



R2 Question #5: What are potential unanticipated complications or reactions (or “black swans”) with respect to defeating ISIL in al-Raqqah?

Contributors: *Kathleen Reedy (RAND), Birol Yeşilada (Portland State University)*

Editor: *Kathleen Reedy, RAND*

Compiler: *Sam Rhem, SRC*

Executive Summary

Predicting the unanticipated is always a challenge, but contributors have identified a couple of considerations for thinking about both potential complications involving external actors such as Turkey (Yeşilada) and what is likely to happen with the combatants themselves (Reedy).

External Factors and a Lack of Stability

One of the main complicating factors in Syria has been, from the outset, the wide variety of external influence on and support for the combatants and groups. Regional countries, world powers, and transnational organizations have all had a hand in shaping the conflict. Turkey in particular has been a volatile player, but has been consistent on its stance on the Syrian Kurds—Erdogan has strongly stated that he will not allow a single bridge of Kurds across the north of Syria. He has also promised, however, that it will be “his forces” and not the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council/Forces (SDF) will be the ones to liberate Raqqah. It is unclear, though, whether he means the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or Turkish forces, though. In any case, apart from the FSA, there are no anti-Assad groups currently operating in Syria that could hold Raqqah even if they could clear it, because they would not have the organic support of the population there. It is possible, then, that if one of these groups is predominantly involved in removing ISIL from Raqqah, they will not have the ability to stabilize the region, and given the animosity between the Turkish forces and the Syrian Kurdish forces, it could lead to outright fighting in the area between them (Yeşilada).

ISIL Fighters and Leaders

The other potential black swan contributors note involves the fighters themselves. There are two broad options for ISIL fighters and leaders: to leave Syria or to stay. There have already been leaders

who have fled the Levant when things began to look somewhat bleak for ISIL, primarily fleeing to North Africa. As they are slowly pushed out of Syria, more leaders and fighters may begin to follow them there. This creates follow-on problems in Africa, as increasing fighters and expertise arrive and challenge already fragile-situations there. However, the fight in North Africa is often more local than that in the Levant in its perspective, and fighters may be reluctant to commit to conflict there because of that and because the territory lacks the ideological impetus of the historical home of the Caliphate. Yemen might be another option to flee to, but given the current conflict and related factors such as food shortages there, that seems a less likely option (Reedy).

The other alternative is to stay in Syria. This may be a more viable option for rank-and-file fighters than leaving because they may not have the resources to flee safely and/or, since many of them are foreign fighters, they may be on watchlists that prohibit them from returning home. Leaders who stay are more likely to do so for ideological reasons. Within this option are two possibilities, which are by no means mutually exclusive. One is that some combatants are likely to either join other groups that continue to oppose the regime and go underground as part of a long-term insurgency scenario. The other scenario is that fighters, feeling backed into a corner, attempt to do as much damage to life and property as they can before they are killed or captured (Reedy).

What Can Coalition Partners Do?

Contributors outlined or implied a few actions that the US government and its coalition partners could do to address these black swans.

1. Keep a **tight rein on allies** within and outside Syria to ensure they do not fall to fighting among themselves (Yeşilada).
2. Ensure that the **clearing and holding of Raqqah are coordinated** and that no single force is primarily responsible for its liberation or stabilization (Yeşilada).
3. **Coordinate and communicate closely** between CENTCOM and AFRICOM to attempt to track, detain, and understand the capabilities of leaders and fighters fleeing from Syria and Iraq to North Africa (Reedy).
4. Prepare to deal with a long-running insurgency, for allies and international organizations involved in stabilizing Syria (Reedy).
5. To deal with levels of extreme violence, **more heavily secure civilian populations and key infrastructure** to protect them (Reedy).
6. Find methods and means to **repatriate foreign fighters** to remove them from the battlefield in Syria or elsewhere (Reedy).

Conclusion

Contributors note that unexpected results can involve both external actors and allies (Yeşilada) and the ISIL combatants themselves (Reedy). Ensuring that U.S. forces and partners are ready to address the wide variety of potential complications and are agile enough to adapt to the unexpected rapidly will be essential to minimize the impacts from these types of concerns. Communication and the ability to rapidly react politically and militarily will be paramount.

SME INPUTs

Dr. Birol Yeşilada, Portland State University

This is going to bring two anti-Assad coalitions face to face for control of the region. (1) The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Al Qaeda affiliates supported by Qatar, Saudis, Turkey, Libya and for FSA France and USA; and (2) Syrian Democratic Council/Forces (SDF) and Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava led by the Kurds (YPG) and supported by Western Allies excluding Turkey. The Turkish government of Erdogan is determined to prevent the Syrian Kurds from controlling the corridor in Northern Syria and will do everything possible to crush the YPG which it sees as an arm of the PKK. Erdogan has total support of the Turkish political parties (except the HDP Kurds) in this. So far, Erdogan has provided limited support for the FSA and al-Nusra in the Euphrates Shield Operation. The Turks are reserving their military force in a “wait and see” strategy and will exercise more forceful intervention depending on the outcome of al-Bab and al-Raqqah operations. On several instances while speaking about Raqqah, Erdogan emphasized that that his forces, not the SDF, will liberate Raqqah. By “his forces” it is not clear whether Erdogan means the FSA or Turkish armed forces. Here lies a major problem. Neither the Turks nor the Kurdish led SDF have significant Sunni Arabs in their ranks to be perceived favorable by the Arabs of Raqqah. Even if they take over the city, it is going to be very difficult for them to hold on to it. I suspect that the Turks and their allies in the FSA and SDF will end up fighting each other.

[Dr. Kathleen Reedy, RAND](#)

If ISIL falls in Raqqa, the most glaring black swan will be what happens to the fighters who are not killed or do not surrender. There are two major categories of possibilities there. One is that the fighters and leadership flee Syria. There has already been some indication that ISIL leaders have fled at various points to proclaimed wilayats in North Africa. While they are likely to be valued for their combat experience there, however, a lot of the extremist violence in North Africa is realistically more locally focused than the grand schemes of ISIL. North Africa also holds less ideological credibility than a fight in the territory of the historical caliphates and so may hold less attraction for many of the foreign fighters from outside the Middle East in particular. Yemen might be another location people would flee to, but given the current complexities there, that seems less likely to be desirable than some of the slightly less contested areas in North Africa. In this case, the problem shifts from the Levant and Iraq to North Africa. Combatting this will take an immense amount of intelligence gathering to track and limit the movement of leaders and fighters. It will also require coordination and communication between CENTCOM and AFRICOM to identify key leaders in particular and what capabilities they bring with them.

An alternative option is that fighters stay in Syria and Iraq. This seems more likely to occur for many rank-and-file members of ISIL who have less access to resources to safely move. Also, foreign fighters who have come to Syria to fight may be more likely to stay because they may not be allowed to reenter their home countries. For these fighters, they will likely contribute to on-going insurgency. Some may go underground or try to blend in with other opposition groups, but some, again especially foreign fighters, they may reach a point where they are backed into a corner and rather than going underground, they may decide to destroy as much as they can in the name of their cause before they are caught or killed. In other words, fighters that stay may contribute to long-running insurgency and/or may be explosive in the short-term, attempting to cause extreme amounts of damage. Combatting the former will require whatever government eventually controls Syria to engage in extended counterinsurgency operations, while the latter are more difficult to

handle as the ball is always in the court of the someone willing to commit extreme violence in these kinds of cases. Ensuring that civilian populations and key infrastructure are secured to the greatest extent possible will be important to help limit damage. Also, finding ways to repatriate foreign fighters would be challenging, but could reduce some of this sort of attempts at catastrophic damage if people feel that they can actually return home.

Author Bios

Kathleen Reedy, Ph.D.

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.



Birol Yeşilada, Ph.D.

Birol A. Yeşilada is professor of Political Science and International Studies at Portland State University (PSU). He is the Vice President of the Board of TransResearch Consortium and holder of the endowed chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies in the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government. He is the Director of the Center for Turkish Studies as well as Director of the Middle East Studies Center of PSU. He came to PSU in September 1998 from the University of Missouri-Columbia where he was Chair of the Department of Political Science.

Dr. Yeşilada received his B.A. degree in 1977 in Neurobiology from the University of California at Berkeley, his M.A. in Political Science in 1979 from San Francisco State University and his Ph.D. in Political Science in 1984 from the University of Michigan.

His current research interests include: Global power transition, PI for the World Values Survey (Cyprus), the European Union, political and economic development of Turkey, radical Islam and terrorism, the Cyprus negotiations and international conflict resolution, and politics of economic reform in the emerging markets. His recent publications include several books, latest *EU-Turkey Relations in the 21st Century*, *Islamization of Turkey Under the AKP Rule*, *The Emerging European*

Union and over 30 articles and book chapters. His is the former co-editor-in-chief of *International Studies Perspectives* and former Associate editor of *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*.

Dr. Yeşilada has been an invited policy consultant at various Departments of the US government including the CIA and the State Department, the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the RAND Corporation, Booz Allen Hamilton, the Nathan Associates, Barclays Capital, the World Bank, and is an Academic Associate of the Atlantic Council. He was invited by the White House to take part in a panel study at the RAND Corporation on “Politics and Islam in the New Constitution of Afghanistan” as part of the commission that drafted the new Constitution of that country.

Dr. Yesilada received numerous awards and grants including the Fulbright fellowship and a grant from the Joint Committee on the Middle East of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. At the University of Missouri, he received a campus-wide William T. Kemper Fellowship in Teaching Excellence in 1996. He is the past-president of the Rotary Club of Tigard, Oregon and president of the Rotary Club of Tigard Foundation, past chair of New Generations Committee and co-chair of District 5100 Peace Conference (2012) and is co-Chair of the Peacebuilder Clubs Committee.