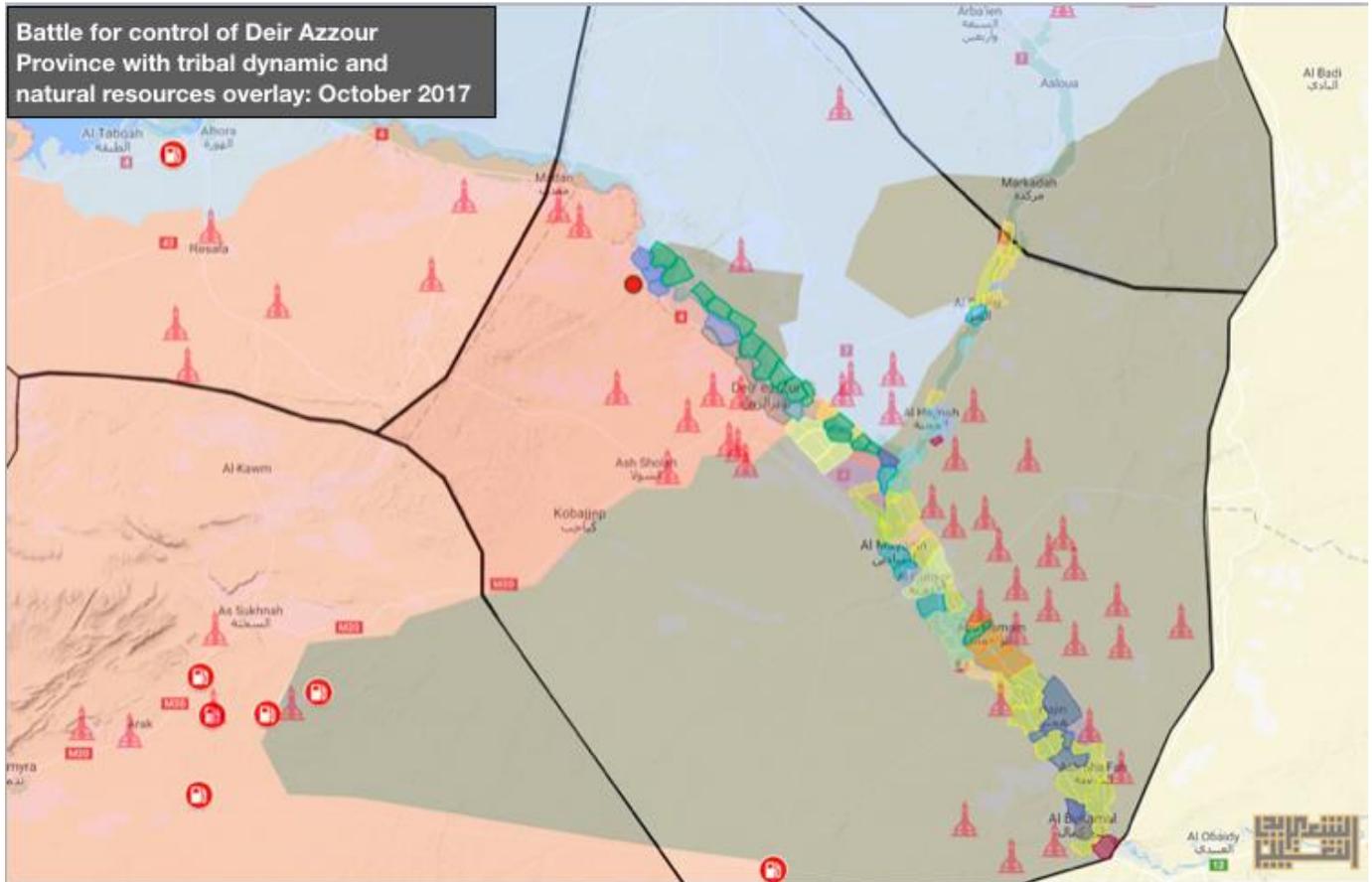


## Review of the socio-political dynamics of northern Deir Azzour Province (September-October 2017)



Map Legend		
Color	Tribe	Sub-Tribe
Green	Baggada	-
Olive	Egaidat	Bakir
Yellow	Egaidat	Bu Kamil
Orange	Egaidat	Bu Rahma
Light Green	Egaidat	Bu Khabour
Dark Green	Egaidat	Qaraan
Light Yellow	Egaidat	Bu Hassan
Light Green	Egaidat	Shwayat
Yellow	Egaidat	Shayat
Light Green	Egaidat	Mkayif
Blue	Egaidat	Mashahda

Map Legend		
Color	Tribe	Sub-Tribe
Blue	Al-Rifaa'i	Sheikh Issa
Cyan	Dulaim	-
Pink	Jabbour	-
Teal	Kul'ayeen	-
Grey	Abeed	-
Light Grey	Bak'ayn	-

**Introduction:** As the Anti-ISIS Coalition prepares to enter Deir Azzour Province in a more substantial way, it is important to consider the kind of socio-political dynamics which will be encountered on the North (or “Jazeera”) side of the Euphrates River, where the bulk of the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) are currently poised to control. Even though it looks likely that the SDF forces will take the Jazeera bank of the river, Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) under the command of the Assad Regime along with its allied Iranian proxies are moving quickly to consolidate the southern (or “Shami”) side of the river to ensure that they control as much of the province’s oil and natural gas wealth as possible. It is important to note that given the SDF’s past experiences ethnic composition, as the majority of the SDF is made up from Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), entering Deir Azzour will be uncharted territory. The province’s social framework is centered around tribal affiliations, extended familial connections and places a heavy emphasis on connections to one’s “family village and land.” Wrestling control of Deir Azzour Province from ISIS also poses a unique set of challenges as the organization has deep ties to the area, having established links to specific families and sub-tribes early on in its attempts to set up a new base of operations within Syria. The cultural and political linkages between Deir Azzour Province and neighboring Anbar Province in Iraq also have ensured that ISIS’ ability to “hop” the border and use the “inbetween” of the two countries to avoid sustained military pressure from the constellation of military actors including: the anti-ISIS Coalition, the Peshmerga, the Iraqi Army and its allied PMU forces, the SDF, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Russian Air Force, the SARG military forces and their Iranian proxies.

Huge segments of Deir Azzour’s civilian population have been uprooted and forced to relocate around the country, fleeing the SARG and Russian air campaign on one side, and the Anti-ISIS Coalition air campaign on the other. On top of all of this, the Syrian Revolution changed the tribal dynamics of Deir Azzour Province, as the older sheikhly order which was tied to the Assad Regime and exerted a modicum of control over the direction and ideological makeup of the region slowly dissolved or lost influence under the weight of the youth of the province. These youths independently chose to support and fight with different military groups affiliated with the Revolution such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, ISIS, the Assad Regime and later some even with the YPG and the SDF. The result has been that from 2011 to 2017, the province experienced mass societal change, the impact of which remains unclear as of now. Nonetheless, the local communal ties to extended family hierarchies and tribes are still strong and can provide some guidance as to how the Deir Azzour community may reconstruct itself post-ISIS. Given the continued prevalence of this dynamic, it is important to understand what existed before the current conflict. Below is a review of the socio-political dynamics on the “Jazeera” side of the river, where it is anticipated the SDF will have the most interaction with the Deir Azzour population.

**ISIS and the control of the Jazeera Side of the Euphrates River:** This area is considered part of the eastern countryside or the “northern side of the river.” This section of the province is one of the most important areas for ISIS (Da’esh) and has been for prior organizations and local authorities due to its abundance of natural resources such as natural gas and oil. Mayadeen City became the central hub for the province since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution and the subsequent conflict instead of Deir Azzour City because of the destruction and constant

fighting in the city. In addition, about 70% of the wheat and sugar in the area is stored in Al-Mayadeen city. The power plant that services the majority of the province is also based in this area. Over the past several years, some local authorities have formed a coalition with either ISIS or Jabhat Al-Nusra to take advantage of the power vacuum to control the aforementioned economic and natural resources. Due to the low levels of educational and modernity found in Mayadeen City and the immediate area, the local social culture and norms do not naturally support either ISIS's or Jabhat Al-Nusra's ideological fervor unlike other parts of the province where both ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra found more local support.

**There are three major tribes in this area: Baggara, Egaidat Confederation (Bakir and Albu Jamil):**

**Baggara tribe:**

The Baggara tribe are located in the area to the east of the Euphrates river but west of the Khabur river ("western countryside"), and overlap with the Bakir tribe in the countryside to the east of the Khabur river and north of the Euphrates in three villages Al-Salhiyah, Khesham, and Jadidat Egaidat ("eastern countryside"). The Baggara tribal area borders the regime held territory in Deir Azzour Province. During the last few years there was no active participation from the tribe in any anti-Regime militias, however, some younger members of the tribe have joined armed groups that have fought the Syrian Regime inside the city of Deir Azzour. The past few years Nawaf Al-Bashir has been an opposition politician who refused to represent his tribe in any of the diplomatic negotiations such as those in Turkey. As a result, this led to the rise of Sheikh Amir Al-Bashir as the face of the tribe who was present in the tribal area until ISIS took control of the region. Amir's profile continued to increase after Nawaf Al-Bashir decided to form a direct partnership with Iran and support the Assad Regime's plan for Deir Azzour Province. As a result, Sheikh Amir Bashir formed a tribal council so he could create balance and harmony within the tribe to counterbalance Nawaf Al-Bashir's actions. Amir also created an understanding with the military leaders within his tribe and asked them to join the council. The council then made a decision that creating a coalition with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was the best option to help liberate their region from ISIS, considering the dearth of other options. The council managed to add hundreds of Hasakah-based fighters and join them together under what's called Al-Nukhba Forces or "The Elite Forces" in English. Recently, some of the Hasakah fighters have decided to join the SDF to launch an offensive in Mi'daan, on Raqqah Province border, to reach the western countryside. The Baggara tribal leadership is fearful that a direct coalition of their fighting forces with the SDF will put them under pressure from Turkish Government, and as a result, the Council decided to allow individual members work with the Elite forces and Duraa Al-Furat forces (Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield in English) to mitigate the perception that the tribe as a whole was supporting the SDF. According to sources, there are about 750 tribal members in the SDF area of operations.

**Bakir tribe (Egaidat Confederation):**

Located in the northern countryside in four villages that overlaps with Albu Jamil tribe and also in the eastern countryside that overlaps with the Baggara tribe, represented by Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Hamadah who resides in Turkey now. The area is divided into four sections:

- Al-A'nabzeh (Khesham)
- Al-Mashrif (Jadidat Egaidat)
- Al-Qabeesah (Bareha- Al Baseera)
- Al-Farj (northern countryside villages)

The Bakir tribe used to fall under Egaidat tribe but during the past years of conflict, the tribe emerged as an independent group, and a separate entity while maintaining its tribal status amongst its population. A large number of its members joined different military divisions which sparked a fight for control the oil and natural gas fields in the area, and to try and consolidate the sources of local revenue. The Sheikh's council in Al-Bakir could not find a way to unite the tribal members so they lived in a state of continuous competition which led to the rise of few leaders such as "Amir Al-Rafdan" from Al-Mashrif, who allied with his cousins from Al-A'nabzeh. These two formed an armed group distinct from the tribal armed groups. This new group cooperated with Jabhat Al-Nusra then joined ISIS because of Jabhat Al-Nusra's intent to control the two oil fields of Al-Jafra and Conoco. Afterwards, Amir Al-Rafdan was appointed as a Wali (Ruler) of Deir Azzour while under ISIS control. His family still controls the oil fields. "Al-Qabeesah" members were involved in the Syrian conflict and created military divisions that fell under the military council of Deir Azzour (The Free Syrian Army) who fought ISIS relentlessly and forced Amir Al-Rafdan to relocate to the Badia Region and to Turkey. "Al-Farj" on the other hand have always traded arms between Syria and Iraq, and when the conflict arose in Syria, their area was the first stop for fighters from Al-Qaeda in Iraq because of their strong relations with the group's original members in Iraq. They are considered a source of personnel for ISIS, to use whenever they needed new fighters. In order to keep the oil and natural gas deals they made with the Syrian Regime, they are maintaining a low profile so they are able to trade and sell at the local markets.

### **Albu Jamil tribe:**

Located in the northern countryside in four villages that overlaps with Bakir tribe and Sha'heil town, and two villages in the eastern countryside north of the river, they are represented by Mos'ab Al-Hafil of the traditional house of the Egaidat Sheikhs (sub-tribe of Albu Jamil tribe). During past seven years of conflict, the Albu Jamil did not participate in any talks between the Egaidat Sheikhs and the new military leaders, representatives of local councils or activists. This led to the deterioration of their influence in Deir Azzour Province where the Egaidat tribe was able to form a military coalition without the traditional method of depending on the tribe's various bloodlines to form alliances, except in some areas such as with the Bakir. The new leaders from the tribe were connected to Al-Qaeda in Iraq before the Syrian conflict, considering the deep ties and their role in organizing and trading arms. This relationship eased the way for Al-Qaeda in Syria, and Sha'heil town turned into a central place for Al-Qaeda in 2011 and was nicknamed "Al-Nusra" city, which became the home for many of Jabhat Al-Nusra's leaders. The tribe's population is considered the biggest faction within Jabhat Al-Nusra, under the leadership of Dr. Youssef Al Hajir, Al Shar'ee and Abu Maraya Al-Qahtani. They are currently located in

southeast Idlib Province, with a force estimated in the thousands that joined Jabhat Al-Nusra. In previous years, members of the tribe were embroiled in a conflict with their cousins from Bakir tribe over control of the economic and natural resources (oil) of the area.

**Recommendations provided by activists and the tribal councils from northern Deir Azzour Province:**

1. Neutral Zone; mitigate any tribal or ideological conflict that would prevent the return of Al-Qaeda, or the Iranians to the area.
2. An agreement about how to run Al-Tabiyyah natural gas factory and who will take control of the facility and distribute the revenues as: "It will create political pressure on the Syrian Regime and the Russians during any negotiations." This natural gas field covers 70% of the central and southern regions of Syria's power, and 60% of natural gas in Syria. It also contributes to producing and consolidating political and economic power in Deir Azzour if one tribe or person is allowed to control the factory. If there is an agreement to properly distribute revenues, it creates pressure on the local parties that do not cooperate with the rest of the province.
3. An agreement on who should run Al-Omar oil field, which is considered the main oil field in Deir Azzour Province. This will create pressure on local groups such as the Albu Jamil tribe, and the Syrian Regime during any future negotiations.
4. Establish a deconfliction point between the eastern and western countrysides, which are considered the main water crossing and transportation route to Deir Azzour, Raqqah, and Al Hasakah Provinces. It is important that this point be controlled by moderate forces, as it will hinder the access of the Syrian Regime and the Iranian/Iraqi militia positioned towards the Iraqi border.
5. Depend mainly on Sheikh Amir Bashir and his tribal council, as it includes military leaders to control this area. With the help of some other individuals or groups from Baggara tribe under SDF leadership or under civil and military governance, a strong defense can be created against Nawaf Al-Bashir's return who is now allied with the Iranians.
6. Strengthen the role and position of Sheikh Amir Bashir in Baggara tribe and present him as a replacement for Nawaf Al-Bashir, which in return will end Nawaf Al-Bashir's role as a tribal Sheikh according to local tribal laws.
7. For now, spreading Baggara tribe military units across the western countryside can be a quick and easy security solution post-ISIS.
8. The Baggara area overlaps with Bakir area. This has been a concern for both tribes; defining a deconfliction line between the two areas and who will manage their natural resources including the Conoco and Al-Jafra gas fields. This will boost the stability in the area.
9. Manage the area with civil representation that is agreed upon before starting any military action between Baggara tribe, Bakir tribe and including all of its groups and Albu Jamil with Mayadeen City as the representational hub.
10. Rely on characters outside of the Sheikh's tribal house "New Leaders" who have the ability to unite and influence public opinion in building a harmonious relationship between the three tribal groups.
11. There should be no military role for members of the Albu Jamil and the Al-A'nabzeh, Al-Mashrif, and Al-Farah Bakir sub-tribes. This is due to some of their people's past support for

Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS. Instead, rely on the Al-Qabeesah, and Baggara members for military control under SDF leadership, or as an independent form of governance.

**12.** Cooperation between the tribal houses of Bakir and Albu Jamil to create a local governance structure resulting in increased stability in the region for extended periods of time because of the influence they hold in the area.

**13.** For years Al-A'nabzeh and Al-Mashrif Bakir sub-tribes and the Albu Jamil tribes were considered sources of recruitment for terror organizations such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS. As a result, depending on them to run security for this area of the province would cause further long-term societal problems.

**14.** Depending on Al-Qabeesah sub-tribe from Bakir tribe to be part of the military and security operations in the region will help reduce any tribal tensions as Al-Qabessah fought against ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra.

**16.** Military control of Al-Mayadeen city will not need the participation of tribal members, the community is very diverse and socially modernized.

**17.** Consider including Al-Mayadeen city in the first stability zone which will halt any advances from the Syrian Regime or its Iranian allies to the Iraqi borders because of the second water crossing that connects the Syrian Badia to the eastern countryside.

**18.** Establishing a disciplined civil committee that is free of tribal influence and not involved in the fight over the natural resources at every level; this creates awareness about the incoming troops and prepares for better conditions for the troops and the civilians as well.

**19.** A governance structure must not be established before the SDF enters Deir Azzour Province in earnest; once the SDF arrives in Deir Azzour city, this governance structure should start implementing reforms and give it absolute power in terms of running the military and security forces overseeing the city and the province.

**20.** The rise of "new leaders" during the conflict period was due to the control these leaders had over economic and natural resources during the subsequent power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Assad Regime and the subsequent fight between the FSA, Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS in their areas. It is therefore important that these "new leaders" be pressured to acquiesce to the new governance structure established in the post-ISIS period.

**21.** Creating a technical team from foreign or Syrian experts (not from Deir Azzour) to provide advice, consultation and oversight to the new governance structure for about two to three years. This will ensure some neutral parties are provide advice from an outside perspective.

**22.** In the event that peace does not last between Bakir and Albu Jamil tribal groups, military forces from members of all Egaidat tribal groups could be used upon an agreement with Baggara to run and manage the area's military and security forces.

**23.** Ensure that the roles of Sheikhs in their areas of influence does not interfere in the development of governance, military and security operations in the area. The three tribal Sheikhs are working now on projects at the provincial level with international parties, this process should be developed independently of the sheikh's influence.

**24.** Bakir and Albu Jamil Sheikhs will initiate internal negotiations if the Baggara tribe decides not to cooperate, since it is considered a different tribe and was not included in the Egaidat tribal coalition. There must be a clarification that their areas are outside of the "Egaidat tribal project" because of their social rejection by the Deir Azzour population in general, due to their relations

with terror groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra. This will be convincing enough for them to cooperate and agree since they know what the general public opinion of them in the area is.