

Are CIA-backed Syrian Rebels Really Fighting Pentagon-backed Syrian Rebels?

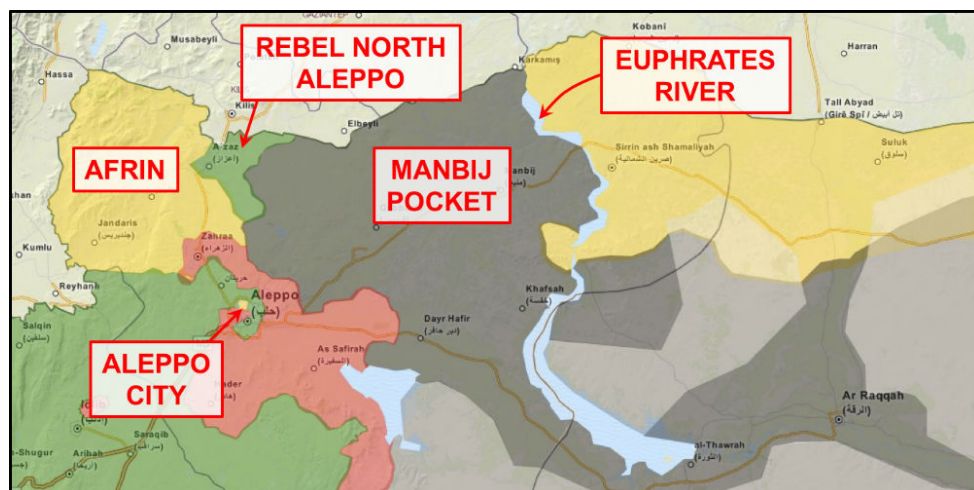
Sam Heller



The *Los Angeles Times*' contention Sunday that "in Syria, militias armed by the Pentagon fight those armed by the CIA" is basically incorrect.

This is complicated, but bear with me. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are not a monolithic force. Like nearly every other faction in Syria, they're spread across an archipelago of enclaves nationwide. The SDF units clashing with Syrian rebels reportedly supported by the CIA are not

supported by the Pentagon —they're from a different enclave. The U.S. military is exclusively supporting the SDF in northeastern Syria on the other side of the Euphrates River. The Pentagon-backed SDF east of the Euphrates is fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic State, not rebels with or without U.S. backing.



Allow me to explain.

The confusion around this news story is a result of wartime Syria's jigsaw-like map of control. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the SDF umbrella under which they operate are primarily active in northeastern Syria east of the Euphrates River, where they've linked what had been two isolated Kurdish enclaves to form a zone of control

Map credit: "Agathocle de Syracuse," 2 March 2016. Labels added. Map key: Red, regime; yellow, SDF; green, rebels; grey, Islamic State.

along much of Turkey's southern border. But they also control a still-isolated enclave west of the Euphrates River in northwestern Aleppo province called Afrin, as well as a single neighborhood in Aleppo city. Afrin remains separated from YPG/SDF territory east of the Euphrates by a long stretch of Islamic State territory that the U.S. government calls the "Manbij Pocket."

Before February, SDF units in Afrin had periodically clashed with Arab and Turkmen rebels in northern Aleppo province, including some that reportedly receive arms via a combined intelligence cell in Turkey that includes the CIA. Then, in February, the SDF in Afrin took advantage of the chaos caused by a Russian-backed regime offensive around Aleppo city to attack the rebels from the west and grab large sections of the northern Aleppo countryside. [The Afrin SDF allegedly enjoyed Russian close air support against these rebels, although they have publicly denied](#) these reports. Some clashes have persisted since then, but the new SDF-drawn lines have mostly held.

Thus, the implication in the *Los Angeles Times* that the SDF drove west from northeastern Syria (east of the Euphrates) to the outskirts of Aleppo city is misleading. The story reports:

At first, the two different sets of fighters were primarily operating in widely separated areas of Syria — the Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeastern part of the country and the CIA-backed groups farther west. But over the last several months, Russian airstrikes against anti-Assad fighters in northwestern Syria have weakened them. That created an opening which allowed the Kurdish-led groups to expand their zone of control to the outskirts of Aleppo, bringing them into more frequent conflict with the CIA-backed outfits.

In reality, the Kurdish SDF actually pushed *east* from Afrin in the northwest, where they had been all along. SDF presence east of the Euphrates largely remains static, although they have established a beachhead west of the Tishrin Dam that spans the river.

All this is relevant because the Pentagon has only supported the SDF east of the Euphrates in its battles with the Islamic State. The Afrin SDF is not Pentagon-backed — this sounds sort of ridiculous, but it's true.

So yes, it is technically true that the SDF receives U.S. Department of Defense support and one of its components is fighting Arab and Turkmen rebels, some of whom received CIA backing. But the factions of the SDF that are fighting these rebels are not Pentagon-backed, so we're not seeing the sort of interagency warfare the story implies.

Beyond the eastern SDF, [some elements of the non-SDF, northern Aleppo Arab and Turkmen rebels have received arms and close air support from the U.S. DoD and the broader coalition](#). This has received essentially no media coverage, but the non-SDF northern Aleppo rebels are seeded with several units that graduated from the Department of Defense "train and equip" program and are conspicuously equipped with the arms stocks procured for that program.

One train-and-equip unit, the 30th Division, was very publicly destroyed by Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra when it was infiltrated via northern Aleppo, an embarrassing failure for the program. (Some members of the 30th Division actually fled to Afrin and joined a part of the non-U.S.-backed Afrin SDF.)

But the 30th Division was just one cohort from the Pentagon's train-and-equip program. Others — including Liwa al-Hamzah, Liwa al-Mu'tasem, and the 99th Division — are now fighting alongside CIA-backed rebels with coalition close air support against the Islamic State in northern Aleppo. These U.S.-backed forces have consciously avoided the rebel-SDF fighting, instead focusing exclusively on fighting the Islamic State. Elsewhere, [another train-and-equip unit, the New Syrian Army](#), recently collaborated with other rebels to seize Syria's southern al-Tanaf border crossing with Iraq from the Islamic State.

So, to sum up: The non-Pentagon-backed SDF are fighting the CIA-backed northern Aleppo rebels, who are fighting alongside Pentagon-backed train-and-equip rebels against the Islamic State. The CIA-backed rebels are not fighting the Pentagon-backed SDF. They are fighting a different faction that does not enjoy U.S. support (and may have actually recently enjoyed Russian support). And the Pentagon-backed SDF is fighting the Islamic State in eastern Syria, half a country away.

Obviously, this is not an easy thing to explain properly, but I hold the U.S. government responsible for doing a poor job making these politically salient distinctions between its various proxies. I hope this doesn't prejudice my access to various U.S. government spokespeople, but the official comment I've gotten to date on, for example, which section of the SDF receives Pentagon support has typically been muddled and unhelpful.

The facts here actually mean the fighting in northern Aleppo is not the absurd intra-U.S. government

<http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/are-cia-backed-syrian-rebels-really-fighting-pentagon-backed-syrian-rebels/>

bloodletting it initially appears to be. But U.S. messaging on this has been sloppy, so you'd never know.

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