-Zour. The SDF has thus far prevented a large-scale ISIS resurgence in eastern Deir ez-Zour on par with the campaign on the western side of the province. The US-led coalition should support the SDF-tribal partnership in the information space by publicizing high-publicity meetings, coalition-sponsored events, and news stories of tribal-SDF cooperation in order to enable continued coalition counter-ISIS presence in eastern Syria. The CJTF-OIR is still seen as a trusted broker by most of the tribes upon whose support the SDF relies. A CJTF-OIR presence in the information environment can defend the legitimacy of the SDF and increase support for tribal negotiations. The US and SDF must be even more proactive about countering false narratives and providing accurate information to tribal stakeholders in eastern Syria. Some tribal leadership have already exposed multiple information operations as externally driven.⁷² The US should help them broaden their message. Rumors that the SDF does not deny or clarify could be taken as truth by tribal leadership, priming them to oppose the SDF and possibly the US presence. US policy makers should also publicly emphasize US commitment to guaranteeing the SDF's long-term success in countering ISIS alongside tribal partners in eastern Syria.

Russia and other anti-SDF actors will amplify any SDF misstep. CJTF-OIR and the SDF should expect disinformation to escalate around SDF counter-ISIS operations. The SDF arrested suspected ISIS members in response to unrest on August 16 and September 2, causing some localized unrest in the process.⁷³ Russian information operations will likely exploit and amplify this unrest. The SDF should also expect that counter-SDF protests, which are frequently videoed, will continue to provide a platform for rumors of SDF misbehavior. The SDF should be extremely cautious in their approach to protests and negotiate openly with local leaders in order to avoid misunderstandings or escalation.

Indicators

Russian information operations are a leading indicator of Russia's intended next steps. If Russia plans to provide support for a tribal insurgency against the SDF, they will likely set the stage for intervention on or shortly after September 11, when the tribes' deadline expires. Russian state media would escalate reports elevating voices of anti-SDF tribal leadership on both the east and west banks in order to create an excuse for intervention and to unite east bank anti-SDF tribes with their west bank pro-regime tribal relatives. Russian media would also likely contrast the regime's peaceful relationship with tribes with tribal-SDF discord to emphasize that the Assad regime is the only sustainable governing body in Syria. These information campaigns may drive protests in eastern Deir ez-Zour to escalate and directly call for regime support. This situation would likely also be marked by escalating tribal movements to expel the SDF and possibly seize SDF weapons, endangering the counter-ISIS mission by preventing the SDF from conducting arrests or raids in villages from which it was expelled.

Russian state media will likely escalate its information campaign that undermines public confidence in eastern Syria regarding the US commitment to Syria. To do so, Russia may cause and publicize additional clashes with US forces or run false media stories that exaggerate a collapse of SDF-tribal alliances to a US audience. This campaign would rely on further kinetic activity, and Russian units or deniable pro-Assad insurgent forces may increasingly target US patrols in high-visibility clashes. Stories targeting specific members of CJTF-OIR or SDF leadership in order to delegitimize their negotiating power would indicate a concerning escalation of these disinformation efforts.

Further military preparation on the western bank of the river may also signal impending military escalation. Russia might build additional cross-river bridges in the days before a military intervention, likely locating them south of the current bridge toward al Busayra or Shuheil, where anti-SDF sentiment is high. The SDF began constructing a new military base in Shuheil on September 1 and may intend to build a concrete wall along parts of the SDF-

regime border in response to early threats of an incursion by pro-regime forces.⁷⁴ Further SDF fortifications in this area could indicate additional Russian-enabled mobilization.

At a minimum, Russia will likely attempt to sabotage SDF-tribal negotiations that could close the window for pro-regime forces to exploit SDF weakness. Russian state media may attempt to use information operations to confuse the outcome of tribal-SDF negotiations, possibly by depicting a false tribal rejection of a deal. The original sources of any announced deal or deal rejection should be scrutinized. Kremlin media may attempt to discredit tribal representatives when a deal is announced. As the tribes of Deir ez-Zour are fractured into multiple tribes, clans, and political orientations, targeted attempts to speak with local allies are unlikely to be successful. CJTF-OIR communication to shape the information environment must be far-reaching and take advantage of social media.

Pro-Assad and pro-Turkish actors could escalate their anti-SDF efforts. Turkish state media may also be originating some anti-SDF information operations via Twitter and to a lesser degree Facebook, as well as through Turkish-funded think tanks and information centers.⁷⁵ Turkey sponsors an Arab tribal council, mainly incorporating tribes from Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo Province, and could convene these tribes to draw support for a Turkish anti-SDF offensive.⁷⁶ Pro-Assad media, including Iranian actors, have propagated anti-SDF information operations and may escalate these campaigns. Iran may use the media outlets of the Iranian-backed “Popular Resistance” militias in Deir ez-Zour to spread disinformation and set the stage for further pro-Assad or Iranian military action..The Assad regime may also attempt to pressure the SDF diplomatically while maintaining kinetic pressure through insurgent groups in Deir ez-Zour, although Russia is more likely to be successful with this approach.

¹ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Troops Injured in Syria After Collision With Russian Vehicles”, *New York Times*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/world/middleeast/pentagon-russia-syria.html>

² “[Arab Tribes invade bases of American-backed militias in Deir ez-Zour and capture their members... video,]” *Sputnik News Arabic*, August 4, 2020, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202008041046180496-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7/

³ The story was partly true but exaggerated. The RT article claimed that SDF members were captured, which appears to have no basis in fact or in the video. Deir Ezzor Now, a local news source, clarified that the SDF withdrew from three checkpoints but no SDF personnel were captured and tribal mediation was underway. Deir Ezzor Now, Twitter, August 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzorNow/status/1290643974018027523>

⁴ “[Arab Tribes invade bases of American-backed militias in Deir ez-Zour and capture their members... video,]” *Sputnik News Arabic*, August 4, 2020, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202008041046180496-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7/

⁵ [Aqidat Tribe – the Official Page], Facebook, August 4, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Alaqidat/posts/1957987374343923>

⁶ Osama Younis, “[Local source clarifies truth in Aqidat tribe announcements in Syria,]” *Russia Today Arabic*, August 4, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1141179-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%AD-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/

⁷ “[Aqidat tribe threatens to evict SDF... and announces the beginning of ‘taking revenge,’]”, *Levant News*, August 4, 2020,

<https://thelevantnews.com/2020/08/%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%91%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A8/>
Turkish-backed actors have also conducted information operations since August 2, resharing similar disinformation on August 4 with an emphasis on tribal claims of independence.⁷

Suriye Gundemi, Twitter, August 27, 2020, https://twitter.com/suriyegundemi_/status/1299054999566196736
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Genevieve Casagrande, “Post-ISIS Insurgency Looms in Northern Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, November 7, 2017, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2017/11/post-isis-insurgency-looms-in-northern.html>

⁸ Osama Younis, “[Syria... injuries by gunfire on protests against the SDF in Deir ez-Zour,]” Russia Today Arabic, August 4, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1141017-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1/

⁹ [Wadad Abd al Waham,] Twitter, August 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/wexP2S7t8yGMwRf/status/1290792286570389506>; [Abbas Sharifa,] Twitter, August 4, 2020, https://twitter.com/abbas_sharifeh/status/1290676523754815488

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¹¹ “[Aqidat tribe expels gunmen paid by the American military from an eastern Syrian village,]” *Sputnik News*, September 8, 2020, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202009081046486069-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/

“[Sources: Aqidat tribe expels gunmen paid by the American military from an eastern Syrian village,]” *RT Arabic*, September 8, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1152282-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/

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¹⁹ [The Popular Resistance in the Syrian Desert], Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-106518844500814/>
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²⁰ This claim may have originated rumors that “9-11 SDF members die in clashes on August 4,” which are otherwise unconfirmed. Thairien, Telegram, August 4, 2020.

²¹ Notably, this group appears to have divided in two in early August, one of which uses the old Facebook Page (“Popular Resistance of the Eastern Front,” Facebook,

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) and one of which uses a new page (“Popular Resistance of the Eastern Front, East Euphrates,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-592452021426268>).

Both groups adopted new branding as of August 2020 that features prominent symbology (a raised fist and AK-47) used by Iran-backed Iraqi “shadow militias,” although ISW cannot confirm the militia’s association with Iran.

²² “[The Ministry of Defense commented on the incident with the military of Russia and the United States in Syria,]” TASS, August 27, 2020

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²³ Warjournal, Telegram, <https://t.me/warjournal/7504>

²⁴ “Syria war: American troops hurt as Russian and US military vehicles collide,” *BBC News*, August 29, 2020,

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²⁵ “[The Ministry of Defense commented on the incident with the military of Russia and the United States in Syria,]” TASS, August 27, 2020

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²⁶ Eric Schmitt, “US – Russia Military Tensions Intensify in the Air and on the Ground Worldwide,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/us/politics/us-russia-military-tensions.html>; Barbara Starr and Ryan Brown, “Multiple US Troops injured in a Collision with a Russian Military Convoy in Syria,” *CNN Politics*, August 26, 2020,

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/26/politics/us-service-members-injured-russia-syria/index.html>

²⁷ Bradley Hanlon, “Weak US Response to Russian Proxies Undermines Deterrence in Middle East and Eastern Europe,” *Institute for the Study of War*, February 16, 2018, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2018/02/weak-us-response-to-russian-proxies.html>

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³⁰ “Unprovoked attack by Syrian pro-regime forces prompts Coalition defensive strikes,” *CJTF-OIR*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1435188/unprovoked-attack-by-syrian-pro-regime-forces-prompts-coalition-defensive-strik/>

³¹ Jennifer Cafarella and Matti Suomenaro, "Russia and Iran Prepare Offensive Targeting US and Partner Forces in Eastern Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 25, 2018, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2018/06/russia-and-iran-prepare-offensive.html>
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³² "[British Newspaper Discovers Airstrike targeting Syrian Army,]" *Sputnik News Arabic*, July 2, 2018, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/201807021033471364-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A/
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