

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is a US-backed anti-ISIS fighting [coalition](#) in northern Syria. It is dominated by the Kurdish [People's Protection Units](#) (YPG), with smaller Turkmen, Sunni Arab, Syriac, and other minority components. The SDF was [formed](#) in October 2015 after the US [encouraged](#) the YPG to rebrand and incorporate Arab units. As the US-led Coalition's primary partner on the ground, the SDF has been successful in taking control of large swaths of land in northern and eastern Syria from ISIS. In October 2017 the SDF marked a major [victory](#) when it ousted ISIS from al-Raqqa city with US-led Coalition support, after a devastating [four-month siege](#).

The Kurds became the US's preferred partner in the fight against ISIS in Syria after the US-led Coalition helped the YPG defend Kobane in [late 2014](#). The US-led Coalition saw the YPG as a more effective and reliable force than Syrian opposition groups, and began shifting support towards the Kurds despite Turkish objections. The incorporation of the YPG into the SDF in 2015 gave the US some buffer from Turkish criticism as it ramped up support to the Kurds. The YPG [has ties](#) to the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), which both the US and Turkey have designated a terrorist organization. Turkey also considers the YPG a terrorist organization, and has grown increasingly worried as US support to the SDF has enabled it to expand the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of 'Rojava' along the Turkish border.

Despite US military [claims](#) that as much as 50% of the SDF fighters are Arab, the YPG commands the SDF and constitutes its [primary fighting force](#). Arab components have been [sidelined](#) in combat, and denied access to better weapons and leadership positions. Non-Kurdish recruits reportedly have to go through YPG [ideological](#) instruction. After the SDF's liberation of al-Raqqa city with US-led Coalition support, Kurdish fighters hung a [large banner](#) of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in the city center.

The SDF has set up [civil councils](#) and [security forces](#) in towns captured from ISIS, signalling that the Kurds intend to retain control. These new bodies have often supplanted opposition-affiliated local governing bodies, which along with measures such as the [forced conscription](#) of Sunni Arabs, has raised concerns about the imposition of SDF/YPG control over non-Kurdish populations. The SDF's progress in northern Syria prompted Turkey to launch operation "[Euphrates Shield](#)" in August 2016, sending Turkish special forces and Turkey-supported opposition groups to capture northern Aleppo towns from ISIS and block the SDF's eastward advance.

The SDF has retained the YPG's pragmatic and transactional approach to other actors on the ground. At various times it has both cooperated and clashed with [Assad Coalition](#) forces, but its relations with Russia appeared to be warming in December 2017 when Russia and the YPG [announced](#) they would conduct joint anti-ISIS operations in Deir Ezzor - where the YPG only operates under the SDF umbrella. The SDF's relationships with Syrian opposition groups vary. While some opposition groups in al-Raqqa province have joined the SDF, in northern Aleppo it has come into [violent conflict](#) with other Turkey-backed opposition groups.

In early January 2018 a US-led Coalition official said that they were working with the SDF to train a 30,000-strong [Border Security Force](#) in northeastern Syria, but the US [backpedaled](#) after an [angry response](#) from Turkey, which threatened to attack what it called a "[terror army](#)." Still, this incident highlights the long-term US commitment to support the SDF, which will likely ensure the force's survival and pave the way for a permanent Kurdish autonomous region.

Alternate Names:

Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk, QSD, قوات سوريا الديمقراطية

