



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية  
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

# Masarat

## Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): *From the Washington - Moscow agreement to Animosity with Turkey*

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This study presents a comprehensive portrayal of one of the critical actors in the Syrian arena, and one whose role recently became more prominent: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF.) It discusses the conditions that led to its formation, its structure, its funding mechanisms and support, its military capabilities, and its grassroots base. The study also presents maps displaying the SDF's influence and control in Syria, its areas of influence, and its military tactics, which depend primarily on the People's Protection Forces (YPG). The study also presents prominent international and regional actors' positions regarding Syria's Democratic Forces, the relationships it enjoys with actors such as the United States and Turkey, and its level of animosity with Turkey.



## Introduction

Field conditions in Syria have become more complex, a development that has had wide-ranging effects for most actors in Syria and beyond, especially the opposition. Geneva's proposed political solution failed after Russia's military intervention in Syria. Russia's military action was under the guise of combating Daesh - which turned out to be a pretext to shell moderate opposition and tip the scales in Syria. All this lends more gravity to the importance of viewing the positions of principal actors in Syria in an attempt to evaluate and/or understand the Syrian case or work towards possible resolutions. A map of major players shows many non-state actors such as Daesh, the Nusra Front, Ahrar Al-Sham, Hezbollah, other Shiite militias, and the SDF.

This study attempts to present a comprehensive view of SDF, which has not received much interest from researchers. Due to its recent inception on the one hand, and its vast expansion on the other, the SDF becomes worthy of more scrutiny when we consider that it has surpassed its role in Syria to facilitate a rare state of reconciliation between Washington and Moscow. It is also this reconciliation that puts relations between the US and Turkey in a state of increased apprehension and uncertainty.

This study sheds light on the events preceding the formation of SDF and the mechanics of its creation. It shows the inconsistency among some of its older components, who tried to appear to be part of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime but in fact intersected more with the regime than the opposition. The study also observes the general political and military structure of these forces, their internal divisions, their most prominent components, and their resources, including funding and armaments. It also shows the SDF's areas of control and influence and the organization's internal/external grassroots base, which is the same as that of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The study also examines the stances of foreign world powers – the United States, Russia, regional powers, Turkey, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, neighboring countries and entities, Lebanon, Iraqi Kurdistan – towards the SDF. This information enables us to comprehend the forces' network of external relations, their opportunities and support, and the challenges and obstacles that face them.

## Field and Political Background

After its establishment on April 9, 2013, Daesh surfaced within the Syrian conflict as a new actor with the power to tip the scales on the ground. It later became a major global threat, prompting many international efforts to target and curb the danger it posed. Among these efforts was the formation on September 5, 2014 of an international coalition comprised of 16 countries<sup>1</sup> and an American-Turkish agreement on February 18, 2015 to train and equip the moderate Syrian opposition<sup>2</sup>.

Colonel Nadeem Al-Hasan, who hails from the city of Manbij and is of Turkmen descent, was appointed as program coordinator from the Syrian side. The program was discontinued on September 29, 2015<sup>3</sup>.

Then-Secretary of State John Kerry announced Washington's search for a Syrian partner alongside other strategies for fighting Daesh in Syria. This announcement came after the Nusra Front's attack and capture of Division 30 infantry group's

Commander Nadeem Al-Hasan and 30 of his men, and the seizure of their arms, in Rif Azaz<sup>4</sup> on July 31, 2015. The Nusra Front had previously attacked Syria's Revolutionaries Front (SRF) base, led by Jamal Marouf, in Rif Idlib on October 27, 2014, driving out the SRF from Rif Idlib completely. Its commander fled to Turkey<sup>5</sup> before eventually joining the SDF.

Many clashes took place between the Nusra Front and Harakat Hazm in Aleppo's western countryside in early 2015. As a result, Harakat announced that it had disbanded on March 1, 2015, with some of its 3000 fighters joining Ahrar Al-sham while others fled to Afrin in Aleppo's countryside. On September 16, 2014, Daesh launched attacks on Ayn Al-Arab in concurrence with events in the western parts of the

Syrian north. The People's Protection Units were able to push them back with the help of international air support and direct supply of arms from the coalition forces, resulting in Daesh's defeat four months later<sup>6</sup>. The YPG gained popularity in global opinion as the group best suited to take on Daesh, only to be accused by the Turkish government and by opposition parties of grave human rights violations, namely the forced migration of Arabs and Turkmen in Hasaka and Raqqa, especially Tal Abyad. They were also accused of establishing a Kurdish state in northern Syria and of having affiliations with the Kurdish Labor Party (PKK), which is listed as a terrorist organization in Turkey. These accusations limited the ability of international parties to market the SDF as a local partner in the war on Daesh.

## Structure and Formation

The Syrian Democratic Forces (otherwise known as Forces of Self-Defense) were officially established on October 10, 2015. The announcement came during a press conference in the city of Al-Malikiyain the Governorate of Hasaka, northern Syria, which falls under YPG protection<sup>7</sup>. According to the announcement, the Forces consisted of 12 groups:

- YPG
- YPJ
- Al-Sanadid Forces
- Syriac Military Council (Sotoro)
- Euphrates Volcano Joint Operations Room
- Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade
- Northern Sun Battalion
- Al-Salajiqi Brigade
- Al-Jazeera Brigades Gathering
- The Kurdish Front

- Al-Tahrir Brigade
  - The Rebels Army (which includes: The Kurdish Front, Troops Brigade 99, Special Operations Brigade 455, Al-Salajiqi Brigade, Ahrar Al-Zawiya Brigade, Sultan Salim Brigade, and Atarib Martyrs Brigade).<sup>8</sup>
- In their first press conference, the Forces announced that they were part of the Syrian revolution, striving to create a state in which the Syrian community and all its factions could enjoy freedom, justice, dignity, with all citizens enjoying their rights. The group stated that it "put Daesh terrorism at the top of their military objectives".<sup>9</sup>

On October 12, 2015, two days after the Forces were formed, US Central Command Spokesman Colonel Patrick Ryder announced that coalition forces conducted an airdrop which included 50 tons of ammunition. Ryder said the ammunition was for

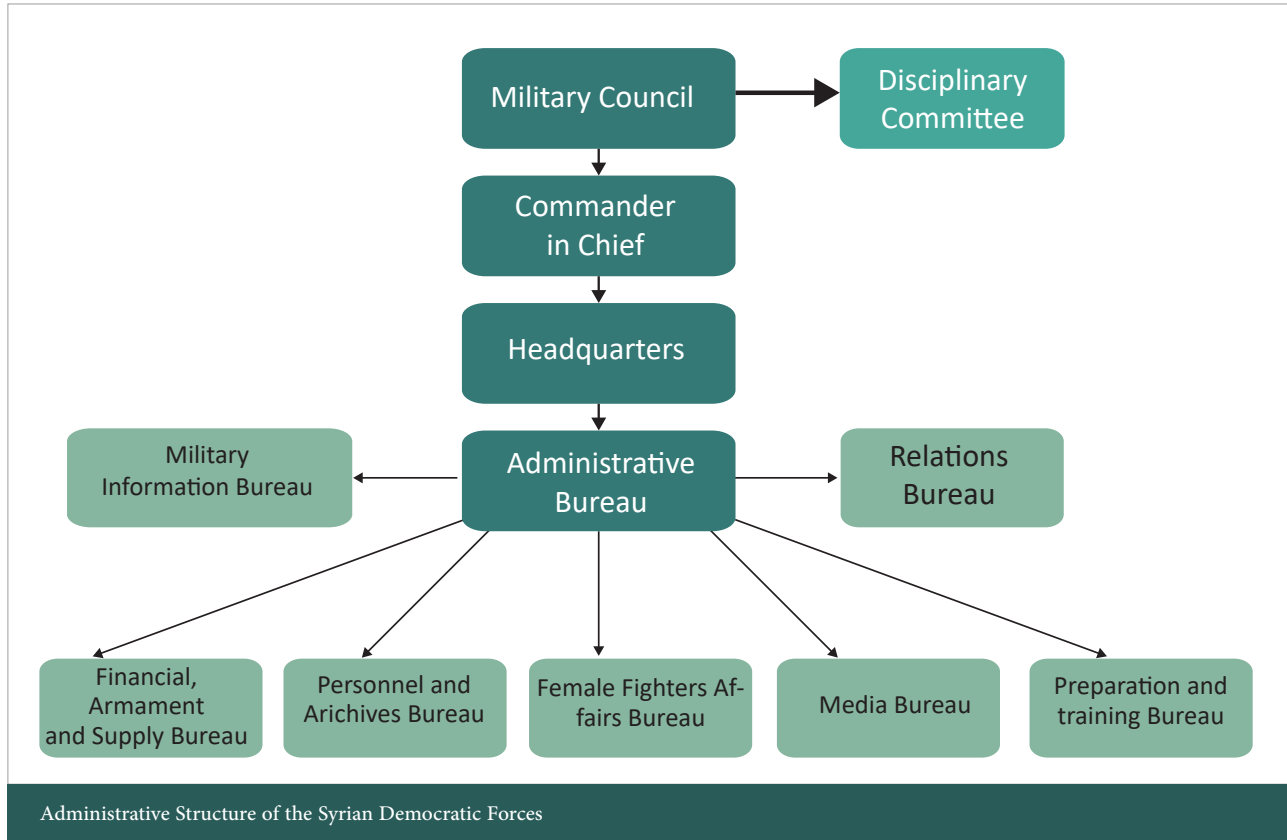


Syrian Arab groups whose leaders were “appropriately vetted by the United States.” The statement did not specify the group’s name but did indicate the effectiveness of the battles led by the YPG and Arab groups to liberate areas northeast of Daesh territory. Ryder also mentioned that the operation carried out

by the Coalition “aim[ed] to support the successes of the Forces in driving Daesh from Syrian territories.”<sup>10</sup>

The first SDF meeting, held on January 25, 2016 and attended by all members of the military council, set out the organization’s structure.<sup>11</sup>

The diagram below shows its basic structural units:



*Duties, responsibilities and general rules were assigned as follows during the meeting:*

- Name: Syrian Democratic Forces, abbreviation: (SDF)
- Banner: White map of Syria, with the Euphrates River appearing on the map in blue. The map is set against a yellow background that has “Syrian Democratic Forces” written on it in Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac, with Turkmen appearing instead of Syriac in Turkmen-populated areas.
- Definition: Syrian military forces comprised of

an alliance of organized factions and military formations representing different Syrian segments and national components with no ethnic, religious, or political discrimination.

- Objective: Liberation of the Syrian homeland and its people and defense against all hostile and terrorist attacks using the legitimate right of defense guaranteed by all international charters, norms, and frameworks. Respect for human rights and commitment to international treaties and conventions relating to armed conflicts, including the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.



The SDF displayed its name, The Democratic Syrian Forces, in both Arabic and Kurdish in its first press conference with a map of Syria as its logo. The name was later changed to Syrian Democratic Forces. In a meeting on January 25, 2016, the Euphrates River was added to the banner, and 'Syrian Democratic Forces' was also added in Syriac, or Turkmen in the case of Turkmen-populated areas.<sup>12</sup>

### General Structure:

- **Military Council:** Comprised of representatives of the various factions and military formations that make up the Syrian Democratic Forces, it is the highest military authority for these forces. It is responsible for making strategic decisions related to war and peace and elects the Commander in Chief and the General Command for the SDF. It also identifies phase targets according to circumstances and facts on the ground, in line with the overall objectives of the forces. The council holds meetings every two months and has the right to hold

special meetings upon the approval of two-thirds of council members.

- **Commander in Chief:** Elected directly by the military council. In charge of Council meetings and the General Command, he oversees General Command activities and appoints the SDF's official spokesperson.
- **The General Command:** The General Command consists of 9-13 members elected in transparent and democratic elections from within the members of the council, with the stipulation that women must be included in the command. The General Command's mission is to implement decisions taken in the council's meetings; screen, manage and direct the forces; and plan, lead and carry out military campaigns on the ground. General Command orders are considered binding and non-negotiable for all factions. No faction can announce a campaign or battle alone against any party without referring to the General Command.
- **Military Disciplinary Committee:** The Military Council appoints 5-7 members with the responsibility of solving problems that may arise between factions participating in the Forces, solving any disputes that may develop between fighters in the Forces or addressing any shortcomings in the internal rules and covenants. The Council makes its decisions based on majority and has the power to punish violators with punishments extending to freezing, dismissing or expelling the member. These decisions are effective upon approval by the Military Council and the Commander in Chief. The Disciplinary Committee also follows up on civilian grievances against



factions or those joining the Forces according to procedures that ensure justice. The Committee is authorized to take precautionary measures regarding public discipline, if necessary, and apply appropriate action.

- Administrative Bureaus: The SDF has many Administrative bureaus, including:

- Relations Bureau: An essential office of high importance tasked with building and developing national and foreign relations on all levels with democratic and grassroots forces, including military factions, clans, and national figures, with the objective of using all available resources in battle. Factions are prohibited from forming diplomatic or military relations without the knowledge of the Relations Bureau and the approval of the Central Command.
- Preparation and Training Bureau: Has one of the more critical roles in shaping the Forces' principal structure. Its role is to prepare theoretical and practical training programs and create the necessary means for their execution: schools, academies and institutes, as well as the preparation of training staff and materials. The Bureau is responsible for all training operations that aim to build a true fighter who believes in the goals and principles of the SDF and adheres to its internal order. The Bureau is responsible for providing mass popular activities and supplying self-defense mechanisms and training material for the public.

- Media Bureau: This office is in charge of organizing and managing media warfare through available media, overseeing appropriate dissemination of physical and audiovisual publications to internal and external public opinion, in addition to organizing with Media Bureaus within the SDF's different factions and directing its media activities. No faction is allowed to produce any publication independently.
- Personnel and Archives Bureau: This office prepares personnel information for every member of the Forces, and their officers and leaders, according to their respective classifications. This includes résumés as well as any penalties they incur or promotions they receive, according to the Bureau's procedures and norms. The bureau keeps all documentation and records in physical and electronic form in addition to backups for emergency measures; the archive represents the memory of the institution. The Personnel and Archive Bureau respects confidentiality, and any negligence or complacency is punished in accordance with its rules and regulations.
- Financial, Armament and Supply Bureau: This is the main planning bureau. It regulates financial affairs through the development of appropriate budgets reconciling needs and capabilities, which requires combining high-level financial restraint with accuracy and transparency. The Finance Bureau organizes and develops the forces' resources, adjusts their expenditures, keeps all annual records, and performs annual, semi-annual and quarterly



inventory procedures while setting exchange mechanisms and revenue according to the administration's regulations. Armament and logistics are vital and must be exacted and rationed, especially in light of limited resources and of the material value of these supplies to the revolution.

- Military Information Bureau:

This includes elements trained in acquiring information by all available means in a manner that serves the military forces in its operations and campaigns, including using necessary technologies and qualified human elements. The activities of this office are considered secret and confidential. In addition to organizing and developing their system, they coordinate with, oversee, and direct the security intelligence offices of other factions in the SDF.

- Female Fighters Affairs Bureau:

This office organizes female fighter's affairs within the ranks of the SDF as a force capable of taking a leading role within the Forces. The Bureau organizes the participation and development of women in the defense process.

The administrative bureaus described above must establish an internal system, state their operation mechanisms, and present them to the General Administration. The GA has the power to put in additional specialized offices when necessary, with the approval of the Commander in Chief.

*Factions that form the SDF and their military capabilities:*

12 military groups of various size and capabilities

make up the SDF. The PYD-affiliated YPG forms the center of gravity in these forces. The most prominent of these factions are as follows:

- The YPG, established in 2011, is the military wing of the PYD, which was formed in 2003 as a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Its leader is Saleh Muslim Muhammad (born 1951 in Shiran, Ayn Al-Arab/Kobane). Khabat Derek established the YPG. He was assassinated in the city of Qamishli on January 14, 2014.<sup>13</sup> General Military Commander Aldar Khalil now commands the forces. Their membership is estimated at 15,000<sup>14</sup> and has probably increased since compulsory service laws were put in place on October 13, 2014.<sup>15</sup> The PYG has the most advanced weaponry in the SDF, with 6 effective tanks dispersed from Qamishli to Ayn Al-Arab, 7 BMP Armored Personnel Carriers, and 10 Police Armored Vehicles provided directly to them by the Syrian Regime. This is the result of the Coalition's destruction of all military vehicles belonging to Daesh, even the empty ones – except for two 57 anti-tank guns found by chance in one of the houses in Ayn Al-Arab - which made it impossible for the SDF to attain them. The YPG also has more than 200 machine gun-mounted pickup trucks, provided by the US during the battle of Ayn Al-Arab. The YPG founded the Kurdish Female Protection Units (YPJ) in 2012, led by Asya Abdullah, a leftist Kurd from Ayn Al-Arab. The YPJ is thought to have 5,000 fighters with middle-grade weapons.
- Al-Sanadid Forces: A militia formed by Arab tribes in 2013 and led by Hamidi



Daham Al-Hadi Al-Jarba, head of the Shammar clans. Hamidi was also tasked with reading the statement announcing the formation of the SDF in a press conference held on October 10, 2015.<sup>16</sup> He was appointed Governor of Al-Jazirah District according to the self-rule project sponsored by the Syrian Regime at the end of 2013. These forces have approximately 500 fighters belonging to the Shammar and Jabour clans native to the Al-Jazira and Hasaka areas.

- Syriac Military Council (Sotoro): A Syriac militia founded in Qamishli in January 2013. Their allegiance is to the Syriac Union Party, which enjoys close relations with the PKK. The Council joined the PYD administration and YPG on 2013. It has 70 fighters with light weapons, in addition to two 57 anti-tank guns, 3 tanks, and 50 four-wheel drive machine gun-mounted pickup trucks in Tal Abyad.
- Jaish Al-Thuwar/Revolutionaries Army: Founded on May 4, 2015, and led by Abdulmalik Barad (Abu Ali) since its conception. This army comprises many factions, including those

belonging to the Al-Farouq Brigade, the Homs Brigade, the Kurdish front and the Special Tasks Brigade, the Arab Martyrs Brigade, Regiment 777, a faction of the Northern Sun Brigade, some factions that belonged to the former Free Syrian Army before it joined the Army as part of Harakat Hazm and Band 30, and smaller groups affiliated with Syria's Revolutionaries Front led by Jamal Maarouf, in addition to the Turkmen Al-Salajiqi Brigade formed, according to the Turkmen News Agency, in

Aleppo's countryside on February 4, 2013<sup>17</sup> in order to protect Turkmen villages in the area. The Al-Salajiqi brigade had 275 fighters before it lost them all with the fall of the village of Al-Rai to Daesh on February 3, 2014.<sup>18</sup> During the formation of the SDF, Colonel Talal Sulo introduced himself as the commander of the Al-Salajiqi Brigade – although he had had no connection to the Brigade since its inception – and declared the brigade a faction within the SDF, even though it does not contain any fighters.<sup>19</sup> The Revolutionaries Army is estimated to have around 500 fighters, 4 Series 23 cannons, and 4 Model 14.5 heavy machine guns.

- Euphrates Volcano: a joint operations room and coalition, established in 2015, that consists of a faction of the Free Syrian Army called Al-Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade (formed late 2013) and led by Ahmad Al-Oush (Abu Issa). Al-Raqqa Revolutionaries' fighters are estimated at around 75. They have been accused of using the Free Syrian Army's name to cover up for YPG practices, especially in Tal Abyad. The Euphrates Volcano currently has no members.
- Brigade Groups of Al-Jazira: an obscure and unknown organization; some people from the Jazira area have said that it includes members of the Civil Defense and Commandos established by the regime in Hasaka governorate.
- Other forces, such as the Jihad in the Path of God Brigade (25 fighters), Euphrates Lions Movement (60 fighters), Al-Safira Lions Brigade (12 fighters), and Soldiers of Al-Haramain Brigade (14 fighters).

#### Prominent Formations in the Syrian Democratic Forces

Formation	Formation Date	Commander	Area of Deployment	Outside Affiliations	Manpower
People's Protection Units (YPG)	2011	Khalil Aldar	Al-Qamishli Ras Al-Ayn Dirbasiyah Amouda in Hasaka Governate Afrin Ayn Al-arab	The Regime Russia United states	Approximately 15000 fighters
Women's Protection Units (YPJ)	2012	Asya Abdullah	Areas controlled by the YPG	The Regime Russia United states	Approximately 5000 fighters
Al-Sanadid	2013	Hmeidi Daham al-Jarba	Assembly of Shamar and Jabbour clans in Hasaka	The regime	Approximately 500 fighters
Syriac Military Council (Sotoro)	2013	Sercon Ibrahim	Qamishli in Hasaka	The Regime and Russia	Approximately 70 fighters
Army of Revolutionaries/Jaish Althuwar	2015	Abdulmalik Bard (Abu Ali)	Afrin Tal Rifat Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo	United States	Approximately 500 fighters
Euphrates Volcano Joint Operations Room	2015	Mahmoud Al-Oush formerly	Ayn Al-arab in Aleppo Tal Abyad in Arr Raqqa	The Regime United States	No one is left in this room
Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade	End of 2013	Ahmad Al-Oush (abu Isa) from Raqqa	Alali Bajilia village in Raqqa	Formerly supported by opposition figures, now by the United States	approximately 75 fighters
Suqur Al-Badia Brigade	2013	Hamid Khalil	Al-Hasaka	The regime	Unknown
Tahrir Brigade	2014	Abdulkarim Mohammad Obaid	Hasaka Tal Abyad in Raqqa Governorate	The Regime Russia	
Jihad in the Path of God Brigade	2013	Farhan Al-Askar (Abu Wael Al-badawi)	Supported by Bedouin clans	Previously supported by opposition factions, now supported by Russia	25 fighters
Northern Sun Battalion	2014	Adnan Al-Ahmad Hannoush (Abu Layla)	Ayn Al-Arab Sarrin in Aleppo	United States	50 fighters
Fadel Al-Shibly Battalion	2015	Fayad Al-Shibly	Rif tal Abyad	The Regime	Unknown
Ahrar Jarablus Battalion	2015	Col. Ali Haju from Jarablus, Aleppo	Ayn Al-Arab in Aleppo	The Regime	Unknown
Euphrates Lions Movement	2015	Anas Obaid from the village of Al-Qubba in Aleppo	Al-Qubba in Aleppo	None	Approximately 60 fighters
Al-Safira Lions Battalion	2015	Zaza Arabi from Al-Safira in Aleppo	Ayn Al-Arab in Aleppo	None	12 fighters
Soldiers of Al-Haramain Brigade	2013 and recently reconstituted	Ibrahim Al-Banawi from Manbij in Aleppo	Ayn Al-Arab and Sarrin in Aleppo	United States	14 fighters
Jarablous Euphrates Battalion Assembly	2015	Abdulsattar Jader and his brothers in the city of Jarablous in Aleppo	Nahiyat Al-Shuyukh in Aleppo	The Regime	20 fighters

### *Military and Political Leadership:*



*SDF military leaders in Hasaka, Ras Al-Ayn, and Qamishli:*

- Redor Khalil: official spokesman of the Democratic Union Party, Kurdish Communist, holds a baccalaureate degree.
- Hamidi Daham Aljarba: Sunni Arab, Shammar clan leader in Hasaka, and head of Al-Sanadid Forces established by the regime under the banner of "Civil Defense."
- Farhan Al-Askr (Abu Wael): Commander of the Jihad in the Path of God Brigade. A Sunni Arab from Al-Badu tribe in Tal Al-Samn village in Al-Raqqa, he does not hold any degree.
- Colonel Talal Raslan: Comes from the city of Hasaka.

*Military Leadership of the SDF in Tal Abyad and Ayn Al-Arab:*

- Hussain Kuju: Military Commander of the YPG and commander in the SDF. A Kurdish socialist and veterinary doctor.
- Mohammad Abdulkareem (Abu Mohammad Kafr Zeita): Current Commander of the Liberation Brigade, was formerly Commander, Special Operations Brigade, in the Al-Farouq Brigades. He is a Sunni Arab from Hama governorate and holds a baccalaureate degree.
- Ahmad Aloush (Abu Issa): Al-Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade Commander, recently joined the SDF. He is a Sunni Arab from Rumaila district in Al-Raqqa and does not hold a degree.
- Ayham Fayad Ghanem: The actual founder of the SDF in Tal Abyad. Cooperated with the Syrian Regime in the past, and worked as a smuggler before the uprisings. Founded the Shabiha forces, affiliated with the SDF.
- Fayad Al Shibley: Battalion Commander of the Fadel Alaswad Al-Shibly Martyrs,

who was killed during fighting with the Syrian regime against the Free Army. Sunni Arab, does not hold degree.

*SDF Military Leadership in Ayn Al-Arab and Aleppo's Countryside:*

- Mahmoud Alrash: Euphrates Volcano Operations Rooms Commander, official liaison with the Americans in the joint operations room, responsible for requesting air cover in battles. A Kurdish communist from the village of Core in Ayn Al-Arab, aligned with the PYD.
- Abdulmalik Barad (Abu Ali Barad): Jaysh Althumar/Revolutionaries Army Commander stationed near Affrin. Former Commander of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front in Idlib. A Sunni Arab from the city of Taftanaz. He does not hold a degree.
- Colonel Ali Hajjou: Military renegade. A police colonel of Kurdish descent from the city of Jarablous. Leftist National Kurdish by political affiliation, his mother is an Arab from the Alsarisat clan. The commander of a brigade to maintain order in Hama. He did not have any revolutionary activity except that of a battalion of Kurds in Jarablous. He fled Jarablous when Daesh assumed control of Ayn Al-Arab, where he remained until the SDF was formed. He announced that he would join them under the banner of Ahrar Jarablous Brigade, formed by Sunni Arab Hassan Alaseel. According to local sources in Jarablous, Hajjou stayed in constant contact with Sabri Othman, Jarablous City Division Secretary in the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Aleppo, during his stay in Ayn Al-Arab. Both of them, in turn, were in direct contact with Ali

Munir, advisor to the Minister of National Reconciliation. A meeting was held between the three in Qamishli two months ago. Hajjou is now in Tal Abyad leading the Investigation Department of the SDF.

The SDF council held its first meeting in Rumailan. It is the same council that emerged from the meeting held recently by the opposition in Al-Malikia on December 8-9, 2015. This political body consists of 43 members, five of whom have Syriac origins (Assyrian, Chaldean, and Aramaic): Isuh Gewriye, representative of the Syriac Union Party in Syria; Bassam Issaq, representative of the Syriac National Council in Syria; Macid Behi, representative of the Syriac Cultural Association in Syria; Semiran Semun, representative of the Syriac Women's Union; and Wail Mirza, representative of the Assyrian Democratic Party. In the meeting, Heysem Menaa and Ilham Ahmad were elected co-chairmans of the SDF, and nine members were chosen for its executive board: Isuh Gewriye, Meram Dawud, Ibrahim El-Hesen, Rojin Remo, Ehmed El-Hebib, Berivan Ehmed, Cemal Sex Baqi, Alaaddin Xalid and Salih El-Nebwani. Sub-committees representing the council abroad will be established at a later date.<sup>20</sup>

Colonel Talal Sulo is the SDF's official spokesperson. He is a secular Turkmen from Al-Rai village in Aleppo and a former Major in the Syrian Intelligence who was dismissed for conduct issues. He does not have a record of revolutionary activity. When the Turkmen Council formed the First Al-Fath Turkmen Division, led by Air Force Colonel Muntasir Jaweesh, the Colonel tried to appoint him as commander of the Seljuk Brigade; but Sulo was not able to cement his control over the brigade, due to conflicts with Brigade Commander Fikrat Ahmad. Sulo fled when Daesh attacked Al-Rai, without engaging the enemy.

Omar Al-Oush, a leftist Kurd from Ayn Al-Arab in Aleppo, is in charge of the SDF's Public Relations Bureau. He periodically visits the border city of Orfa in Turkey and attends meetings held there. Al-Oush is the one responsible for contacting factions and persuading them to join the SDF. Seven months ago he had surgery in Adana Hospital in Turkey. Haqi Kobane, a leftist Kurd from the Katakene clan, centered in Jarouqa village in the western countryside of Ayn Al-Arab in Aleppo, coordinates between the PYD and other factions. He manages on-the-ground work in Ayn Al-Arab in Aleppo and the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room. He trained at PYD headquarters in the mountains of North Iraq and Turkey.

The SDF performs most of its operations under coalition air-force cover or cover from Russia. Other factions of the SDF do not engage in combat except through protection and entry points offered to them after airstrikes and PYD attacks. In cases where PYD units are unable to penetrate a location, these factions are called in for combat or to infiltrate a village in which Daesh has possibly set traps.

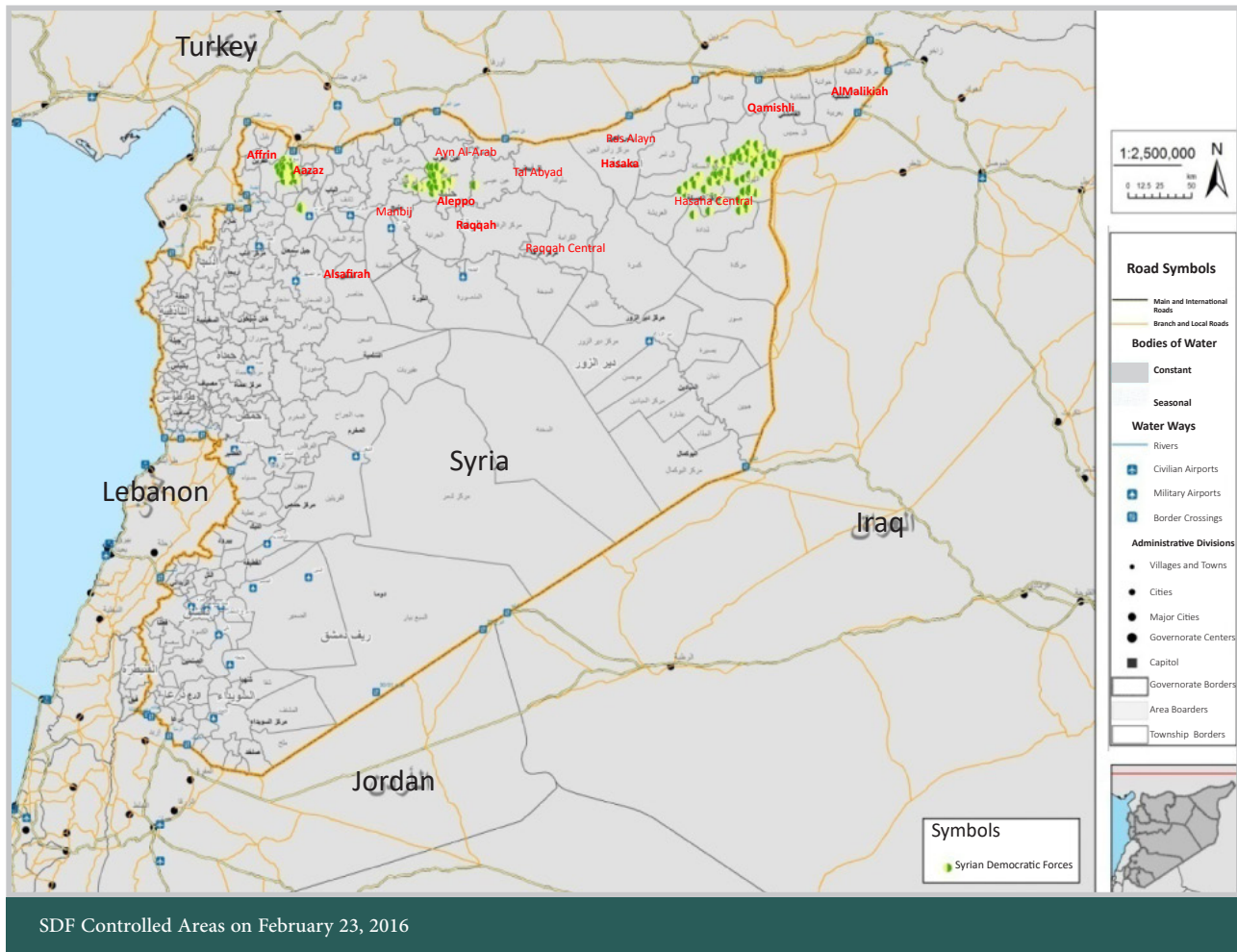
One of the latest military developments of the SDF was its continued advance into Aleppo's eastern countryside. On December 23, 2015, the SDF assumed control of Saharij village near Tishreen Dam in Aleppo's eastern countryside, after a large-scale attack on the Daesh-controlled village that resulted in casualties on both sides. The forces also announced that they had defeated Daesh and were taking control over Tishreen Dam, situated on the Euphrates River in the countryside of Aleppo. The SDF took advantage of tensions in the opposition's ranks in Aleppo's countryside and advanced from Afrin towards many villages. On February 11<sup>th</sup>, it was able to assume control over Menagh Military Airbase and other areas in the northern countryside, with the help of Russian air coverage. On February 15, it also took control of

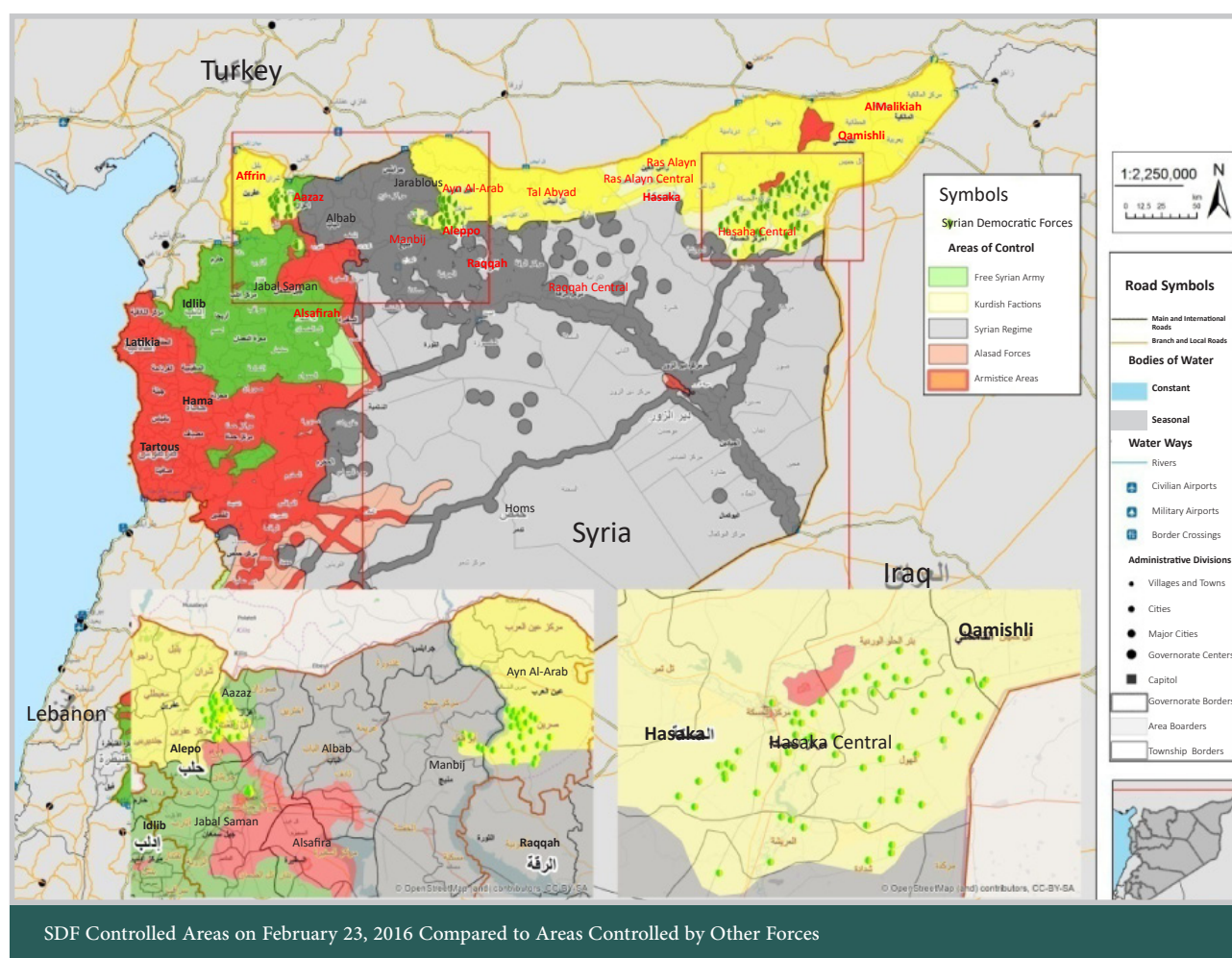




the city of Tal Rifat near the border with Turkey and advanced toward Al-Sheikh Issa village west of Mar'a. With these advances, the city of Mar'a was the only thing that stood between direct contact with Daesh,

which controlled many villages and areas in Aleppo's countryside. After clashes with Daesh on February 21, the forces were also able to assume complete control over Al-Shaddadi village, south of Hasaka.





## Ideology, Grassroots Base, and Funding

It is believed that the SDF's social incubator is the same as that of the YPG: a group of secular leftist Syrians that gathered under the Syrian Democratic Council. We can also include some of the clans loyal to Hamidi Daham Al-Jarba in that classification. On the other hand, there appears to be an intellectual convergence between the SDF and the Turkish Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C), a leftist group that believes in a grassroots struggle and is comprised mostly of Alawites, Kurds, and Arabs. The same dynamic is seen with the People's Democratic Party (HDP),

a Kurdish leftist group represented in the Turkish parliament. The convergence became more apparent when on July 19, 2015, on the third YPG anniversary of the recapture of Ayn Al-Arab, HDP co-leader Figen Yuksedag said, in Kurdish: "We are supported by the PYD and the YPG."<sup>21</sup> As for funding, most SDF components do not have funding sources, except for the YPG, which possesses Al-Rumailan Oil Field, an asset that shares returns with the Syrian regime, according to recently-leaked documents published by opposition websites.<sup>22</sup> The YPG also collects taxes from their areas of control



and imposes toll charges on trucks and cars. While the YPG probably does not cover all of the SDF's

spending, no data is available on which other parties fund the forces.

## External Relations and Stances

The most notable relationships between the SDF and actors in the Syrian conflict are as follows:

### The US:

On February 9, 2016, John Kerry, US Secretary of State, stated that the US does not share the same point of view as Turkey with regard to YPG's designation as a terrorist organization, stressing Washington's continued support for the Unit.<sup>23</sup> Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy, visited Ayn Al-Arab in early February 2016 and met with SDF leaders.<sup>24</sup>

On January 23, 2016, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stressed in a joint press conference with US Vice President Joe Biden that Turkey continues to combat terrorism and that the YPG is on its list of terrorist organizations. In response, Biden replied: "We agree with you regarding Daesh, The Nusra Front, and the PKK; simply put, these are terrorist organizations, and we stand with Turkey against all terrorist groups that harm Turkey and its people,"<sup>25</sup> without including the YPG among these organizations.

The US's support for the YPG in arms and air coverage during their battles against Daesh is proof of the American stance; the US has asked Turkey, in a written statement issued by the White House and written by US Vice President Joe Biden on February 15, 2016, to stop shelling YPG headquarters.<sup>26</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry said: "We were not convinced that the YPG is responsible for the bombings, and the answer to the question 'who did it?' is still open for discussion."<sup>27</sup> This was after YPG shelling resulted in the death of 29 Turkish citizens

on February 18, 2016 in Ankara.

In a press conference on February 23, Department of State Deputy Spokesperson Mark Toner expressed Washington's desire for the Turkish targeting of YPG locations to stop, saying: "We want to see Turkey stop its shelling," and repeating the sentiment seven times.<sup>28</sup> The presence of US specialists alongside the YPG is one of the strongest indicators of US support; direct contact is established through a joint operations room, organized from the Kurdish side by Mahmoud Alrash through advanced GPS technology.

The US has undertaken four military landing operations for the purpose of aid: two in Hasaka, the last of which was two to three months ago; one in Ayn Al-Arab during YPG battles against Daesh; and one in Ayn Issa almost four months ago. This military aid mainly consisted of different types of ammunition, except for one shipment in Ayn Al-Arab which has not yet been opened. It is kept in a special warehouse overseen by YPG fighters, and the person responsible for it is located in Ayn Al-Arab and is named Azad.

Field sources reported that 12 American troops made on-site visits to YPG locations and the Euphrates Volcano operation room 20 days before the announcement of the SDF's creation. The forces started to receive monthly stipends of 40,000 Syrian lira and were equipped with 200 Toyota pickups, communication devices, and GPS trackers; it is thought that financial support to the Forces is received through Iraqi Kurdistan or landings.



**Russia:**

The Liaison Office of the self-ruling Kurdish administration in Moscow opened on February 10, 2016.<sup>29</sup> There was an air shipment of weapons to YPG units in Al-Sheikh Maqsoud<sup>30</sup> on December 1, 2015. There was military training for YPG units in Afrin by Russian officers and experts, which confirms Russia's support for the troops, especially in the latest battle in the northern countryside, when they provided air cover for the YPG in their battles against the Free Syrian Army. Meetings between Russian military leaders and leaders of the SDF were also held in early February 2016.

**Turkey:**

Turkey sees the YPG as an extension of the PKK, not as an opposition force. Ankara's refusal to partner with the PYD within the "opposition" delegation during the last summit in Geneva, and later Turkish statements regarding the PKK, is evidence of that. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed the US saying: "Are we your partners, or [are the] Kobane terrorists?" referring to the YPG.<sup>31</sup> On February 11, 2016, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said: "We will take the same measures in Syria that we have taken in Jabal Qandeel, since terrorism comes from there."<sup>32</sup> This statement was made in The Netherlands two days before YPG locations were shelled. The most recent of these statements came in a telephone conversation between the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and his American counterpart, in which Jawhish Ihsanoglu requested a clarification from John Kerry regarding the US stance towards the YPG, pointing out that including these units in the Combating Daesh program is a weak indicator<sup>33</sup>. Ihsanoglu also stressed that Ankara would shell the unit's headquarters in Aleppo's and Hasaka's countryside starting on February 13, 2016.

The shelling is still ongoing and according to local sources, 150 casualties have been reported, a sign of Turkey's hostility towards the units.

**Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:**

Saudi Arabia has not issued any statement on the SDF and there are no clear indicators of its stance towards it.

**Lebanon:**

Lebanon, according to Syrian intelligence, is the source from which the PKK was created. There is a strong Kurdish lobby for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Lebanon.

**The Syrian regime:**

The SDF and the regime are connected through joint checkpoints in Hasaka and Qamishli: Dawar Al-Sabbagh checkpoint, upon first entering Hasaka from Tal Tamr, and Dawar Al-Zouri checkpoint, upon entering Qamishli en route to the airport, in addition to both Gwairan and Eastern Nashawa checkpoints in Hasaka. On February 20, 2016, Bouthaina Shaaban, political and media advisor to Bashar Al-Assad, stated that the YPG are part of the Syrian Army units.<sup>34</sup> Bashar Jaafari, Permanent Representative of Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, stated on February 17, 2016 that SDF victories in Aleppo fall within the interests of the regime.<sup>35</sup> Operations that have taken place in a coordinated fashion between the regime and the SDF in Aleppo's countryside are the biggest proofs of their connections.

**Iraqi Kurdistan:**

Peshmerga forces sent 1500 equipped fighters to the battles between Daesh and the YPG in Ayn Al-Arab. Sources inside Ayn Al-Arab confirmed that there was no direct contact between the Peshmerga forces and the YPG, and that the



units had prevented residents from approaching the Peshmerga forces, describing them as traitors. Meanwhile, private sources confirmed

that Peshmerga forces were described as conservative, performed prayers, and refrained from shelling mosques.

## Conclusion

The inception of the Syrian Democratic Forces came about from a convergence of the US's search for an internal Syrian partner to confront Daesh with the aspirations of Kurdish groups. The role of the YPG – the SDF's leading faction – in combating Daesh's attacks in Ayn Al-Arab was one of the major points leading to its creation. The Syrian regime and Russia have also had a hand in shaping Syria's democratic forces. The meeting that brought Saleh Muslim and Tariq Sulo together in the Kazakh capital of Astana and the announcement of the formation of the SDF one week later, in addition to a lack of confrontation between the forces and the Syrian regime since October 2015, indicate the relationship between these parties and the SDF.

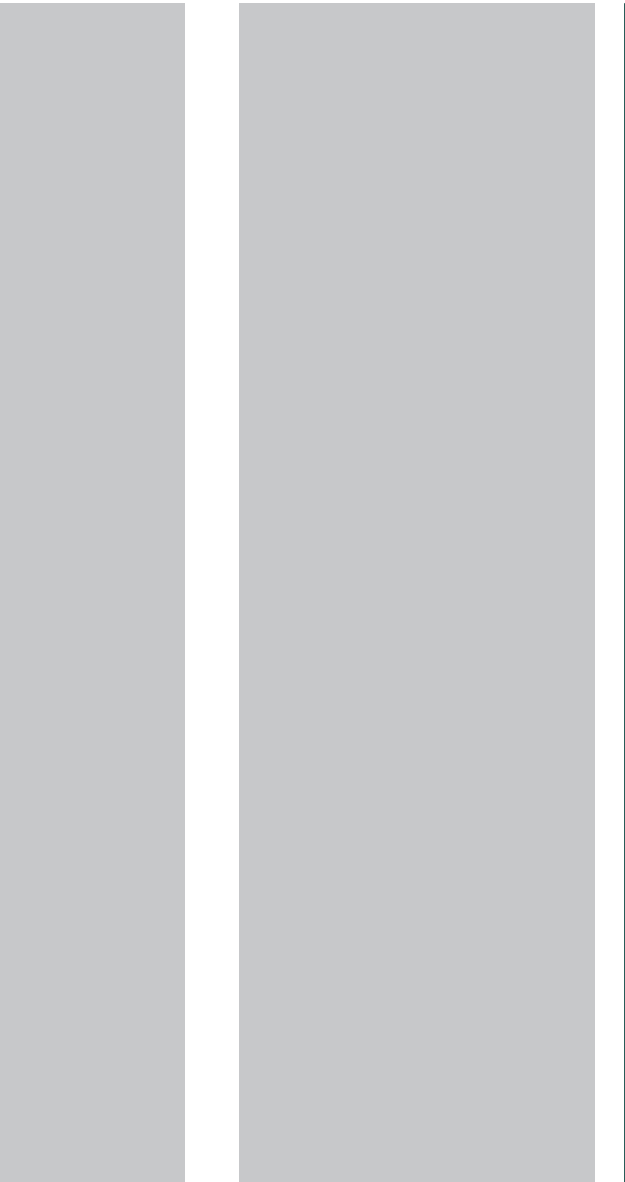
The structural underpinning of the SDF demonstrates its keenness to work within the parameters of organizational norms, rules, and boundaries. Still, the SDF's connection with the PKK, which is categorized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, as well as limited funding sources and dependence on American and Russian support to compensate, are obstacles in the group's quest to extend its influence. The SDF enjoys a great deal of harmony in its relations with the US and Russia, continued relationships with the regime, and the support of the Kurdish lobby in Lebanon. At the same time, it faces armed hostilities from Turkey, the neutrality of the Peshmerga Forces, and while Saudi Arabia has not declared its stance on the group, it is likely that the Kingdom's sympathies lie with Turkey.

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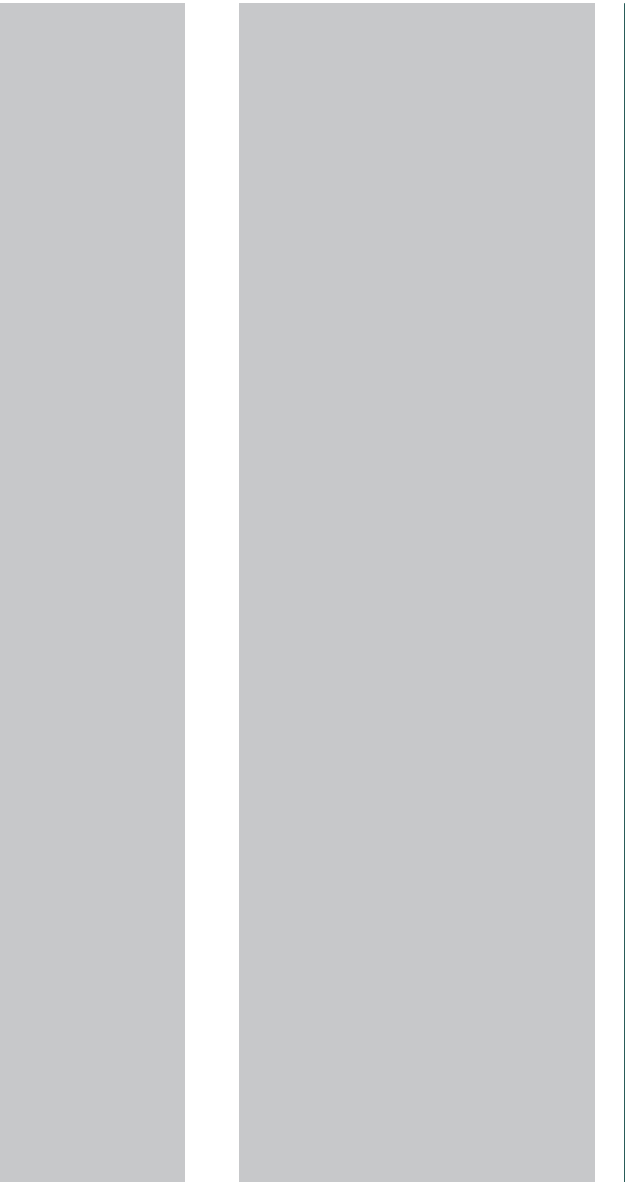


# Masarat





# Masarat



## King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

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Founded in 1983 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and chaired by HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz, the mission of The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies is to be a beacon of knowledge for humanity as envisioned by the late King Faisal bin Abdulaziz. The Center aims to accomplish this through conducting research and studies that stimulate cultural and scientific activities in the service of mankind, enriching cultural and intellectual life in Saudi Arabia, and facilitating collaboration between the East and the West.

The Center's activities include lectures, seminars, conferences, and roundtable discussions. It houses the King Faisal Library, a collection of rare manuscripts, an Islamic art museum, and the King Faisal Museum. It also administers a robust Visiting Fellowship Program. Since the Center's focus is scholarly research, the Research Department was restructured in 2013 to carry out in-depth analysis in contemporary political thought, Saudi studies, regional studies, Arabic language studies, and modernity studies. The Center has also been collaborating with various research centers around the world within its scope of research.



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