

THE ROAD TO AR-RAQQAH: BACKGROUND ON THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES



The composition and behavior of the force that recaptures ar-Raqqah City will in part determine the long-term success of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign in Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is the U.S.’s most effective partner fighting ISIS in Syria, but it has limitations that risk undermining the gains it makes on the ground. The SDF, although dominated by the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), is not monolithic. The SDF coalition consists of Kurdish, Arab, Syriac Christian, and Turkmen groups. The U.S. built the [SDF in late 2015](#) by recruiting a “Syrian Arab Coalition” to fight alongside the YPG and other local militias. The SDF continued to attract Arab fighters in the lead up to operations against ISIS in ar-Raqqah, including the recent inclusion of members of the [Free Officer’s Union](#), a group of several high-ranking Syrian Arab Army defectors, in October 2016.

The YPG nonetheless continues to dominate the SDF, despite increased efforts by the U.S. to diversify the coalition and recruit additional Arab fighters. The SDF remains dependent upon the YPG for logistics and experienced fighters, providing the YPG with outsized leverage within the coalition. Turkey considers the YPG to be a terrorist organization due to [the group’s ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party \(PKK\)](#), placing the SDF in direct conflict with Turkey. Local Arab and Turkmen populations in northern Syria also oppose the YPG, accusing the group of “[ethnic cleansing](#)” and forcibly displacing local communities. Moreover, the YPG’s political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), intends to create [a semi-autonomous federal region](#) in northern Syria, which Turkey, Arab opposition groups, and other Kurdish parties oppose. The SDF’s effort to advance towards ar-Raqqah City and thereby expand Kurdish influence further into traditionally Arab terrain threatens to exacerbate these tensions and escalate into a more violent Arab-Kurdish and intra-Kurdish struggle in the region.


The following chart identifies some of the largest and most influential groups within the SDF. This list of groups, however, is not exhaustive.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)



Group Name & Insignia	Ethnic Composition (approximate majority)	Areas of Operation	Description
People’s Protection Units (YPG) 	Kurdish	Hasakah, ar-Raqqah, and Aleppo Provinces	The YPG is the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in northern Syria. The YPG and PYD are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a militant organization that is waging an active insurgency against the Turkish state. ¹ Open source reports estimate the YPG maintains approximately 25,000 fighters across northern Syria. ²
Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) 	Kurdish	Hasakah, ar-Raqqah, and Aleppo Provinces	The YPJ is an all-female unit within the YPG.

Group Name & Insignia	Ethnic Composition (approximate majority)	Areas of Operation	Description
Sanadid Forces 	Arab	Hasakah Province	The Sanadid Forces is a group of Arab fighters affiliated with the Shammar tribe and closely allied with the YPG. ³
Syriac Military Council (MFS) 	Syriac Christian	Hasakah Province	The Syriac Military Council (MFS) is an Assyrian Christian militia active in Hasakah Province. The MFS is closely allied with the YPG. A media report estimated that the MFS maintains 500-1000 fighters. ⁴
Jaysh al Thuwar 	Primarily Arab with some Kurdish and Turkmen local affiliates	Primarily active in ar-Raqqah and Aleppo Provinces	Jaysh al Thuwar is a Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated coalition that claims to have local affiliates across northwestern Syria. The group's local affiliates are most active in Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces as members of the Syrian Arab Coalition of the SDF. The group denounced the Turkish military intervention into Syria in August 2016 and is a member of the Jarablus Military Council. ⁵
Kita'ib Shams al Shamal 	Arab and Turkmen	Aleppo and ar-Raqqah Provinces	Kita'ib Shams al Shamal is a local FSA-affiliated opposition group that is a component of Jaysh al Thuwar. Many of the group's fighters are from Manbij and the group is a member of the Manbij Military Council. ⁶
Jabhat al Akrad 	Kurdish	Hasakah, ar-Raqqah, and Aleppo Provinces	Jabhat al Akrad is a predominately Kurdish opposition group from northern Aleppo that used to work closely with FSA-affiliated opposition factions that were closely aligned with Turkey. The group has since become allied with the YPG, however. Jabhat al Akrad denounced the Turkish military intervention into Syria in August 2016. ⁷ The group is a component of Jaysh al Thuwar and the Jarablus Military Council.
Liwa Jund al-Haramayn 	Arab	Aleppo and ar-Raqqah Province	Liwa Jund al-Haramayn is a local FSA-affiliated opposition group that is a member of the Manbij Military Council. ⁸

Group Name & Insignia	Ethnic Composition (approximate majority)	Areas of Operation	Description
Liwa al Salajaqa 	Turkmen	Aleppo and ar-Raqqah Provinces	Liwa al Salajaqa, commonly referred to as the “Saljuk Brigade,” is a local group of Turkmen fighters from Aleppo. The group denounced the Turkish invasion of Syria in August 2016 and is a member of the Jarablus Military Council. ⁹ Liwa al Salajaqa’s leader is a prominent spokesperson for the SDF.
Arfad Revolutionaries Battalion (No photo available)	Unknown	Aleppo Province	The Arfad Revolutionaries Battalion is small group of local fighters from Tel Rifaat, north of Aleppo City, that joined the SDF in June 2016. The group denounced the Turkish invasion of Syria in August 2016 and is a member of the Jarablus Military Council. ¹⁰
Euphrates Martyrs Battalion (No photo available)	Arab	Aleppo Province	The Euphrates Martyrs Battalion is a small group of local fighters from the village of al Qubba in northeastern Aleppo Province along the Euphrates River. It was previously affiliated with opposition groups that were closely aligned with Turkey, but joined the SDF in January 2016. ¹¹ The group is a member of the Manbij Military Council. ¹²
Free Officers Union (No photo available)	Arab	Aleppo & Dera’a Provinces ¹³	Deputy Chief of the Free Officers Union Hussein al Awak defected from the Free Syrian Army with “hundreds” of fighters and joined the SDF on October 13, 2016. ¹⁴ Al Awak stated the Free Officers Union would work alongside the SDF to “defeat the brutal Turkish occupation.” ¹⁵ Several high-ranking Syrian Arab Army defectors established the Free Officers Union in the Apaydin Army Defectors Camp in Hatay, Turkey in July 2016. ¹⁶ It is unclear, however, if the members of the Free Officers Union contribute fighting forces to the SDF, or if the defection was largely symbolic.
Liwa Tahrir al Furat (No photo available)	Unknown	Aleppo Province	Liwa Tahrir al Furat was formed in October 2016 as part of the Manbij Military Council. ¹⁷ The group has recently been involved in clashes against ISIS west of Manbij and was targeted by an alleged Turkish airstrike in the area on November 20. ¹⁸

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ENDNOTES

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- ² Ben Hubbard, “New U.S.-Backed Alliance to Counter ISIS in Syria Falters,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html>; David Pollock, “Making Rojava More Like the KRG,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus150_Clawson.pdf.
- ³ Roy Gutman, “New allies in northern Syria don’t seem to share U.S. goals,” *McClatchyDC*, 27 October 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article41559747.html>.
- ⁴ David Ignatius, “The new coalition to destroy the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, 22 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-coalition-to-destroy-the-islamic-state/2016/05/22/54d9b466-2036-11e6-aa84-42391ba52c91_story.html?utm_term=.f96163fc2d79.
- ⁵ “Factions of the Free Army declare supporting JMC,” Hawar News Agency, 29 August 2016, <http://en.hawarnews.com/factions-of-the-free-army-declare-supporting-jmc/>.
- ⁶ “Kurds doggedly defend Ain al-Arab,” *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 5 December 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Dec-05/279971-kurds-doggedly-defend-ain-al-arab.ashx>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcxdUu8ZvGA&feature=youtu.be>
- ⁷ “Factions of the Free Army declare supporting JMC,” Hawar News Agency, 29 August 2016, <http://en.hawarnews.com/factions-of-the-free-army-declare-supporting-jmc/>.
- ⁸ [“Creation of the Military Council of Manbij and its Countryside”], YouTube video, posted by Ajansa Hawar ANHA, 02 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcxdUu8ZvGA&feature=youtu.be>.
- ⁹ “Factions of the Free Army declare supporting JMC,” Hawar News Agency, 29 August 2016, <http://en.hawarnews.com/factions-of-the-free-army-declare-supporting-jmc/>.
- ¹⁰ “Factions of the Free Army declare supporting JMC,” Hawar News Agency, 29 August 2016, <http://en.hawarnews.com/factions-of-the-free-army-declare-supporting-jmc/>.
- ¹¹ [“What is Katiba Shuhada al Furat?”], Hawar News Agency, 14 January 2016, <http://www.hawarnews.com/%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%9F>.
- ¹² [“Creation of the Military Council of Manbij and its Countryside”], YouTube video, posted by Ajansa Hawar ANHA, 02 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcxdUu8ZvGA&feature=youtu.be>.
- ¹³ [“Assassination of Brig. Gen. Al Menshaq Amad Akrad”], Hawar News Agency, 14 October 2016, <http://www.hawarnews.com/%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF/>.
- ¹⁴ [“Defection of Officers from the ‘Free Officers Union’ Affiliated with the Free Syrian Army “], YouTube video, posted by Mohammad Hamou, 14 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVQqqSj9WdY&feature=youtu.be>; Qehreman Misté & Silber Haji, “Hundreds of Syrian rebels join the pro-Kurdish SDF alliance,” *ARA News*, 14 October 2016, <http://aranews.net/2016/10/hundreds-syrian-rebels-join-kurdish-arab-alliance-sdf/>.
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- ¹⁷ @QSD_Jabha, Twitter Post, 04 October 2016, 11:14 AM, https://twitter.com/QSD_Jabha/status/783324454600388609; Ahmed Shawish, [“Liwa Tahrir al-Furat Joins Manbij Military Council in Rif Aleppo”], *ARA News*, 02 October 2016, <http://aranews.org/2016/10/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B6%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%AC/>.
- ¹⁸ @mmc2016c, Twitter Post, 20 November 2016, 2:53 PM, <https://twitter.com/mmc2016c/status/800426971431718912>.