

Profile: Arab Tribal and Clan Forces

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Brief Analysis

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

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

A newer unit of Arab militiamen in Syria, raised by pro-Assad figure Ibrahim al-Hifl to form an unbroken corridor of Iran-backed tribal fighters between Deir al-Zour and Aleppo.

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

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

History:

- On September 20, 2023, Ougaidat tribal sheikh Ibrahim al-Hifl [announced \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF\)](#) the formation of an “Army of Arab Tribal Forces” to fight the Kurdish-led SDF amid ongoing clashes between the SDF and disgruntled Arab tribesmen in Deir al-Zour province. He called on members of the Ougaidat tribe for financial support and also requested assistance from the Baggara, another influential tribe in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.
- Previously, on [August 31 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sdfs-insurgency-challenge-deir-ez-zor\)](#), Hifl had joined the Arab tribal rebellion and became the figurehead of the "Arab Tribal Forces" militant group, making the town of Diban the center of this revolt.
- Hifl’s Arab Tribal Forces did not support Ahmad al-Khubayl, better known as Abu Khawla, even though the latter hailed from the Baqir clan of the Ougaidat tribe. In an [audio message \(https://twitter.com/DalgashRasoul5/status/1697236244286033924\)](#) leaked during the uprising, Abu Khawla threatened Hifl.
- In 2020, Hifl [called \(https://twitter.com/EvaKahan/status/1304165285658791941\)](#) for the transfer of local administration to Arab tribes in Deir al-Zour, likely due to the SDF’s control of the profits generated by oil fields.
- In its [quarterly report \(https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003392203/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q1_DEC2023_GOLD_508.PDF\)](#) to Congress for the period October-December 2023, Operation Inherent Resolve noted that tribal fighters had emerged as a “full-fledged resistance movement” that receives explicit support from the Assad regime and its Iranian allies on the western side of the Euphrates River, where fighters resupply, rearm, and launch attacks on SDF-controlled villages on the eastern side.
- On September 3, 2023, ATCF [seized areas \(https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89/\)](#) from the SDF in the countryside of Raqqa and Hasaka in north and northeastern Syria. In the process, its forces managed to take control of the villages of al-Mohsenli, al-Mahmudiyah, Arab Hassan, and Manbij. A few days later, they took al-Tarki and Tal Tawil near Tal Tamer.

Objective:

- ATCF’s primary [objective \(https://www.jusoor.co/ar/details/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-](#)



Arab Tribal and Clan Forces logo

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[%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84\)](#) is to fight the SDF and strengthen Arab tribal control east of the Euphrates. A secondary objective is to strengthen Iran's grip in this area and push U.S. forces out of Syria. Areas under SDF control are generally inaccessible to proxies in Iran's so-called "axis of resistance," so gaining a foothold in these zones would enable the IRGC to establish a northern land corridor leading to Aleppo.

Chain of command:

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



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

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

- **Lebanese Hezbollah/Hajj Abu Ali:** In early February 2024, 150 fighters from Hezbollah-controlled military positions in central Syria [remobilized \(https://npasyria.com/en/110750/\)](#) to the east to join Arab tribal militias in fighting the SDF. Senior Hezbollah figure and Lebanese national Hajj Abu Ali oversees the operations of the Arab Tribal Forces and is responsible for the direction and distribution of new fighters arriving in Deir al-Zour province. He is also reportedly in charge of the Iranian-held zone near al-Baloum roundabout in Mayadin.
- **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps:** Abu Ali coordinates with Hajj Abbas, an Iranian IRGC commander in Abu Kamal. Hajj Abbas is responsible for liaising with Regiment 47 (see Subordinate Units below), deploying local fighters to the other side of the river, and monitoring the situation in Abu Kamal. The IRGC oversees combat training for Arab tribal militia personnel in preparation for conducting operations east of the Euphrates.
- **Assad regime:**
 - The Syrian Army significantly [contributes \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/how-iran-and-assad-penetrated-the-ranks-of-so-called-tribal-fighters/\)](#) to the operational assistance of tribal militia forces in east Syria, including the movement and deployment of fighters throughout the area. It also guarantees the delivery of vital supplies such as ammunition, sustenance, and military gear. Furthermore, tribal militias such as ATCF are actively involved in recruiting from eastern towns and villages. These activities are aimed not only at expanding their own forces, but also at providing manpower for the regime's military and intelligence operations.
 - On February 10, 2024, Hifl was [observed \(https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2024/2/10/%D8%B8%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%81%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85\)](#) participating in a ceremonial event at the Damascus guesthouse belonging to Sheikh Farhan al-Marsoumi, chief of al-Marasma tribe. This event was reportedly orchestrated by the Assad regime with the objective of enabling Hifl to establish and strengthen alliances and connections with other Arab tribes. Notably, Marsoumi has significant business ties with both the Assad regime and the IRGC.

Affiliate relationships:

- **Sons of Jazira and Euphrates Movement:** The Telegram channel associated with this movement actively disseminates information regarding ATCF operations, often commending the group, expressing support, sharing updates on their progress, and providing insights into ATCF's tribal makeup. Given that Hifl presides over both the Sons Movement and ATCF, the channel frequently publishes statements attributed to him in one capacity or the other. Additionally, the channel systematically issues calls to Arab tribal members within the SDF to abandon the organization and integrate into tribal militias such as the ATCF, indicating a strategic effort to bolster their ranks through defections. The Sons Movement also has [an active track record \(/node/18441\)](#) of attacking U.S. and SDF units.
- **Liwa al-Baqir:** Muntasir al-Hussein, a prominent figure within [Liwa al-Baqir \(/node/18453\)](#), plays a crucial role in spearheading an extensive recruitment drive for ATCF. This campaign aims to bring thousands of minors into ATCF's ranks, targeting the communities of Deir al-Zour, Abu Kamal, Mayadin, Ayyash, Shumaytiyah, and al-Tabni. Hussein also supervises their training and preparation for crossing the Euphrates. Notably, the Baggara clan is ATCF's second-largest contingent in terms of personnel strength; it also composes the majority of Liwa al-Baqir forces. Based in Aleppo, Liwa al-Baqir has attacked U.S. and SDF units and developed a uniquely close relationship with Iran's IRGC and the Assad regime.
- **Other tribal militias:** ATCF often coordinates joint military offensives with the [Hashemite Tribes Regiment \(/node/18597\)](#), the [Lions of the Ougaidat Brigade \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade\)](#) and various other Arab tribal militias in the east. Their shared goal is to oust U.S. forces from the area and reclaim Arab sovereignty from the SDF. These militias not only collaborate closely in combat operations, but also engage in comprehensive joint training programs. They use identical transportation pathways, rely on the same supply lines, and collectively manage numerous checkpoints across the region.

Additionally, they are involved in recruiting efforts on behalf of the Assad regime's military and intelligence entities.

- **Liwa Fatemiyoun:** In collaboration with this Afghan-based militia—which operates in Syria with support from the IRGC—ATCF **actively recruits** (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9>). Syrian nationals all across the east, particularly Deir al-Zour. The two groups share operational territories, including numerous checkpoints, and coordinate closely on military engagements. Furthermore, their recruitment efforts extend beyond their immediate ranks, contributing personnel to both the Syrian army and the Assad regime's irregular National Defense Forces (NDF).

Subordinate relationships:

- **Regiments 47 and 137:** Abu Issa al-Mashhadani commands Regiment 47 in Abu Kamal and is charged with mobilizing its local fighters, with a focus on ensuring their security throughout all operations. The regiment's deputy leader is Atallah al-Hamoud (aka Abu Awad al-Mashhadani), who manages operations involving newly arrived fighters. Following initial training led by Muntasir al-Hussien, these troops were set to undergo further preparation at Regiment 47's training camps situated on the outskirts of Abu Kamal and Regiment 137's facilities near Deir al-Zour Airport; the training was to span an estimated fifteen to twenty days.
- **Al-Saiqa Forces:** This is ATCF's special forces branch, responsible for overseeing the safe passage of fighters from the Abu Kamal countryside. It is supervised by Amer Abu al-Fadel.
- ATCF maintains an active official Facebook page with about 9,700 followers. This page frequently posts about the group's activities in general, and Hifl's in particular. ATCF also maintains two very active official Telegram channels with about 3,400 and 4,200 subscribers each, and has multiple other fan-based Telegram channels dedicated to it.



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