

POLICY REPORT  
AUGUST 2025

# Assessing U.S. State-Building Initiatives in Northeastern Syria

BY ANTHONY AVICE DU BUISSON



NEW LINES  
INSTITUTE  
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

NEW LINES INSTITUTE FOR  
STRATEGY AND POLICY

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

**Our purpose** is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.

The content and views expressed in this intelligence briefing are those of the author and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.

U.S. forces train members of the YPG/SDF in Al-Hasakah province, Syria in September 2022. Türkiye considers them an extension of the PKK, and is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S., Türkiye, and the European Union.(Hedil Amir/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

CONTENTS

Executive Summary \_\_\_\_\_ 3

Introduction \_\_\_\_\_ 3

Background \_\_\_\_\_ 4

Security-Sector Capacity and Governance \_\_\_\_\_ 7

    Civil Society Development \_\_\_\_\_ 7

Demographics \_\_\_\_\_ 7

CJTF-OIR Partnership Dynamics \_\_\_\_\_ 8

    U.S. Troop Presence \_\_\_\_\_ 8

    Syrian Democratic Forces/Syrian Arab Coalition \_\_\_\_\_ 9

Compatibility Issues \_\_\_\_\_ 9

    The By-With-Through Model \_\_\_\_\_ 9

    Partner Force Structure \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Evaluating Effectiveness of the CJTF-OIR Mission \_\_\_\_\_ 11

    Security Impact \_\_\_\_\_ 11

    Strategic Sustainability \_\_\_\_\_ 13

Obstacles to Effective State Building \_\_\_\_\_ 14

    Geopolitical Constraints \_\_\_\_\_ 14

    Assad and Al-Sharaa \_\_\_\_\_ 15

    Lack of International Recognition \_\_\_\_\_ 15

    Ethnic and Tribal Tensions \_\_\_\_\_ 15

    The Persistent ISIS Threat \_\_\_\_\_ 15

    Damascus Versus the DAANES \_\_\_\_\_ 16

    No Coherent U.S. Endgame \_\_\_\_\_ 17

Policy Recommendations \_\_\_\_\_ 17

Conclusion \_\_\_\_\_ 19

## Executive Summary

U.S. state-building in northeastern Syria through Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) has centered on its partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). Focused on defeating the Islamic State and promoting stabilization, the mission has achieved notable gains in security and localized governance.

The mission is entering a transitional phase. The U.S. has reduced its presence from 2,000 to 500 troops in early 2025, as Washington normalizes relations with the new Syrian government. Military bases in Deir ez-Zor province are closing with sites in Raqqah and Hasakah set to follow. Evaluating the SDF's ability to sustain security and governance without continued U.S. support is critical, particularly amid plans to integrate the SDF into a reconstituted Syrian Army.

CJTF-OIR still faces critical challenges: persistent ethnic and tribal tensions; underdeveloped institutions in Arab-majority areas; geopolitical constraints; and lack of international recognition for the DAANES. An Islamic State resurgence and absence of a long-term U.S. strategy compound risk. Failure by the SDF could reverse gains, create a security vacuum, and enable extremist reemergence, undermining regional counterterrorism and efforts to contain Iran.

## Introduction

The United States continues to maintain 500 special operations personnel in northeastern Syria. This estimate reflects a drawdown of 75% from 2,000 personnel in the past five months.<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, these forces have conducted counterterrorism and stabilization initiatives under U.S. Central Command's Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). Working in partnership with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the U.S. has aimed to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State (aka ISIS or Daesh) and promote regional stability in areas governed by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). ISIS's territorial defeat as a proto-state in 2019 raised strategic questions that the U.S.-led coalition continues to face. Some analysts and government officials, citing shifting regional dynamics, limited resources, and evolving global priorities, are openly skeptical of the idea that ongoing military engagement in Syria remains effective, sustainable, or even necessary. While the Islamic State is largely defeated, the organization continues to launch low-level attacks and has attempted jailbreak operations at facilities like al-Hol. Hundreds of fighters remain in detention in these facilities and connect with terrorist cells outside to conduct operations targeting coalition personnel. Its attacks have also targeted the new government in Damascus.

U.S. involvement has focused on supporting local partner forces in security operations while also assisting the development of civil society, rudimentary institutions to uphold the rule of law, and essential services. However, a host of structural and political obstacles has confronted these state-building initiatives.

An examination of critical U.S. policy instruments established in northeastern Syria, such as foreign aid, security assistance, and support for local governance structures, shows how they have interacted to counter extremism and terrorism while contributing to local state-building efforts under the DAANES. Meanwhile, the performance of CJTF-OIR initiatives can be evaluated through three interrelated criteria:

1. Security Impact: The ability to suppress extremist threats and ensure stability.
2. Institutional Development: Support for essential governance functions such as rule of law and public service delivery.

1 Al Arabiya English. (2025, June 2). *US withdraws hundreds of troops from Syria after Pentagon directive*. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2025/06/02/us-withdraws-hundreds-of-troops-from-syria-after-pentagon-directive>



# Combined Joint Task Force Campaign Design

Phase I	Phase II	Phase III	Phase IV
Degrade	Counterattack	Defeat	Support stabilization
Enable the military defeat of Daesh in the Combined Joint Operations Area (CJOA)			
Enable sustainable military partner capacity in the CJOA			
Leverage cohesive coalition effects			

Source: [Operation Inherent Resolve](#)

3. Strategic Sustainability: The long-term viability of local governance with reduced reliance on external assistance.

While U.S. efforts have contributed to significant stabilization and securitization outcomes, both geopolitical considerations and internal governance issues remain significant barriers to their long-term effectiveness.

## Background

The United States launched a military intervention in Syria in response to the rise of the Islamic State, which had capitalized on political instability in both Iraq and neighboring Syria to acquire territorial control beginning in 2013.<sup>2</sup> After capturing Mosul in June 2014, Daesh’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the formation of a cross-border “caliphate.” In Syria, the Islamic State’s split from Jabhat Al-Nusra allowed it to capture Raqqa, which became the proto-state’s de facto capital.<sup>3</sup> This rapid expansion, accompanied by acts such as the Yazidi genocide and the destruction of state institutions, initiated a regional humanitarian and security crisis.<sup>4</sup>

The international community mobilized a concerted response to the escalating violence. In August 2014, the United Nations Security Council condemned the violence and called for action.<sup>5</sup> The United States launched airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria at the request of the Iraqi government as part of a broader international response to the group’s atrocities.<sup>6</sup> To coordinate the campaign, the U.S. Department of Defense established CJTF-OIR on Oct. 17, 2014.<sup>7</sup>

Operating under U.S. Central Command, CJTF-OIR’s mission is to “advise,

2 Editorial. (2019, October 28). *Timeline: The rise, spread, and fall of the Islamic State*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

3 McCary, I. (2024, March 21). The Islamic State five years later: Persistent threats, U.S. options. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-five-years-later-persistent-threats-us-options>

4 Congressional Research Service. (2025, March 11). Syria: Transition and U.S. policy (CRS Report No. RL33487). Prepared by Christopher M. Blanchard. Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>

5 United Nations Security Council. (2014, August 15). *Security Council resolution 2170 (2014) [on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts by Al-Qaida and associated groups]* (S/RES/2170). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2170\(2014\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2170(2014)); United Nations Security Council. (2015, November 20). *Security Council resolution 2249 (2015) [on measures to combat terrorism and violent extremism, particularly in relation to ISIL]* (S/RES/2249). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2249\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2249(2015))

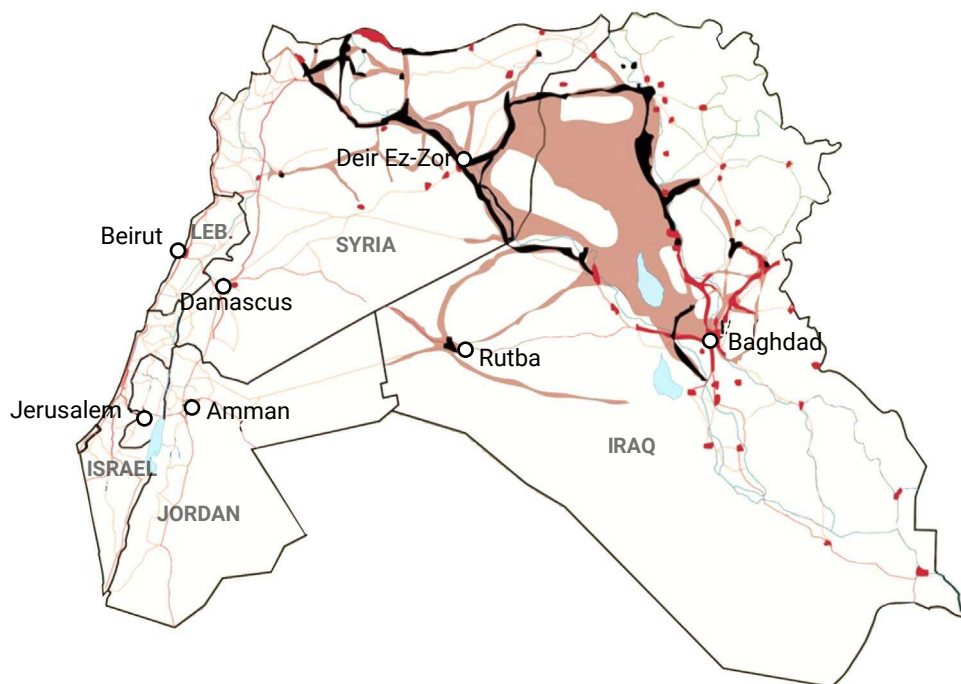
6 Scharf, M. P. (2016). How the war against ISIS changed international law. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 48(1–2), 1-54.

7 Bae, S. J., et al. (2022, October 17). *Operation Inherent Resolve: U.S. ground force contributions*. RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA719-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA719-1.html)

## ISIS Sanctuary at Peak Territorial Height

August 2014

- ISIS-controlled area
- ISIS attack zones
- ISIS support zones



Source: Institute for the Study of War

assist, and enable partnered forces until they can independently defeat Daesh in designated areas of Iraq and Syria, to set conditions for long-term security cooperation frameworks." Comprising over 80 nations, this Global Coalition against ISIS adopted a four-phase strategy [see chart on page 4] to combat the organization using a *by-with-through* operational approach through "regional partners" to enable whole-of-government actions to increase regional stability.<sup>8</sup>

At Daesh's territorial height in late 2014, the proto-state encompassed 110,000 square kilometers (42,471 square miles) of eastern Syria and northern Iraq and governed around 10 million people.<sup>9</sup> The absence of a viable state partner in Syria meant that U.S.-led coalition forces had to look elsewhere for assistance. Kurdish forces at Kobani in northern Syria held their ground against ISIS fighters in October 2014, providing a valuable inroad for CENTCOM to establish new connections.<sup>10</sup> As the territorial campaign progressed, U.S. policy goals in Syria began to shift from counterterrorism toward stabilization and limited state-building. The Kurdish-led People's Defense Units (YPG) spearheaded operations against ISIS with coalition forces providing support.

A train-and-equip program under the DoD assisted in this role and deepened the partnership. Soon after the SDF, a multiethnic coalition of militias led by the YPG and made up of Arabs, Kurds, Syrians, and others, was formed in late 2015, it quickly became the main local partner for CJTF-OIR operations, not only in combat roles but also in securing and governing areas liberated from ISIS.<sup>11</sup>

The collapse of the caliphate following Raqqa's capture in 2017 and that of Baghouz in 2019 shifted the focus of combat operations to postconflict stabi-

8 Votel, J.L., & Keravouri, E. R. (2018). The by-with-through operational approach. *Joint Force Quarterly*, (89), 40–47.

9 Wilson Center, 2019.

10 Knights, M., & van Wilgenburg, W. (2022). Supporting from afar: Kobane to al-Hawl. In M. Knights (Ed.). *Accidental allies: The U.S.–Syrian Democratic Forces partnership against the Islamic State* (pp. 63–100). The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

11 Van Wilgenburg, W. (2020). *Syrian Democratic Forces*. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu>

## Syria Funding Enacted and Requested

Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)  
from FY 2019 to FY 2025

(In millions)

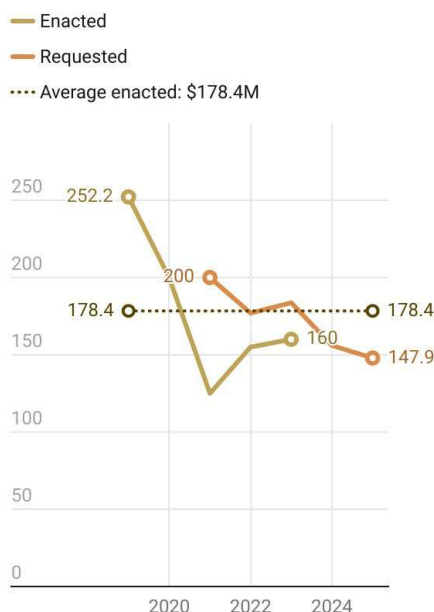


Chart: ©2025, New Lines Institute • Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) • Created with Datawrapper

lization and governance support. The SDF's partnership with coalition forces undermined ISIS's state-building capacity, with over 8,000 coalition airstrikes in the first year alone, damaging critical infrastructure. Thousands of ISIS fighters were either killed or captured in successive operations between 2014 and 2017 that helped coalition forces reclaim 95% of the territory the group had held.<sup>12</sup>

The DAANES, a Kurdish-led political structure that emerged during the conflict, assumed governance over the region. The U.S. provided indirect support by assisting to those involved in civil administration affiliated with the DAANES and by embedding civil affairs teams to work with partner forces to restore basic services.<sup>13</sup> These forces aim to provide security, maintain public order, and address the immediate needs of the population.<sup>14</sup>

The U.S. State and Defense departments established distinct military and civilian instruments in Syria to support stabilization. Congress, meanwhile, authorized funding that permitted assistance by supporting vetted Syrian opposition forces.<sup>15</sup> The DoD initially funded operations through the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund and Iraq Train and Equip Fund, but it later consolidated these support mechanisms into the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund to supply money, equipment, and advisory support to partner forces on the ground. Between fiscal years 2019 and 2023, Congress allocated approximately \$892 million for Syria, with an average of \$157.5 million annually over the final two years.<sup>16</sup>

Complementing these efforts, the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Office of Assistance Coordination through the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding for stabilization programs that have affected 6.5 million people.<sup>17</sup> In cities like Manbij, Raqqa, and Tabqa, civil affairs teams coordinate with local governance officials to deliver services and help reconstitute local administrative capacity. These initiatives focus on infrastructure repair, basic

- 12 McCary, The Islamic State five years later: Persistent threats, U.S. options, 2024; U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General. (2024, October). FY 2025 comprehensive oversight plan overseas contingency operations (COP-OCO). <https://www.stateoig.gov/report-296>
- 13 Brau, P. S. (2019, May–June). Civil authority in Manbij, Syria: Using Civil Affairs to implement stabilization activities in nonpermissive environments. *Military Review*. Army University Press. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2019/Brau-Syria-print/>; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Assistance Coordination. (2022, October). *Assessing NEA/AC programming impact on policy priorities in Northeast Syria*. <https://www.state.gov/assessing-nea-ac-programming-impact-on-policy-priorities-in-northeast-syria/>; Bae et al., *Operation Inherent Resolve*, RAND, 2022.
- 14 U.S. Department of Defense. (2018, December 13). *DoD directive 3000.05: Stabilization* [Directive]. U.S. Government. [https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/d3000\\_05.pdf](https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/d3000_05.pdf); Brau, *Civil Authority in Manbij*, 2019.
- 15 U.S. Congress. (2014). *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015*, Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 1236, 128 Stat. 3292. <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General. (2016, February). *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress*. [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/oir\\_quarterly\\_december\\_2015\\_-\\_a2.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/oir_quarterly_december_2015_-_a2.pdf)
- 16 U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller). (2019–2024). *Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF): Budget justification books* [FY 2020–FY 2025]. <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>
- 17 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Assistance Coordination. (2022, October). *Assessing NEA/AC programming impact on policy priorities in Northeast Syria*. <https://www.state.gov/assessing-nea-ac-programming-impact-on-policy-priorities-in-northeast-syria/>

service delivery, and support of institutional development, forming the backbone of the U.S. mission in Syria.<sup>18</sup>

The scope of CJTF-OIR's mission has changed significantly since the start of the campaign. What began as a military operation to defeat a terrorist organization has transitioned into a civil-military stabilization and state-building initiative. This shift mirrors developments in Iraq, where similar efforts have been accompanied by an incremental drawdown of U.S. forces. These changes demonstrate the evolving landscape of northeastern Syria made possible through the cooperation of CJTF-OIR with the DAANES and the SDF.

## Security-Sector Capacity and Governance

The defeat of the Islamic State created opportunities for new forms of governance structures to emerge and expand in northeastern Syria. One of the most prominent has been the DAANES, which represents a unique experiment in self-governance that combines decentralized communal structures with centralized executive institutions. U.S. engagement has centered on supporting partner forces through CJTF-OIR and this local civil administration. The SDF's security efforts are reinforced by the partnership formed by civil affairs teams working with DAANES-affiliated civil councils, which remains the core of U.S. stabilization strategy in the region.

### Civil Society Development

The DAANES has prioritized the development of civil society through the establishment of representative civil councils in liberated areas. These councils are inclusive, incorporating locals from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds who are responsible for local administration, including education, health services, and infrastructure development. The councils cooperate with CJTF-OIR civil affairs teams to stabilize each area.<sup>19</sup>

One example is the Raqqa Civil Council, which governs the city and surrounding areas. The group's civil administration cooperates with local Arab tribes to ensure proper governance. Leadership is tasked in a co-chair system with representatives such as Layla Mustafa working with Shiekh Mahmoud Shawah al-Bursan, who serves with 20 representatives from different tribes. When a disagreement arises between members, compromises are made.

An example of this can be seen with the YPG and Arab tribes' disagreement over conscription. The YPG wanted to conscript Arabs in the Raqqa area for fighting, but local tribes rejected this, and the Raqqa council waived the requirement to settle the matter. Compromises such as these are integral to the dynamics of the region and the self-interest of the DAANES to stabilize areas and act as a legitimate representative for the people of northern Syria.<sup>20</sup>

## Demographics

The DAANES governs a highly ethnically diverse region. Kurds are estimated to comprise around 1.5 million people, or approximately 8-15% of Syria's population, with their strongest concentration found in the northeast, notably in areas

18 Brau, *Civil Authority in Manbij*, 2019; Brown, F. Z., & McCurdy, D. (2021, January 12). *Stabilization assistance amid geopolitical competition: A case study of eastern Syria*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/stabilization-assistance-amid-geopolitical-competition-case-study-eastern-syria>

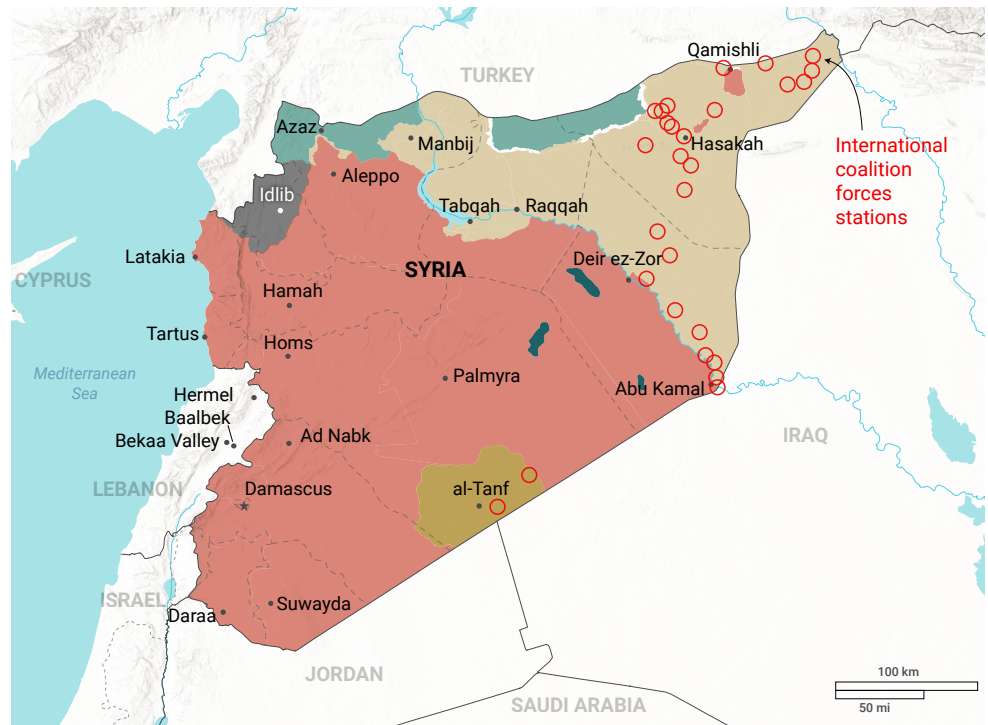
19 Brau, *Civil Authority in Manbij*, 2019.

20 Brown & McCurdy, *Stabilization assistance amid geopolitical competition: A case study of eastern Syria*, 2021; Middle East Institute. (2021, March 24). *The kin who count: Mapping Raqqa's tribal topology*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/kin-who-count-mapping-raqqas-tribal-topology>.

## International Coalition Forces Stations

### Areas of Control, 2022

- Syrian government/allies
- Syrian rebel forces/allies
- Kurdish forces/allies
- Turkish forces/allies
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham/allies
- Islamic State



Sources: COAR, LiveuMap, Suriyak, The New York Times, Arab News, [Jusoer for Studies](#)

such as Qamishli, Kobani, and the broader Hasakah governorate.<sup>21</sup> However, Arabs remain the majority and are mostly represented in the periphery areas of the DAANES area of control, specifically in the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates. Other ethnic groups include Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, and Circassians.<sup>22</sup> Demographics are important as each canton is governed differently based on the composition of the population. For example: Arab areas tend to be securitized more due to differences in leadership ethnicity and tribal dynamics.<sup>23</sup> The SDF consists predominantly of Arabs due to this population and existence of the Self-Defense Forces, a conscript component within the SDF.

## CJTF-OIR Partnership Dynamics

### U.S. Troop Presence

The United States maintains multiple military bases across northeastern Syria, notably in key locations near areas like the al-Omar oilfield and in the Jazira canton. CJTF-OIR's troop deployment fluctuates around 1,000 special operations forces in the region, conducting patrols and aiding security operations with local partner forces. Coalition special operations forces conduct joint patrols, oversee military-to-civilian transition operations, and provide intelligence and logistical support [see map above].<sup>24</sup> However, the U.S. presence is

21 Allsopp, H., & van Wilgenburg, W. (2019). *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, diversity and conflicts*. I.B. Tauris.

22 Holmes, A.A. (2019). *SDF's Arab majority rank Turkey as the biggest threat to NE Syria*. Wilson Center. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/sdf\\_arab\\_majority\\_rank\\_turkey\\_as\\_biggest\\_threat.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/sdf_arab_majority_rank_turkey_as_biggest_threat.pdf)

23 Dukhan, H. (2021). The politics of tribalization in Syria. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 53(3), 502–506. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/politics-tribalization-syria/docview/2572472856/se-2?accountid=8285>

24 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General. (2025, February). *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress*. [https://media.defense.gov/2025/Feb/20/2003649130/-1/-1/1/OIR\\_Q1\\_DEC2024\\_FINAL\\_508.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2025/Feb/20/2003649130/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q1_DEC2024_FINAL_508.PDF)



expected to consolidate further. Thomas Barrack, the special envoy for Syria under President Donald Trump, has indicated that U.S. troops were expected to withdraw from seven of the eight bases in the region, with the rest to shut down.<sup>25</sup>

### Syrian Democratic Forces/Syrian Arab Coalition

The formation of the SDF marked a turning point in the evolution of U.S. engagement in northeastern Syria. Coalition cooperation between the YPG and U.S. special operations forces proved effective in liberating Kurdish areas. However, the farther these forces went outside Kurdish areas in Syria, the more the need for social legitimacy in predominantly Arab areas and local tribal cooperation. Therefore, a Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) framework was established in 2015 to include Arabs in the cooperation structure to enhance legitimacy and ensure reflective governance in those areas.

Early opposition to the SAC framework from the YPG led to a CJTF-OIR compromise, wherein the Kurdish forces retained operational leadership, while Arabs maintained autonomy in areas in which they are the majority. This helped balance power dynamics within the SDF and maintain cohesion across diverse ethnic constituencies. However, there have been tensions between the SDF and Arab tribal leaders, which have been seen in numerous clashes between these entities, specifically in areas like Deir ez-Zor. For example, in 2023 the SDF disagreed with tribal leaders over governance of the region and the influence of Assad regime elements.<sup>26</sup> Support to the SAC coincided with increased kinetic operations against ISIS between 2017 and 2019, highlighting a significant shift in U.S. engagement. A “drip-feed” model was also adopted to ensure that resources flowed effectively. This approach offered Washington a cost-effective alternative to its failed train-and-equip program and provided the foundation for the by-with-through approach moving forward.<sup>27</sup>

## Compatibility Issues

### The By-With-Through Model

The Department of Defense requested an estimated \$1.73 billion from Congress for operations in northeastern Syria between 2017 and 2021 to assist forces under CJTF-OIR, significantly less than the \$4.59 billion requested for the mission in Iraq during the same period.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting a different approach taken to dealing with ISIS, CJTF-OIR in Syria aimed to limit the number of troops needed to conduct operations. Utilizing partner forces through a by-with-through operational model meant that fewer resources were needed for more effective gains. To quote one U.S. official, “The combination of YPG fighters and Tier 1 U.S. Special Forces was a no-brainer. It was a good operational choice mainly because it was cheaper and easier politically. If you are not going to do it right, do it cheap.”<sup>29</sup>

By-with-through enables the indigenous partner force to take charge in combat

## Money Requested by DOD from Congress

**\$1.73B** REQUESTS FOR NE SYRIA OPS BETWEEN 2017 AND 2021

**\$4.59B** REQUESTS FOR IRAQ OPS BETWEEN 2017 AND 2021

25 Al Jazeera. (2025, June 3). *US to reduce military presence in Syria, keeping only one base operational*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/3/us-to-reduce-military-presence-in-syria-keeping-only-one-base-operational>

26 Al-Hamad, J. (2024, August 23). *Deir ez-Zor: A year of unrest*. Al-Jumhuriya. <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2024/08/23/deir-ez-zor-a-year-of-unrest/>

27 Knights, M., & van Wilgenburg, W. (2022). *Accidental allies: The U.S. – Syrian Democratic Forces partnership against the Islamic State*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

28 U.S. Department of Defense. (2017–2022). *Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF): Budget Justification Books for Fiscal Years 2018–2022*. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller). Available at: <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>

29 Knights & van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 2022.

operations with coalition forces providing intelligence, over-the-horizon support, and other assistance on the battlefield as well as in stabilization efforts through the legitimization of the victory.<sup>30</sup>

Although this approach has yielded military success, integrating the model with the ideological goals of DAANES governance has presented challenges. Differences in strategic priorities, as evidenced during times of significant challenges such as with neighboring Türkiye, highlights limitations. For example: YPG/SDF training incorporates ideological teachings from Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan (known as Apo), who Türkiye has designated a terrorist for leading a decades-long insurgency against it.<sup>31</sup> This runs contrary at times to the Arab component of the SDF that rejects some of the ideological synchronicities of Apoist teachings. The coalition has slowly diminished the impact of the ideological requirements in recruiting.

### Partner Force Structure

The SDF comprises a variety of militias led by the YPG, including Women's Defense Forces, the al-Sanadid Arab tribal forces from Jazeera, MFS, HSNB, various units from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) such as Liwa al-Raqqa, and an assortment of military councils such as Tabqa Military Council. As of 2023, the SDF consisted of over 100,000 armed fighters.<sup>32</sup>

Collaboration between Syrian Arabs and Kurds aimed to legitimize the capture of territory from Daesh.<sup>33</sup> Once liberated, the territory falls under the security of the representative self-defense unit from that area and the Asayish, which is the internal police force for the DAANES responsible for local security.<sup>34</sup>

The SDF's command structure is centralized, with command flowing from the top to lower levels. YPG commanders, primarily former People's Defense Forces (HPG) commanders from the PKK, oversee that command.<sup>35</sup> Notable of these commanders is Mazloun Abdi Kobane who serves as the commander-in-chief of the entire SDF. HPG is integrated into the command structure to enforce the centralization component within the military and to create ideological coherence. This model is reflected in other areas where the PKK operates, notably in Sinjar, Iraq, where HPG forces who liberated Yazidi territory from Daesh created a self-defense unit in 2015 that is made up of the local population but trained in Apoist ideology to govern.

Abdi oversees SDF operations and delegates the conduct of those operations to subcommanders that who embedded among fighters to enforce the chain of command.<sup>36</sup> This structure is exemplified in the various military campaigns that the SDF conducted over the years, such as the one to liberate Manbij in 2016.

Militarily, the organization employs various combat tactics, from standard guerrilla fighting to specialized urban combat units equipped with high-tech equipment.<sup>37</sup> This development in tactics is due to coalition cooperation and training. The train-the-trainer program ensures that SDF can pass on training to new units with limited coalition interference when possible. The SDF integrates these tactics to meet international standards employed in war.

30 Ibid.

31 McDowall, D. (2021). *A modern history of the Kurds* (4th ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

32 Mahmud, R. (2023, June 9). *Why Arabs are increasingly joining the SDF in Syria's northeast*. *Al Majalla*. <https://en.majalla.com/node/295071/politics/why-arabs-are-increasingly-joining-sdf-syrias-northeast>

33 Knights & van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 2022.

34 Ibid; Holmes, *SDF's Arab majority rank Turkey as the biggest threat to NE Syria*, 2019.

35 Van Wilgenburg, *Syrian Democratic Forces*, 2020; Knights & van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 2022.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.



U.S. forces provide military training to members of the YPG/ SDF, which Türkiye consider as an extension of PKK in Syria, in the Qamisli district in the Al-Hasakah province, Syria in August 2023. (Photo by Hedil Amir/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

## Evaluating Effectiveness of the CJTF-OIR Mission

Three interrelated criteria reflect CJTF-OIR's core objectives: security impact, institutional development, and strategic sustainability.

### Security Impact

The security impact of CJTF-OIR's mission on counterterrorism and regional stability has been substantial. Daesh's territorial caliphate is significantly dismantled in large part to CJTF-OIR's partnership with the SDF and the by-with-through operational approach.<sup>38</sup> Since 2019, coalition forces have continued to pressure ISIS remnants.<sup>39</sup> Counterterrorism operations proceeded at a sustainable tempo in early 2024, the SDF in conjunction with special operations forces and coalition air-support conducted 28 joint raids in the region, neutralizing or capturing dozens of Daesh operatives.<sup>40</sup> U.S. military reports indicate that the SDF can now conduct complex missions "up to the battalion level" largely independently of coalition assistance. This is evident in operations targeting Daesh sleeper cells and raids into the al-Hawl camp that have degraded the Islamic State's capacity to reclaim significant territory or population centers.<sup>41</sup> This operational maturation is also highlighted in the SDF's command-and-control capability, its use of indirect fire assets such as artillery, and improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) collection. However, the SDF's organic ISR capabilities are still limited, primarily to small-scale drone operations, such as with the use of cheap, accessible DJI and Autel drones, while

38 Knights & van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 2022; Votel & Keravuori, *The by-with-through operational approach*, 2018.

39 Margolin, D. (2023, June 26). *The future of repatriation from northeast Syria*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-repatriation-northeast-syria>

40 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General. (2024, April). *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress*. [https://media.defense.gov/2024/May/02/2003455786/-1/-1/1/OIR\\_Q2\\_MAR2024\\_FINAL\\_508.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2024/May/02/2003455786/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q2_MAR2024_FINAL_508.PDF)

41 Rojava Information Center. (2025, March 2). *Annual sleeper cell report 2024*. Rojava Information Center. <https://rojivainformationcenter.org/2025/03/annual-sleeper-cell-report-2024/>; Margolin, *The future of repatriation from northeast Syria*, 2023.

coalition forces continue to provide advanced support.<sup>42</sup>

The presence of U.S. forces continues to contribute to broader territorial stability in northeastern Syria. Between 500 and 700 U.S. personnel remain stationed on the ground who can assist SDF forces in covering one-third of Syria. Despite this large area of operations, the de facto autonomous zone continues to be a source of stability for 4 million people.<sup>43</sup> No significant external armed actor has been able to dislodge the DAANES or encroach on strategic military and economic assets in Deir ez-Zor and al-Tanf.<sup>44</sup> However, Islamic State sleeper cell activity as well as Arab insurgents sympathetic to their cause remain in the Deir ez-Zor region, an area prone to exploitation by former Assad regime affiliate and Iranian-backed elements.<sup>45</sup>

The force protection dimension of security remains a consistent challenge to partner force capabilities. To protect coalition personnel, CJTF-OIR has consolidated its bases and adopted a force posture emphasizing safety at the expense of deterrent capacity.<sup>46</sup> This is particularly an issue for the SDF, as Türkiye continues to conduct targeted strikes on critical infrastructure. In 2023, Turkish forces hit a Kurdish Red Crescent vehicle, killing medical personnel, another attack targeted electricity supplying neighboring villages, leaving communities without power.<sup>47</sup> Unilateral action by the Turkish government is a persistent threat to SDF partner forces, while Iranian proxies also conduct sporadic attacks against U.S. positions.<sup>48</sup>

Other operational vulnerabilities that the SDF confronts stem from structural and institutional shortfalls rather than tactical deficiencies. The Defense Department's Office of Inspector General has noted persistent issues in the SDF's ability to manage logistics independently, including challenges with equipment maintenance, ammunition distribution, and the sustainment of extended operations without coalition support. These challenges demonstrate the fragility of the security architecture absent broader political agreements.<sup>49</sup> Gaps are compounded by limited standardized training across units and the absence of a unified doctrine, which affects command cohesion during multiunit operations. Nevertheless, the SDF has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, particularly in security training, and has shown increasing capability in planning and executing asymmetric operations. These include nighttime raids and disruption

42 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General. (2023, May 2). *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress*. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/02/2003213005/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF>; Borsari, F. (2025, February 19). *The evolution of the SDF's drone operations*. Militant Wire. <https://www.militantwire.com/p/the-evolution-of-the-sdfs-drone-operations>

43 Smith, W. (2024, September). Challenges to effective stabilization assistance in northeastern Syria. The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) Research Programme. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/challenges-to-effective-stabilisation-assistance-in-northeastern-syria-2/>

44 Crisis Group. (2025, February 16). *Al-Tanf, Syria*. Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-usisrael-trigger-list/flashpoints/al-tanf-syria>

45 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, April 2024; United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, February 2025.

46 Ibid.

47 Holmes, A.A. (2024, June 10). *Why isn't the US supporting free and fair elections in Northeast Syria?* Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/why-isnt-us-supporting-free-and-fair-elections-northeast-syria>

48 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, February 2025; United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General. (2022, July 29). *Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*. <https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Lead%20Inspector%20General%20for%20Operation%20Inherent%20Resolve%20Quarterly%20Report%20to%20the%20United%20States%20Congress%20April%201%2C%202022%20June%2030%2C%202022.pdf>

49 Cordesman, A.H. (2017, March). *Stability operations in Syria: The need for a revolution in civil-military affairs*. Army University Press. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Online-Exclusive/stability-operations-in-syria-by-anthony-cordesman.pdf>



“A lack of long-term strategy or formal recognition of the DAANES constrains long-term planning. This is relevant as enduring success of the northeastern Syria project hinges on continued U.S. or international guarantees.”

of smuggling networks along the Euphrates River, underscoring a growing capacity for decentralized command execution.

### Strategic Sustainability

Evaluating the longevity of U.S. involvement in northeastern Syria is critical to weighing the effectiveness of the mission. This involves assessing the cost-effectiveness and durability of the mission, including the management of the alliances and domestic support for it.

CJTF-OIR's limited state-building initiative through stabilization and security programs can be seen as cost-efficient compared with other U.S. nation-building engagements, notably those in Afghanistan and Iraq. The cost of U.S. commitment to stabilization operations through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund in Syria from 2019 to 2023 was \$892 million,<sup>50</sup> considerably less than the mission in Afghanistan. The American footprint has also never exceeded a few thousand troops in Syria. Current deployment of troops is set to remain under 1,000 personnel across one to three operational bases. Based on recent budget trends, sustaining such a footprint, which includes logistical, force protection, and partner support costs, is likely to remain under \$200 million annually. This reinforces the mission's relatively low-cost profile compared to other U.S. stabilization efforts.<sup>51</sup> As Trump said in 2020, “A small presence of United States armed forces remains in strategically significant locations ... conducting operations against continuing terrorist threats.”<sup>52</sup>

The U.S. has achieved significant security outcomes at low cost in personnel and resource expenditure. In this sense, the light footprint approach has been a success that government officials continue to cite as worthwhile. This is evident with the 321-103 rejection in 2023 of a House bill that pushed for withdrawal of U.S. forces that cut across party lines.<sup>53</sup> The concerns over a potential low-level ISIS resurgence that drove the vote have only grown more pressing during Syria's political transition. ISIS could exploit the increased instability and reduced central authority during this period to reconstitute networks and reclaim territorial influence.

However, a lack of long-term strategy or formal recognition of the DAANES constrains long-term planning. This is relevant as enduring success of the northeastern Syria project hinges on continued U.S. or international guarantees. Turkish offensives into northern Syria against the SDF in 2018 and 2019 place pressure on the Kurdish-led administration and the United States. Additionally, Türkiye has established and reinforced forward operating bases in northern Syria, including constructing the Menagh Military Airbase in Aleppo and taking control of Syria's Tiyas air base.<sup>54</sup> This signals Turkish intent to sustain long-term influence close to DAANES-controlled territory. A lack of long-

50 All funding data for CTEF–Syria (FY 2019–FY 2023) is drawn from: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller). (2019–2024). *Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF): Budget justification books* [FY 2020–FY 2025].

51 U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller). (2024, March). *CounterIslamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF): FY 2025 budget justification book*. [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025\\_CTEF\\_J-Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_CTEF_J-Book.pdf)

52 McCaul, M. (2023, March 8). *McCaul speaks on House floor against removing U.S. armed forces from Syria*. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-speaks-on-house-floor-against-removing-u-s-armed-forces-from-syria/>

53 Harris, B. (2023, March 8). *House votes down Gaetz bill to withdraw troops from Syria*. Defense News. <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2023/03/08/house-votes-down-gaetz-bill-to-withdraw-troops-from-syria>

54 North Press Agency. (2025, March 17). *Turkey constructs military base in Aleppo*. North Press Agency. <https://npasyria.com/en/123287/>; Radiance Weekly. (2025, April 14). *Turkey to take control of Syria's strategic T4 air base: Report*. Radiance Weekly. <https://radianceweekly.net/turkey-to-take-control-of-syrias-strategic-t4-air-base-report/>

term, coherent strategy will put the coalition in a dilemma: Staying indefinitely creates chances for risk and conflict fatigue, but leaving could forfeit the very stability and security that has been built up. Shifting national security priorities in Europe and the Indo-Pacific compounds this strategic conundrum.<sup>55</sup>

Local support for the U.S. mission remains strong in northeastern Syria, especially among the Arab population that benefits from inclusive governance.<sup>56</sup> However, recurring tensions between YPG-led Kurdish structures and Arab tribes, including Türkiye's sustained hostility toward the SDF, raise questions about durability of current arrangement.<sup>57</sup> Without a clear endgame or multilateral buy-in, the sustainability of U.S. involvement remains uncertain.

In summary, while U.S. efforts have been effective in diminishing Daesh, fostering inclusive governance and enabling local state-building capacity, these outcomes are uneven and vulnerable to external factors.

## Obstacles to Effective State-Building

Despite progress in stabilization and local governance, CJTF-OIR's state-building efforts in northeastern Syria face five major obstacles that threaten the long-term viability of the mission: geopolitical constraints, a lack of international recognition of the DAANES, ethnic and tribal tensions, the persistent threat of ISIS, and the absence of a coherent U.S. strategy. Each presents distinct risks to the sustainability of CJTF-OIR's achievements and the overall strategic direction of U.S. policy.

### Geopolitical Constraints

The Turkish government remains the most disruptive geopolitical actor in northeastern Syria. Ankara, which sees the SDF as an extension of the PKK in Syria, has launched multiple offensives into Syria to curtail the expansion of the group and undermine the DAANES' project. Türkiye perceives the DAANES as a terrorist statelet that facilitates PKK operations in southern Turkey. Several major Turkish operations, Euphrates Shield in 2016, Olive Branch in 2018, and Peace Spring in 2019, were launched to destroy the statelet. These undermined DAANES control of Afrin in 2018, allowing Türkiye to establish alternative governance structures, leading to mass displacement and ethnic reconfiguration.

Turkish drone and artillery strikes have targeted senior officials in the administration, while its armed forces support the Syrian National Army to target DAANES areas of control. These operations continue to undermine coalition efforts at stabilization, as the U.S. is constrained by Türkiye's NATO membership and must balance this consideration with maintaining relations with the SDF.<sup>58</sup>

### Assad and Al-Sharaa

The regime of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad continued a long-established Arab nationalist governmental system that persecuted ethnic minorities and excluded them from opportunities afforded to Syria's majority-Arab

55 Congressional Research Service, Syria: Transition and U.S. policy, 2025; Salih, M. A. (2025, January 14). *Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, opportunities, and the US role in shaping its future*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/post-assad-syria-challenges-opportunities-and-the-us-role-in-shaping-its-future/>

56 Mahmud, *Why Arabs are increasingly joining the SDF in Syria's northeast*, 2023; Holmes, *SDF's Arab majority rank Turkey as the biggest threat to NE Syria*, 2019.

57 Knights & van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 2022.

58 Ibid; Wilson Center, *Timeline: The rise, spread, and fall of the Islamic State*, 2019; Siccardi, F. (2021, September 14). *How Syria changed Turkey's foreign policy*. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/09/how-syria-changed-turkeys-foreign-policy?lang=en>

population.<sup>59</sup> This system institutionalized racial policies to malign the Kurdish, Druze, and Alawite populations.<sup>60</sup> The regime's collapse in late 2024 brought an opportunity for change. However, the new government under interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa has implemented these same barriers to integration.

Damascus continues to malign the DAANES by not recognizing its autonomy and the rights of minorities constitutionally. This is despite the recent signing of significant agreements between Abdi and al-Sharaa to increase integration.<sup>61</sup>

### **Lack of International Recognition**

The DAANES remains in a legal and diplomatic state of limbo. Despite functioning as a de facto governing authority with functional institutions, having developed armed forces and capabilities to engage in state governance across one-third of Syria, it lacks international recognition and is excluded from formal peace processes.<sup>62</sup> Most Gulf states do not formally recognize the DAANES, either, and provide only limited informal humanitarian assistance, as not to impede Turkish ambitions. This lack of recognition affects the DAANES's ability to receive external funding, notably from U.N.-led organizations, and undermines its legitimacy. This is especially the case in Arab areas, where a significant portion of the population believes the local government does not represent the people but is an extension of an external actor.<sup>63</sup>

### **Ethnic and Tribal Tensions**

In Arab-majority areas, notably in Dier ez-Zor, the DAANES model of governance is not perceived as credible. While some Arab tribes, such as the al-Shammar, have integrated into the governance framework through civil councils and military structures via the Syria Arab Coalition, the allegiance of others is more transactional, with some even openly hostile to the administration. The imposition of the DAANES's inclusive education system in Deir ez-Zor in 2022, for example, was met with hostility.<sup>64</sup> This escalated into armed attacks against the its military council that required intervention by Kurdish forces from outside the province. These types of incidents complicate the goal of cooperation that coalition forces have worked toward, especially in negotiating with tribal leaders. Those leaders continue to hold significant leverage in controlling Arab fighters and are routinely consulted when brokering arrangements between other tribes in the case of Daesh fighter repatriation.

### **The Persistent ISIS Threat**

ISIS remains a latent threat in northern Syria, specifically through sleeper cell activity and radicalization within camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The largest of these camps is al-Howl, which houses nearly 50,000 people, including thousands of former ISIS fighters and their families, including both Syrian citizens and foreign nationals. Despite SDF raids and security sweeps, limited resources and international reluctance to repatriate foreign fighters

59 McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds*, 2021.

60 Ibid.

61 Goldbaum, C., & Ward, E. (2025, March 10). *Syrian government signs breakthrough deal with Kurdish-led forces*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/10/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-agreement.html>

62 United Nations Security Council. (2015, December 18). *Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) [on a road map for the peace process in Syria]* (S/RES/2254). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2254\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2254(2015)).

63 Salih, *Post-Assad Syria*, 2025.

64 Dukhan, *The Politics of Tribalization in Syria*, 2021; Mahmud, *Why Arabs are increasingly joining the SDF in Syria's northeast*, 2023; Enab Baladi. (2024, May 1). *Deir Ezzor: A deteriorating educational sector with inexperienced teachers*. Enab Baladi. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/05/deir-ezzor-a-deteriorating-educational-sector-with-inexperienced-teachers/>

have allowed ISIS ideology and activities to fester in the area.<sup>65</sup>

Daesh sleeper cells pose a threat to cities throughout the DAANES area of control. The Islamic State frequently claims responsibility for attacks using improvised explosive devices, assassinations, and prison breaks. The risk of a mass breakout from detention centers such as the one in Hasakah remains a high priority for CJTF-OIR planners.<sup>66</sup> A prison riot and attempted escape in Hasakah in 2022 caused a mass disruption requiring quick SDF intervention.<sup>67</sup> These risks only further emphasize the need to deal with this continuing issue. Coalition forces provide essential support, but without broader international burden-sharing and repatriation efforts, the risk of resurgence increases.

### **Damascus Versus the DAANES**

The emergence of the al-Sharaa-led government presents a major shift in Syria's internal and external political dynamics. Since assuming power in late 2024, al-Sharaa has pursued normalization with regional states and Western powers, including outreach to the European Union and the high-profile diplomatic engagement with Trump in Riyadh.<sup>68</sup> This marks a departure from the Assad-era alignment with Russia and Iran, signaling potential recalibration of Syria's foreign relations. Notably, al-Sharaa has expressed openness to dialogue with the SDF and a commitment to combating Daesh, positioning Damascus as a possible future partner in counterterrorism.<sup>69</sup>

This evolving landscape places the United States in a strategic dilemma. Continued support for the DAANES is anchored by the CJTF-OIR presence and may conflict with efforts to rebuild formal ties with Damascus. While the DAANES remains a key actor in counterterrorism, its political future is uncertain in a scenario in which Washington and Damascus reconcile. The al-Sharaa government has not yet produced a new constitutional framework guaranteeing rights for Kurds and other minorities, and its ability to govern contested regions remains incomplete. Damascus's integration efforts have also been halted by sectarian attacks against the Alawites in the northwestern coastal region and the Druze in the southwestern region.<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, the appearance of a functional Syrian state willing to address U.S. counterterrorism interests may weaken the rationale for a prolonged American military presence there. If Damascus can credibly ensure ISIS containment and regional security, U.S. policymakers may view continued CJTF-OIR operations as politically redundant.

The U.S. now must perform a careful balancing act between continuing support for its Kurdish partners, including ensuring their safety and political

65 Farley, B. R. (2022, October 24). *The Syrian Democratic Forces, detained foreign fighters, and international security vulnerabilities*. Lieber Institute for Law & Land Warfare – West Point. <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/syrian-defense-forces-detained-foreign-fighters-international-security-vulnerabilities/>; Rojava Information Center, *Annual sleeper cell report 2024*, 2025.

66 United States, Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, February 2025.

67 Hassan, M., & alAhmed, S. (2022, February 14). *A closer look at the ISIS attack on Syria's alSina Prison*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/closer-look-isis-attack-syrias-al-sina-prison>

68 Zelin, A. (2025, May 14). *Trump Meets Sharaa: Writing a New Chapter in U.S.-Syria Relations*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations>

69 Azhari, T., Stewart, P., Spicer, J., & Al-Khalidi, S. (2025, March 12). *US steered Syrian Kurds towards Damascus deal, sources say*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-nudged-kurds-towards-damascus-deal-troop-presence-comes-into-focus-2025-03-12/>

70 6Syria/Homs: Violations against civilians amid lack of effective complaint and redress mechanisms. (2025, June 18). Syrians for Truth and Justice. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-homs-violations-against-civilians-amid-lack-of-effective-complaint-and-redress-mechanisms/> Ashawi, K., & Bassam, L. (2025, July 20). *Clashes rage in Druze region as Syria struggles to enforce ceasefire*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/clashes-rage-druze-region-syria-struggles-enforce-ceasefire-2025-07-19/>



inclusion on one hand, while deepening engagement with al-Sharaa's government on the other.

### No Coherent U.S. Endgame

The CJTF-OIR mission's most significant strategic challenge is the absence of a clear long-term U.S. policy for Syria. Success on the battlefield against Daesh remains a critical tactical victory for the CJTF-OIR, but the mission lacks a defined political objective beyond the group's enduring defeat. Successive U.S. administrations have oscillated between support and disengagement, undermining trust with local partners. Congressional debates over troop withdrawals reveal bipartisan divisions.

The lack of a durable framework for political transition leaves the DAANES vulnerable to future abandonment. As global priorities shift toward great-power competition with China, there remains a growing risk that northeastern Syria will be deprioritized. Without a multilateral strategy or formal recognition of the DAANES as a legitimate local authority similar to how the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was recognized after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, gains made since 2015 could be reversed.<sup>71</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

To ensure the long-term sustainability of U.S. engagement in northeastern Syria, CJTF-OIR's mission requires a strategic reconfiguration with the goal of creating a replicable model for responsible disengagement from conflict zones.

The U.S. should deepen its support for the DAANES by enhancing its administrative capabilities, public service delivery, fiscal institutions, and essential infrastructure. This can be achieved by:

- Prioritizing the development of fiscal institutions within the DAANES, including the establishment of a transparent taxation system and financial administration capable of collecting revenue, managing budgets, and ensuring equitable resource distribution across cantons.
- Supporting capacity-building programs that train local financial officers in budget planning, procurement, and auditing to reduce dependency on external donors and foster long-term administrative viability.

These additions highlight the indispensable role of fiscal capacity in state-building and reinforce the need for the U.S. mission to go beyond security force development by investing in the economic foundations of governance. They also align with the broader aim of enabling eventual U.S. disengagement without reversing stabilization gains.

- Expanding support for training civil servants in coordination with available State Department mechanisms from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Office of Assistance Coordination and civil society implementers. Alternatively, the Defense Department should establish a civil coordination mechanism that can fill the gap left by the dissolution of USAID.
- Prioritizing investment in education and health infrastructure in critical Arab-majority regions, notably in Deir ez-Zor.
- Assisting DAANES institutions in curriculum development, education accreditation, and teacher training to strengthen education capacity.

These investments would reinforce local legitimacy and support long-term deradicalization of formerly Daesh-held areas.

<sup>71</sup> McCary, *The Islamic State five years later: Persistent threats, U.S. options*, 2024; Congressional Research Service, *Syria: Transition and U.S. policy*, 2025.

## 1 EXPAND THE DAANES'S CAPABILITIES

## 2 ENHANCE ETHNIC AND TRIBAL POLITICAL INTEGRATION

Inclusive governance must be strengthened through expanded integration of Arab tribal actors in DAANES political and military structures. This requires fundamentally:

- Facilitating dialogue between tribal leaders and Kurdish officials through U.S.-sponsored tribal engagement workshops conducted by civil affairs teams.
- Institutionalizing tribal representation within civil councils and military bodies such as the SAC, but with an emphasis on shared leadership.
- Establishing local tribal liaison offices in Arab-majority areas to address grievances and ensure accessibility.

This would help absorb tribal structures into DAANES governance and reduce the potential for ethnic polarization.

## 3 LINK STABILIZATION AID TO GOVERNANCE BENCHMARKS

A performance-based aid model would increase efficiency and accountability in U.S. support.

- Tie financial assistance to progress in inclusive governance, public service delivery, and gender equality. The DAANES remains one of the most inclusive proto-states in the region, but this mechanism would allow for objective criteria that the coalition could assess to define the parameters for support and then withdrawal.
- Establish measurable indicators such as education enrollment rates, judicial access, and civil service participation to determine continued support.
- Engage third-party monitors from nongovernmental organizations like Human Rights Watch or intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations to conduct annual evaluations in coordination with civil affairs teams.

This model creates incentives for local governance reforms while ensuring resource efficiency.

## 4 ESTABLISH A LOCAL ISLAMIC STATE TRIBUNAL AND REPATRIATION MECHANISM

Addressing the legal quagmire of thousands of Islamic State fighters and affiliates requires a multilateral solution. This policy recommends:

- Establishing a hybrid judicial mechanism involving DAANES legal institutions and international experts to process Daesh-related crimes.
- Coordinating with U.S. and international partners to expedite the repatriation of foreign nationals from IDP camps like al-Howl.
- Prioritizing judicial triage of high-risk detainees to reduce overcrowding and limit radicalization.
- Dismantling al-Howl and other large IDP camps to make consolidation and radicalization of their residents difficult.

A credible justice mechanism would support reconciliation and reduce the long-term security issue posed by unresolved detentions.

## 5 INSTITUTIONALIZE A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT STABILIZATION TASK FORCE

Civil-military coordination should be centralized through a Joint Stabilization Task Force for northeastern Syria:

- Unify efforts by the State and Defense departments into a single coordination body.
- Align military operations with governance and development objectives across cantons.
- Enhance responsiveness to local concerns by integrating civil affairs personnel with governance advisors.

## 6 DEVELOP A PHASED TRANSITION AND WITHDRAWAL FRAMEWORK

This structure would increase operational coherence and adaptability in fragile environments.

Finally, a transparent transition strategy is needed to provide an exit for U.S. personnel in the region while ensuring the preservation of battlefield successes. This plan would build off the previous mechanisms and aim to:

- Define governance benchmarks, such as rule-of-law capacity, public service coverage, and civil-military coordination, as conditions for continued support.
- Structure U.S. military drawdowns in phases tied to performance indicators.
- Communicate clear timelines and expectations to DAANES partners and the U.S. government.
- Tie phase-down of U.S. personnel to more concrete examples of good-faith normalization between the SDF and government in Damascus.

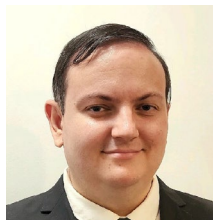
This model ensures accountability while preventing an abrupt withdrawal that could lead to reversed progress or trigger humanitarian crises, as evidenced in past counterinsurgency missions.

## Conclusion

U.S. support for local governance structures through the coalition's partnership with the SDF and the DAANES civil administration has been fundamental to the defeat of ISIS as well as enabling localized governance and fostering relative stability in Syria. However, progress remains uneven across cantons due to ethnic tensions, underdeveloped institutions, geopolitical constraints, and the absence of a coherent long-term U.S. strategy.

These findings emphasize the importance of sustained and adaptive international engagement with the region. The proposed phased transition model offers a viable pathway for balancing strategic disengagement with lasting impact through achieving governance benchmarks and regional integration. By aligning resources with local state capacity-building and inclusive governance structures, the United States can ensure that its efforts in northeastern Syria endure beyond the near term.

More broadly, the Syrian case provides a valuable model for future U.S. engagement in other complex conflict zones. The model demonstrates the utility of light-footprint, indigenous partner-led stabilization approaches while highlighting its limitations due to a lack of strategic vision, interagency coherence, and political will. Future U.S. policy in similar environments must internalize these lessons to avoid repeating past cycles of tactical success followed by strategic uncertainty or failure.



## AUTHOR

**Anthony Avice Du Buisson** is a conflict analyst and researcher specializing in U.S. foreign policy, security, and human rights, focused on the Middle East and Eurasia regions. He is a graduate student and research assistant at American University's School of International Service, where he is pursuing an MA in Global Governance, Politics, and Security as a Mustafa Barzani Peace Fellow. His work emphasizes Kurdish politics, securitization, and state-building. He has been published in *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Times of Israel*, and *Tibetan Review* and featured in academic journals such as the *Johns Hopkins SAIS Journal of Global Affairs*.

## Contact

For media inquiries, email  
[media@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:media@newlinesinstitute.org)

To learn more about New Lines'  
publication process, email  
[submissions@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:submissions@newlinesinstitute.org)

For other inquiries, send an email to  
[info@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:info@newlinesinstitute.org)

1660 L St. NW, Ste. 450  
Washington, D.C., 20036

P: (202) 800-7302