



Question (R2 QL7): *What significance will small military groups, particularly in Northern Syria, have in a post-ISIL Levant? How should CENTCOM best shape or influence these groups?*

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Executive Summary

Dr. Kathleen Reedy, RAND Corporation

The primary theme that all of the experts touched upon is that there will be no single unified situation regarding either the military groups or status of northern Syria in a post-ISIL environment. The current fractured nature of the resistance groups in the area will continue, with different sub-regions experiencing different likely outcomes with different actors. Dr. Craig Whiteside (Naval War College) also includes the important caveats that a) post-ISIL means after ISIL loses its ability to control extended territory, as it will likely continue to hold control of villages across Syria and Iraq for some time to come; and b) this question is predicated on continued U.S. strategic interest in engaging in Syria in the near- and medium-term future. A third assumption is that these militant groups continue to operate. If a political solution can ever be reached, some of these militias will likely sign on to the agreement and may disarm or be incorporated into regime security forces, meaning many of them may be removed from consideration.

Assuming that the U.S. will continue some level of involvement in Syria, the wide variety of actors and situations on the ground will necessitate taking a broad variety of tactics, as each organization and population will require different approaches. In some instances, this may mean acknowledging that CENTCOM will be unlikely to be able to engage in effective ways and even where it can, as Mr. Vern Liebl (Marine Corps University) notes, may have to be resigned to only having limited and short-term influence.

Wide Variation by Region and Actors

The experts agree that there will be a wide degree of variation in what happens with the military groups after ISIL loses control over the extended territory of the caliphate. Faysal Itani (Atlantic

Council) and Liebl both suggest that the vacuum left by ISIL will be filled by the Syrian regime, Kurdish forces, and the broad spectrum of Syrian opposition groups. Whiteside considers the remainder of the ISIL forces and those they manage to recruit part of this milieu as well.

Itani and Liebl offer that the Kurdish population will be one of the dominant players in northern Syria after the fall of ISIL, with the PYD continuing to serve as the political arm and the YPG as the militant one. The Kurdish groups are likely to hold their current territory along the northern border of the country as well as contest areas in the northeast. Their ability to hold ground much in more ethnically diverse territories may be less effective, but as a militia and a political force, they are likely to remain a key player. Itani notes that some of the Kurdish power in the northeast will be contested by various Arab militias, some of which participated as part of Euphrates Shield. Liebl describes the wide variety of militias that are likely to compete for power, each of which has their own agenda. Jabhat Fateh al Sham (JFS, formerly al-Nusra) may attempt to gain some control here as well, but is likely to be poorly received by the local population and may instead be coopted by ISIL.

Northwest of Aleppo and into Idlib Province, where ISIL has had no real influence, are likely to continue to see the influence of JFS and the only somewhat more moderate Salafi Ahrar al-Sham. The only major contender for control against them in the region will be the regime coming from the south and Aleppo, but it may take extended periods of counterinsurgency efforts to fully eliminate them (unless they can be brought into a political solution, which JFS has shown no interest in and Ahrar al-Sham seems to be divided on), meaning they are likely to remain active and violent, if underground.

Whiteside focuses on the Salafi groups, particularly on what the remnants of ISIL will likely do in the wake of such an event. Under different names, he argues, the Islamic State has been in a similar position twice before, which will likely serve as an indicator of how they may react in the future. A defeated ISIL would find core areas in Iraq and Syria where the reach of the government is limited, which would include dozens of places in Iraq (particularly in Anbar, the Jazira desert, and Diyala and Salahuddin provinces) and even more in Syria. In these locations, they would try to keep the flames of resistance alive while waiting for opportunities to take advantage of the environment (such as poor governance or sectarian behavior). They would likely not only do so using their own forces, but would attempt to recruit and coopt other Salafi groups and fighters into an umbrella movement, as they did (as Tawhid wal Jihad and later AQI) in Iraq in 2003-2006, using financial and political rewards as a recruiting incentive.

In addition, there are a number of other, more pro-regime militant organizations that will be vying for control, including the regime itself and Hezbollah (as well as the Syrian-based Shi'a militias backed by Iran). These groups will be attempting to solidify the regime's control, but what and how they do so, and how they interact with other extant militias, is highly uncertain at this point.

CENTCOM Engagement Will Have to Be Tailored

All of the experts agree that future engagement from CENTCOM will have to be tailored to the specific group they are attempting to influence and much of it will depend on how the political situation unfolds. Itani notes that relationships do exist between the US and some groups, but were mainly forged in the covert operations rooms set up in Jordan and Turkey rather than via CENTCOM, and have been strained by local perceptions that the United States is no longer concerned with the war and focuses exclusively on ISIL and, increasingly, JFS. Repairing these relations and re-establishing credibility will be a challenge, but important if CENTCOM wishes to exert lasting influence rather than just transactional engagements. Below are examples provided by the experts of particular militant groups and advice on how to engage them.

- **PYD/YPG:** Liebl describes the history of U.S. engagement with the Kurdish forces. In essence, the U.S. has been inconsistent with its support, supplying more and less of it at various points since 2013. While the Kurds have generally been happy to work with U.S. forces and will undoubtedly continue to do so, they may not see the U.S. as a “stable” ally, especially when Turkey and Russia are involved. Maintaining credible and consistent relations with them will be an essential part of CENTCOM’s approach, though the Kurds may always hedge.
- **Anti-Regime Militias:** This umbrella consists of a wide and diverse range of militant groups, each with very different relations toward the U.S. and very different agendas. Some will be more accessible to CENTCOM influence, but some may be out of reach. Liebl cautions that the U.S. will need to be realistic about how much influence it can actually wield with these groups. He provides examples, including
 - The Syriac Military Council, allied to the PYD, but with little connection to the U.S., meaning the U.S. will likely have little ability to influence it
 - The Turkmen Sultan Murid Division, which is anti-PYD and neo-Ottoman, affiliated with the FSA and closely coordinates with the Turkish Army may be another group the U.S. may not be able to influence
 - The Turkmen Seljuk Brigade, which is pro-Kurdish now, may be more amenable to U.S. support in terms of training and financing.
 - The Sunni Arab Hamza Division, associated with the FSA, and Jbhat Thuwar al-Raqqa were both part of the U.S. train and equip program are likely to continue to be amenable to U.S. support and leverage.
 - The al-Mu’tasim Brigade, also with the FSA has received support from the U.S., but is more closely allied with Turkey, so should be treated with caution.
 - The Jaysh al-Thuwar are largely independent in their anti-ISIL fight, and having not yet accepted U.S. aid, are unlikely to do so.
- **Pro-Regime Militias:** There are a number of these of different ethnic and religious backgrounds that the U.S. is unlikely to ever be able to influence, given the political differences between the regime and the U.S., including, the regime itself, Hezbollah, and smaller regional groups like the Assyrian Gozarto Protection Force and Sootoro.
- **Hardline Salafi Groups:** The remnants of ISIL and JSF will continue to be a combative one.
- **Ahrar al-Sham:** Itani notes that engaging this group will be somewhat more complex than the other Salafi organizations, because while it has often worked closely with JFS, it does not aspire to a transnational jihad. This group is internally divided between those who are pushing for outreach to the U.S., and others who are committed to a more hostile form of Salafism. This is a powerful group and an important one. The U.S.’ best

bet is to try to separate the reconcilables from the hostiles, by offering a choice between US support (including against ISIL and the regime) and conflict.

SME Input

Comments on Small Military Groups Post-ISIL

Vern Liebl
Marine Corps University

In examining small military groups in northern Syria, bearing in mind a U.S. desire to leverage and/or influence them, it is best to at least initially focus only upon those groups in northeastern Syria, as those are the most accessible to the U.S. The first “minority military group” would have to be the Kurds, nominally described as the “PYD”, and separated, at least initially, into three distinct pockets.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) with the KNC (Kurdish National Council, an umbrella organization of many small Kurdish political organizations), have established an interim government based upon the three non-contiguous autonomous areas or *cantons*, Afrin, Jazira and Kobani. It has been a major effort by the PYD to join these three enclaves into a single geographically contiguous band stretching east to west along the southern side of the Turkey/Syria border, naming itself Rojava (“the West” aka Federation of Northern Syria). The political system of Rojava is best described as inspired by democratic confederalism and communalism; it is influenced by anarchist and libertarian principles, considered to be a type of libertarian socialism.

Economically the private sector is comparatively small, with a focus on expanding social ownership of production and management of resources through communes and collectives. According to the Rojava Ministry of Economics, approximately three quarters of all property is under community ownership and a third of production transferred to direct management by workers councils. There are no taxes on the people or businesses in Rojava, instead money is raised through border crossings, and selling oil or other natural resources. Oil and food production exceeds demand so exports include oil and agricultural products such as sheep, grain and cotton.

The military of Rojava is the People's Protection Units, in Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), also known as People's Defense Units. There are also Women's Protection Units, in Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, (YPJ), also known as Women's Defense Units, as well as allied Sinjar Resistance Units, in Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*, (YBŞ), formerly called King Peacock Units, in Arabic: Malik Al-Tawus. The YPG and YPJ are collectively known as Peshmerga, a term used by all Kurdish military units, whether in Rojava, the KRG in Iraq, the PKK in Turkey, or the KDP-I and PJAK in Iran.

In trying to apply leverage to induce movement or actions favorable to U.S. interests, the recent history of U.S. interaction with Rojava military forces needs to be borne in mind. On 13 Oct 2015, Turkey informed the U.S. and Russian ambassadors of Turkish disapproval in providing

arms and material supplies to PYD in its fight against the Islamic State, one week later Russia offered to supply PYD forces (YPG & YPJ) in their fight against Islamic State forces. Subsequently, the U.S. cut its aerial support to PYD forces.

The PYD declared its “happiness” in getting Russian support against ISIS. On 24 Nov 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane, bringing the region to the brink of an even larger (potentially global) war. On 16 Dec 2015, Russia openly began discussing the “Kurdish card” in relation to Turkey. Additionally, Turkey had unilaterally abrogated the Turkish-PKK ceasefire of 2013, initiating security crackdowns on PKK and the associated People’s Democratic Party (HDP). With this rising internal conflict between Turkish security forces and PKK, on Jan 2016, Russia demanded the Syrian Kurds be included in any Syrian peace talks. This movement openly alarmed the Turks as they see the PYD Kurds of Rojava as sponsored surrogates of the PKK. Simultaneously, the PYD opened Rmeilan airfield to U.S. forces in northwestern Syria.

In May 2016, the U.S. renewed its air support to the PYD after several months of Russian air support to YPG and YPJ units, followed in June 2016 with a peaceful rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. These twin events both lessened regional stress and increased pressure on the Islamic State. Then, in Aug 2016 the Turks conducted an incursion into Syria at Jarabulus, supporting Free Syrian Army forces trained and equipped by the U.S. (the “Syrian Train and Equip Program”) against PYD and PYD-affiliated forces also trained and equipped by the U.S.

So, with that brief reprise, it is likely clear that the U.S. is not considered to be a stable “player” in the region for the PYD Kurds. They very much like Americans on the personal level, and have at times enjoyed limited military support (the aerial support at the Battle of Kobani (Sep 2014 to Mar 2015) as well as the new U.S. base at Rmeilan). However, with the constant drumbeat of Turkish diplomatic and political demands of the U.S. to stop support for the PYD, almost always linked to references of PYD-PKK alliance and collusion (with notation that the U.S. has carried the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since Oct 1997), any U.S. support has always been a tenuous and tentative thing since Jul 2013.

Looking at a few affiliated units with the PYD, specifically within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), we can first look at the Syriac Military Council (in Syriac Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo [MFS]), essentially an Assyrian Christian militia operating in Al-Hasakah and Raqqa provinces as part of the SDF, allied, supplied and supported by the PYD Kurds. U.S. leverage with this organization is likely very slight. These Assyrians are not to be confused with the geographically co-located Assyrian Gozarto Protection Force (GPF) and Sootoro, a combined organization comprised of Assyrian Christians and Armenian Christians resident in Qamiishli in Al-Hasakah province. Their loyalties are to the Baathist regime in Damascus, therefore they can be considered fairly hostile to U.S. interests. All of the above Assyrian-based organizations receive some unofficial assistance from the American Mesopotamian Organization (the AMO also provides support to Iraqi Assyrian militias and was shocked to find out it was supporting the anti-U.S. GPF).

Putting the above in historical context, these “Christian militias” (as they are often termed) of northeastern Syria are now battling the Islamic State alongside Kurdish forces. However, these groups did not simply emerge spontaneously as a response to Islamic State persecution: they are the latest incarnations of the Dawronoye movement, which first appeared on the European and Middle Eastern political scenes twenty years ago. While they are indeed Christian, their fight is not primarily for their faith, but for their nation, which is neither Syria nor Kurdistan. In their

native tongue, a contemporary descendant of the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus, they call their people Suryoye (Syriacs) and their homeland Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia). Thus, for at least some in northern Syria this is a clash of civilizations in which they do not understand why the U.S. - in their eyes a nation of Christian antecedents- does not aid them.

When looking at Turkmen, estimates maintain somewhere between 800,000 to upwards of 3.5 million (most unlikely). As with the Turkmen of Iraq, they are unrelated to the Turkmen of Central Asia and are descendants of Turkic people of the former Ottoman Empire. As such they are often pro-Turkish.

For example, operating under the Hawar Kilis Operations Room, which is affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and closely coordinates with the Turkish Army, is the Sultan Murid Division. This organization (not a unit) is anti-PYD and neo-Ottoman in outlook, and participated in the Aug 2016 Turkish incursion at Jarabulus. It has also skirmished with YPG forces in Oct 2016 north of Manbij. Another organization along the same lines is the Liwa Ahfad Saladin (Descendants of Saladin Brigade), a combined Syrian Arab and Turkmen organization who also participated with the Turkish Army at Jarabulus. Extension of the Turkish Republic or resurrection of Neo-Ottomanism is their primary aim, not reknitting of a unified Syrian state.

Contrasting with them is the Seljuk Brigade, (not to be confused with the anti-ISIS and anti-Kurdish "Syrian Turkmen Brigades"), who while formerly allied with Turkey have now switched to supporting the PYD in the wake of the Turkish incursion at Jarabulus. The Seljuk Brigades is a member of the SDF. An affiliated SDF organization is the Manbij Turkmen Brigade. The problem is nobody has a clear idea of total Syrian Turkmen manpower participating in the regional conflict. Estimates vary between 8,000 to around 25,000, split between the various anti-Kurd and pro-Kurd organizations. The anti-Turkish Turkmen organizations are intent on aiding the Kurds in establishing a Kurdish state.

Allied with the Turks are the Hamza Division, a largely Arab Sunni organization associated with the FSA. It is part of the U.S. "Syrian Train and Equip Program" and is considered anti-Islamic State and Anti-PYD. It supported the Turkish incursion at Jarabulus and has skirmished with YPG/YPJ elements north of Manbij in Oct 2016. Another FSA unit, the Al-Mu'tasim Brigade, also largely Arab Sunni, is anti-PYD and part of the U.S. "Syrian Train and Equip Program". Both of these organizations, while benefitting from U.S. aid, are pro-Turkish and willingly subvert U.S. aims and goals if they contravene Turkish aims and goals. The possibility that they will support the PYD is nil and the goal of anti-Islamic State combat is secondary to Turkish goals.

Looking at multi-ethnic organizations affiliated with the SDF, the first we can examine is the Jaish al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries), who refused U.S. aid but has always been allied with the PYD. They restrict themselves to fighting the Islamic State and are not supported in anyway by Turkey. A similar organization is the Jabhat Thuwar Al-Raqqa (Front of Raqqa Revolutionaries), who have accepted U.S. aid as beneficiaries of the "Syrian Train and Equip Program" and are also part of the SDF. However, this organization has its differences with the PYD and has in the past engaged in skirmishing with the YPG. They are both aligned against the Islamic State. U.S. leverage is possible here the latter group.

Tribal forces are part of the equation. There is the Euphrates Jarabulus Brigade, based primarily on the small Al-Jader tribe and a member of the SDF. They have faced off against both the

Islamic State and the Turks, they ethnically Arab and allied with the PYD Kurds. The Liwa Siquir Al-Badiye is the Al-Sheitat tribal militia, an Arab tribe mainly located in the vicinity of the Syrian Euphrates River. Allied with the SDF, it has suffered losses of over a thousand tribesman since 2014 in a fierce war with the Islamic State. The Al-Nukhbat Brigade is a combined organization of Sheitat and Shammar tribesmen, also with the SDF. Smaller tribal militias working with the SDF but primarily based in Iraq are the Sharabiyya and Zubaid tribes. All the above tribal forces are part of the "Euphrates Volcano", a joint rebel/resistance organization in northern Syria which is anti-ISIS but 'not necessarily' anti-Damascus, pro-U.S. but anti-Turkey (see SDF). Provision of U.S. weapons, training and limited assistance to all these tribes would likely sway them to U.S. aims, at least temporarily (very likely not long-term).

A very critical tribal militia, also allied with the SDF, needs to be addressed here in reference to post-conflict aims and U.S. ability to shape or influence. That would be the Shammar tribe. As referenced in an earlier response (S-3), the Shammar is a tribal confederacy of over 12 million members, with approximately half a million resident within northeastern Syria. There are approximately 3 million in Iraq, in the main fiercely opposed to the Islamic State, and a further 6.5-7 million in Saudi Arabia (another 2.5 million or so are spread among Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain). In northeastern Syria, the tribal militia is called the Al-Sanadid, usually shortened to the Sanadid Force. It is part of the SDF and has participated in numerous battles against the Islamic State.

What makes this force interesting is what are its goals and what would it take the U.S. to shape and/or influence this group. The Shammar in this part of Syria (as well as those in northern Iraq) have had a close and largely cooperative relationship with the Kurds since the 18th century (there have been short periods of violence and conflict). The Sanadid Force and the (northern) Shammar are considered very pro-Kurdish. The stated goals of tribal leaders has been to preserve tribal autonomy and security, as they are in essence similar to an undeclared nation crossing recognized international borders. They are neither supporters of nor opponents to the Baathists of Damascus. The tribal leaders have also clearly articulated their hostility to the tenets of Wahhabism and would like to break-up the Saudi state. They would like to reclaim the former Emirate of Jabal Shammar, also known historically as the Emirate of the House of Rashid, which existed from 1830 to 1921 (and was a supporter of the Ottomans). Below are the territorial aspirations of the Shammar.



So, an interesting question is how does the U.S. aka CENTCOM want to address Shammar aspirations in order to shape or influence a post-Islamic State Middle East?

In conclusion, how CENTCOM approaches all the above noted entities is extremely susceptible to past experience with the U.S., with current local political realities, and traditional provision of aid in light of a zero-sum environment. Support and blandishments will not be long-lasting and likely will not have any relation to expressed U.S. goals towards democratization, women's rights, gender diversification, etc. However, acknowledgement of local grievances (most related to religious and/or ethnic issues) as well as recognition that the Westphalian system as it relates to Middle Eastern national borders is dead.

As well, there has been no discussion about the status of the Damascus-based Syrian regime of Bashar Assad in relation to a post-Islamic State situation. Staying strictly within northeastern Syria, the current Syrian regime and its military/security forces could definitely be considered a "minority military group". What those forces will do post-Islamic State is unknown, as the Assad regime has already outlived almost everyone's expectations. It is a given that those forces and Bashar Assad himself understand that the U.S. is hostile to them, thus precluding almost all CENTCOM efforts at local shaping with them.

So, bottom line, flexibility and honest realization that short-term is the only way to advance should be the two keys. There are no easy approaches here that are all-inclusive. It should also

be noted that this is not an all-inclusive list of “minority military groups” within northern/northeastern Syria nor has there been addressal of many of the linked-entities operating in northern Iraq (such as the Shammar).

Comments on Small Military Groups Post-ISIL

Faysal Itani
Atlantic Council

Depending on specific geography and the local balance of power, the vacuum left by ISIL will be filled by the Syrian regime, Kurdish forces, and the broad spectrum of Syrian opposition groups. The largest Kurdish force will be the YPG with whom the US military and intelligence communities will have a good deal of familiarity and relationships. The Syrian opposition groups are more complex. ISIS territory liberated by the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield coalition will be taken by Sunni Arab insurgent groups including moderates and Islamists, some of whom have worked closely with the United States as part of a covert program directed at fighting the regime, or under the Department of Defense’s counter-ISIL train and equip program.. This coalition will find itself in tension with both the regime and Kurdish forces. It will dominate northern Aleppo province unless the regime and its allies or the YPG can successfully push it out - they will be deterred somewhat by the Turkish involvement and presence in the Euphrates Shield coalition. Barring such a direct attack on Turkish interests, much of Aleppo province will be controlled by these Arab militias. Unlike Aleppo city itself and its immediate western and southern approaches, Euphrates Shield-controlled territory does not include and likely will not include the presence of the Al Qaeda offshoot Jabhat Fateh al Sham (normally Jabhat al Nusra). Finally, there are of course a large number of pro-regime (and largely Iranian-backed) militias operating in Aleppo, particularly Hezbollah and Iraq militia.

In contrast, the north western province of Idlib (and parts of Latakia and Hama provinces) contain a strong Jabhat Fateh al Sham (JFS) presence. There is no ISIL presence and no effective militia competition in this area. The less extreme but still conservative Salafi group Ahrar Al Sham is powerful in this area as well, and has cooperated with though remained independent of JFS. The main challenge to these groups' dominance in this geography will come from the regime to the west, south, and possible East if Assad captures Aleppo. Idlib will remain a conservative Islamist opposition area regardless, even if the militias are defeated. ISIL is unlikely to return, having been driven out by Syrian opposition groups in 2014.

In the northeast, areas lost by ISIL will also be contested by the regime, the YPG and possibly some Arab allies, Euphrates Shield Arab militia, and JFS. This is a tribal area and authority is likely to be decentralized for a while. Despite Kurdish gains in this area, in Arab territories these gains are fragile and unpopular (the area is partly Kurdish, partly Arab). Authority will likely remain decentralized in Raqqqa province. Arab militia will play a marginal or secondary role to the YPG in Kurdish Hasakeh province. The militias’ role in Deir al Zour is unclear: It is held by ISIL and the regime. JFS is likely to try to fill the post-ISIL vacuum in these areas, but it is not popular and will face local hostility. Militias organized along tribal lines and the regime itself will likely dominate these eastern areas.

The best way to shape or influence the militias likely to replace ISIL is to identify areas of

overlapping interests and exploit them. Northern Syria does not lend itself to a single unified US approach. For example, JFS is not reconcilable to US interests, and will likely need to be defeated, though a conventional counterterrorist approach is likely inadequate and local partners will be essential. The most salient reality for the opposition non-extremist militias likely to replace ISIS is their conflict with the regime. They will gravitate to whomever patron can consistently provide money to pay salaries, and weapons, equipment, and ammunition to fight the regime and protect their own populations. This is the reason for their deference to Turkish influence and agreement to participate in Euphrates Shield against ISIL. It follows that there are two ways to shape the local militia environment on the opposition side: Help them fight the regime, or help end the war (or both). In return, these local groups are the best 'inoculation' against the re-emergence of ISIL. In addition, they are the ones best placed to fight JFS on the ground, but that itself is only likely to happen if military pressure from the regime is lessened, and there is enough trust between the US and these opposition groups to form the basis for a local alliance against JFS. These relationships do exist between the US and some groups, but were mainly forged in the covert operations rooms set up in Jordan and Turkey rather than via CENTCOM, and have been strained by local perceptions that the United States is no longer concerned with the war and focuses exclusively on ISIL and, increasingly, JFS.

One group deserves separate mention: Ahrar al Sham is the hardline Salafi Islamist group that has often worked closely with JFS, but does not aspire to a transnational jihad. This group is internally divided between pushing for outreach to the US, and others who are closer to the ideologically hostile form of Salafism. This is a powerful group, and an important one. The US' best bet is to try to separate the reconcilables from the hostiles, by offering a choice between US support (including against ISIL and the regime) and conflict.

The pro-regime groups such as Hezbollah offer a different challenge, of course, and they are likely to retain a powerful presence in northern Syria. These groups are essentially under Iranian control, without independent agency, and should be seen through the prism of US-Iranian relations.

Comments on Small Military Groups Post-ISIL

Craig Whiteside
Naval War College

Assuming the region is still a key area of interest to the United States, and that we have a desire to reduce the factors in the environment for the return (yet again) of ISIL or a politically similar group anathema to the United States or its local partners.

I also assume that "post-ISIL" as a phrase means: after the caliphate is collapsed and ISIL fails to control territory as the governing body of any significant polity above a small town. Certainly post-ISIL would not mean an environment where ISIL does not exist. They will continue to exist, much as they did after 2006-7 and the Sahwa movement/Surge period. Insurgent groups rarely die; hopefully they will fade away in time. There is a very small possibility they will fracture and collapse.

My research focuses on the doctrine and strategy of the Islamic State movement, and I have little knowledge of the Syrian groups in question, including judgments on their ideology, political goals, or history. That said, the Islamic State has been in a similar position twice before and I think it is safe to say that their behavior in such a situation in the near future would be similar. A defeated ISIL would find core areas in Iraq and Syria where the reach of the government (Syrian or Iraqi) is limited. That would be dozens of places in Iraq (particularly in Anbar, the Jazira desert, and Diyala and Salahuddin provinces) and even more in Syria. In these locations, they would try to keep the flames of resistance alive while waiting for opportunities to take advantage of the environment (such as poor governance or sectarian behavior).

In 2003-6, the IS movement (Tawhid wal Jihad and later AQI) worked diligently to recruit small Salafi-aligned groups into an umbrella movement. Prior to the declaration of an Islamic State (in 2006), the movement leadership understood the imperative of rallying the disparate groups in the Iraqi resistance to the occupation to their banner. They were moderately successful in this regard, but failed to recruit larger groups into the Mujahideen Shura Council (Jan-Oct 2006). Their gambit was successful; in the end, small groups that could not compete with the larger groups (1920s, Islamic Army, Mujahideen Army) joined ISIL, which lavished them with incentives. For example, small group leaders gained high positions within the MSC and later the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in return for pledging allegiance and joining the political front.

When the Sahwa tribal movement rose against AQI/ISI in 2006-7, many of the larger groups joined the Awakening to oppose the Islamic State movement. What observers didn't realize was that these groups (insurgent groups) were not monolithic, and fractured in the 2008-2011 period. While many joined the Awakening, many more fighters sat out and were easy prey for ISI recruiters who were selling a message of anti-government/sectarian resistance that many of the irreconcilable members wanted to hear.

Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that six years after the split, none of these groups maintain a viable opposition to either the state or the Islamic State. They have been coopted and undermined by the Islamic State writ large. The same can be said for the Sunni tribal structure in Iraq, with some exceptions (tribes that have been independent from ISIL since 2004, and some permanent enemies).

The Islamic State movement has demonstrated exceptional ability in recruiting smaller groups that need resources, protection, and a larger name brand. Despite their reputation for inflexibility when they are dominant – when weak, they become very malleable in order to regain some momentum toward their political goals. We are well aware of the groups that joined in 2006-7 (only because ISIL told us), but the fate of the resistance groups after 2008 and the IS tribal engagement strategy has been under-examined. I would imagine that we will soon learn that the majority of ISIL recruits after 2010 came from the fractured Sunni resistance groups (including some former prisoners).

A key to preventing or managing the return of the Islamic State to Syria after its caliphate collapses is to emphasize the grooming and coalescing of these small Syrian resistance groups by

the U.S. and its allies/partners, if only to prevent their recruitment by ISIL or JFS. This could be a relatively cost-effective risk abatement measure to forestall any defections to a relatively wealthy insurgent group that has learned to harness economic resources very efficiently to fulfill its military and political goals, and has strong name brand appeal.

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One of the major unknowns in answering such a question is what will happen if and when there is a political solution in Syria. If there is, undoubtedly some of the militant groups will sign on to it, and will either disarm or find themselves incorporated into the regime security forces in some way. However, there are those that will refuse to do so, either because of the specifics of the agreement or because they have stated from the beginning that they do not intend to cooperate (or are disallowed from doing so by the international community). Some members of these primarily extreme Salafi groups, including JFS, ISIL, and (sometimes) Ahrar al-Sham, are likely to flee Syria and continue to plan jihad from other territories (primarily North Africa), but those that remain will be spoilers and continue their fight in a more insurgent style. Non-Salafi groups may also continue to fight, but the sharp drop off in resources from international supporters should an agreement be reached will limit their effectiveness as militant organizations. The areas northwest of Aleppo are likely to be strongholds for JFS and Ahrar al-Sham, while ISIL will undoubtedly continue to exert influence in the east and northeast.

The major exceptions are the Kurdish organizations, which, given their size and support from the international community, are likely to remain powerful players in a post-ISIL Syria even if they are part of a political agreement. With or without an agreement (depending on near- versus long-term perspectives here), they will likely remain a force in particularly the northeast of the country, in addition to maintaining control of their current territory. They will likely be involved in continuing to remove pockets of ISIL fighters and other spoilers.

As for engagement from CENTCOM, as in so many cases in the Middle East, it will have to be very tailored to the individual groups. The role of other international actors will be an additional

complicating factor, so weighing that role, the changing nature or aims of any given group, and the broader political situation in Syria will require a great deal of finesse.

Author Biographies



Dr. Kathleen Reedy

Kathleen Reedy is an anthropologist and mixed methods researcher at the RAND Corporation. Her background is in Middle Eastern culture and politics. In particular, her research has focused on nationalism, political identities, governance, rule of law, and the gaps between policy and practice in war zones. Prior to joining RAND, she served as a CENTCOM SME for the USAF and as a social scientist for the Army's Human Terrain System, embedding with BCTs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Her graduate fieldwork included 13 months of ethnographic research in Syria, and she has also worked in and on Egypt, the Gulf, China, and Japan.

Since joining RAND in 2014, Dr. Reedy has led or participated in studies on strategic posture and presence; Islamic extremism; right-wing nationalism; the human domain in remote sensing operations; policy options for Syria, Yemen, and Iran; military education and training; and military gender integration.

Dr. Reedy received her Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh, and her undergraduate degree from Penn State.



Mr. Faysal Itani

Faysal Itani is a resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, where he focuses primarily on the Syrian conflict and its regional impact.

Itani was born and grew up in Beirut, Lebanon and has lived and worked in several Arab countries. Before joining the Atlantic Council, he was a risk analyst advising governments, corporations, and international organizations on political, economic, and security issues in the Middle East. Itani has repeatedly briefed the United States government and its allies on the conflict in Syria and its effects on their interests. He has been widely published and quoted in prominent media including The New York Times, TIME, Politico, The Washington Post, CNN, US News, Huffington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.

Itani holds an MA in strategic studies and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a certificate in public policy from Georgetown University, and a BA in business from the American University of Beirut.

Mr. Vern Liebl

Vernie Liebl is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL). Mr Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia.

Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr Liebl has a Bachelors degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Masters degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Masters degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with “Highest Distinction” and focused on Islamic Economics).

**Dr. Craig Whiteside**

Dr. Craig Whiteside is an Associate Professor at the Naval War College Monterey, California where he teaches national security affairs to military officers as part of their professional military education. He is a senior associate with the Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island and a fellow at the International Centre for Counter-terrorism – the Hague. Whiteside’s current research focuses on the doctrinal influences on the leadership of the so-called Islamic State movement and its evolving strategies. He has a PhD in Political Science from Washington State University and is a former U.S. Army officer with combat experience. His recent publications on the Islamic State can be found [here](#).