



U.S. Soldiers surveil the area during a combined joint patrol in Manbij, Syria, on 1 November 2018. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. ZOE GARBARINO/DVIDS

Framed by more than three decades of anthropological research experience working in Syria and surrounding Middle Eastern countries, and experience working with both U.S. development and military entities, Dr. O'Leary and Mr. Heras offer a sociocultural and political analysis valuable for deployed SOF. They contend that the political strategy necessary for sustainable strategic effect in the unconventional warfare (UW) component of the counterterrorism operation against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was subordinated to the operational level imperative to cultivate a viable proxy force. The authors offer SOF a way to conceptualize strategic political analysis for UW efforts using Syria as a recent case study, but also provide a glimmer of hope for consolidating the gains made there in support of national policy.

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Political Strategy in Unconventional Warfare

O'Leary and Heras



JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



Political Strategy in Unconventional Warfare: Opportunities Lost in Eastern Syria and Preparing for the Future

Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras

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On the cover. TOP: Water irrigation system in Syria near the Euphrates river. PHOTO BY MARTCHAN/SHUTTERSTOCK. BOTTOM LEFT: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and president of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government Masoud Barzani attend a ribbon cutting ceremony in Diyarbakir, Turkey, 16 November 2013. Erdogan talked with the visiting Iraqi Kurdish leader in a bid to boost the ongoing settlement process which aims to end the decades long Kurdish conflict in Diyarbakir. PHOTO BY MUSTAFA KAYA XINHUA NEWS AGENCY/NEWSCOM. BOTTOM RIGHT: People's Protection Units (YPG) soldiers from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) wear the symbolic badges of their cause. On the right, the face of OCALAN, their leader, was imprisoned for years by Turkey. PHOTO BY MAXPPP/NEWSCOM

Back cover. U.S. Soldiers surveil the area during a combined joint patrol in Manbij, Syria, on 1 November 2018. This operation ensures partner forces can safely work together to maintain the safety and security of the region and protect the civilians of Manbij in their common pursuit of defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Maintaining security and stability in Manbij is important to sustaining momentum for ongoing operations to defeat Daesh in eastern Syria. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. ZOE GARBARINO/DVIDS

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From the Dean

The goal of this monograph is to help Special Operations Forces (SOF) evaluate the challenges they face in achieving strategic effects while engaged in campaigns with unconventional warfare (UW) characteristics. Dr. O’Leary’s and Mr. Heras’ analysis is framed by over three decades of embedded anthropological research experience working in Syria and surrounding Middle Eastern countries. They also have experience working with both U.S. development and military entities, which further adds weight to their insights. The monograph offers an example of the kind of sociocultural and political analysis valuable for deployed SOF.

The authors’ text is immediately relevant to SOF because it focuses on a contemporary—indeed, still unfolding—case study. The text is written as a retrospective, though Syria represents an evolving regional crisis. While the majority of the text is written with an eye to the very recent past, readers will recognize, that in a few instances, circumstances on the ground have already changed. Still, there is much to learn or consider with a recent case study, and readers are encouraged to review all the chapters closely.

Many readers will interpret the text through the prism of their own experiences in this theater of operations and may question whether certain factors asserted as knowable were available to the SOF enterprise in real-time or actionable based on existing policy, strategy, or permissions even if knowable. Nevertheless, it is certainly fair to ask SOF to think about whether they could have or should have sought out such information, and, if so, how they might have accomplished the task. It might be that the value of this monograph is in demonstrating the importance of generating a structure that enables the enterprise to accelerate learning about truly complex socio-cultural dynamics.

Many readers will recognize that U.S. Government actions in Syria might have progressed differently had different perspectives about local dynamics been considered. Dr. O’Leary and Mr. Heras progressively build out the maze of relationships SOF were forced to navigate, and oftentimes learn about for the first time, as their tours progressed. Their contention is that these political relationships were known to scholars and other observers at the commencement of the counterterrorism campaign against ISIS, and, that by

focusing on cultivating a viable proxy force against ISIS, the U.S. missed the larger sets of decades-old relationships guiding political decisions of subnational and regional actors. Ultimately, the authors contend the impact of the successful operational-level counterterrorism fight against ISIS was limited by the failure of the USG to conceive a political strategy associated with the UW aspect. The campaign might have been more successful if governance and local politics had been given equal consideration.

Whether readers agree or disagree with the premise of this monograph in the Syria context, it is perhaps just as important to also imagine whether or not they would like to have similar analysis prior to deploying to other locations. A likely answer for most will be a resounding, yes! Stability in Syria and Iraq may prove elusive moving forward, and the international community may need to reengage. The key insights provided by Dr. O’Leary and Mr. Heras emphasize the importance for the USG, and SOF in particular, to establish achievable strategic political goals for a sustainable operational-level UW or CT engagement that helps achieve the government’s overall strategic effect.

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About the Authors

Dr. Carole A. O’Leary’s research and fieldwork focuses on analyzing cross-border communal identity politics in conflict situations, with a specific focus on the importance of Arab tribalism in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Since 1980, she has conducted extensive field research throughout the Middle East region, including in Lebanon, Syria Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and the GCC states.

Her work experience includes serving as a subject matter expert for the U.S. Government for nearly two decades in various capacities for the United States Central Command, United States Special Operations Command, Central Intelligence Agency, and the Department of State Bureau of Near East Affairs/The United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

As an adjunct research professor for 16 years at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C., she co-directed a State department-sponsored Tribal Networking Project which focused on analyzing modes of contemporary Syrian tribal leadership (moral, jural and political), as well as the role of Syrian tribal youth guest worker networks, to better understand how Arab tribalism functions as an important aspect of traditional civil society in autocratic states.

She served as co-principal investigator on a series of USAID and State Department-sponsored educational, human rights, and rule of law capacity building programs implemented in Iraq. These programs included working with Iraqi stakeholders to establish an Iraqi Human Rights Commission and launch a comprehensive voter awareness/election education program in the Arab Sunni regions of Iraq that experienced the lowest voter turnout prior to the 2010 elections. Her work to establish an Iraqi Human Rights Commission involved providing extensive legislative drafting support to the members of the Human Rights Committee in the Iraqi Parliament (Council of Representatives). Dr. O’Leary organized a team of constitutional experts at the request of Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, Chairman of Iraq’s Constitutional Drafting Committee, to advise the Committee on legislation pertaining to women’s rights, minority rights, and federalism.

In addition, she advised the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and authored journal articles for the Counter Violent Extremism Journal,

Terrorism Monitor, the Michigan State Journal of International Law, and the Middle East Review of International Affairs.

Dr. O’Leary earned her bachelor’s degree in Oriental studies in 1980, a master’s degree and Ph.D./ABD from the University of Pennsylvania in anthropology in 1987, and then her Ph.D. in 2007 from Leiden University in faculty of governance and global affairs.

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Introduction

The Great Syrian Revolt began with dramatic rebel victories, but it ended with the slow and inexorable reassertion of government control over the devastated countryside, district by district and village by village. Most of the hundreds of insurgents named and sentenced in absentia by government courts fled into exile. The truly anonymous rebel masses melted back into their ruined villages and urban quarters. - Michael Provence¹

The passage above could easily apply to Syria in the years 2011–2018 though it references the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–1926. Then, as now, rural rebels nearly brought the foreign-backed Syrian mandate government to its knees through a series of loosely coordinated, tactically successful attacks only to lose the strategic victory due to a lack of political coherence and scorched earth, aerial bombardment by French forces against villages supporting the rebels.² In noting these similarities the point is not that the future of the 2011 rebellion could have been foretold by looking to the past. Rather, it is to highlight that essential sociocultural dynamics at play in Syria in 2011 were readily knowable, heavily researched, and could have—indeed, should have—informed the unconventional warfare (UW) activities employed in the counterterrorism campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from 2014 to the present. Achieving U.S. strategic political objectives in Syria starting in 2014 required designing interventions to compensate for the very dynamics that contributed to the 1925–1926 rebellion's collapse.

Despite extraordinary tactical and operational military success by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Syria, the U.S. once again stands on the precipice of strategic political defeat as the Assad regime, backed by the governments of Iran and Russia, positions itself to assume authority over the territory retaken by U.S. partner forces from ISIS and other militant Islamists. The unfortunate refrain since the 9/11 attacks has been precisely that—tactical success not translating into sustainable strategic effect.³ While SOF have demonstrated yet again a high degree of proficiency in linking up with partner forces, brokering politics among disparate military elements,

and devastating an enemy's military capability, navigating the higher order political calculations and nuances of foreign sociopolitical systems still appears to be an area for improvement.

The objective of this text is threefold. First, it is a sincere attempt to utilize the Syrian Civil War starting in 2011 as a relevant case study for the types of sociocultural and political factors that should inform intelligence, plans, and strategy in a civil conflict. Events in Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Syria suggest U.S. SOF have clearly mastered the tactical-to-operational military aspects of UW, but that the operational-to-strategic political aspects that lead to sustainable strategic effect remain a gap in training and education. This observation is similarly argued by General Joseph L. Votel, Lieutenant General Charles T. Cleveland, Colonel Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin about the ability of SOF to undertake UW in gray zone environments. They assert that the experience SOF have with political warfare has atrophied and needs to be recaptured with fresh curricular emphasis on social movement theory, regional history, and cultural studies.⁴ These factors are discussed in numerous places, such as *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies*,⁵ *Joint Publication 3-05: Special Operations*,⁶ and more recently the *Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations (HAMO)*.⁷ Unfortunately, traditional intelligence and planning constructs rooted in Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic aspects of state power; Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure aspects of state power; and Area, Structures, Capabilities, Organizations, People, and Events typically used for civil-military planning and operations analysis, are simply insufficient for revealing the sociopolitical dynamics at play in such environments. Ethnographic and other social science approaches are required, but can be made accessible and operationally relevant.

Second, it forecasts the stressors contributing to likely future Syrian—indeed regional—conflict so that Indicators and Warning can be developed. While the Syrian Civil War appears to be in the closing chapters of this round of violence, it introduced a number of sociopolitical elements that the Assad regime and its foreign sponsors will likely struggle to suppress. The exact interplay of these new elements with preexisting ones is impossible to predict, but informed scenarios of future conflict can be forecasted and Indicators and Warning of trends toward the different scenarios can be tracked. Among the new elements in Syria are the rise of Iranian-backed, foreign, Shi'a communities contributing to a Shi'a arc; resurgent Kurd-Arab

tensions; resource scarcity in the context of Kurdish political dominance; and empowered Kurdish nationalism that might transcend the current political parties.

Third, but perhaps belatedly, it offers ideas on how to make the most of the strategic opportunity still available to the United States with the territory remaining under the authority and influence of its partner forces in Syria. Stated U.S. policy in Syria has five objectives: (1) defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda-related organizations and prevent their return, (2) support a political process leading to a post-Assad transition under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, (3) diminish Iranian influence in Syria, (4) create the conditions for refugees and Internally Displaced Persons to return to their homes, and (5) ensure Syria's weapons of mass destruction are eliminated.⁸ Recent press reports suggest that policymakers have opted to steadily withdraw U.S. reconstruction resources⁹ and diplomatic support from partner forces,¹⁰ which will likely play to the Assad regime's strategy for reasserting its authority. Nevertheless, policy is mutable if clear alternatives are presented, and this text hopes to introduce feasible options to support U.S. political objectives.

Policy constraints certainly impact how SOF operate, the resources available to it, and the time it takes to achieve mission objectives. Yet even within policy constraints, SOF often have decent latitude to determine how they negotiate amongst different partner forces, the types of engagement activities to emphasize, the types of relationships to promote or discourage, and the narratives and themes to disseminate. These aspects are the stuff of politics, and the pages that follow hopefully contribute to the force's ability to navigate the politics of UW as masterfully as it conducts the military component. There were clearly missed political opportunities in Syria, and they ultimately created the conditions that enabled the Assad regime to successfully prosecute a military campaign in 2018 instead of being compelled to negotiate a peace.

Thesis—Then and Now

This text as printed is in actuality the third attempt at framing the content and is presented largely as retrospective since it anticipates the Assad regime's ability to restore authority over all Syrian territory after its publication. It was originally submitted in September 2017, but the rapid collapse of ISIS immediately thereafter forced a revision. The second version also

became a victim of changing ground circumstances when the Assad regime successively defeated rebels in Damascus's Eastern Ghouta suburb and Dara'a Governorate between May and July 2018—just as it was being prepared for printing. The political opportunity structure prior to these events was favorable for the United States with respect to reconciling disparate opposition ambitions in Eastern Syria through a broader nationwide rebel coalition, and though the Assad regime had made strong advances by mid-2017, it was by no means assured of military victory. What tipped the balance between October 2017 and July 2018 was political miscalculation starting in 2014.

The text's original thesis in mid-to-late 2017 asserted that the U.S. could yet achieve strategic political objectives despite the maze of internal and external political tensions that manifested among its partners by early 2017. It stated:

The United States has a viable but fleeting opportunity to secure Eastern Syria for the anti-Assad opposition, quell Turkish and Iraqi concerns over Kurdish nationalism, and roll back Iranian influence in the area, but must play the role of a strategic political balancer given the deep intergroup distrust stemming from embedded resource scarcity, ethnic nationalism, and ideological conflict. Without a balancer and structural incentives, Arab-Kurd cooperation in Eastern Syria, also called al-Jazeera, is likely to devolve into ethnic conflict once the common threat of ISIS retreats. Despite the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and Democratic Union Party's (PYD) ability to seize territory from ISIS and govern in its wake, relying on the tenuous alliance they have formed actually sets the stage for U.S. strategic failure in both Syria and the region more broadly. Bashar Assad's post-ISIS Eastern Syria strategy—and by extension Iran's near-term regional influence strategy—relies upon exacerbating Arab-Kurd identity conflict and resource competition so that his regime becomes a strategic security partner yet again to tribal Arabs.

This is not to say that Eastern Syria, also known as al-Jazeera, would be partitioned from the Syrian state, but administered separately for an unspecified period of time. Already the Assad regime, with the support of Russian forces, is implementing the strategy described above at the time of this writing. While the Assad regime long supplemented its mainline military with Alawite-based *Shabiha* and mixed-sect, locally-oriented National Defense

Forces (NDF),¹¹ it has recently created a local militia-based Fifth Corps with Russia's support due to widespread discontent with the way the Shabiha and NDF operated in the past.¹² The Assad regime also formed in June 2018, notably with Russian backing, a Bedouin tribal national defense entity in Eastern Syria, which drew tribal leaders from as far as Hasakah and Dara'a governorates.¹³ Whereas the Euphrates once looked like a crucial military demarcation line, its importance as a political barrier is likely evaporating.

At the same time, political fragmentation intensified among the opposition as Turkey and the United States continued down divergent paths in their support for rebel forces. The U.S. objective of eliminating ISIS in Syria and Iraq resulted in its heavy support for the PYD, which Turkey considers a strategic threat.¹⁴ Turkey, on the other hand, has been willing to work with a number of mostly-Arab Islamist groups to fight against the Assad regime, serve as proxies in the fight against the Kurdish PYD, and restrict humanitarian aid to mainly Kurdish areas in al-Jazeera.¹⁵ It also signed the Astana Accord with Russia and Iran, which requires it to enforce a ceasefire between the opposition forces in its area of control and the forces aligned with the Assad regime. The only exception was in combatting "terrorists"—a term conveniently interpreted by the Assad regime and its allies as the main rebel groups in the Homs/Hamah countryside, Eastern Ghouta, Dara'a Governorate, and Idlib Governorate.¹⁶ When one considers that Turkey supported other Kurdish groups during the Cold War and maintains friendly relations with them to this day, one must wonder if current political tensions, even causing questions about Turkey's involvement in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), were avoidable.

The updated thesis is, therefore: the operational mandate of U.S. SOF to defeat ISIS in Syria through partner forces superseded the political strategy to augment the Syrian opposition's coherence and capability thereby undermining the optimal UW effect. This text demonstrates that essential sociocultural and political factors were publicly available to analyze and plan against in 2011, and it describes how local actors responded to events once the Assad regime pulled its influence back from Eastern Syria. More specifically, it illustrates how the immediate operational necessity to support the PYD and its militia should have been recognized as a medium-term political threat that could have been mitigated by concurrently building governance structures sensitive to internal opposition and external ally

concerns. Instead, placing the PYD at the center of anti-ISIS efforts resulted in a militarily effective operation, but not a sustainable, politically viable one.

As for the remaining strategic opportunity, there is a small chance that the U.S. can continue to frustrate the Assad regime's overtures to the tribal Arab community and forestall what would likely be the seeds of yet another active conflict in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq. Although many tribal Arabs are coming to perceive Assad as winning the long fight and are gradually responding to his overtures,¹⁷ there is still a chance to secure the gains made by the opposition and deal a crucial strategic influence blow to the growing Iranian-backed Shi'a Crescent stretching from Iran through Iraq and northeastern Syria to Lebanon.¹⁸ The counterstrategy requires the U.S. to emphasize village and town-level identities where intergroup cooperation and interests unite Eastern Syrians at the local level, which can balance against higher-level intergroup fears, in order to establish a functional political system more attractive than what the Assad regime can offer. If successful, this strategy erodes Assad's ability to buy back loyalty or foment ethnic conflict, mitigates expanding Iranian influence in Eastern Syria through its work with the Assad regime, and diminishes regional government fears about Kurdish nationalism as Syrians refocus their efforts on internal governance and economic reconstruction instead of nationalist expansionism.

The Context

From the start of the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) campaign in Syria in 2014, the U.S. military was able to build up the SDF and its adjutant force, the Syrian Arab Coalition, with a relative minimum of communal tension between Kurds and Arabs. This local partner building project emerged in September 2014 when the U.S. military began engaging with the Kurdish-majority coalition of armed groups, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the YPG's Arab militia allies, which had at that time recently formed the Burkan al-Furat (Euphrates Volcano) coalition against ISIS. The U.S. military's kinetic support for the Burkan al-Furat coalition was decisive in this coalition's successful defense of the northern Syrian city of Kobani from a major ISIS assault.¹⁹ The operation to defend Kobani was a turning point in these Syrian partners' war against ISIS and a paradigm shift in the development of the socio-politics of the al-Jazeera. The U.S. military, working from this initial alliance of Kurds and Arabs at the battle of Kobani,

nurtured a 50,000-plus fighter SDF that reclaimed from ISIS virtually all of Syria east of the Euphrates River, including ISIS' former capital of Raqqa.

Yet as successful as OIR was in accomplishing its goals by, with, and through the SDF, these achievements must ultimately be judged by whether or not the local Syrian partner force could support successful, resilient, and sustainable governance in its wake. As the ISIS threat to the al-Jazeera receded, the potential for destabilizing Kurdish-Arab communal conflict in Northern and Eastern Syria remained. Tensions persisted due to (a) historical and contemporary social and political dynamics, (b) the unsettled nature of Syrian intra-Kurdish politics, and (c) the renewed attention of the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) on securing its future in the al-Jazeera.

The underlying social and political tensions among Kurds and between Kurds and Arabs in the al-Jazeera constituted the most crucial political threat to the military operation because they compelled al-Jazeera's actors to seek external support in what appeared to them a zero-sum competition over very limited local resources. The structures of governance that OIR encouraged with its local Syrian partners inadvertently accentuated the lines of vulnerability. These dynamics were: (1) the struggle within Syria's Kurdish community over the value of the Kurdish nationalist ideology established by Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers Movement (PKK) and how to actualize it in the day-to-day affairs of the governance of the al-Jazeera; and (2) the influence building operations of the SARG in the al-Jazeera, and whether and how Damascus would be able to reassert its authority through new or renewed patron-client relations. Furthermore, Turkey's anxiety over the PYD's influence in Northern and Eastern Syria internationalized these internal tensions and effectively split two of the opposition's most important foreign sponsors.

To be clear, the choice to support the PYD is not in question. Rather, the decision early on not to moderate its political and military significance through broader institution building is. Indeed, the text asserts this (non) decision represents the turning point in what could have been both a militarily and politically successful UW campaign.

Methodology

To make its case, this text relies on two research components. First, it provides a historical assessment of Kurdish-Arab relations in the al-Jazeera. In

so doing, it offers a succinct yet operationally relevant review of HAMO-related dynamics. Second, it leverages in-depth interviews with Syrians from the al-Jazeera and non-Syrians who are currently posted there or have traveled there frequently following the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising in 2011.

This study purposefully focuses attention to the dynamics of the period between 2011 and 2014, and on the governance vacuum created by the departure of the SARG from most of the al-Jazeera. It was during this period that the PKK-linked, PYD Syrian Kurdish political movement rose to prominence and power in the al-Jazeera, and, with the active assistance of the PKK, organized a large part of the Syrian Kurdish community in this region under the military structure of the YPG. This relative—and often forced—unity of the Syrian Kurdish community in the al-Jazeera benefited the U.S. military as it found a cohesive and effective local partner to build up a force to fight ISIS. But the internal contradictions that now threaten the viability of the campaign were knowable and accessible at the time of the U.S. intervention. By focusing on this period in the context of the al-Jazeera's Kurdish-Arab relations, the opportunities lost become clear and the potential futures more apparent.

While the future is never definitively written, it is imagined in the context of historical relationships, economic and political structures, and fears.

Breaking free of conflict dynamics requires new ways of imagining cooperation and social, economic, and political structures that make them possible and relevant.

Breaking free of conflict dynamics requires new ways of imagining cooperation and social, economic, and political structures that make them possible and relevant. These structures could not transform in Eastern Syria absent dedicated U.S. intervention to promote the mostly overlooked, village-level cooperative interests that exist across ethnic and sectarian groups. Drawing upon the history and interviews, the text offers a possible strategy for a focused intervention in the current al-Jazeera system of interethnic relations.

Chapter Overview

To achieve the three objectives above, the text is divided into three parts. Part 1 consists of a basic sociocultural overview of Eastern Syria and consists only of chapter 1. Part 2 includes chapter 2 on tribal Arabs descended from

Bedouin lineage and chapter 3 on the Kurds. Together, parts 1 and 2 constitute a baseline overview of political tensions in Eastern Syria applicable to UW analysis. The thesis of the text is largely covered by parts 1 and 2, but is complemented by the conclusion in part 3.

Part 3 consists of chapter 4 describing the potential impact of the new sociopolitical factors identified above, chapter 5 providing potential future scenarios in Eastern Syria, and a concluding chapter 6. Part 3 contributes to both the Indicators and Warning for future conflict and the recommendations for how to salvage strategic political benefit from the current situation. When combined together, parts 1–3 provide what is hoped to be a working example of the higher order political analysis for sustainable UW strategic effect.

More specifically, chapter 1 provides a baseline overview of the sociocultural dynamics and main identities driving behavior in the region. It discusses the historical relations between Kurds and Arabs, but also describes identities common to all ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups. The latter identity types create important mixed-group, cooperative political opportunities, but are often missed as traditional intelligence analysis emphasizes ethnicity, religion, and sometimes tribe.

Chapter 2 describes tribal Arab politics in Eastern Syria including the complicated relationship between the Arab Alawite regime and the predominantly Arab Sunni population. It begins by describing the tribe as the foundation of Bedouin Arab identity in al-Jazeera and how the state has steadily eroded the institution of the sheikh as a leader among the people. Chapter 2 also describes how the Assad regime leveraged resource scarcity as a means of dividing tribal loyalties to prevent a coherent tribe-based threat to the regime.

Chapter 3 describes the extraordinary complexity of Kurdish political interests in Eastern Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iraq and Turkey. It provides a brief overview of the idea of Kurdistan, describes the differences between Kurdish political party interests within Syria, and analyzes the promise and peril of the political system dominated by the PYD. Furthermore, chapter 3 explains the complicated foreign interventions in Kurdish minority politics in each of the countries with Kurdish populations.

Chapter 4 forecasts the structural and identity conflicts that might potentially emanate from the current trends in Eastern Syrian politics. The chapter focuses on five dynamics, ranging from an internal al-Jazeera balance

of power among opposition groups or a possible balance of interests, the implications of a Shi'a Arc running from Iran to Syria through al-Jazeera, and little reported rise of Kurdish Islamism. When combined with resource scarcity, these dynamics portend continued instability absent a political accord among al-Jazeera's populations that promotes cooperation instead of resource conflict.

Chapter 5 explains why there is a brief moment of opportunity for a possible system of governance in Eastern Syria. Called "West Berlin in Eastern Syria," this scenario covers the conditions making it possible, the enabling conditions that will enhance the chance for success, and the obstacles that will be faced along the way. It also recognizes the possibility of three other future scenarios and briefly describes why they could arise.

Chapter 6 concludes this analysis and summarizes the findings for future application to UW analysis.

Part 1

Chapter 1. A Sociocultural Appreciation of Eastern Syria

For UW to be strategically sustainable, the structures created through assistance first have to reconcile the main tensions between partner forces, which in many cases means emphasizing identities that cross ethnic, sectarian, or even ideological lines. Jedburghs in World War II, for instance, spent a great deal of effort on keeping French partisans focused on fighting the German occupiers and not each other.²⁰ While ISIS provided a compelling reason for opposition forces to coalesce around a military threat, organizing militias along ethnic and sectarian lines also reinforced the identities with the greatest potential for political division. Instead, other functional or interest-based identities were available to leverage as political glue while the partner force matured.

The sociocultural dynamics in the al-Jazeera as they existed prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising in March 2011 were important to consider in analyzing the potential for future cooperation and conflict in Eastern Syria. Indeed, they were much different than what manifested by 2018. Pre-revolutionary society and politics in this region featured a greater level of cooperation between Kurds and the region's Arabs, who overwhelmingly descend from the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, than is usually presented in the popular discourse. Sociopolitical cooperation between these two ethnic communities in the prerevolutionary period was the foundation upon which the PYD and its political partners in the al-Jazeera built their idea of a Federal System. Yet, despite recent sociopolitical cooperation between Kurds and al-Jazeera's Arabs, in both the prerevolutionary period and in the period between March 2011 and September 2014, communal tension between Kurds and Arabs were relevant and a challenge to solidifying the Syrian Opposition's gains because the Assad regime maintained just enough presence to exploit the tensions.

This chapter analyzes how the purposeful manipulation of identity politics impacted the development of the modern al-Jazeera before the Syrian

Uprising began and what it meant for the Syrian Opposition's political trajectory once the Assad regime pulled back. Before diving into the content, it is important to clearly define the terms used to delineate Syria's complex population. For this text, the terms ethnicity and tribe are treated as distinct identity layers, though they share many of the same features. Similar to Donald L. Horowitz, it accepts that ethnicity is constituted by a range of layers including common language, behaviors, norms, and kinship ties, and that those kinship ties could establish the boundaries of the group. However, it also recognizes that a shared ethnicity, such as the Arab identity, can be rooted in common features, like language and lineage, yet subsume other identity layers that could differentiate the members under different circumstances.²¹ In this case, the semi-nomadic, Muslim, tribal Arabs can share an Arab ethnicity with urban, Christian tailors or sedentary, Druze farmers in Syria due to common language. Yet as Horowitz notes, kinship is such an important element of identity that it can form increasingly smaller circles of in-groups.²²

Since family, clan, and kinship bonds, together describing the tribe at higher levels of abstraction, constitute the center of Arab tribal identity,²³ it is also fair to view tribes as their own ethnic units, especially if they self-consciously reinforce those boundaries.²⁴ While being pastoral nomads was historically a mode of living, increasing pressures to settle and become sedentary over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries transformed the inter-relatedness of mode of living and tribe into something modern eyes would see as ethnicity.²⁵ As a result, the text recognizes the common tribal lineage of al-Jazeera's Arab population, but notes the differences in interests and relationships that exist between the sedentary farming, pastoralist, and semi-pastoralist tribal Arabs.²⁶

Similarly, religion and sect are of course treated as distinct since religions are typically comprised of multiple sects with differentiated practices and consequences on identity and in-group/out-group calculations. In the Syrian case, this fact is punctuated by a multitude of Christian and Muslim sects with diverse, ancient languages reinforcing the boundaries of identity.²⁷ For the sake of ease, the term inter-sectarian encompasses social relations between members of different religions and members of the same religion but different sects. This formulation allows the analysis to distinguish between ethnicity, tribe, religion, sect with clarity of orientation.

Ethnic, Religious, and Sectarian Composition

In 1990, the well-known cultural theorist Arjun Appaduri proposed that in the post-Cold War period, ethnicity was like a genie out of the bottle.²⁸ Appaduri referred to the rise of so-called cultural identity wars in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the demise of the East-West geopolitical divide. Analyzing nationalist identity-making strategies pursued by both state elites and the ethnic, tribal, religious, and/or sectarian groups who oppose them, Appaduri argued that “the central problem of post-Cold War global interactions is the struggle on the part of states to produce cultural uniformity and the opposing efforts of subnational ethnic groups to gain cultural and political rights, autonomy, and even statehood.”²⁹

Cultural identity, however, whether ethno-linguistic, tribal, religious, sectarian, or national, is not in and of itself a positive or negative force. It is, rather, a product of the social construction of difference—or to put in everyday language—cultural identities are the products of how different groups within societies choose to define difference. For example, societies can choose to define differences between the old and the young, men and women, labor vs. management, one language group vs. another or one religion, tribe or sect vs. another. Much of the violence seen in Iraq after 2003, as well as the violence experienced by Iraqis under Saddam Hussein, is the direct product of the dark side of the kind of identity politics to which Appaduri referred.

In Syria, the effort to make a state out of a few provinces of the Ottoman Empire angered a few genies. Zisser summarizes:

Ostensibly, the roots of the modern Syrian state lie in Arabism, i.e., in the Arab-Muslim past of the Syrian Lands (*Bilad al-Sham*) and thus in the Arab national idea that emerged in the region in the early twentieth century. Yet, it was the perception of a distinctly Syrian civilization that led France to establish the Syrian state in the 1920s. Thus, Syria—the state as well as the population—found itself oscillating between Syrianism and Arabism over a period of half a century. Moreover, both sources of inspiration, Syrianism and Arabism, proved to be insufficient to mold and entrench a distinctive Syrian identity and thus provide legitimacy for the territorial Syrian state, first and foremost in the eyes of its population. Ultimately,

the Assad regime ... merged with all that came before: the regional Arab experience as well as the pre-Arab and pre-Islamic past of the Syrian lands.”³⁰

While some scholars assert that a nascent Arabism and sense of Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) actually coalesced by the late-nineteenth century around key elites,³¹ Zisser’s point is that, in the effort to make a cohesive Syrian state, successive governments opted to stress the Arab identity, which intrinsically subordinated the non-Arab identity groups in its territory, such as the Kurds, to second class status.³² In al-Jazeera, the proportion of Arab to non-Arab identities is lower than in most other parts of the country, which created unique opportunities for cooperation and conflict depending on the identities made more or less relevant by the politics of the time.

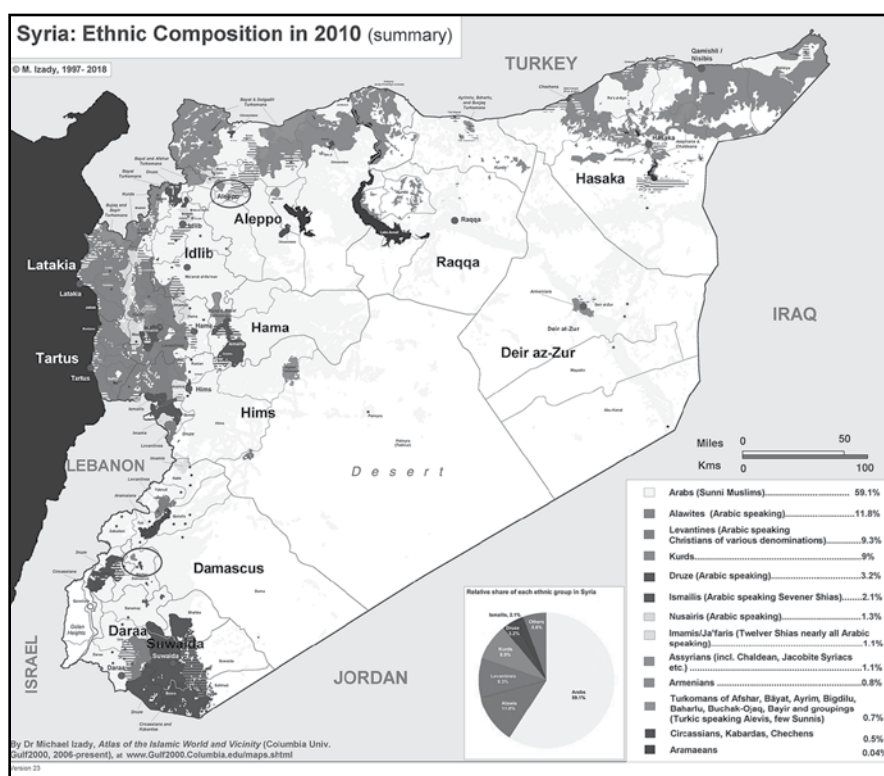


Figure 1. Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Syria. SOURCE: Dr M Izady, *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York, Columbia University, Gulf 2000 Project: 2006-present), II.A.42. USED WITH PERMISSION.

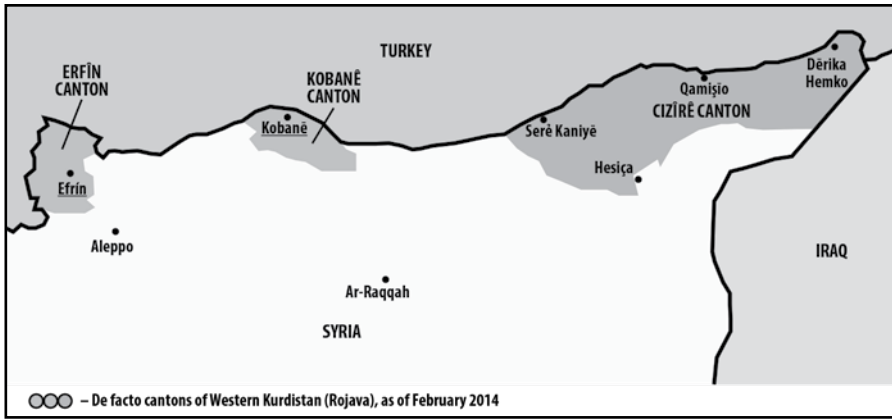
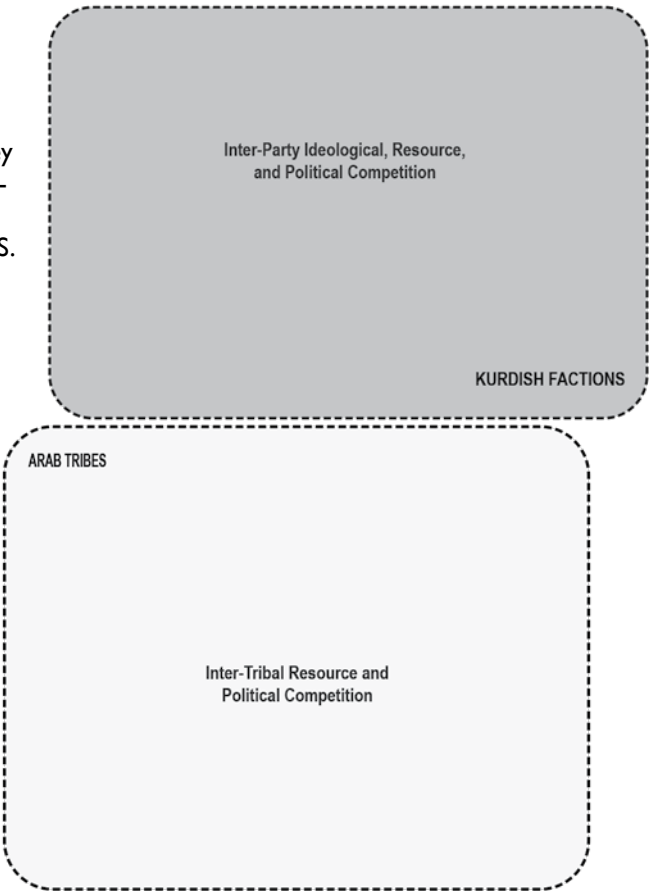


Figure 2. Kurdish cantons in northern Syria and al-Jazeera, called Rojava by Kurdish activists. SOURCE: PUBLIC DOMAIN (CC0 1.0)

The demographic richness of the al-Jazeera is a challenge to self-governance due to the social and political fragmentation of this region's two largest ethnic communities, Arabs and Kurds (figure 1). Ethnic Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni Muslim with a Yazidi minority, represent the plurality of the population in the northeastern areas of Hasakah province. Kurds are a significant minority in other areas of the al-Jazeera, including in a belt of communities that stretches along the Syrian-Turkish border in northern Raqqa province (figure 2).³³

However, the single largest identity community in the al-Jazeera is ethnic Arabs, who are predominantly Sunni with a minority Shi'a population, and who are mainly descended from the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, and still organized along family, clan, and tribal lines. Although there are other, sociopolitically important ethnic and sectarian communities in the al-Jazeera, such as ethnic Assyrians who are Christian, and ethnic Turkmen who are mainly Sunni Muslim, the relationship writ large between Kurds and Arabs is the most important for the future stability of the al-Jazeera (figure 3). This is due to the historical strategy of the SARG to divide communities internally, including Kurds and Arabs by promoting ethnic animosity between them, and to privilege some Arab communities at the top of the hierarchy in the al-Jazeera to facilitate the administration of this remote region from Damascus. The SARG has followed this strategy under the command of the Syrian branch of the Arab Ba'ath Party under successive regimes since the mid-20th century.³⁴

Figure 3. The main ethnic groups in al-Jazeera along with key sources of intra-communal tension.
SOURCE: AUTHORS.



Tribal Arabs

Tribal Arabs represent a form of sociopolitical organization, like a nation-state, as well as a form of communal or collective cultural identity, like an ethnic group, based on shared notions of kinship and genealogy, honor, and autonomy. Persons holding a tribal identity are not limited in their economic activities or educational experience. Tribesmen and women can be pastoral nomads, village agriculturalists, shopkeepers in towns, taxi drivers, and heads of corporations, as well as the rulers of Arab states, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.³⁵

In the case of Syria, there was a longstanding practice of Arab tribesmen spending significant amounts of time outside of their home region as guest workers in neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states,³⁶ where they form a veritable proletariat of men away from their families (often for the first time),³⁷ which often required them to transfer remittances and other goods through unofficial, sometimes criminal groups,³⁸ and introduced them to new ideologies, such as religious extremism.

Millions of rural Syrians expressed an active tribal Arab identity prior to 2011, and tribal affiliation was used extensively to mobilize the political and armed opposition against the SARG,³⁹ to organize paramilitary forces in support of the SARG,⁴⁰ and to serve as vital components of the SDF and the Federal System. Urban Syrian Arabs, on the other hand, often suppressed their tribal identity due to anti-tribal Ba'athist ideology. Many actors involved in the Syrian Civil War, including the U.S. military and the SDF, the Syrian armed opposition unaligned with the SDF, and the SARG and its allies recognized the political importance of the tribal networks that crossed Syria and extended into neighboring countries. As a result, winning the support of Syria's tribes was a strategic goal for these actors, most importantly the two main competitors for control over the al-Jazeera: the U.S.-led Coalition and its SDF partners, and the SARG and its allies.

Kurds

The Kurds trace their heritage to Central Asia, but have lived along the Iranian plateau since approximately 2000 BC⁴¹ and are now considered part of the Iranian ethno-linguistic group like Persians, Lurs, Baluch, and Bakhtiari.⁴² They inhabit the mostly mountainous area where the borders of modern Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria converge. Kurds constitute the second largest ethnolinguistic group in Syria.⁴³ Unlike the Kurdish communities in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, the Kurdish community of Syria does not live in a geographically contiguous region. The Kurds are in three geographical areas that border Iraq and Turkey: first, the historical al-Jazeera region, which includes Hasakah and Deir ez Zour provinces; second, Ain Al-Arab, or Kobani in Kurdish, located north and east of Aleppo; and third, Afrin, or Kurdagh in Kurdish, located northwest of Aleppo. Kurds are also found in the Ruknaddin, the Kurdish suburb of Damascus, also referred to as

Alakrad and al-Salhiyya.⁴⁴ There is also a very large Kurdish community in Aleppo city (mainly as workers, students, and internal migrants from Afrin region), and in the eastern areas of Aleppo province in and around the town of Manbij. Some Kurds also live in the central-western Syrian city of Hama (mainly large landowners from the Barazi family).⁴⁵

Although the ongoing civil war in Syria completely disrupted the demographic balance in the three northern predominantly Kurdish regions (i.e., Hasakah, Kobani, and Afrin), the Kurdish Institute in Paris estimates the Kurdish population there at approximately 2.5 million. There are approximately another one million Kurds in Aleppo and Damascus combined. In all, the Syrian Kurdish population is estimated to be between 3 and 3.5 million, or between 12.5 percent and 15 percent of the population.⁴⁶ Nationalist Kurds, wherever they may live, use the term “Rojava,” or “West,” to refer to the three regions of northern Syria with significant Kurdish populations. Given its nationalist flavor, the governments of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran reject the term and many Syrian Arabs also find it discomforting. Since December 2016, the official name of this self-declared Kurdish autonomous region (Rojava) is the Northern Syria Democratic Federal System.

In the al-Jazeera, the Kurdish community shares this region with various Arab tribes (e.g., the Shammar, Baggara, Jabbour, Jeas, Haddadeen, Afadhlah, Dulaim, Ougaidat and Tayy), and with Syriac speaking Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, with Turkomans, as well as a small number of Armenians in Qamishli (figure 4). The Kurdish population, depending on the source, constitutes between less than 50 percent (according to Arab tribal sheikhs) and 60 percent of the region’s people (according to Syrian Kurdish political figures), mainly concentrated along the border regions with Turkey and Iraq, although the city of Hasakah now has a large Kurdish community as well. In Ain Al-Arab (called Kobani in Kurdish and Arapinar in Turkish), the Kurdish population is concentrated in a cluster of villages and towns along the Turkish border, constituting roughly 60-70 percent of the people of the region. In Afrin (Kurdagh), the Kurds constitute more than 90 percent of the people of the region.⁴⁷

The geographical disconnection of the three Kurdish areas originates with the border settlement between France (the Mandate Power ruling Syria) and Turkey in the 1920s. The French used the Orient Express train line between Istanbul and Baghdad as the dividing line between the two countries, without any consideration for natural or ethnic borders. Yet, these three areas

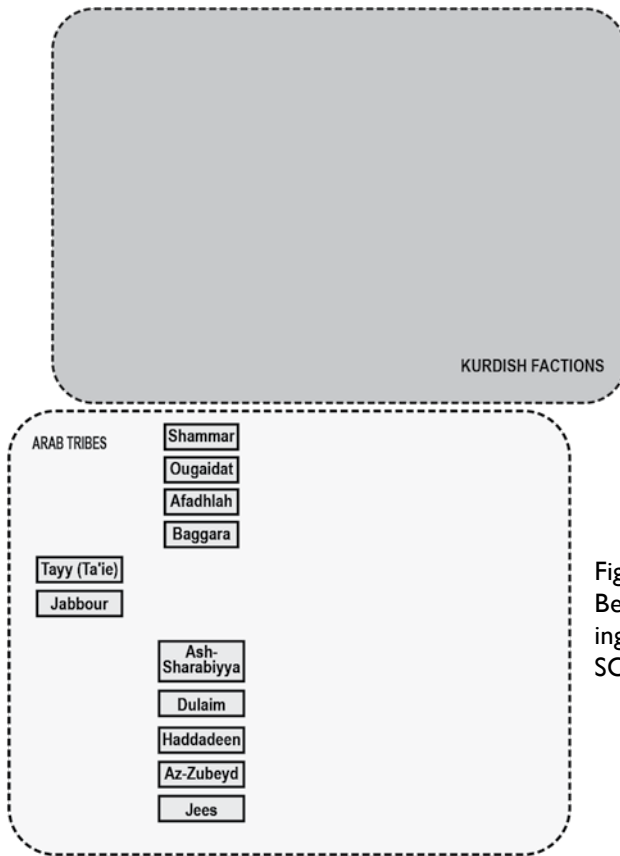


Figure 4. Main al-Jazeera Bedouin tribal Arabs living alongside the Kurds.
SOURCE: AUTHORS

are in fact geographical extensions of Kurdish provinces in Turkey. For the same reason, several Arab communities are included on the Turkish side of the border. Though mainly Arabs, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmen also live between the three Kurdish areas in northern Syria.

Bridging Secondary Socializations

While the primary socializations of ethnicity (Arab, Kurd, Armenian, Turkoman, Circassian, Chechen), religion and sect (Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, Christian, Yazidi), and tribe are commonly known and often easy to distinguish, there are other identity socializations that can be equally meaningful for the political aspects of UW. These are called secondary socializations because they form after primary socializations, derived from family

and community, are fully imprinted in a person. Secondary socializations emanate from broader interaction, such as with education, hobbies, professional associations, music, and other interests. Some societies reinforce primary socializations while others are more open to developing—or even encouraging—secondary socialization.

The challenge from an UW perspective is that primary socializations are very apparent and easy to define. Everyone can recognize family, tribe, religion, and ethnicity, especially when people consciously self-identify accordingly. Unfortunately, secondary socializations are harder to detect and tend to have weaker institutional support than primary socializations. In short, sociopolitical analysts have to proactively search for them in order to detect them. The reality is that primary socializations also tend to have a greater chance for a history of conflict between groups than secondary socializations, so the more primary socializations are emphasized, the more fodder there is for religious, ethnic, and tribal chauvinists to animate fear about outsiders and stifle cooperation. In Syria, this is most certainly the case.

The concept of social capital is instructive here in that it delineates the effects of primary and secondary socialization. The primary socializations of ethnicity, religion, sect, and tribe are often described as “bonding social capital” because they bind people together in a cohesive group, which is important for survival in times of conflict and scarcity.⁴⁸ Bonding social capital transmits crucial information on how to behave and survive in a given environment, and it creates dense, reinforcing networks of mutual support for those considered to be members of the in-group.⁴⁹ On the other hand, bonding social capital is thought to be homogenizing, and it limits the range of and opportunities for new ideas, skills, and economic opportunities available to members when it is used as a social boundary.

Conversely, secondary socializations often serve as “bridging social capital” in that they link different groups together based on common interests, needs, and ideologies.⁵⁰ The broader range of knowledge, skills, and opportunities augment any given in-group’s capabilities while expanding the range of potential collective action.⁵¹ However, bridging social capital tends also to be weaker because, much like secondary socializations, the institutions linking them together are less robust, have weaker trust relationships, and lack the expectation of mutual support during times of crisis.⁵² Over time, bridging social capital can become relatively robust and reinforcing, but the start-up costs are often high and of lower priority where resource scarcity prevails.

Recognizing the types of social capital at play in a local environment is crucial for the political analysis of an UW environment. Callois and Aubert succinctly summarize the effects:

Bonding social capital (i.e. strong links) and bridging social capital (i.e. weaker links giving access to new resources) have conflicting effects. Bonding social capital can solve agency and collective action problems, but also fosters redundancy of information, low incentives, collusion and discrimination. Conversely, bridging social capital is essential for bringing new ideas and opportunities, but the potential resources it carries are much less reliable.⁵³

In general, the belief is that rural communities are more prone to bonding forms of social capital while urban environments are more likely to create opportunities for bridging social capital, at least in Western societies.⁵⁴ In other words, a baseline expectation for UW in rural environments might be that they are more likely to display in-group oriented, low or limited trust behavior with slow or constrained development trajectories. In Eastern Syria, this is the case, and it will be extremely important to emphasize secondary, bridging socializations to moderate the fear-inducing effects of politics forming around primary, bonding socializations. As will become apparent, to advance political and economic initiatives and overcome distrust between primary socialization groups, it will be necessary to create activities, structures, and environments that emphasize secondary socialization interests and identities.⁵⁵ The identities listed below offer context relevant secondary socializations around which engagement and informational activities can be designed for Eastern Syria.

Rain Dependent Agriculturalists

The most important economic development that shaped the social and political dynamics of the contemporary al-Jazeera was the nearly decade-long drought that lasted from 2000 to 2010 throughout central and eastern Syria.⁵⁶ While there were numerous underlying economic stressors contributing to the revolution, including the concentration of political and economic influence among Assad's extended family and friends, weak industrial growth relative to population growth, and uncertain oil and gas revenues,⁵⁷ the drought undermined the agricultural foundation of the Syrian economy and drove

many destitute families from rural areas to the cities.⁵⁸ Writing about Syria in *The Atlantic* in late 2013, William Polk noted that “four years of devastating drought beginning in 2006 caused at least 800,000 farmers to lose their entire livelihood and about 200,000 simply abandoned their lands, according to the Center for Climate & Security.”⁵⁹ According to Polk, in some places all agriculture ceased, in others crop failures reached 75 percent, and as much

Hundreds of thousands of Syria’s farmers gave up, abandoned their farms, and fled to the cities and towns in search of almost nonexistent jobs and severely short food supplies.

as 85 percent of livestock died of hunger or thirst. Hundreds of thousands of Syria’s farmers gave up, abandoned their farms, and fled to the cities and towns in search of almost nonexistent jobs and severely short food supplies. Outside observers including United Nations (UN) experts estimated that between 2 and 3 million of Syria’s 10 million rural inhabitants were reduced to “extreme poverty.” As they

flocked into the cities and towns seeking work and food, these “economic” and “climate” refugees were confronted with a situation in which they had to compete not only with one another for scarce food, water, and jobs, but also with the existing foreign refugee population. Syria was already a refuge for a quarter of a million Palestinians and about 100,000 Iraqis who had fled the 2003 Iraq war and subsequent occupation. Formerly prosperous farmers were lucky to get jobs as hawkers or street sweepers. And in the desperation of the times, hostilities erupted among groups that were competing just to survive.⁶⁰

Hasakah province had been fiercely struck by the economic crisis, exacerbated by the drought that crippled the local agricultural economy and forced 36,000 families of the province to leave the land that they once farmed. According to the November 2009 issue of the Lebanese economic magazine *Executive*, over 1.3 million people in eastern Syria were affected by the drought, and more than 803,000 Syrians lost their employment because of its impact on several successive harvests. After allowing the drought crisis to result in famine following several years of failed harvest, the Syrian government, working with the UN and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), created the Syrian Drought Response Team, which requested \$53.9 million in both immediate food assistance and for agricultural support and job training.⁶¹ The economic hardships in the al-Jazeera caused by several years of severe drought and generally inefficient or apathetic Ba’ath Party

action was repeatedly cited by tribal sheikhs interviewed by the authors as the main factor that weakened the potential for tribalism to be an effective form of traditional civil society in al-Jazeera.

Due to the economic turmoil, out-migration from the al-Jazeera, across all the identity communities, was significant. Many youth, some as young as 12, left their home communities in the al-Jazeera for western Syrian cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and to Lebanon where Syrians have traditionally gone to find work.⁶² They also traveled to Arab countries, especially the nations of the GCC. Lebanon by far has the largest number of Syrians of any single country, with over 400,000 young Syrian males residing in Lebanon for employment as of the end of 2010. Further, many Arab tribal youth were not returning to their homeland, choosing instead to send money back home as remittances. This created a “youth drain,” leading to an older, less economically active population of Syrian tribesmen in the al-Jazeera.

Threatened Cultural Minority

On 12 March 2004, clashes erupted at a soccer game in the mixed Kurd-Arab city of Qamishli between supporters of a local team and those of an Arab, Deir ez Zour-based team. Nine people lost their lives. The next day, marchers in a funeral procession for the victims chanted anti-Assad slogans, raised Kurdish flags, and threw stones at a statue of the late president, Hafez al-Assad.⁶³ In response, Syrian security forces opened fire, killing 23 people and sparking days of protests and rioting in northern Syria's Kurdish regions (Hasakah, Kobani, and Afrin) as well as Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Aleppo and Damascus. Syria would not see another mass anti-regime demonstration until March 2011. One of the dominant narratives among Syria's Kurds was that:

The Qamishli uprising proved that the regime could no longer fail to recognize Kurdish identity; it paved the way for the Kurds to rise up alongside Syrians in 2011. The uprising also proved that the Kurdish political movement had failed to deal with the Kurdish issue. It showed the superiority of the Kurdish public and the success of protests in drawing recognition for the Kurds from [Bashar al-Assad], the head of the Syrian regime.⁶⁴

It is certainly the case that many Kurds across the world came to see the 2004 Qamishli riots as an affirmation of Kurdish identity and Kurdish resistance against state imposed cultural and political repression.

Similarly, Arab tribal identity, mode of living, and culture came under significant pressure from the Ba'ath regime's modernizing, state-centric philosophy for over five decades.⁶⁵ Additionally, the continuing economic hardships of the al-Jazeera, caused by the several years of severe drought, the history of a generally inefficient or apathetic SARG administration, and the civil war, were repeatedly cited by tribal sheikhs in this region as the main contemporary factor that weakened the potential for tribalism to be an effective constructor of a vibrant, indigenous civil society in the contemporary al-Jazeera. Recent research in eastern Syria asserted that the Ba'ath Party's policy of rural education and continuing the Ottoman and French colonial legacy of "settling" the Syrian tribes was calculated to make the tribes more pliable to central government control.⁶⁶

In other words, by pushing the tribes of the al-Jazeera region towards farming and wage labor, the Ba'ath Party attempted consciously to create a "proletariat" open to the Ba'ath Party's message of Arab Socialism while undercutting the traditional power of tribal sheikhs, who through financial patronage of their tribesmen enabled by their large landholdings and flocks, were able to be "rivers to their people."⁶⁷ That state of affairs no longer prevailed as it once did, although the moral authority of the sheikhs (as opposed to political power and influence) remained—and continues to remain—viable.⁶⁸

Politically and Economically Marginalized Citizens

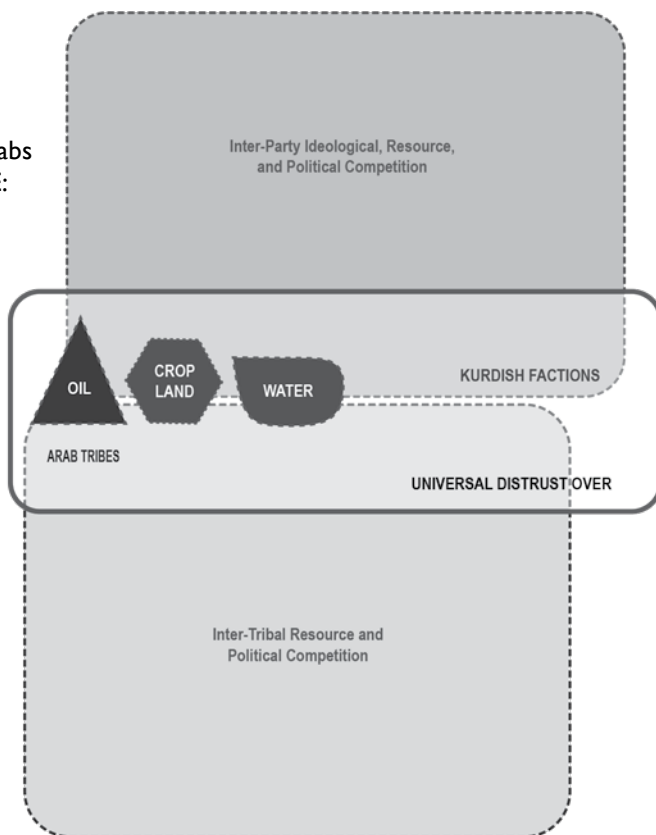
According to Claudia de Martino, the SARG was experiencing a crisis well before the March 2011 uprisings because the governing system was founded on the systematic repression of opponents and the continuous imposition of a state of emergency.⁶⁹ The system also relied on a selective welfare system, with access to institutions managed on a sectarian basis that did not guarantee any form of universality and neutrality in allocating resources. It clearly favored the Alawite (12 percent), Christian (8 percent), Druse (3 percent) and Shi'a (1 percent) minorities, discriminating against the Sunni majority (65 percent), condemning respectively 11 percent of the population to total poverty and 30 percent to relative poverty.⁷⁰ For de Martino, the series of

continuous droughts between 2006 and 2010, together with the structural reforms undertaken by the regime in the agricultural sector, contributed to the growing social unrest that manifested itself in 2011. In her view, this was also the cause of significant social and ethnic inequality in rural areas, most of which were inhabited by Sunnis. The agricultural northeast of the country, including Hasakah and Raqqa provinces, “had been forced to their knees by reforms and deprived of alternative forms of revenue, with 58% of the population becoming poor (which perhaps explains a great deal about ISIS taking root in [Raqqa] in 2014).”⁷¹

To complement its policy of settling Arabs in Kurdish areas of Hasakah province, the SARG practiced discriminatory policies that underserved rural Kurdish communities, which were often right next to Arab tribal villages that were better serviced, even if marginally so. Damascus pursued these discriminatory policies to reinforce the superiority of Arabs. The SARG committed to this strategy of underservicing Kurdish communities in the al-Jazeera to subtly encourage Kurds to move to urban areas, either to nearby Qamishli, Hasakah, or Raqqa, or to migrate to the major cities of western Syria such as Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, and Hama, where the Kurds could be more efficiently “Arabized.”⁷² These policies created almost Darwinian conditions that made social cohesion difficult and even survival an open question at the time of the Syrian Uprising. And, for more than two years following the uprising, poor, rural Kurdish communities and their neighboring Arab villages, came into low-intensity conflict over water resources, farmland, and access to diesel depots to operate machinery for farming (figure 5).⁷³

Today, Syria's main Kurdish communities are engaged in an internal struggle—played out in the social and political terrain—over the definition of their communal identity. Those who are secular are divided between support for the PYD and its Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) coalition of PKK-influenced or allied Syrian Kurdish groups, and the other minor Syrian Kurdish parties that are mostly linked to the broader Syrian opposition movement and come under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council (KNC). Masoud Barzani, the former president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) who leads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) there, is a major supporter of the KNC (figure 6).⁷⁴ Other member parties of the KNC are linked to national and transnational Islamic movements and parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham

Figure 5. Key points of tension between al-Jazeera's tribal Arabs and Kurds. SOURCE: AUTHORS



al-Islamiyya (HASI), al-Qaeda, and ISIS. The authors of this study believe that the more extreme Kurdish Islamists in Syria today will very likely join either al-Qaeda in Syria or the remnants of ISIS that will go to ground in Arab Sunni towns and villages in central, eastern, and southern Syria.

Oppressed Local Residents

In attempting to crush the Kurdish Soccer Riot (as well as possible future Kurdish uprisings in northern Syria), Bashar al-Assad reached out to the premier sheikh of the Shammar confederation of Syria, Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim al-Jarba. The fact that he reached out to Sheikh Ajil, who had long aligned himself with Saddam Hussein against the SARG, was an indication of just how high the threat level was assessed to be at the time. Bashar

al-Assad went so far as to offer to arm Sheikh Ajil's tribesmen if they would agree to assist regime forces in crushing the riots.

As recalled by Sheikh Ajil's son, Falah, the sheikh categorically refused to take up arms against the Kurds in Hasakah province, describing them in one interview as, "neighbors and friends who suffered with us under the (two) Assad regime(s) and with whom we have shared land for the last one hundred years or more."⁷⁵ Sheikh Falah continues to cite this reaction by his (now deceased) father as indicative of how tribal Arabs, Kurds, and Syriac-speaking Christians in northeast Syria have much in common, having all suffered under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Further, Sheikh Falah rejects the notion that the long-established bonds of intercommunal association have been broken by the events since March 2011. Another indication of this positive trend is the fact that the local civic councils and NGOs that emerged in the al-Jazeera after March 2011 were also representative of the communal groups of the region, cooperating

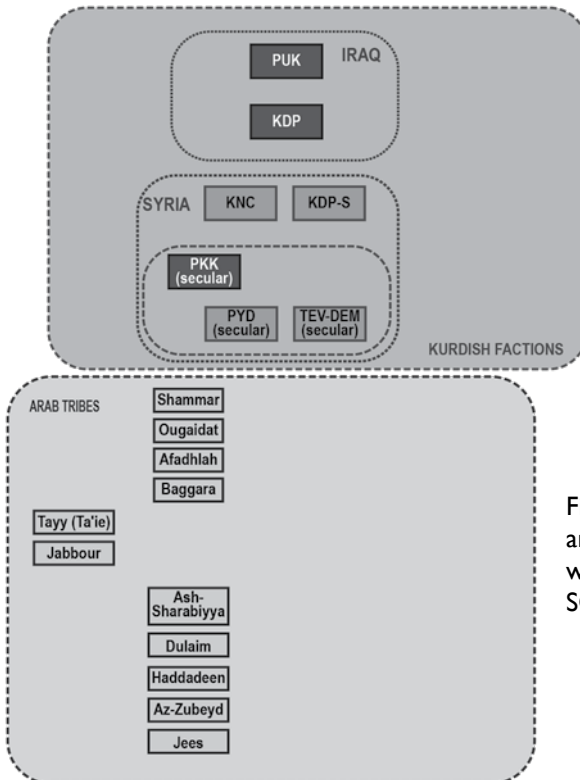


Figure 6. Kurdish ideological and political factions along with Arab tribes in al-Jazeera.
SOURCE: AUTHORS

closely on matters related to representative local governance, civil society building and human rights.⁷⁶ Thus, for example, civic councils in Amuda,

What bound them all together was the sense that they all had lived under oppression, suffered together, and suddenly found new opportunity together based on local trust relationships.

Hassaka Governorate comprised of Christians, Arabs, and Kurds, worked together for the good of the town. It was also common to find ethnically and religiously-oriented NGOs working with other ethnic and religious group NGOs in places like Qamishly, Amuda, and Hassaka City. There were mixed NGOs that focus on women's

rights, the family, and disability rights, among other issues. What bound them all together was the sense that they all had lived under oppression, suffered together, and suddenly found new opportunity together based on local trust relationships.

The Politics of Resource Scarcity

At the onset of the Syrian Uprising, the economic situation in the al-Jazeera neared disaster. Infrastructure in this region was aging and in need of repair, especially agricultural infrastructure (e.g. wells), and there was little to no internet penetration. These conditions continued to impact many of the communities in the al-Jazeera, and the relative poverty of rural Kurds in this region allowed the PYD to recruit and mobilize a significant number of fighters for its YPG affiliates, and for militant Salafi organizations, including for a time ISIS, to recruit and mobilize Arabs. Although internet connectivity in the al-Jazeera improved significantly in the years since 2011, it was a fundamental limiting factor on the human development of the people in this region. In the rural areas of the al-Jazeera, computers were rare, and the ability to connect to the internet was underdeveloped. These conditions limited the capacity of communities in this region to engage with the outside world, except by being mobilized into armed groups such as the constituent militias that made up the SDF or ISIS. In other words, bonding social capital was key for survival though bridging social capital existed due to shared experience and interests.

Although Arab tribalism as a form of identity, and for social mobilization, was important in the al-Jazeera, the tribal communities in the region

lost political power due to decades of economic neglect by Damascus. These conditions allowed the PYD to build up direct influence on poorer Arab tribal communities, and, through the relationship of the SDF with the U.S. military, the ability to use economic resources and the promise of social services to achieve some Arab tribal support for a federal system. In interviews with the authors during 2008–2010, Arab tribal sheikhs from the al-Jazeera explained that they found themselves in a comparatively weaker position, which when combined with the outmigration of impoverished tribal youth, was another factor destabilizing this region. One of these tribal leaders, Sheikh Mesaad Metaab of the Tayy (Ta'ie) confederation, lived with his section of the Tayy (Ta'ie) in a belt of villages in the southern suburbs of Qamishli. Sheikh Mesaad's tribal group was nominally under the protection of the SARG, and youth from his tribe were paid by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to guard checkpoints going into and out of their villages. An eloquent spokesman for his tribe, in 2009 Sheikh Mesaad described to the authors the severe pressure that the drought and predatory land ownership practices promoted by the SARG put on the Arab tribes of the al-Jazeera:

This season was actually worse than the previous one. We had some rain and even snow early on, then it stopped, and the harvest froze. Many people did not yield any harvest. They just overturned the soil to keep the seeds for next year. People's debts are growing because they did not have the funds to pay the previous years' debts. Most farmers take loans from government owned banks or individuals for the planting season. They were hoping that the harvest would help them cover their debts. Unfortunately, the last good season was more than 6 years ago. There is no cultivation in the area anymore and no huge projects are being launched there. The population is living with high debt rates, which clearly explain why many youth are emigrating to look for jobs in the Gulf and in Lebanon.⁷⁷

During the extended period of drought, and continuing into the post-2011 period, the wealthier Arab sheikhs felt the economic effects as much as their tribesmen, along with the pain of losing a key aspect of their sheikhly status—the ability to provide for their people. Many of the sheikhs went into debt to either the SARG (through government-controlled banks), or to private lenders who cooperate with the Ba'ath Party.

With the capture of public lands from the SARG by the YPG, the PYD had power to offer land to sheikhs in exchange for their support, or a willingness to convince their tribesmen not to contest the PYD's project of building

the Federal System. Similarly, the SARG offered sheikhs from the al-Jazeera land rights, cash bonuses, and a monthly salary in the hundreds of dollars and a plot of land to farm for each member of the tribe that they could mobilize on behalf of Bashar al-Assad.⁷⁸

These overtures from both the PYD and the SARG enhanced tribal authority, however they were also indicative of the desperate conditions that many Arab tribesmen in the al-Jazeera were living in prior to and for much of the course of the civil war. Arab tribesmen lost their lands to the drought or because they could not pay their debts. Tribesmen belonging to lower status tribes—those who herded cattle, sheep, and goats—suffered the hardest because the drought forced many of them to slaughter their livestock before they died of starvation, or sell them for petty cash for less than their value, which put them in an even more vulnerable economic situation than before. As Marie Frenztz of the European Commission to Syria explained, “Those that are really dependent, herders and small farmers, their livelihoods are being destroyed. If they are not already dependent on food aid, they soon will be.”⁷⁹

UW Implications

Primary socializations have both histories of conflict and cooperation, but both tribal Arabs and Kurds in the region tend to have strong in-group orientations. Times of crisis encourage in-group solidarity—or bonding social capital—as a survival mechanism because the norms reinforcing trust relationships are strongest. The Assad regime’s practice of leveraging resource competition between tribal Arabs and Kurds weakened their ability to coalesce in opposition to the regime by orienting their fears on each other.

While a common external threat, namely ISIS, was enough to forge a temporary SDF military alliance structure, the longer term political element of the opposition required emphasizing identities beyond tribal Arab and Kurd. Without structures and activities to reinforce these common interests—or bridging social capital opportunities—there was little way to develop institutions representative of the diverse but overlapping interests of villages outside the PYD construct. With the PYD and YPG receiving both military and political support from the U.S. military, Kurdish PKK influence through the PYD was empowered well beyond its natural constituency. However, the secondary socializations identified here are still highly relevant and could be utilized to generate meaningful alternatives bridging social capital and political structures over time to mitigate concerns about PYD/PKK influence in al-Jazeera.

Part 2

Chapter 2. Arab Politics and External Influences

While the Syrian Arab Republic is, for obvious reasons, considered an Arab state, al-Jazeera's tribal Arab population has a checkered history with all previous governments. The Ottoman Empire was the least impactful on Arab tribal culture, but all twentieth century governments embarked upon a concept of modernization and development that conflicted with the Bedouin Arab mode of living. The unique experience of Syria's tribal Arabs was crucial to consider in terms of devising a political approach to the UW campaign against ISIS to overcome the patterns of tension between Arab tribes and Kurds in the region that were reinforced over decades by the Assad regime.

The Arab Tribes and al-Jazeera

The predominant form of social identity and mobilization among Arabs in the al-Jazeera is through tribalism.⁸⁰ Tribal Arabs are predominantly Sunni Muslim, though some tribes include Shi'a Muslim families and clans. The region's main multinational tribal confederations include the Shammar, the Ougaidat, the Baggara, the Tayy (Ta'ie), and the Jabbour, and smaller tribal groups such as the ash-Sharabiyya and the az-Zubeyd.⁸¹ Ougaidat, Shammar, and the Albu Hassan branch of the Baggara that predominate in the Hasakah Province's southern subdistricts of al-'Arisha, ash-Shaddadi, and Markadah maintain close ties to their kinsmen in neighboring Deir ez Zour province.⁸² Several of the region's Sunni Arab tribes, including the Shammar, Jabbour, and the Baggara, also have cross-border ties with fellow tribesmen in Iraq, which they have drawn upon for social and armed support during the course of the Syrian Civil War.⁸³

Tribes are an entry point into traditional and indigenous Syrian civil society. Tribes have existed in Syria, and the wider Middle East, for thousands of years. They are a stable form of indigenous sociopolitical organization in which tribal identity is based on real or imagined ties of blood (i.e. kinship

in the present and patrilineal genealogy in the past). The metaphor of the family as the organizing principle of tribal identity provides a high degree of social cohesion. Tribalism as a form of communal identity (like ethnicity and national identity) has weathered the storms of colonialism and modernity. Tribes can provide a productive avenue for efforts to promote civil society and democracy in Syria in as much as there are clearly democratic ideas and civic traditions within the tribal system itself. Such ideas include notions of consensus building, of the equality of tribesmen, and of the sheikh

Tribes can provide a productive avenue for efforts to promote civil society and democracy in Syria in as much as there are clearly democratic ideas and civic traditions within the tribal system itself.

as first among equals, as well as such practices as mediation, negotiation, and compensation which come under 'urf or traditional tribal law.

In the northern, Kurdish-majority areas of Hasakah province, many of these Sunni Arab tribal groups were settled in the area from 1965–1976 as part of the “Arab Belt” policy of the Ba’ath government which established government-built Arab communities amidst Kurdish villages on land taken from resident Kurds.

It is estimated that approximately 60,000 Kurds were displaced from their land by this policy.⁸⁴ Some Sunni Arab tribesmen participated in armed opposition groups that fought against both the al-Assad government and the Kurdish militias in the region, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (Victory Front).⁸⁵ One particular tribally organized armed group that cooperated with Jabhat al-Nusra in the region is the “Free Jazeera Brigade,” which was organized by Shammar tribesmen as an affiliate of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that had a presence near the Syrian-Iraqi border in the northeastern Ya’rubiyah subdistrict.⁸⁶

It is important to note that when an author began engaging with Syrian tribal sheikhs in the al-Jazeera prior to the start of the revolution against the SARG, they were under enormous political, social, and financial pressure due to the years of drought and resulting famine in the al-Jazeera region. Over the last several decades, relationships between different tribes in the al-Jazeera have been strengthened by the mutual difficulties that all Syrian tribesmen that live in this region face, and by a shared bond of kinship and a common Sunni Muslim tribal Arab heritage that differentiates tribesmen from the ruling Alawite Assad family that usurped the power of the Syrian Ba’ath Party. The economic disaster facing tribal youth, combined with the

political pressure that is constantly applied by the SARG, caused Syrian tribes to look to each other for mutual help and support.

The traditional vertical authority of the sheikhs in the al-Jazeera over the rest of their tribesmen weakened over time, causing decision-making authority to extend beyond one person (or family) in a specific tribal lineage to mutually supporting individuals in a wider network of tribes. Under coercion from the state, many tribal sheikhs were forced to leave their traditional areas in the al-Jazeera to live quietly in Damascus or Aleppo, or left Syria entirely, becoming remote figures from the perspective of their tribesmen. Without revenues, they became unable to provide for the essential needs of their tribes, particularly during the most recent drought that began in 2003 and lasted through the rest of the decade.

The small community grants program component of the project an author was involved in from 2008 through 2010 afforded the sheikhs the opportunity to practice leadership and provide support to their communities. This enhanced their reputations within and beyond their own tribes, as they could directly aid the people in their communities who were literally starving in many cases. The sheikhs were also given the opportunity to travel beyond the borders of Syria and engage in dialogue about their region, tribalism, civil society, and the world at large in a safe environment. A long history of neglect typified the relationship between the communities of tribes in northeastern Syria and the regime, as well as between the tribes and the international organizations. A legacy of broken promises by the SARG and the international organizations resulted in a failure to implement sustainable development projects on the ground in the al-Jazeera region.

The State as a Threat

Prior to the start of the Syrian Uprising, Arab tribal society was at its strongest in the al-Jazeera, along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, where lingering ethnic conflicts, especially between Kurds and Arabs, had led to an extremely heavy SAA and SARG intelligence presence. The Syrian Ba'ath Party traditionally sought to undermine the independence of the country's tribes through intimidation, infiltration, and dependence.⁸⁷ These aggressive policies continued under both the Hafez and Bashar al-Assad governments and were exacerbated by decades of economic stagnation and the near total collapse of the rural economy of regions in northern and eastern Syria due

to drought, corrupt use of water resources, and mismanagement of crop-lands where many tribesmen resided. It is no wonder then that the tribes of the al-Jazeera helped to initiate the Syrian Uprising. Their participation in the uprising from its inception was well-documented and was celebrated by the Syrian opposition. The first “Day of Rage” demonstration against the SARG was led by the tribes of Hasakah city on 5 February 2011, which was conducted by networks of tribesmen from the Jabbour, Tayy (Ta’ie), and Hassanna branch of the ‘Anaza tribal confederations.⁸⁸

It was estimated that more than sixty percent of Syrian tribesmen and women came from this region of the country. Syrian tribal sheikhs, in theory, could challenge the SARG through their political and moral authority and ability to activate networks of tribespeople living in the hamlets, villages and towns linked to the cities in the region, including Qamishli and Deir ez Zour. Identifying how Syrians understand their tribal identities today allows observers to have a window on how shared ideas about loyalties, morality, honor, and the nature of society relate to concepts of civil society, good governance, and democracy as those in the West understand them.

Through residual Arab tribal clients in al-Jazeera, the SARG, more so than PYD or Arab Sunni extremist organizations, stands as the clearest and most present threat to the development of harmonious communal relations in the al-Jazeera. The SARG is the most active and persuasive competitor against the PYD in the battle for the sympathy of local Arab populations, through the presence of the SARG’s forces in the cities of Hasakah and Qamishli, and in the ability for the SARG to position itself to be “in it for the long run.”⁸⁹ It is no surprise that the tribal Arabs most closely working with the Assad regime are the ones settled in the Arab Belt in the 1960s-1970s and that feel most at risk.

The Triumph of Arab Nationalism and Ba’athism

Both Iraq and Syria are multicultural, pluralistic societies, although Syria has a significant core national identity group—Sunni Arab—that represents about 70 percent of the population. Starting in the 1930s, Iraq’s ruling elites came to define Iraqi-ness or Iraqi national identity based on a single ethno-sectarian identity—Sunni Arab identity. In fact, from early Ottoman times until the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Arab Sunni community, representing well less than half the population, controlled the levers of power

in a multiethnic, multireligious and multi sectarian society in which tribalism was, and is, a key form of sociopolitical organization.

The project of national identity-making in modern Syria, however, followed its own distinct path. In Syria, the government muddled through a number of civil-secular Arab governments before Assad's ruling Alawite minority ultimately consolidated power over the state. Alawites sought and achieved recognition by Islamic scholars as a Muslim sect, which was a political necessity in predominantly-Muslim Syria, but did so in the context of imposing civil-secular Arab national identity on all of Syria's ethno-linguistic communities, including Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians, Chechens, Assyrians, and other Syriac speaking Christians. Ba'athism as an experience attempted to subordinate religious identity in favor of Arab identity and faith in a modernizing, totalitarian state.

In considering Kurd and Arab communal dynamics in the contemporary al-Jazeera, it is important to situate the topic in historical context. The SARG failed to establish—indeed, could not establish—a modern national identity rooted in Arabism within its Kurdish community. It is an open question as to how nationalism would have evolved in Syria if the state had focused on constructing a Syrian national identity that acknowledged and embraced Syria's cultural diversity. This, of course, would have included recognition of Syria's non-Arab ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyro-Chaldeans, as part of the sociocultural fabric of the state.

Although the modern Syrian state did recognize religious (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Yazidi) and sectarian (Alawite, Sunni, Shi'a, and various Christian denominations) identities, non-Arab ethnic identities (e.g., Kurdish, Turkmen, etc.) were submerged under Syrianism—a territorial construct that was coupled with the ethno-nationalist construct of Arabism. Further,

It is an open question as to how nationalism would have evolved in Syria if the state had focused on constructing a Syrian national identity that acknowledged and embraced Syria's cultural diversity.

the modern Syrian state, even before the rise of the Ba'ath party, considered Arab tribalism, another form of communal identity, to be both "primitive" and a threat to the integrity of the state.⁹⁰ Furthermore, while the popular communal identity narrative about Kurds stressed their ethnolinguistic identity over other forms of identity, it is important to not to underestimate

the historic and current importance of Islamic identity to a growing number of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

Resource Competition as Ba'athist Governing Strategy

Throughout the al-Jazeera, the SARG utilized a divide-and-conquer approach that negatively impacted the local civil society, social cohesion, and civic peace between Kurdish and Arab communities. The SARG tried to create a pervasive atmosphere of distrust, especially between the Kurds and Arabs, because it needed to pacify and dominate both the Kurdish and Arab tribal populations. In the period before the revolution began, the SARG only employed ethnic Arab policemen throughout the al-Jazeera, some of whom were members of the local tribes and others were from outside the region. Ethnic Kurds were not trusted to be in the local police forces in the al-Jazeera.

Both before, and in the year following the start of the Syrian Uprising, the SARG utilized members of the Jabbour tribe in and around Hasakah city, and the Tayy (Ta'ie) tribe in and around the city of Qamishli to target Kurds and tribal Arab opposition members (figure 7). The reason that these tribes were mobilized effectively by the SARG against their neighbors is due to the precarious position the members of these tribes perceived in their respective cities. Using an old play from its book, the SARG turned these tribes against the Kurds and other Arabs by arming and bestowing cash gifts on them. To this day, the YPG and Syrian Kurdish activists have difficulty reconciling the experience of their community with these tribes with the need to incorporate the Jabbour and the Tayy (Ta'ie) into the Federal System.⁹¹

The Syrian government was adamantly against granting more local level authority and autonomy to the people of this region, no matter the ethnic community. Besides the intelligence and interviewee networks the SARG and SAA had established throughout the al-Jazeera, it also utilized other tactics to inhibit local level authority and autonomy. These included land nationalization, restrictions on farming and grazing rights, and even forced relocation of whole groups of people (Kurds and tribal Arabs) from one area to another. From Damascus, the SARG attempted to assert total control over the al-Jazeera to the degree that it blocked outside aid agencies from bringing relief to the region during the multiyear drought and subsequent famine.

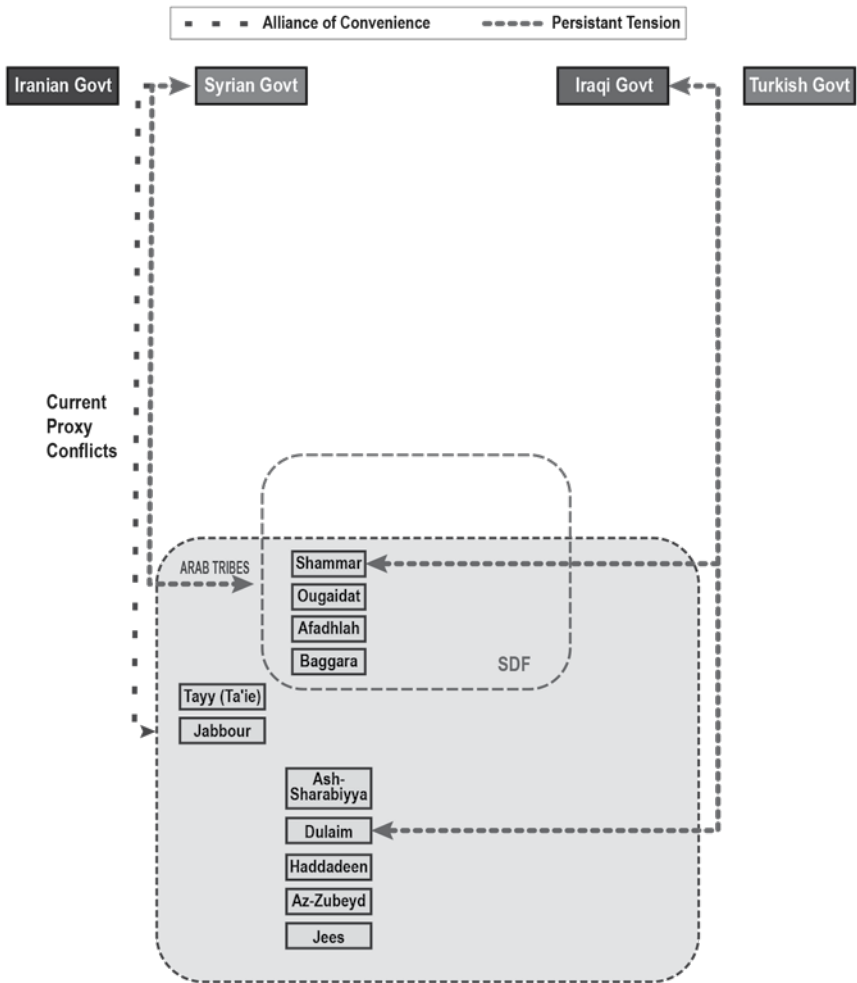


Figure 7. Syrian Government and Iraqi Government tribal alliances and tensions in al-Jazeera. SOURCE: AUTHORS

Tensions between Kurds and some Arab tribes flared on and off in the decade prior to the start of the Syrian Uprising, with a turn for the worse since the 2004 soccer riots in Qamishli. The SARG paid certain tribes and ethnic Armenians to fight Syrian Kurds, and the SAA remained at the ready to crack down on the Kurdish population of Qamishli at any time. There was a checkered record between the local Arab tribes and the Kurds, with the Shammar having the best relationship with Syrian Kurds and the Jabbour of

the area of Hasakah city and the Tayy (Ta'ie) of the area of Qamishli city the worst. The Jabbour are a minority of the Arab tribal population of Hasakah province, and the Tayy (Ta'ie) a minority of the Arab tribal population of Qamishli.⁹² Both tribes, in a precarious position in and around the city of Qamishli, were pliable to the coercion and manipulation of the SARG, which desired to keep its “Kurdish problem” cost effectively managed through the arming of tribal militias and cash “gifts.”

Cooperative Interests among Arabs in Eastern Syria

Three aspects of Arab tribal cooperative interests are readily apparent, some of which could be leveraged for cooperative engagement with Eastern Syria's Kurdish population. First, Syrians from al-Jazeera have a nearly uniform experience of political oppression and limited meaningful representation in the government. Freedom from oppression, arbitrary arrest and detention, and political surveillance are important values of the 2011 revolution around which the Arab tribes find common cause. Similarly, the Arab tribal members desire influence in the political system both at the personal and tribal identity levels.

Second, economic opportunity is essential to Eastern Syria's Arab tribes given the insecurity coming from regional drought and conflict over the last fifteen years. While Eastern Syria is the country's breadbasket—source of its key export crop (cotton), and home to its oil and gas resources—the region has long lagged behind Western Syria in terms of development infrastructure. Though it has the resources to become relatively prosperous, it lacks the infrastructure, governance, and policies to effectively mature.

Third but not least, protection of traditional tribal identity and territory are vital Arab interests in the al-Jazeera. Tribal identity and territory are nearly synonymous, but resource competition and Kurdish expansionism through the PYD/YPG threaten the integrity of both. Securing traditional tribal lands and agricultural opportunity for tribal members are primary responsibilities of sheikhs and could either be a source of stability or instability.

Divisive Interests among Tribal Arabs in Eastern Syria

Of course, some dynamics create tensions among Arab tribes. First, resource competition even among Arab tribes is a fact of life, especially under

circumstances of resource scarcity. Aside from potential conflict over limited water and arable land, competition also exists over the resources of the government and foreign assistance. While personal and familial relationships at the village level can often mitigate specific instances of competition, conflict at the tribal level can destabilize whole areas.

Second, prior to the 2011 Syrian Uprising, Islamism was a predominantly urban, Western Syrian phenomenon, and even then it was not particularly extremist. While there had been a decade-long Islamic revival of sorts in Syria, much of it was led by Sufi religious leaders, with pockets of Salafis in areas like Eastern Ghouta and Salafi jihadis using Deir az Zour as a transit hub to Iraq in the mid-2000s. Salafi jihadism has become a fact of life in Syrian society due to seven years of conflict, and it is hard to forecast how exactly it will play out in Arab tribal politics especially since groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusrah gained credibility in the struggle against the Assad regime. Just how deeply embedded and widespread extremism is in Syrian society is still unknown. However, rural Sunni Syrians remain largely inspired by Sufi-based interpretations of Islam, and tensions between Sunni Muslim communities will be likely moving forward.

Finally, ethnic conflict between certain Arab tribes and Kurds is highly probable given recent history. Ethnic fears are palpable for the Tayy and Jabbour tribes given their relative exposure as minorities in predominantly Kurdish areas. Given their continued relationship with the Assad regime, it is possible that ethnic clashes could manifest over time and divide the Arab tribes based on differential interests with the Kurdish community and new political structures.

UW Implications

The state, or any form of official government, has long been a challenge to tribal identity and law. While al-Jazeera's Bedouin Arabs have succumbed to the power of the state and the institution of the sheikh has been weakened, the tribal structure is still meaningful at the family and clan level, but now less coherent at higher levels of tribal organization. To the extent that inter-tribal cooperation is possible, it is typically a result of common interest in preventing the further erosion of scarce resources and political influence.

Tribal Arab identity has never fully coincided with the Ba'athist Syrian state, which presented an exploitable political opportunity for a more

coherent opposition against the Assad regime even though the main target of the UW campaign was ISIS. By recognizing the inherent contradictions in the Arab-SARG relationship, activities and governance structures supporting common interests and bridging social capital could have been emphasized with likely positive implications for relationships with Kurds, Turkomen, and other groups facing similar circumstances.

By relying on the Kurdish PYD as the backbone of governance in the anti-ISIS campaign, the U.S. essentially traded one problematic government for another in the eyes of the Arabs. As a result, al-Jazeera's tribal Arabs found themselves in 2018 needing to counterbalance the influence of the PYD/PKK Kurdish governance structure with the SARG, Russia, and Iran constituting the only viable alternative. The effectiveness of the SARG's outreach to tribal Arabs moving forward will depend on how acutely the family and clan sheikhs perceive political and resource opportunities in Eastern Syria, and this is very much influenced by U.S. policy in the region.

Chapter 3. Kurdish Politics and External Influences

While Kurds are often described by outsiders as being a cohesive ethnic group, the reality is that there are a multitude of clan, national, and ideological cleavages complicating relationships between the main Kurdish political parties. These differences were exploited to great effect by regional governments that used Kurdish proxies all throughout the Cold War to destabilize or weaken their neighbors. Intra-Kurdish political competition was certainly significant and relationships with neighboring governments were difficult to decipher at the outset of violence in 2011. However, the current political discontinuity between Turkish and U.S. interests in al-Jazeera could have been avoided by exploring these relationships and adapting the UW approach to prioritize tempering the internal Kurdish political competition while alleviating tribal Arab concerns about the PYD and YPG. This chapter explores some of the dynamics and foreign influences at play amongst Kurdish groups.

The Idea of Kurdistan

Following World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds had been promised their own country under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Sevres only to find the offer rescinded under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Numbering at least 25 million people today, Kurds are mostly divided among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.⁹³ The main area they inhabit is about 230,000 square miles, equal to Germany and Britain combined. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a state. The term “Kurdistan” is widely used in Iraq to refer to the Kurdish area of northern Iraq, and in Iran to refer to the Kurdish area of its northwest. Turkey and Syria, however, have long avoided recognizing this term for political reasons, although under the Ottomans it had been widely used.⁹⁴ Robert Lowe writes of Syrian Kurds:

The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a state.

The Kurds of Syria tend to be characterized as ‘forgotten’ or ‘silent’ in the subtitles of the few works that have been published on them,

because these people have been far less visible than the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. This all changed after shootings at a football match in Qamishli in March 2004 gave rise to large popular demonstrations and riots and a dramatic upsurge of Kurdish national feeling which surprised the Syrian government and brought the Kurdish issue to the fore in the debate about the future of Syria.⁹⁵

Six distinct events in the modern history of the al-Jazeera created vulnerabilities that could decisively damage the U.S. military's operations in Syria. Chronologically, these six events were:

1. the Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party's program of "Arabization" in the 1960s and 1970s that resettled ethnic Arab, tribal communities in majority Kurdish areas of Hasakah governorate, and privileged the transplant Arab communities at the expense of the local Kurdish communities;
2. former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad's decision to allow the PKK to establish a safe haven in northern Syria in the 1980s and 1990s,⁹⁶ which provided the PKK with strategic depth to plan and conduct cross-border raids to strike Turkish military and Turkish intelligence agency (*Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı* or MiT) targets in the Kurdish-majority areas of eastern Turkey and to create organic support for the PKK among Syrian Kurds;
3. the 2004 "soccer riots" between Kurds and Arabs in the city of Qamishli that featured intense SARG repression of the Kurdish community;⁹⁷
4. the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising in March 2011 and the gradual withdrawal of the SARG from the al-Jazeera, which ushered in a subsequent period of fierce political competition within the Kurdish community and between Kurds and Arabs;
5. the expansion of Salafi jihadi organizations, notably al-Qaeda and ISIS, into the al-Jazeera in the time period between 2012-2014 along with the Salafi jihadi mobilization against the Kurds; and
6. the establishment of the partnership between OIR and the YPG at the battle of Kobani in September 2014, and, as a result of this partnership, the formation of the SDF in October 2015 in concert with the

creation of the Northern Syria Democratic Federal System ("Federal System") in March 2016.

The first three events were knowable and could have factored into the UW strategy once the U.S. military was ordered to intervene. Between March 2011 and September 2014, a governance vacuum left by the withdrawal of the SARG from most of the al-Jazeera created the political space for organic, local governance to manifest. The organizations, platforms, and social resonance were researched and discussed in real time, but seem not to have influenced the political program of the UW campaign in support of the YPG/PYD. The decision to support the YPG/PYD after it had already subordinated, perhaps even subjugated, organic, locally legitimate governance structures shaped the current social, political, and security dynamics that the U.S. military encounters in al-Jazeera today.

The Legacy of External Influence in Syrian Kurdish Politics

Although this study does not focus on the mechanism of the Federal System as it developed under the auspices of OIR, this incipient governance structure deserves further explanation because its realization is a major goal of the PKK in Syria. And the success, or failure, of the Federal System will significantly impact the prospects for communal harmony between Kurds and Arabs, particularly concerning building inclusive local governance and responsive public administration, in the al-Jazeera region. For all intents and purposes, the Federal System is the practical application of the "Democratic Self Administration," or more commonly referred to as "Democratic Societies," theory of Abdullah Öcalan.⁹⁸ Öcalan, currently imprisoned in solitary confinement in Turkey, is a Turkish-Kurdish revolutionary leader who helped establish the PKK, and who is the key influential figure that shaped its ideology.

PKK

Syria, under the Ba'ath Party, had longstanding relations with the Kurdish insurgency movements in Turkey and Iraq. Commencing in the mid-1980s, Syria supported the PKK in its fight against the Turkish state.⁹⁹ Michael Dunn succinctly describes the rationale:

Syria supported the PKK not from any Syrian interest in Turkish Kurds but because its overall interests clashed with Turkey's in other areas. In the long run, Syria would no more want to see an autonomous or independent Turkish Kurdistan than it did an Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991-92. Its support of the Kurds was purely a tactic to outmaneuver Turkey, not an altruistic commitment. When the policy no longer served its interest, especially with Turkey threatening intervention against Syria, Syria abandoned the policy.¹⁰⁰

Like Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, Syria was quite willing to support Kurdish insurgencies against its neighbors. For example, Syria supported the establishment of the Patriotic Union Party (PUK) of Jalal Talabani in Damascus in 1975. As Dunn states, "this has sometimes been called "exporting the Kurdish question."¹⁰¹ There is no doubt that some (undetermined) number of Syrian Kurds became PKK fighters and that PKK fighters from Turkey spent long periods of time in Syria. It has been suggested to the authors that the PYD/PKK was able to win the political and military space in Syrian Kurdish areas precisely because of the long-term support for the PKK there, as well as the familiarity with the area on the part of Turkish PKK fighters who based themselves in the Qandil region of the (then) Kurdish Safe Haven of Iraq after 1991.¹⁰²

Öcalan retained a powerful influence over the social and political beliefs of a significant part of the Syrian Kurdish community in the al-Jazeera. In response to the repression of the Syrian Kurdish community by the SARG at Qamishli in 2004, Öcalan wrote a series of letters from prison in Turkey that were collected and published in a book in 2005 that was subsequently published in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic. Öcalan's Democratic Societies ideology was controversial within the Syrian Kurdish community of the al-Jazeera because it downplayed Kurdish Nationalism in favor of a governance system based on anarcho-syndicalism.¹⁰³

Anarcho-syndicalism as an ideal has different variants but the common threads include: (a) participatory democracy for all citizens regardless of race, gender, religion, or ethnicity; the devolution of governance to the lowest effective political unit; civil, political, and economic rights protected by a central government; and environmentally sustainable industrial development.¹⁰⁴ Syndicalism is a socialist-inspired theory of action dating to the mid-nineteenth century positing that workers must seize power for themselves

through localized collective organization. However, the anarchist perspective viewed provisional assemblies, centralized governments, and revolutionary dictatorships to be as susceptible to political corruption as capitalist and elite institutions. For anarcho-syndicalists, political institutions should distribute power to workers through local councils.¹⁰⁵ Anarcho-syndicalism was sustained by the International Working-Men's Association from the 1860s–1945 with chapters across dozens of countries in Europe and Latin America.¹⁰⁶ From the perspective of the PKK and its local Syrian affiliates, the goal was not to create a nation-state with defined boundaries, but rather a political entity that was composed of an interconnected system of local councils raised by local communities to achieve self-determination in a commonwealth.¹⁰⁷

The Federal System was implemented mainly in Kurdish-majority areas of the al-Jazeera, although the local councils were inclusive of other ethnic and sectarian groups.¹⁰⁸ The challenge for the Federal System—which could exacerbate communal conflict in the al-Jazeera—was that the PKK continued to maintain a strong influence on the strategic direction of the governance of the Federal system, which came into conflict with other Kurdish parties and with groups such as Arab tribes that did not want to lose connection to a unified Syrian political entity that still supports an Arab nationalist identity.¹⁰⁹

The governance vacuum created by the departure of the SARG from most of the al-Jazeera between 2011 and 2014 was decisive in molding the social and political realities in the al-Jazeera. It was during this period that the PKK-linked, Syrian Kurdish PYD political movement rose to prominence and power in the al-Jazeera, and with the active assistance of the PKK, organized a large part of the Syrian Kurdish community in this region under the military structure of the YPG. This relative, and forced, unity of the Syrian Kurdish community in the al-Jazeera benefited the U.S. military as it found a cohesive and effective local partner to build up an operationally capable force to fight ISIS.

Abdullah Öcalan retained powerful authority within the organization despite the fact that he was imprisoned by the Turkish government. In essence, he was the father figure of the PYD, which was why Turkey became so alarmed by an empowered Kurdish political entity along its border. Nevertheless, the relationship between the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish community writ large, beyond the PYD, was complex and evolving. Not all the PKK's influence in Syria was derived from its special relationship with the PYD, or from the almost two-decade long period during which Abdullah Öcalan

and many senior leaders of the PKK were based in Syria. More important to the recent rise of the PKK in the al-Jazeera was the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the SARG from most of northeastern Syria. The PKK deployed approximately 1,500 fighters to the al-Jazeera, a force that was instrumental in developing the YPG, and for improving the capability of the Syrian Kurds in that region to defend their communities, particularly from the Salafi jihadi organizations.

The establishment of the SDF and the Federal System changed the social, political, and security dynamics of the al-Jazeera region. As stated above, both organizations were formed in accordance with Öcalan's concept of "Democratic Societies," an ideological construct that evolved in response to the experiences of state repression and intercommunal violence (Arab on Kurd) that was directed against Syrian Kurds during the 2004 soccer riots in Qamishli. Öcalan crafted this ideology specifically to respond to the challenges that the PKK would need to overcome to be the vanguard of a revolutionary movement to overthrow or push back a repressive state apparatus in such a communally complex al-Jazeera.

Yet, the implementation of the Democratic Societies model in the al-Jazeera by the PYD could not have occurred without the war against ISIS in Syria and the support of the U.S. military. The PYD faced significant challenges promoting the Democratic Societies model beyond its constituency within the Kurdish community, although the threat from ISIS had the effect of drawing most of its competing parties within the Kurdish community in the al-Jazeera into a tense alliance with the PYD. In this regard, it is important to note that PYD outreach beyond the Kurdish community was active *before* September 2014, most notably through the PYD's successful recruitment and mobilization of Arab fighters into the constituent militias it controlled within the YPG organization.

It was after the U.S. military first supported the YPG against ISIS at the battle of Kobani in September 2014 that the PYD became politically and structurally empowered to institute the Democratic Societies model in the al-Jazeera. The security structure of the SDF acted as a recruiting vehicle for the YPG (and by extension the PYD) to promote Öcalan's ideology to individuals from communities other than the Kurds, particularly Arabs. It was the SDF that fulfilled the counterterrorism priority of the United States to fight and defeat ISIS. Through the Federal System, the PYD built up a governance structure that maintained the Kurdish community's dominance while

providing mechanisms for other communities to participate, particularly Arabs. It was the Federal System that fulfilled the U.S. military's objective of instituting governance in the wake of ISIS, and as a conduit through which U.S. military stabilization operations were conducted.

The PYD developed significant influence over the local politics of northeastern Syria through the Federal System and potentially decisive social and military power through the

Through the Federal System, the PYD built up a governance structure that maintained the Kurdish community's dominance while providing mechanisms for other communities to participate, particularly Arabs.

YPG. Yet, according to local observers in the al-Jazeera, the PYD could not have acquired its power and influence without the alliance that it struck with the U.S. military starting in September 2014. With the support of the U.S. military, the PYD had the opportunity and the support needed to recruit Arabs of the al-Jazeera into either the SDF or the YPG.

As OIR transitioned to stabilization operations in the areas of Syria liberated from ISIS, the sustainability of the effort, requiring the unity of the U.S. military's local Syrian partners, demonstrated weaknesses. This effort required the PYD to transition from being the dominant political actor in the al-Jazeera to just an important actor that willingly shared power with other actors within the Syrian Kurdish community and with the representatives of the other identity communities in the al-Jazeera—most notably the tribal Arabs. The Democratic Societies model promoted by the PYD could be the roadmap for this transition, although obstacles remain in the path to establishing a more stable social and political system in the al-Jazeera precisely because the PYD/PKK is loath to empower others with different governing visions.

Turkey

Today, with the exception of Qatar and some Iraqi Kurds, Turkey has no allies or friends in the Middle East, a position one of Erdogan's advisers optimistically spun as "precious loneliness."¹⁰

Turkey was forced to balance two sets of internal security concerns in its approach to developments in Syria. The first was the security situation in Kurdish majority areas in its east and southeast and the second was the

presence of persons and/or cells affiliated with al-Qaeda, ISIS, or related groups. This made for a complicated calculus that resulted in Turkey being unable to form a traditional alliance with the United States, Russia, the SARG and/or Iran. Turkey did, however, successfully manage its relations with former-KRI President Masoud Barzani and his KDP. This was due both to the deep involvement of Turkey in the KRI economy and to the fact that they were united in their antipathy to the PKK.

While it is well known that Turkey was involved in long-standing conflict with the PKK dating back to the early 1980s, it is less well-known that Masoud Barzani and the KDP considered the PKK to be a threat to their leadership role in Iraqi Kurdistan and indeed to their narrative that claims the role of founders of the modern Kurdish national movement.¹¹¹ Turkey's relations with Iraq's central government, on the other hand, were fraught with conflict since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, mainly due to the highly sectarian nature of the post-Saddam Government of Iraq (GOI) and its close ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Regarding the relationship between Turkey and Iran, it is argued here that fundamentally nothing changed. Turkey and Iran remained "cold" neighbors committed to keeping their border zone stable and secure. Both states long rejected the idea of a new Kurdish state in the region. However, Turkey seemed much less concerned about an independent or quasi-independent Kurdish state arising in northern Iraq and ruled by a close relative of Masoud Barzani due to the economic, political, and security ties between the Erdogan government and the Barzani family. Conversely, Iran appeared less concerned about the rise of a Kurdish state in northern Syria under the control of the PYD, given its longstanding ties to the PKK.

As recently as 21 August 2017, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan reported that the Chief of Staff of Iran's armed forces and Turkish leaders held discussions in Ankara about possible joint military action against Kurdish militant groups. Erdogan also stated that a more effective struggle against the PKK and its Iranian affiliate, the Kurdistan Free Life Party, would be possible through joint action with Iran: "Joint action against terrorist groups that have become a threat is always on the agenda. This issue has been discussed between the two military chiefs, and I discussed more broadly how this should be carried out."¹¹² However, this belies the fact that Iran covertly supported the PKK for years as a lever against Turkey, as well as against the interests of Masoud Barzani and the KDP. Israel was another factor working

against a structural change in Turkey's relationship with the Islamic Republic. While there were serious impediments to restoring Turkey's relations with Israel, Erdogan is attempting to do so.

According to Cagaptay and Danforth, Erdogan has failed to understand that Turkey, a former imperial and Muslim power, does not have the influence he believes it should have in the Middle East because Turkey's religious ties are undercut by serious cultural differences:

Turkey's involvement in the war in Syria, among other misadventures, has left it more isolated and insecure than ever. In Syria, Turkey has failed to oust the Assad regime and instead generated new enemies such as the Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds. At the same time, Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, as well as its alliances with Sunni Kurds and Arabs in Iraq against the Baghdad government, have left Ankara woefully isolated.¹¹³

For years, Iran and Russia showed an unwillingness to support Turkey's position against the PYD and affiliated YPG, though this position might be changing. It would have been wise for Turkey to work with the U.S. to support decentralization and power-sharing in northern and northeast Syria's ethnically mixed areas. This would not only have helped ensure that the Kurds could not secure a monopoly on power there but also rebrand Turkey as a neutral problem solver rather than problem maker.

Iran

The geopolitical landscape changed dramatically for Iran after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 and removed the government of Saddam Hussein with whom Iran had fought a brutal eight-year war. From 2003 on, Iran expanded its strategic depth across Iraq; generated significant political power in Baghdad, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and across the south of Iraq; established Shi'a militias loyal first to the Supreme Leader and only secondarily to Iraq; recruited the backbone of its multinational Shi'a force in Iraq; and then field tested and deployed this force in Syria.¹¹⁴ The expanded presence and

It would have been wise for Turkey to work with the U.S. to support decentralization and power-sharing in northern and northeast Syria's ethnically mixed areas.

activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Quds Force (QF) within the intelligence and security apparatus of the Assad regime, and the vital role of the IRGC-QF and its proxy network forces in conducting military campaigns on behalf of Assad in Syria, resulted in the areas under Assad's control in western Syria becoming the major base for coordinating operations for the IRGC-QF and its proxy network—that is, Iran's malign activities in the Middle East—for the foreseeable future.

Syria was a core national security interest for Iran, a major site to extend its influence in the Middle East and for applying pressure on one of its two major adversaries in the region, Israel. The commander of the IRGC-QF, General Qassim Solaimani, referred to Syria as the “main bone of contention” and described a conflict where “on the one side is the whole world on the other stands Iran.”¹¹⁵ Iranian national security policymakers viewed Iran's participation in the conflict primarily as a foreign internal defense mission carried out by the IRGC-QF in support of the SARG; that is, Syria was a vital battle to protect Iran by combating Salafi jihadi organizations inside of Syria.¹¹⁶ The Syrian Civil War also provided the IRGC-QF with the opportunity to scale up its multinational proxy network of predominately Shi'a militias, which included fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, India, and Syria.¹¹⁷

In Syria, the IRGC-QF turned the SARG into a client state, whereas prior to the uprisings in 2011 and subsequent civil war it functioned more as an ally, with occasional disagreements and sometimes differences in policy goals. The civil war in Syria allowed Iran to influence and shape the functioning of the deep state that supports Bashar al-Assad's rule, which includes the elite security and intelligence services that are primarily led by Bashar al-Assad's extended family, his tribe, and members of the Alawi community. The geostrategic implications of the Syrian conflict favored Iran's long term interests, if for no other reason than U.S. President Donald Trump stating that the U.S. role in Syria was circumscribed, limited to defeating ISIS and supported what Brett McGurk, the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, termed “interim stability” in the *al-Jazeera*. For years, Iran, reached out to Arab (Sunni) tribal leaders in the *al-Jazeera*, including in Hasakah and Deir ez Zour provinces, and positioned itself to push back on U.S. influence in Eastern Syria through Arab proxies if necessary.¹¹⁸

Deir ez Zour Province served an important case to examine in this regard, including the strategically situated town of Abu Kamal (or Bu Kamal). The U.S.-Russia brokered de-confliction zone's dividing line in Deir ez Zour province ran alongside the Euphrates River, with U.S.-backed SDF operations permitted to the north, and those conducted by pro-regime forces permitted to the south. The town of Abu Kamal, situated across the border from the Iraqi town of al-Qa'im, was in the southern zone controlled by the SARG and its IRGC-QF allies. If this division held, or if regime forces seized all of Deir ez Zour province, Iran would have been able to increase its strategic depth in eastern Syria, providing a corridor of access to southern Syria, and from there to Jordan and Israel.

Given that the Trump Administration espoused limited U.S. involvement in Syria, Iran stood poised to emerge from the Syrian conflict with more assets and influence in Syria than it had before conflict began. Additionally, consider Iran's oft stated "redlines:"¹¹⁹

- Preservation of the Islamic Republic and the position of the Supreme Leader;
- Preservation of Lebanese Hezbollah and its leadership role in Lebanon;
- Preservation of the current political system in Iraq (weak state, controlled by religious Shi'a parties closely aligned with Iran);
- Preservation of the SARG (or a similar one drawn from the leadership of the Alawite community in Syria); and
- Preservation of Iran's strategic interests in Syria tied to its support for Lebanese Hezbollah and the more recent, multi-national Shi'a armed force established by the IRGC-QF and deployed in Syria.

The authors could not determine how the UW campaign seriously challenged any of these redlines despite the opportunity to do so. In fact, Iran gained strategic depth and influence since the start of the Syrian Uprising and demonstrated the ability to deploy its new, multi-national Shi'a armed force (militia) outside of Syria.

Iraq

Iraq's geostrategic interests were seen through two analytical frames: the perspective of the GOI and that of the KRI. While the interests of the GOI coincided completely with those of the SARG and Iran, the situation was more complex than that. The religious Shi'a bloc that controlled Iraq's central

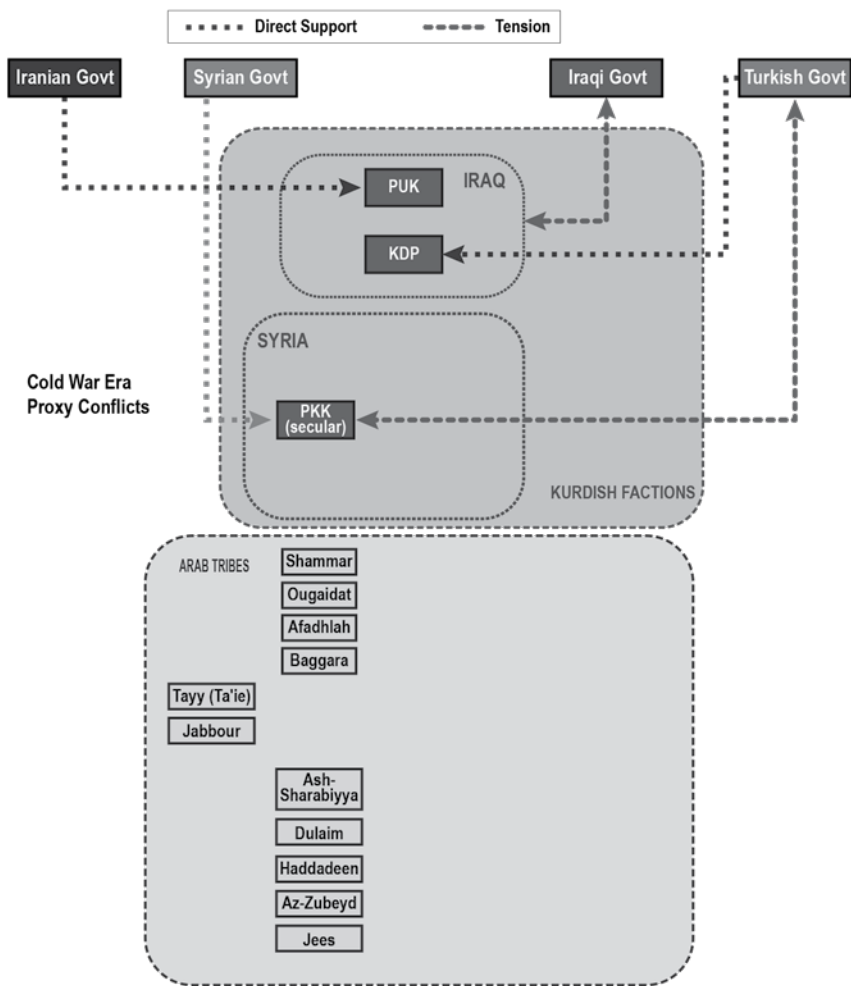


Figure 8. Syrian, Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian support to proxy groups during the Cold War. SOURCE: AUTHORS

government was not allied with Russia, despite its longstanding ties to the SARG and, more recently, to Iran. From the perspective of the GOI, first the Soviet Union, then Russia, had a close relationship with Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath Party, including after Saddam ordered his cousin, Ali al-Majid (aka Chemical Ali), to crush the 1991 uprisings in the Shi'a majority region of southern Iraq.

Second, even though Iraq's tribal Arab Sunnis were reduced to minority status in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq with no real power in Baghdad, the GOI understood that Syria's Arab tribes were "cousins" of Iraq's Arab tribes and that they inhabited the space on both sides of Iraq's artificially imposed national border with Syria. The GOI comprehended the security implications of related Bedouin Sunni Arab tribes on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border. In fact, the GOI straddled its position as an Arab country in a predominantly Arab Sunni region despite its government being comprised of religious Shi'a parties closely aligned with Iran. Also, the GOI had the Kurds to consider. In this regard, it was not surprising that Baghdad maintained contact with the PKK, a powerful rival of the KDP party. It is thus very possible that Baghdad may have directly or indirectly supported the governance project of the PYD, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, a position in line with Iran's.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

The key challenge for the KRI was managing the growing power of the PKK both in northern and northeastern Syria, and inside Iraqi Kurdistan itself. Barzani's KDP did not have the power to drive the PKK forces out of Sinjar in northwest Iraq, an area claimed by the KDP as part of the KRI. The PKK then came to the rescue of Yazidis trapped by ISIS in Sinjar in 2014 at the same time the Yazidi victims were accusing KDP forces of abandoning them to ISIS. A second and related challenge was how the KDP managed the demands and expectations of Iran, which worked through the PKK inside Iraqi Kurdistan to pursue its interests. Iran had a history of using violence to pursue its interests inside Iraqi Kurdistan, including working with radical Kurdish Sunni jihadis in the final phase of the Kurdish Safe Haven period (2000-2002).¹²⁰

The KDP also had to manage the relationship between the KRI and Baghdad. Baghdad had several modes of pressure it could bring to bear on the KRI, including holding back part or all the 17 percent of the federal revenue set aside for the KRG. Baghdad also understood that the PKK had established social and political roots in Iraqi Kurdistan and, as a rival organization to Barzani's KDP, was a potential ally for Baghdad. Likewise, the Kurdish parties based in Iraqi Kurdistan that opposed the KDP, including the Patriotic Union Party (PUK), Goran, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union, had the potential to ally with Baghdad and maintain ties to Iran.

The KDP's interests in Syria were mainly aligned with Turkey. Both sought to diminish the power of the PYD (and, therefore, the PKK) in northern and northeast Syria. However, Barzani and the KDP criticized Turkey's military intervention in Kurdish majority Afrin, in northwest Syria. Turkey and the KDP failed to empower their Kurdish proxies in Al-Jazeera. None of the local Kurdish parties opposed the rise of the PYD as the hegemonic political and military force in the al-Jazeera were successful, but neither did they receive sufficient material support or political space to challenge the PYD's dominance, which was backed by the YPG.

The trend that will be most interesting to watch is if, under current circumstances (post Afrin) Barzani's KDP and Turkey will work to establish a coalition to push back against the PKK in Syria. Will the KDP, supported by Turkey, work to establish an anti-PKK coalition consisting of the local Syrian Kurdish parties that remain loyal to it with sections of one or more of the Arab tribes of al-Jazeera (who are equally suspicious of the end game that the PKK is pursuing)? With its longstanding ties to the Barzani family who lead the KDP, the Shammar confederation based in Hasakah province and across the border in northwest Iraq is an obvious Arab tribal partner in such a coalition.

Kurdish Political Parties in Eastern Syria

Analysts fear this combustible environment could presage a bloody ethnic and sectarian conflict that will resonate far beyond Syria's borders, especially if it involves the Kurds. There is concern that Iraq's Kurds, who are already training Syrian Kurds to fight, may jump into the Syria fight to protect their ethnic brethren.¹²¹

The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S) was the first Kurdish political party established in Syria. Founded in 1957, it divided into three branches by 1970. Key areas of disagreement within the party focused on key questions, such as whether the goal of the party should be an independent Kurdish state. Divisions also arose based on issues of rank and status (former communists vs. Kurdish notables). Experts on Syrian Kurdish politics such as Syrian-born Omar Sheikhmous argue that differences in the political platforms of the current Syrian Kurdish parties are minimal and play a minor role in the ongoing conflicts among them. Clan, regional origin, and rank/status, on the other hand, do play a major role in these conflicts.¹²²

Unlike Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey, none of Syria's Kurdish parties demanded an independent Kurdish state or the inclusion of the Syrian-Kurdish regions in a united Kurdistan. Also, unlike the Kurdish parties in Turkey and Iraq, none of the Syrian Kurdish parties ever advocated the use of force to gain their perceived rights. The reason for this is that the geographic and demographic conditions in Syria did not support armed conflict or the demand for an independent state. The Kurdish population in Syria remains proportionately smaller than in Iraq and especially Turkey. Nevertheless, analysis of the platforms of the various Syrian Kurdish parties shows little to no ideological differences between them.

Additionally, the three main Kurdish population areas in Syria are geographically separate, thus inhibiting modern state formation and/or the creation of an ethnic federal region or ethnic autonomous zone. On the other hand, demographic factors did not rule out consideration of a multiethnic, multireligious, geographic federal region in the oil-rich al-Jazeera, where Syria, Iraq, and Turkey meet. The Federal System that the PYD and its allies in TEV-DEM sought to build was an effort towards achieving this goal.¹²³ As previously described, tribal Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, and Turkmen alike, for the most part, lived in relative harmony. And the two largest communities of this oil-rich region, Kurds and Arabs, agreed broadly that successive revolutionary regimes based in Damascus, culminating in the al-Assad era, selectively and unjustly targeted them, depriving their region of needed resources and infrastructural development.

The Promise and Peril of the PYD

The PKK was historically an organization marked by its willingness to use violence, inculcate totalitarian administration, and observe an almost cultish devotion to Abdullah Öcalan. It used threats and actual violence against other Kurdish parties, movements, and independent individuals throughout the Middle East. Following the model of the Palestinian militant organization Abu Nidal, the PKK sold its services to any rogue government or entity that supported it and helped it survive. But, it could also be pragmatic.¹²⁴ By the fall of 2011, not long after the Syrian Uprising began, the PKK influence in northern Syria grew through the PYD and its allies TEV-DEM. Estimates of its support in the three predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria were: approximately 30 percent in al-Jazeera, approximately 50 percent in Kobani,

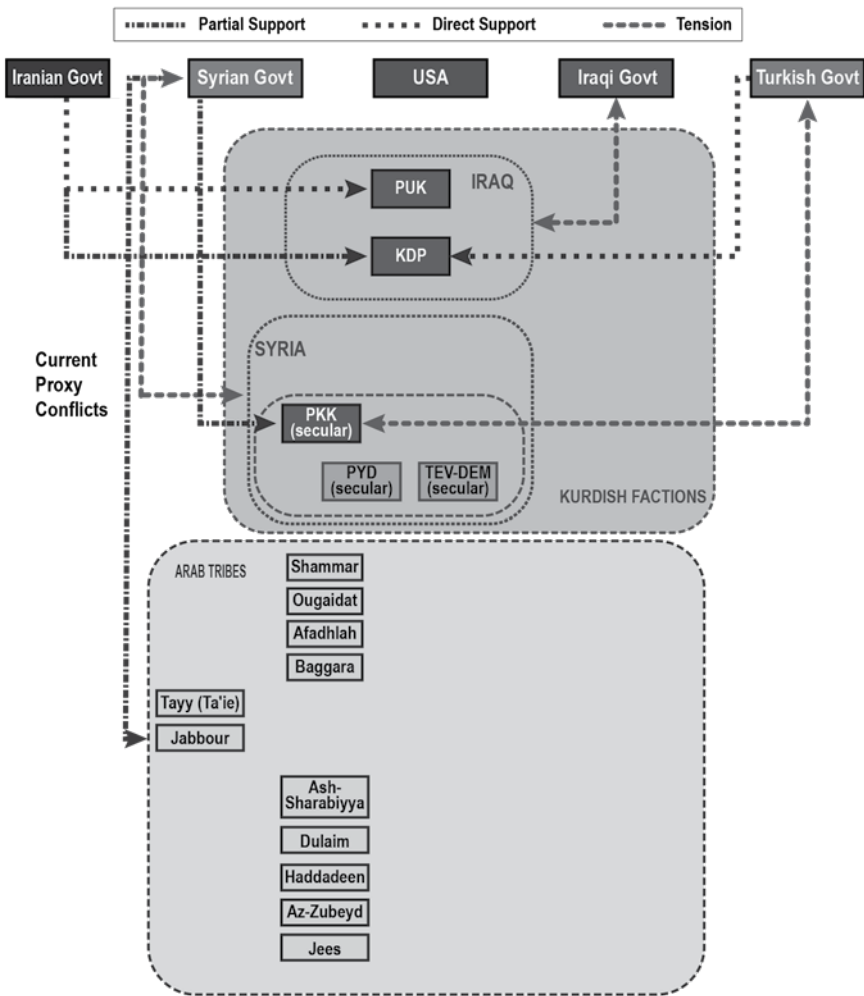


Figure 9. Proxy conflict between regional states utilizing Kurdish parties.
SOURCE: AUTHORS

and approximately 80 percent in Afrin.¹²⁵ By the conclusion of 2011, at the request of the SARG and the IRGC, the military wing of the PKK (that bases itself in Qandil, inside the KRI) sent more than 1,000 fighters of Syrian origin back into northeastern Syria to harass the opposition parties that had been organizing local coordination committees that had been forming throughout the al-Jazeera to oppose the rule of Bashar al-Assad.¹²⁶ Paradoxically, once it established a strong position inside of the al-Jazeera at the expense of other

Kurdish parties by July 2012, the PYD began to liberalize its approach, allowing civil society organizations that were not completely aligned with it to reemerge, provided they did not form militias to contest it.¹²⁷

For all intents and purposes, from July 2012 on, the PYD and its allies in TEV-DEM wielded state-like power in the Kurdish regions of Syria due to their strong influence on the main militia organization, the YPG.¹²⁸ The YPG, frequently overseen at the command level by cadres of PKK fighters from Syria and Turkey, controlled large parts of the border region between the Kurdish areas of Syria and Turkey as well as Iraq, and established numerous checkpoints. Starting in 2012, the YPG imposed taxes on gasoline and collected border fees into and out of the Kurdish-majority areas of the al-Jazeera.¹²⁹ Further, starting gradually in the summer of 2011 and completed by July 2013, the SARG turned over the administration of cities, towns, and villages in the Kurdish areas of the al-Jazeera to the YPG, which was most heavily influenced by the PYD and its parent the PKK.¹³⁰

The fact that these locations were taken over without any significant fighting—no dead or injured were reported—could indicate that all this was an agreement, officially negotiated or not, between the SARG and the PYD.¹³¹ Yet, for its part, the YPG, and the PYD and its allies in TEV-DEM, denied any cooperation with the SARG.¹³² Likewise, the PYD and its allies in TEV-DEM generally denied being a formal part of the PKK organization, and instead suggested that they were inspired by Öcalan's ideology, and did not directly follow his leadership.¹³³ Given that the PKK was labeled as either criminal or terrorist by many states including the U.S., the PYD sought to gain international recognition by disclaiming this connection. According to Denise Natali, Syrian Kurds make up about one-third of the PKK and have maintained close social ties with Kurds in Turkey.¹³⁴

There is also strong evidence that beginning in 2012, the PYD, acting on behalf of the PKK, regularly threatened, kidnapped, and murdered activists of other parties.¹³⁵ From mid-2011 to mid-2012, these acts of violence might have been committed on behalf of the regime, however, by early 2013, they were done to consolidate the PYD's supremacy in the Kurdish areas of the al-Jazeera. Syrian Kurds from the al-Jazeera expressed to the authors that the PYD, and therefore the PKK, was a totalitarian organization and does not share power when it is strong. Thus, even though the KRI trained a cadre of Syrian Kurdish fighters in a peshmerga military structure, the supremacy of the YPG, and therefore the PYD and PKK, in Syria was not seriously

challenged as far back as 2013.¹³⁶ The YPG was by far the strongest militia in the Kurdish area of Syria, and therefore able to dictate the rules of the game.

The Promise

The threat from ISIS led to the rapid militarization of many of the al-Jazeera's ethnic and sectarian communities prior to September 2014, and many of these communities did not want to be reliant on the YPG for their protection. It was not surprising that the al-Jazeera was a major site of Arab support and recruitment for Salafi jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Prior to the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, there was clear evidence of cooperation between some Syrian tribes in the al-Jazeera and extremist Sunni organizations that were sending fighters to combat the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.

This arrangement between some of the tribes in the al-Jazeera and Salafi jihadi fighters was convenient for the tribes, as it allowed tribesmen to earn income for their families at a time when the broader economy in this region of Syria was collapsing. There is no dispute that the al-Jazeera region was a major transit point for the movement of jihadi (including al-Qaeda) fighters into Iraq, at least until late 2007. Syrian tribesmen, due to their intimate knowledge of the terrain of the area, and family connections on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, benefitted immensely from the payments they received for smuggling weapons and fighters into Iraq.¹³⁷

Arab tribes in the al-Jazeera, with the tacit approval of the SARG, could participate in an extensive war industry of smuggling foreign fighters into Iraq from this region of Syria. In October 2007, coalition troops seized hundreds of documents maintained by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) that were

The "Sinjar Records," as they are now called, gave great insight into the composition and origins of AQI fighters from outside of Iraq.

housed in the northwestern Iraqi city of Sinjar.

The "Sinjar Records," as they are now called, gave great insight into the composition and origins of AQI fighters from outside of Iraq. AQI, from which ISIS evolved, had strong ties to the al-Jazeera region of Syria, particularly in Deir ez Zour province, but also in areas of Hasakah province such as in and around ash-Shadadi in

the southern areas of the province, that are close to Kurdish communities. Syrian fighters in Iraq accounted for the third highest total (8 percent)

reports that mosques in these cities daily broadcast sermons urging the local population to donate homes to serve as safe houses and arms dumps for jihadi fighters moving into Iraq, and that local religious leaders and tribal sheikhs worked with their Iraqi compatriots on the other side of the border to facilitate the jihadis' movement into Iraq. The message to wage jihad against the U.S.-led coalition forces was not lost on local tribesmen either—many Syrian tribesmen, particularly from Deir ez Zour, went into Iraq to confront U.S.-led coalition troops.¹⁴⁰

However, over time, due to the training provided to the YPG by seasoned PKK operatives, and the weapons available to the Kurdish-majority organization due to the support of the SAA prior to July 2012, a significant number of tribal Arabs and sectarian and ethnic minorities began to become affiliated with the YPG to receive weapons and financing. For example, ethnic Assyrian communities in the Khabur River valley area of Hasakah province formed militias that manned checkpoints that guarded the approach to their villages. They were organized and trained by the efforts of an ethnic Assyrian, former Swiss Army soldier, and then sought and received formal assistance of the YPG.¹⁴¹ Yazidi villages were also threatened by predominately Arab, tribal militant Salafi fighters and either fled their villages or turned to the YPG for armed support.¹⁴² In addition, the ash-Sharabiya and Zubayd Arab tribal communities near Ras al-Ain accepted arms and affiliation with the YPG.¹⁴³ Overall, YPG units were generally raised at the local level (village, town, city quarter), and on a day-to-day basis had significant autonomy from YPG central command.

The PYD expended considerable effort to conduct outreach to Arabs and ethnic and sectarian minorities in the al-Jazeera region to outcompete the SARG for local loyalties. In 2013, a period during which the PYD rule was weaker than now, many of the Christian minority groups in the al-Jazeera, such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Armenians, were resistant to a formal relationship with the YPG. These sectarian communities were unsure if the SARG would return to their areas, and were uncertain if the PYD had lasting power, or if the KDP-S would be able to make a deal with Turkey that would allow its peshmerga to enter northeastern Syria to displace the PYD/PKK.¹⁴⁴

Another dynamic at play in the period between July 2012 and September 2014 was that although Arab tribal fighters were being recruited into the YPG, most of the local Arab tribes in the al-Jazeera sought a continuing relationship with the SARG, their own autonomy, or were part of the broader

armed opposition movement. It was also evident that the PYD, especially before ISIS became a direct threat to the Kurdish heartland, dismissed the local Arabs as being somewhat primitive in their aspirations and vision for the future end state of what had been Syria. A wide range of Syrian Kurds in Hasakah province were hostile towards the Arabs who lived in the so-called Arab Belt communities of northern Syria, which the Kurds viewed as prime recruiting grounds for Sunni extremist groups, and over which the YPG imposed a tight security administration to prevent attacks on neighboring Kurdish communities. These Arab communities, which were predominately inhabited by low-ranking Arab tribes from the rural areas of Raqqa province, remained vulnerable and it is unclear if they would be fully incorporated into the Kurdish-backed Federal System.¹⁴⁵

The pattern of conflict in the al-Jazeera during the period from July 2012 to September 2014 was a war of maneuver in the context of the withdrawal of the SAA and its adjutant militias as the possessor of the monopoly of violent force in this region. The SARG was forced to rely upon an outpost strategy where the cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli represented its most secure means of implementing patchwork influence upon the various constituent ethnic and sectarian communities in the al-Jazeera. Into this vacuum, the YPG asserted itself, organizing Kurdish and allied militias from the other communities into the overarching Supreme Kurdish Committee, as it sought to establish the foundation of the Federal System in the al-Jazeera.

While the SAA retained its strongest outposts in the cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli, it ceded a great deal of territory in the al-Jazeera to local armed groups.¹⁴⁶ SAA positions in both cities were pressured by local militias. The southern countryside of the city of al-Hasakah province, in the sub-districts of al-'Arisha, ash-Shaddada, and Markada, were the site of frequent clashes between the SARG and the Arab armed opposition, and then later between the Arab armed opposition and the YPG. The town of ash-Shaddadi had seen particularly fierce fighting, with militant Salafi forces led by Jabhat al-Nusra seizing it, before giving way to ISIS by the end of winter 2014.¹⁴⁷

Fighting in the al-Jazeera during that period demonstrated the complexity of the region, and the nature of the SARG's patchwork authority in it. Ras al-Ain, contiguous as was with the Turkish city of Ceylanpinar, was a convenient logistical route for the armed opposition. Ras al-Ain was also a fault-line area that Sunni Arab Salafi jihadi organizations would seek to incorporate into an Islamic Caliphate and that Syrian Kurds desired to be

part of a potentially autonomous Rojava.¹⁴⁸ Low intensity conflict had been ongoing in Ras al-Ain since the end of 2012, with bouts of conflict in the city in July and August 2013, the most intense and destructive since Kurds and Arabs began to clash for control over it at the start of the Syrian Uprising.¹⁴⁹

The fighting in the al-Jazeera, combined with a poor economy and increasingly difficult access to food resources and basic medicine, led to the mass internal displacement of people from all identity communities, but particularly Kurds and Arabs from conflict areas such as Ras al-Ain.¹⁵⁰ For example, during the period from late August to early September 2013 more than 30,000 refugees fled from the al-Jazeera to Iraqi Kurdistan, overcrowding existing refugee camps there, such as those in the province of Dohuk, which at one point was forced to accommodate more than 55,000 refugees in a camp that was meant for 15,000.¹⁵¹

The second major site of conflict in the al-Jazeera was in the far north-east districts of Hasakah province, in the al-Qahtaniyah and al-Malikiyah districts, particularly in the subdistrict of Tal Hamis in al-Qahtaniyah and the subdistrict of Yarubiyah in al-Malikiyah.¹⁵² Tal Hamis and Ya'rubiyah abut the Syrian-Iraqi border area of Rabia in the Tal Afar region of Iraq's Ninewah province. This area had been the focus of frequent clashes between the SARG, which conducted air strikes against tribal Arab armed opposition groups, mostly raised from the Shammar, and the YPG and its local tribal allies, also mostly raised from the Shammar, and a reportedly tenuous alliance of Sunni Arab armed opposition groups that sought to control the oil fields in and around the towns of Ma'badi (Girke Lege in Kurdish), Gar Zero, and Suweidia and the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing of Ya'rubiyah/Rabia which were used to smuggle armed opposition fighters and materiel into Syria.¹⁵³ Armed opposition fighters seized the Ya'rubiyah crossing on the Syrian side of the border in March 2013, reportedly out of a motivation to prevent the flow of military assistance from the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki to the government of Bashar al-Assad.¹⁵⁴

Several Sunni Arab armed groups were also present in the sub-districts of Tal Hamis and Ya'rubiyah, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and the Shammar tribally-affiliated fighting front, the Free Jazirah Brigades.¹⁵⁵ Other armed opposition organizations which reported their participation in the battle for the area included local affiliates of HASI and the militant Islamist group Tajammou' Kata'ib al-Haq.¹⁵⁶ Saleh Muslim stated at that time that the Kurds controlled 60 percent of the region's oil wells, with

the rest belonging to local Arab tribal groups.¹⁵⁷ Fighting for control of the oil fields around Rmeilan, in Hasakah province, continued sporadically even after the U.S. military began working with Burkan al-Furat in September 2014. These oil resources continued to represent a source of conflict in the future between Kurds and Arabs in the al-Jazeera, as they offered a lucrative source of income for whoever controlled them (figure 11).

It was thus during the period from the fall of 2013 into the summer of 2014 that the YPG began its transition into becoming a regional, core

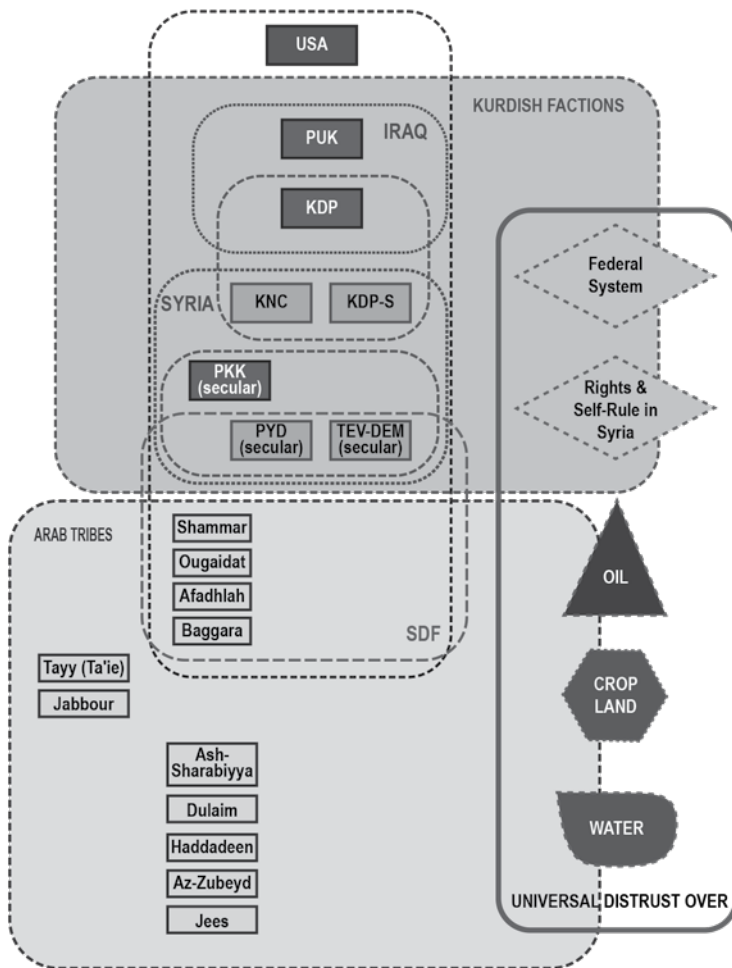


Figure 11. Main sources of tensions and universal distrust between ethnic, religious, and ideological groups in al-Jazeera. SOURCE: AUTHORS

defensive force that gave itself the mandate to defend all of al-Jazeera's core communities. These communities included ethnic and sectarian minorities—Assyrians, Armenians, Yazidis, Turkmen—and Arabs that could work with the YPG to constitute a pan-communal authority. The YPG, as a security structure, began to more actively distinguish itself from the PYD. In reaction to charges of its close affiliation with the PYD/PKK, the YPG also gradually recruited more Arabs and other communal groups into its structure and developed into a genuinely pan-ethnic fighting force to confront the challenge from ISIS.

The Peril

Local Kurdish parties, movements, and youth-led local civic (community) councils in the three major Kurdish regions of the al-Jazeera, together with some independent individuals, formed the KNC of Syria in Qamishli on 22 October 2011. At that time, it was composed of 11 Kurdish parties, one movement, representatives of local youth coordinating committees, and a few independents. It took four months, and a good deal of pressure from Masoud Barzani and others to convince the Syrian Kurdish parties to establish the KNC.

The PYD was involved in all the negotiations leading up to the establishment of the KNC but withdrew on the last day, demanding higher representation than the other parties and, possibly, over the issue of refusing to join the broader Syrian opposition movement. This was at the behest of the military wing of the PKK in Qandil. PYD leader Saleh Muslim stated at that time, “the whole opposition movement for regime change in Syria is an American-Turkish plot for the overthrow of a progressive regime.”¹⁵⁸ From the viewpoint of the KNC and its backers, Masoud Barzani and the Erdogan government, the PYD, upon the command of the PKK, was playing the role of spoiler, incited to this action by the intelligence branches of the SARG and the IRGC. Since the PYD, through its strong influence over the YPG militia network, was well armed and supported by the SARG, the other Kurdish parties in Syria were forced to adopt a tactic of “appeasement.”¹⁵⁹ Sending a clear message to the KNC, the PYD joined with TEV-DEM in late 2011—a group that until it allied with the PYD and PKK was often described as the “loyal opposition” within Syria. The PYD continued to harass the local people and Kurdish opposition groups in 2012, for example in the town of

Amuda and in the city of Qamishli. Further, the YPG maintained armed checkpoints with unidentified masked men. KNC members understood this as a direct provocation, challenging their position to actively participate in society and politics of the al-Jazeera.

It was during this period, over the course of late 2011 into the summer of 2012, that approximately 1,000 of the PKK's experienced armed fighters of Syrian Kurdish origin were dispatched from their bases in Qandil, Iraqi Kurdistan, to support the YPG, and by extension the PYD, forces in Syria. According to Omar Sheikhmous, the SARG and the IRGC plan was to create problems between the local Syrian Kurdish parties and the broader Syria opposition movement, particularly the various, mainly Arab militias of the FSA, and the Syrian National Council (SNC).¹⁶⁰ The PYD, while at that time not the most popular organization in the three main Kurdish areas of Syria, was well-organized on the ground. Every member pledged 10 percent of his or her income to the PYD, which was not the case for the other Syrian Kurdish parties. The PYD benefited from the taxes they imposed on goods brought into the region and their levies on gas and oil. It emerged as the dominant force in the Kurdish areas in 2012 due to SARG support, coordinated with the IRGC. The PYD also greatly benefited from the phased, strategic withdrawal of SAA forces from most of the Kurdish-majority towns and villages of the al-Jazeera, leaving these areas to be administered by the well-armed YPG forces supported by the PKK.

Masoud Barzani and his KDP party in Iraqi Kurdistan coordinated closely with Ankara in this period. Barzani understood that the PYD and its partners of convenience, the SARG and the IRGC, hoped that the KDP would act precipitously against the PYD in Syria. Barzani directly supported the establishment of the KNC to check the growing power of the PYD in Syria.¹⁶¹ Poorly armed, the parties within the KNC followed a policy of appeasement—optimistically termed “neutralization”—towards the PYD-influenced YPG militias, to avoid intra-Kurdish fratricidal fighting. The Erbil agreement between the KNC and PYD of 11 July 2012, arranged by Masoud Barzani, was part of this strategy. The KNC and President Barzani understood the risks involved in trying to tame the PYD and separate it from the PKK. In fact, they recognized that it was virtually an impossible task, but saw no other alternative at the time.

The KNC was strongest in the al-Jazeera region, although it also had influence in Ain Al-Arab, where it is said to have about the same level of

influence on the general population as the PYD, and far less influence in Afrin. Heeding the advice of longtime Arab allies in the region (including al-Jazeera-based Sheikh Falah Ajil Abdol Karim al-Jarba of the Sham-

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mar Confederation), the KNC began a dialogue with the Arab tribes and the Syriac-speaking Christians of al-Jazeera. This took place in order to agree on a form of joint administration for this oil-producing region in the post-Assad period. The KNC supported a decentralized model for the region, as did some of the Arab and

Christian leaders. Representatives of the KNC requested that the FSA not to enter their areas to maintain the peace.

In the fall of 2012, clashes in Ras al-Ain (Serikani in Kurdish) pitted YPG militias affiliated with the PYD against local Arab tribal fighters who may or may not have been actual FSA members. The thinking among local Kurdish political parties and NGOs at the time was that the FSA should stay out of the Kurdish regions, given that these areas were not directly under SARG control, and avoid retaliation by the SAA against these regions. The attitude towards the FSA in general was positive, except for concern about the militant Islamist elements within the armed opposition movement. Two of the main commanders of FSA at the time were Kurds, and some 3,000 Kurdish soldiers joined its ranks, most of whom would join the Jabhat al-Akrad (Kurdish Front) organization that was part of the armed opposition's Supreme Command.

However, the experience of the Jabhat al-Akrad organization in its relationship to the Arab-majority FSA deserves special attention because it highlights the obstacles that even secular, non-PYD backed Kurdish militias faced in integrating with the Syrian armed opposition. Never fully accepted by the predominately ethnic Arab, and to a lesser degree ethnic Turkmen, armed groups within the FSA, Jabhat al-Akrad sought to forge an independent path that ultimately led it into incorporation into the SDF, where it fought in close cooperation with Arab, Turkmen, and Assyrian militia forces that are part of the SDF structure.¹⁶² In contrast, Kurdish militia groups that were part of the militant Salafi armed organizations, such as in HASI, fared better in their relationship with Arab opposition fighters because Islamist

ideology, not ethnic identity, is promoted by those groups. This reality did not go unnoticed by Syrian Kurdish activists, who wryly observed that the post-September 2014 PYD was better at building interethnic cooperation than the FSA ever was.¹⁶³

Intra-Kurdish Tensions Post-ISIS

Regarding the efforts of then-KRI President Masoud Barzani to organize and support the Syrian Kurds in 2011-2012, a major challenge as he saw it was a lack of authentic leadership. Barzani did not see that local Syrian Kurdish leaders were connected to their own people. He was concerned about the inability of Syrian Kurdish leaders to project moral and political authority.¹⁶⁴ The strategy of Masoud Barzani after the March 2011 Syrian uprising had been first to support the growth of strategic depth of the KDP-S and then to support the same for the KNC in Syria. In this regard, the leaders of the KDP-Iraq, under Barzani's close supervision, worked to unify the divided parties that were closest to the KDP-Iraq and, secondarily to the PUK-Iraq. With significant effort, as mentioned above, Masoud Barzani managed to establish the KNC in October 2011 and then hosted 225 of its members from 11 parties plus some independents in Erbil in January 2012. The PYD was invited but did not attend. In July 2012, Barzani brokered the creation of a High Council of Syrian Kurdish Parties that included the PYD. Joining the High Council did not change the hegemonic behavior of the PYD toward the other Kurdish parties.

Barzani opened all doors in terms of support for the KNC. Barzani's representatives held long meetings with the KNC leadership to try to get them to identify their end goal. The problem, however, was that they could not agree on an end state. For example, some want to move towards secession, although Barzani argued that they needed to learn from KRG experience in Iraq since 1991 (i.e. to make realistic demands and then impose a status quo on the ground). Barzani's end-state goals for Syria, as of July 2012, were to:

1. Preserve a unified Syria;
2. Ensure real democratic change; and

In July 2012, Barzani brokered the creation of a High Council of Syrian Kurdish Parties that included the PYD.

3. Embrace pluralism- Syria after Assad must be both democratic and pluralistic.

Barzani's negotiation strategy for the KNC was to: (1) demand full rights for all Syrians (i.e. for all minorities—not just Kurds—and demand such rights be incorporated into the constitution); and (2) not pursue secession or post-Saddam Iraq style federalism but rather work for political decentralization.

In other words, Barzani wanted the KNC to work towards a form of self-rule—less than Iraqi Kurdistan style federalism but more than simple local, provincial administration. For example, he argued for a model wherein the Kurdish regions would be responsible for their own health and education policy, but not foreign policy, currency, or defense, all key portfolios that would come under the authority of the central government. Barzani stressed that confirmation of these rights must be included in a future constitution. He also mentioned that an important element of rights under a political decentralization model should include some degree of control and decision over natural resources (natural gas and oil) in a region. In addition to these governance and economic rights, he sought official recognition of the Kurdish language, which should be used in government correspondence in the Kurdish areas of Syria. Barzani was also insistent that, as was the case in Iraq, Syria's Kurds must be active at the center, in Damascus.

Intra-Kurdish tensions remained unresolved as a result of the different constituencies, differences in factional alliances, and fears about political domination. In the face of common threat, these differences among Kurdish factions became less apparent. However, the recent history of PYD-PKK domination of the political space in Eastern and northeastern Syria bode poorly for the U.S., especially if the desire was for a legitimately governed polity. The specific exclusion of the KNC from politics despite its links to the U.S. through the KDP and the PYD's potential ties to the SARG and Iran through the PKK suggested that, left to its own devices, the PYD could replicate the very political circumstances prompting the 2011 Syrian Uprising. Should this circumstance occur, it is quite possible that ethno-sectarian conflict could arise or even witness the renewed relevance of ISIS or another variant of Salafi jihadism.

UW Implications

Syria's Kurdish parties were heavily influenced by historical ties to regional powers during the proxy wars of the Cold War. They were divided by tribal lines, ideological differences, and practical governance experiences even at the beginning of the Syrian Revolution. While Kurds coalesced in the face of existential crisis, they should not have been viewed as a cohesive political group because doing so masked the diversity of interests, range of interethnic relationships, and rivalries each group formed over the decades.

While there was much satisfaction within the SOF community regarding the PYD/YPG's ability to govern after retaking territory from ISIS, its historic relationships with the SARG and Iran should have caused U.S. leaders great pause. Moreover, the main reason that it was able to govern so effectively was that it utilized fear and military force to quell opposition. Despite its Democratic Systems rhetoric, al-Jazeera residents realized that the PYD/YPG were still arms of the PKK, which was itself totalitarian in nature.

By infusing the PYD/YPG with military and political resources starting in September 2014, the U.S. military left the Kurdish and tribal Arab groups suspicious of them no option but to join the Federal System. With the PYD/YPG's problematic relationships with the SARG and Iran and its heavy-handed governance practices, the operational decision to support the SDF/YPG and augment the PYD's governance agenda effectively broadcast to Kurds and Arabs that their medium-term concerns, such as meaningful political representation, access to scarce resources, and oil revenues, would not be addressed as part of U.S. policy.

At the same time, the SARG and Iran recognized they had two potential lines of advance in al-Jazeera when the time was ripe. First, and the most likely scenario, would be for resource scarcity and interethnic tension over time make the Assad regime seem like the least bad option for tribal Arabs. The PYD/YPG demonstrated between 2014-2018 a willingness to dominate the political space, which by late 2018 already prompted many tribal Arab sheikhs from al-Jazeera to meet with representatives of the Russian military and the Assad regime.¹⁶⁵ Second, both the SARG and Iran were supportive of the PKK in the past and they could feasibly create extraordinary problems for it and its subordinate organizations down the line. In the end, the PKK would likely choose survival over risking an existential conflict with its former benefactors. So long as Turkey remains a key competitor for the

SARG and Iran, the PKK has value as a proxy, and that would likely be its pragmatic choice. In the end, the U.S. placed all its eggs in a single basket that could be sold to the Assad regime to the long-term benefit of the Iranian government. Indeed, there are some reports that small, disaffected Kurdish elements of the SDF have already aligned with the SARG and Iranian proxies

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in preparation of the advance on Idlib Province, which they view as a springboard for liberating Afrin from Turkey.¹⁶⁶

The missed political component of the UW campaign was in failing to recognize the political contradictions amongst al-Jazeera's Kurdish and Arab communities. There was a moment in 2014-2015 when the PYD/YPG was sufficiently dependent on external support that its domi-

neering behavior could have been curtailed to allow for the political space necessary for other Kurdish and Arab actors to rejoin the governance discussion and generate countervailing influence. The KNC, with the support of the KDP/KDP-S, presented at least one alternative that had some degree of popular support and a history of favorable working relationships with the U.S. military. Despite having good relationships with important Arab tribes, it was institutionally and militarily too weak to confront the PYD/YPG prior to September 2014. Thereafter, U.S. military and diplomatic personnel most certainly had the access, placement, and influence over the PYD/YPG to create the political space for a meaningful opposition to arise, organize, and coherently engage al-Jazeera's population in the truly representative Democratic System. Failing to prioritize this element of the unconventional campaign ultimately reinforced historically rooted tensions and intercommunal fears stoked by the Assad regime as part of its governing strategy.

These dynamics were clearly known by Syria scholars and analysts, and should have been a priority non-kinetic operation concurrent with the kinetic one. The near and medium term political implications of these dynamics are discussed in part 3. While trends appear dire for the strategic sustainability of the otherwise operationally successful UW campaign against ISIS, there is still a chance of recovering some advantage.

Part 3

Chapter 4. Looking Ahead—The New Pressure Cooker

The previous chapters demonstrate that intra-Kurd and Arab-Kurd social and political dynamics within al-Jazeera are influenced by actors outside of the region. External actors shaped the social and political dynamics and, thus, the human terrain of northeastern Syria. As the counter-ISIS campaign winds down in Syria, the sociopolitical obstacles in the path of the U.S. military as it seeks to accomplish its stabilization goals in the al-Jazeera are exacerbated by the behavior of regional actors outside of Syria. These actors are the SARG with its Iranian and Russian allies, Turkey, the GOI, and the KRI, which acts in many ways as a client state of Turkey.¹⁶⁷

The U.S. military will need to factor into its planning that the sociopolitical situation in the al-Jazeera, which developed after the Syrian Uprising began—but prior to the start of OIR's relationship with Burkan al-Furat in September 2014—is still highly relevant and important to future stability operations. The communal conflicts that emerged in 2011-2014 were put into dormancy because weaker groups, such as the Arab tribes that had cut themselves off from military and financial support of the SARG, saw an opportunity to receive weapons and influence through the U.S.-backed SDF. The potential for communal conflict remains, even though, and perhaps ironically, considering the ruthlessness with which the PYD/YPG captured and consolidated power in the 2011-2014 period. The PYD has subsequently demonstrated, through its promotion of the Federal System, that it can to some degree accommodate the other identity communities in this region into its vision of the end state in the al-Jazeera. The problem may be more internal in that the PYD cannot accommodate other Kurdish views and political parties that challenge its bid for ethnic hegemony.

The obstacle to the multiethnic Federal System is the widespread commitment to promote Kurdish nationalism among the Kurds of Syria. According to interviewees for this study, this commitment on the part of the Syrian Kurds is having a demonstrably negative effect on the durability of this

incipient governance system in the al-Jazeera. This rising Kurdish nationalism in the al-Jazeera cannot be easily controlled by the PYD, or the PKK for that matter, and it is a type of populism that exacerbates latent conflicts with the region's Arab community. At the eye of this political hurricane is the question of whether tribal Arabs settled by the SARG in Hasakah province during the Arabization period should be allowed to remain on their lands, or should be relocated to areas conquered by the SDF from ISIS in Raqqa Province.¹⁶⁸

A Balance of Power or a Balance of Interests?

As of the time of this writing, governance in Eastern Syria is effectively constituted by a balance of power tipped in favor of the PYD in large part due to its relationship with the U.S. military. While such an arrangement can survive when there is a common threat—such as that previously presented by ISIS—the situation becomes increasingly less tenable when the issue becomes about governance and political representation in a new order. For a new

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political order to survive, its constituent elements must find it legitimate and open to their interests. Otherwise, the foremost power will resort to a domination strategy relying on force and compulsion. Given the range of external interests playing in Eastern Syria at the moment, it is crucial to gain an appreciation of the interests of the various Kurdish,

tribal Arab, and minority groups as they can be manipulated by external actors to create a legitimate balance of interests or cause the Eastern Syrian pressure cooker to blow.

The Shi'a Crescent

Through the SARG, and potentially through ongoing relations with the PYD through the PKK, the IRGC is seeking to build a belt of influence stretching from the Kurdish areas of Iraq into Syria.¹⁶⁹ Although this is smart power politics on the part of the Iranians, it also serves the purpose of providing the Iranians with an alternate land route into Damascus if their route through

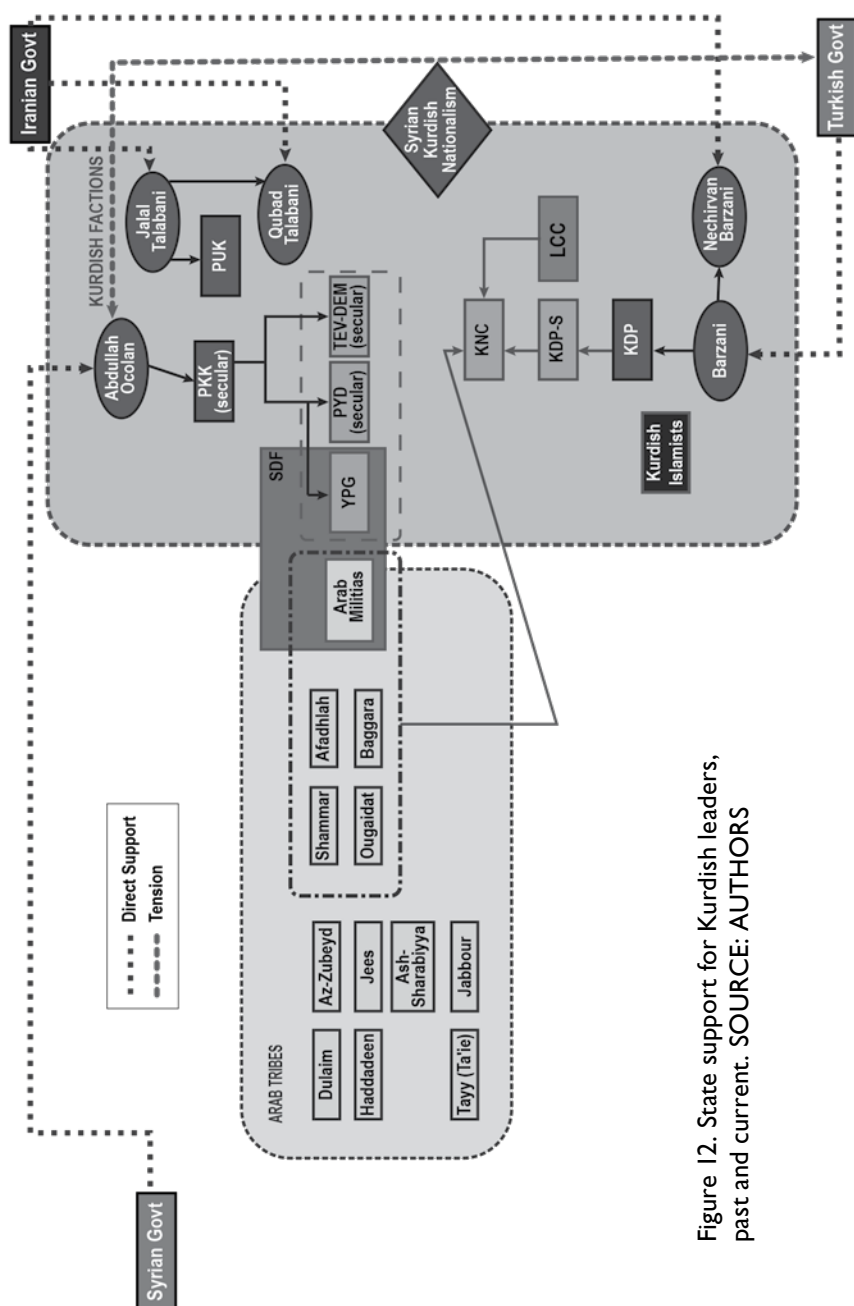


Figure 12. State support for Kurdish leaders, past and current. SOURCE: AUTHORS

Deir ez Zour via the Syrian Desert to Damascus is cut off. While it may be counterintuitive with current U.S. support for the SDF seemingly cutting off Iran's access to large areas of the al-Jazeera, the IRGC-QF already operates in Qamishli, and has levers of influence on Iraqi Kurdish political leaders who could be quietly marshalling their strength to seize the levers of power in the KRI.

An author has high-level and long-standing Iraqi Kurdish contacts who have stated that the Iranian regime has declared to all Iraqi Kurdish political parties and the central government in Baghdad that Qubad Talabani is Tehran's "man" in the KRI. Qubad Talabani has a long-standing interest in the Syrian Kurdish communities, and interacts with the representatives of the Syrian Kurdish parties frequently at gatherings outside of the Middle East. Further, Nechirvan Barzani and Qubad Talabani, based on their personal friendship and shared positive perspective on Iranian culture and civilization (as well as mutual close ties to the Supreme Leader and other dominant figures in the Iranian system), are well-positioned to succeed in becoming the most powerful leaders in the KRI.

These two leaders, who represent the next generation, could be preparing to promote a strategic alliance between the KRI and Iran, which would allow the KRI to be the dominant actor in the Kurdish areas of the al-Jazeera in Syria. The authors of this study already sees a return to the "1990s paradigm" in Iraqi Kurdistan in which the KDP under Masoud Barzani has aligned with Turkey and the PUK with Iran. The national and regional political effect of the "Nechirvan factor" remains to be seen. But this much is clear: Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the KRI is the KDP's key conduit to Iran's Supreme Leader.

A key question that must be considered by U.S. planners, particularly if the U.S. military will continue to use Erbil as a rear operating base for both counterterrorism and stabilization operations in the al-Jazeera region of Syria, is the stability of the KRI as Iran seeks to be the dominant regional influence on it. Key to this question is whether Nechirvan Barzani, given his close ties to Iran, is (or will become) "Tehran's man in the KDP." The Barzani "family" is already highly internally divided: with the descendants of Mulla Mustafa Barzani by his first two wives in an alliance on one side and those of his third wife (daughter of a Zebari tribal *agha*) on the other. Will Nechirvan Barzani continue to attempt to straddle both sides of the family rift to postpone what is likely to be an unavoidable clash with his

first cousin, Masrour Barzani (the eldest son of Masoud Barzani and head of Intelligence and National Security in the KRI)?

It is the view of the authors of this study that there are two very important questions that will need to be answered because of these Iranian-directed developments in the dynamics of leadership succession in the KRI (figure 13). They are:

1. Will Nechirvan Barzani's known attachment to Iran and his close friendship with Qubad Talabani drive him away from the "axis" of Masoud Barzani, Masrour Barzani, and Turkey?
2. Will Iran become the preeminent foreign power in Iraqi Kurdistan, reducing the role of Turkey in the region, and thus strengthen its land routes to supply the SARG through both Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish areas?
3. Are there Syrian groups in Hasakah and its surrounding areas who would be disenfranchised by an Iranian-Syrian Kurd alliance?

Resurgent Arab Nationalism

The actions of the SARG are an imposing obstacle to achieving the U.S. military's stabilization effort in the al-Jazeera. Presently the SARG, through the efforts of its SAA and the adjutant militias of the SAA that are mobilized through the NDF organization, is actively contesting the U.S. military and its SDF partners. Iran is supporting the SARG's campaign to undermine OIR through the activities of its IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah, the most capable expeditionary partner force of the IRGC-QF. The SARG is taking active measures to reestablish lines of influence inside of the Federal System, focusing on Arab tribes.

Bashar al-Assad and his allies are concerned that the U.S. military is preparing to establish an indefinite military mandate in the areas of the al-Jazeera that are controlled by the SDF. The SARG is currently pursuing two main lines of efforts: information operations; and resistance activities through the network-building, mobilization, and arming of proxy militias to undermine the U.S. military's stabilization efforts in cooperation with the SDF in the al-Jazeera. The SARG's first line of effort, information operations, specifically challenges the legality of the operations of OIR in Syria, to

weaken international support for the U.S. military and its allies' campaign against ISIS and to send the signal to local actors in the al-Jazeera that it is the government of Bashar al-Assad, and not the United States, that will have staying power in this region of Syria.

Aware that the U.S. military presence in Syria does not have a blank check from either the Trump administration or the U.S. Congress, and concerned with the creation of an indefinite American zone of influence on the ground inside of Syria, the Assad regime and its allies are utilizing a range of military and nonmilitary activities to undermine the U.S.-led coalition and to prevent the establishment of a U.S. military mandate in Syria. The strategy of the SARG and its allies is a particularly difficult threat to counter because of the tenuousness of political support for the OIR's Syria campaign within the U.S. Congress. There is a still-developing Trump administration Syria policy review, and there are reported disagreements within the administration about how much and how long to invest in the counterterrorism operations in Syria. At the heart of this debate is whether an indefinite residual U.S. military presence in Syria will be required to prevent the resurgence of ISIS.¹⁷⁰ The U.S. Congress is increasingly looking to develop a bipartisan authorization for the use of military force for the counter-ISIS campaign, and it is applying pressure on the Trump administration to provide a comprehensive roadmap for OIR's counter-ISIS and the end state that is expected in Syria as part of the administration's strategy.¹⁷¹

Bashar al-Assad's government and its allies have focused on messaging that disputes the legality of the OIR counter-ISIS campaign. Previously careful to ignore the U.S. military conducting the counter-ISIS campaign in Syria because OIR operations relieved the ISIS pressure on the SARG and its partners, particularly the IRGC, Bashar al-Assad has started to personally single out the U.S. military as "invaders" threatening to occupy Syrian land in his messaging to Syrian, Arab, and global audiences.¹⁷² Implicit in these communications from Bashar al-Assad is the message that the SARG considers the local Syrian partners of the U.S. military to be traitors to their country, and that there is no alternative to patriotism but in support of his government. To amplify this message, both the Russian and the Iranian governments have repeatedly and loudly protested the U.S. military presence in Syria, and have devoted resources to repeat the message to the international community that only the SARG in Damascus can authorize OIR operations on its sovereign territory.¹⁷³

Simultaneous to this messaging, pro-SARG media outlets and social media accounts significantly increased their content depicting the SAA and its allied forces conducting counter-ISIS operations in eastern Syria. There is an active and well-established network of media and social media accounts providing coverage in support of the war effort of the SARG and its allies that emerged over the course of the Syrian Civil War. These outlets generally cover factual realities as they occur on the ground, in the context of military activities, through an editorial lens that supports the SARG and its allies' narrative that the government of Bashar al-Assad is fighting a counterinsurgency campaign against foreign-backed Salafi jihadi organizations. Examples of these pro-SARG outlets include the Al-Mayadin news channel, which is based in Beirut; and Al-Masdar News, which has bureaus in Beirut and Damascus and social media accounts on Twitter such as "Ivan Sidorenko," (@IvanSidorenko1), "Peto Lucem," (@PetoLucem), "PartisanGirl," (@Partisangirl), and "TheNimrTiger," (@TheNimrTiger or @Souria4Syrians).

These media and social media outlets have increasingly focused on debunking international claims that the SARG used chemical weapons against opposition areas, portraying the armed opposition in an unflattering context, and, increasingly, drawing attention to the military gains of the SAA and its allied forces against ISIS. They have, for example, cited the mobilization of local populations by the SAA and the NDF to fight ISIS to undermine the argument that the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS is necessary because of inattention or inability of the forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. This social media production frequently showcases the role of Arab tribal militias in support of the SARG's counter-ISIS campaign, prominently mentioning the origins of these proud tribal soldiers from the al-Jazeera region fighting with the SAA. These sites and accounts are also focusing increasing attention on purported divisions between Arabs and Kurds within the SDF and disseminating reports of civilian casualties caused by the OIR air campaign against ISIS.¹⁷⁴

At the geopolitical level, the SARG and its allies are calling into question the argument made by the United States and its coalition partners that the OIR activities inside of Syria are justified without Bashar al-Assad's permission because the SARG is unwilling and/or the SAA and its allied forces are unable to dismantle ISIS.¹⁷⁵ The SARG is trying to sow doubt about the true intentions of the United States in Syria and question why the U.S. military is working by, with, and through a proxy force that the SARG depicts, with

some truth, as a foreign militant organization that is reviled by Syria's neighbors. Bashar al-Assad's government is seeking to draw a parallel between the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq—which stemmed from a policy of regime change and which many people in the region believe is the root cause of the region's recent instability—and the expanding U.S. military

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zone of influence on the ground in Syria. And, the SARG is trying to send the message to the Arabs of the al-Jazeera that as in Iraq, the United States is working closely with Kurdish partners that are seeking to take territory away from the core geographical region of the Arab peoples. The messaging of the SARG intends to wear away the foundation of the Federal System and any potential residual U.S. military deployment in the al-Jazeera by turning the local Arab population against the United States and the SDF.

The effect is to portray the United States as an aggressive power that is trying to use the excuse of ISIS to conquer the territory of one

of the historically most important areas of the Muslim world. Following the release of news stories by prominent Turkish media outlets about the location of 10 U.S. military bases and outposts in SDF-controlled areas of Syria which caused tensions between the United States and Turkey, the SARG and its allies—led by the Russian foreign ministry—quickly launched a social media campaign that amplified the story and used it as a hook for public messaging that the U.S. military was in the process of developing the infrastructure for an illegal, permanent occupation of Syrian land.¹⁷⁶

Further, Sheikh Khalid Abdol Karim Ajil al-Jarba and his brother Falah Abdol Karim al-Jarba, both from the village of Nurik in northern Hasakah province, relate that the SARG has already begun an active campaign of influence operations based out of Qamishli to undermine the U.S. military effort in the al-Jazeera. The sheikhs state that the SARG is attempting to use the current SDF conscription campaign against it. That Damascus sees an opportunity to play on the rising frustration with the SDF, which people in the al-Jazeera view as the PKK by another name, to turn all the

communities—not just the Arabs—against the SDF and the U.S. military that supports it.

However, as approximately half of the fighters in the SDF are now Arabs, the SARG has a chance to target Arabs with its messaging campaign, and it has already begun to do so. There are two arguments that the SARG and its intelligence agencies make to the communities of the al-Jazeera as to why they should begin to cut deals with Damascus as the conflict against ISIS winds down. First, the SARG argues that it has never left the al-Jazeera, that it continues to pay the salaries of school teachers and other skilled professionals that are employed by the state,¹⁷⁷ and moreover, that it controls secure routes for commerce into and out of the al-Jazeera that are needed by the local population. Second, the SARG argues that the Arab armed opposition groups fought for money, not for freedom or honor, and were little better than criminals if not outright terrorists, and for the Kurds, that the PYD is a criminal group that profits while the Kurdish population continues to be poor, and that these poor people are now dying for the Americans to occupy Syrian land.¹⁷⁸

The kinetic activities of the SAA and its allied forces against OIR in Syria are similarly designed to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. military operating in the country and its local partner forces led by the SDF.¹⁷⁹ Instead of directly assaulting the legitimacy of the OIR campaign against ISIS through information warfare, these kinetic activities directly target the SDF, and seek to weaken the resolve of the Arab and ethnic and sectarian minority fighters from the al-Jazeera that have joined into alliance with the YPG. The SARG and its allies have correctly assessed that the key to the “by, with, and through” strategy that is being conducted by the U.S. military in Syria is local partners.¹⁸⁰ As both the U.S.-led coalition and the forces of the Assad regime and its allies make gains against ISIS in Syria, tensions between the two sides continue to mount over who can move into which areas formerly held by ISIS.

This line of effort is being supported by the IRGC-QF, which has a dedicated intelligence cell in Qamishli and Damascus that focuses on recruiting and supporting high value Arab tribal community leaders, such as Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares of the Tayy (Ta'ie) confederation and Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir of the Baggara confederation. The SARG's decision not to completely abandon northeastern Syria to the PYD, and to maintain forward operating bases in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah, and its expanding zone of

control in Aleppo province, provides the SAA and the IRGC-QF with the opportunity to contest the human terrain of al-Jazeera against the Federal System. From the SAA bases in al-Jazeera, the SARG can provide weapons and financial assistance to Sunni Arab sheikhs willing to mobilize local forces under the NDF in support of the SARG. This, of course, undermines the monopoly of violence that is enjoyed by the militia forces that are loyal to the Federal System. The fragmented human terrain of the al-Jazeera will provide the SARG and the IRGC-QF with opportunities to engage in UW to shape the post-ISIS social and political context of the al-Jazeera to their benefit.

Qamishli, which is for all intents and purposes the most important city in the al-Jazeera, provides an important case study of how the SARG is seeking to implement a resistance strategy that undermines the SDF and the Federal System, and in so doing to force the U.S. military out of the al-Jazeera. The SAA, working through the NDF organization, has partnered with the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah to slowly but surely build up both Sunni and Shi'a Arab tribal forces to confront the SDF, and if need be, the U.S. military in and around Qamishli. General Ali Mamluk, the chief of the SARG's intelligence bureau, is working with the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah to work with Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares to build up a Tayy (Ta'ie) tribal militia to act as a rapid reaction force against the YPG affiliates in Qamishli. Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares's NDF militia is part of the foundation of the SAA and IRGC-QF's resistance operations in the al-Jazeera, and demonstrate the type of Arab tribal leader, and the type of local Arab force, that will be mobilized against the U.S. military and its partners in the al-Jazeera by the SARG (figure 14).

Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares is a native of the Haret Tayy district of the southern area of Qamishli City, a Sunni Arab-majority neighborhood where his section of the large, transnational Tayy tribal confederation is predominant. He is a descendant of a prestigious, sheikhly lineage within his section of the Tayy tribe, and is a member of the Syrian parliament.¹⁸¹ Prior to the start of the civil war, Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares was an organizer of Sunni Arab tribal groups that targeted Kurdish demonstrators and looted Kurdish-owned stores during the 2004 Qamishli soccer riots. He has also participated in interethnic and intersectorian dialogue sessions in Qamishli, appealing to Syrian nationalism and pluralistic values. His relationship with the majority Kurdish community in Qamishli is believed to be more nuanced than

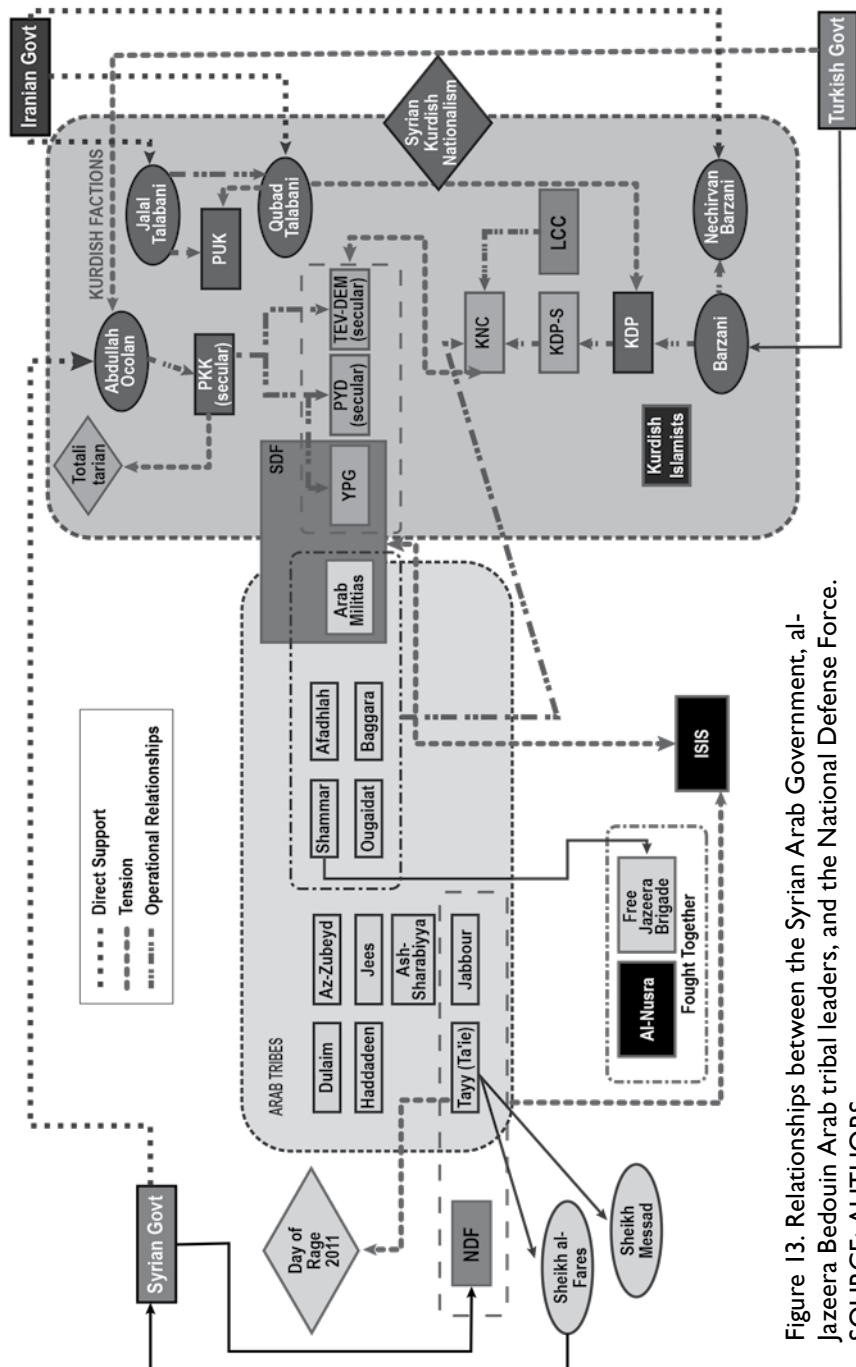


Figure 13. Relationships between the Syrian Arab Government, al-Jazeera Bedouin Arab tribal leaders, and the National Defense Force.
SOURCE: AUTHORS

simple ethnic animosity, although shaped by a pan-Arab Syrian ideology. Since the start of the Syrian Uprising in 2011, he has emerged as a key ally of the SARG in Qamishli. He has been mobilizing Tayy (Ta'ie) tribesmen loyal to him and policing and limiting anti-regime demonstrations in his district of Haret Tayy, including threatening and arresting dissident members of his own tribe.

Under Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares's overall leadership—his Tayy (Ta'ie)-mobilized force believed to number more than 2,000 fighters drawn from Qamishli and its suburbs—is integral to maintaining the SARG's foothold in the city and its surrounding areas.¹⁸² Over the course of the war, fighters under the command of Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares have served in the SARG'S security structure in the region of al-Qamishli, including in roles such as kinetic operations against Syrian Arab armed opposition groups, guarding checkpoints, policing or attacking anti-Assad and Kurdish nationalist demonstrations, and operating as truck-borne rapid reaction forces. His force has also been an active combatant against the YPG in Qamishli. His strong pro-regime stance in Qamishli, and the area's strategic importance, has also positioned him as the leading loyalist sheikh informally presiding over an intra-tribal network of local, pro-Assad sheikhs and their tribesmen in Hasakah province. Building off this position, it is reported that Sheikh Muhammad al-Fares has consistently arranged Damascus meetings of pro-SARG tribal leaders from Hasakah, organizing them based on a narrative of Arab ethnic solidarity and resistance against the Federal System administration that is being built in the al-Jazeera. Sheikh al-Fares is also leading a multiethnic and sectarian pro-SARG umbrella militia called al-Jazirah al-Arabiyya Sooria (Syrian Arab Jazirah), which has trained with IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives.

In addition to the Tayy (Ta'ie), other Arab tribal groups in the al-Jazeera are being quietly contacted by the SARG to organize militia forces, the most important of which is a powerful branch of the Jarba subtribe of the Shammar confederation led by the al-Ajil clan. The SARG is also trying to build lines of influence into identity communities other than Arabs in the al-Jazeera, including minority communities that prior to September 2014 were resistant to the PYD and are also suspicious of the Kurdish Nationalist ideology that Masoud Barzani's KDP-S promotes. These minority communities include Assyrians, Armenians, and Circassians, with the Assyrian community of the Khabour River valley in central-southern Hasakah province being

a target of SARG information operations due to the historical animosity between Assyrian and Kurdish communities.

From a strategic perspective, the SARG is particularly concerned that the U.S. military will establish an indefinite, forward operating presence in the al-Jazeera, which would constrain the complete reconstitution of a central state under Assad's rule. In response to the deployment of U.S. forces in Syria, the SARG and its allies have devised an extensive resistance strategy to contest the U.S. military's role in the al-Jazeera. The SARG is pursuing this strategy with a focus on trying to create social and political turmoil within the population of the al-Jazeera to make a future U.S. military presence untenable. The SARG has particularly focused on non-kinetic, influence operation activities to avoid a direct military confrontation with OIR in the al-Jazeera.

Kurdish Islamism

MiT likely will use all the tools at its disposal to prevent the growth of the PYD, and therefore the PKK, in the al-Jazeera. One of those potential tools is Kurdish Hezbollah. And, with or without Turkish support, Kurds from Turkey and Iraq tied to extremist Sunni groups including Kurdish Hezbollah, ISIS, and al-Qaeda, may well find ideological common ground with tribal Arab Sunnis in the al-Jazeera in their mutual antipathy towards the PYD, which they view as the Syrian branch of the PKK.

It is well known that thousands of secular-nationalist Kurds have crossed from Turkey to Syria to join the PYD on behalf of the PKK. However, it is less well known that some 600 Turkish Kurds joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria, by mid-2015. Since 2007, more Kurds have voted for the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party than for pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. Many are willing to support a predominantly ethnic-Turkish party if it is ideologically rooted in Islam.¹⁸³

Turkey's Kurdish Hezbollah is a separate entity from its Lebanese namesake. It started as an extremist Sunni Kurdish movement sympathetic to Iran's Islamic Revolution. Just as the PKK seeks to carry the banner for secular Kurdish nationalists, Hezbollah has since the 1980s vied to represent religious Kurds through its own utopian vision: an Islamic state for the Kurds. The resulting intra-Kurdish rivalry killed hundreds on both sides throughout the 1990s.¹⁸⁴ For example, in January 2015, a large crowd

gathered in Diyarbakir to protest the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. They carried banners reading, “I am Hamas in Palestine,” and “I am Hezbollah in Kurdistan.” The rally was estimated to be 100,000-strong. The protests were organized by Hûda-Par, a hardline Islamist party created by Kurdish Hezbollah members in December 2012.¹⁸⁵ Writing in 2015, Michael Kaplan suggested that a growing number of Kurdish youth in Turkey were trading the Kurdish nationalism of their fathers for the vision espoused by radical jihadi groups in Syria.¹⁸⁶

According to Turkish Kurdish scholar Mahmut Bozarslan, the impoverished province of Bingöl (population about 270,000), has emerged as a major ISIS recruitment base in the predominantly Kurdish region of southeast Turkey.¹⁸⁷ Based on his interviews with locals, Bozarslan estimates that at least 600 young men joined the jihadi group, lured through religious indoctrination and other incentives including money and marriage. Islamic militants from Bingöl have figured prominently both in the leadership and lower ranks of Turkey’s Hezbollah, a Kurdish Sunni Islamist group with a bloody past. Bozarslan estimates that close to five hundred Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan also joined ISIS. Most are said to come from the Halabja region, which, like Bingöl, is known as a conservative stronghold.

It is possible that regional conflicts will exacerbate intra-Kurdish divisions and fuel radicalism on both sides. Hûda-Par’s core support base resides near the Syrian and Iraqi borders. In October 2014, secular-nationalist Kurds staged massive protests in southeast Turkey over the ISIS siege of Kobani. Clashes soon erupted there between the PKK and Kurdish Hezbollah’s party, Hûda-Par, with the former raging against the latter’s Islamic messages and alleged support for ISIS. Kobane is instructive here: the fundamental conflict along the Turkey-Syria-Iraq border is not Islamists vs. Kurds, but is at times also an internecine Kurdish battle between Islamists and secularists. The growth of internal Kurdish violence should be considered in the context of the situation in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey today. Planners, analysts, and operators should not overlook the deep fissures that continue to divide the Kurds and the significant swath of them who reject the secularist vision of those fighting jihadis in Syria and Iraq.

As has been demonstrated previously, establishing stability and good governance in the al-Jazeera, as well as in other ethnically mixed areas, requires the PYD to share power with other Kurdish actors, as well as with Arabs, and other ethnic and sectarian minorities. For example, it is known that

after the March 2011 uprising, indigenous Syrian Kurdish youth from places such as the town of Amuda in Hasakah province and not affiliated with the PYD or PKK, played a significant role in setting an agenda for change focused on democracy. A future Turkish government initiative to settle the Turkish-Kurdish conflict that includes PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in peace negotiations would, in theory, be one way to diminish the PKK's power in Syria. Another means would be to work to separate the PYD from the PKK, by focusing on the middle and lower level PYD leaders who are indigenous Syrian Kurds. The first pathway raises an obvious question: How committed is the PKK military leadership in the Qandil mountains to Abdullah Öcalan? For example, would it follow Öcalan if he were to seriously attempt to end the Kurdish armed struggle in Turkey? Regarding the second pathway the question is: How loyal in practice (vs. rhetoric) is the PYD leadership in Syria to the military leadership of the PKK in the Qandil mountains? There is simply not enough data to be able to assess the loyalty of the lower levels of indigenous, Syrian PYD leadership to the PKK. Today, however, the PKK dominates the Syrian Kurdish landscape and the future of democracy in the Al-Jazeera is unknown.

The Politics of Resource Scarcity in Arab Tribal Culture

Scarcity has been a reality of Eastern Syria for decades, the result of which has been the entrenchment of a competition mentality between ethno-sectarian and tribal groups. As previously stated, this was a key component of the Assad regime's divide and conquer strategy. The political manifestation of this regional culture is important to appreciate, especially as external military, governance, and development resources are applied to the area. Arab tribal dynamics in resource competition are often hard to interpret, but can be deciphered if viewed through the proper perspective. One example is the case of Sheikh Humaidy Daham al-Hadi al-Jarba, 72 years old, of the Shammar Confederation. Sheikh Humaidy's father and grandfather were born in northern Iraq. His father fled Iraq into Syria in the context of his involvement in high-level political machinations over Shammar leadership issues in Iraq. The leadership of the Syrian Shammar at that

Arab tribal dynamics in resource competition are often hard to interpret, but can be deciphered if viewed through the proper perspective.

time was in the hands of the family of Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim al-Jarba, a distant cousin of Sheikh Humaidy.

Sheikh Humaidy presents an interesting and important case study of how Arab tribal leadership in the al-Jazeera plays out in a powerful tribal confederation with a single sheikhly leadership lineage (the Al Jarba). Sheikh Humaidy is a case study for consideration for U.S. military operators in the field and military officials, as well as their civilian counterparts, in understanding the role and status of Arab sheikhs in their local context. He is a ranking member of the leadership council of the Federal System, and one of the major Arab tribal allies of the YPG. He is the overall leader of Jaysh al-Sanadid (Army of the Brave), a militia force that is a constituent member of the SDF. Sheikh Humaidy mobilized Jaysh al-Sanadid from tribesmen belonging to his branch of the Shammar, and from members of the weaker tribes in the al-Jazeera, including some semi-nomadic tribesmen. Jaysh al-Sanadid has a center of gravity in and around the town of Tal Hamis in the northern and eastern area of Hasakah province. Sheikh Humaidy's eldest son, Bandar, is the day-to-day commander of Jaysh al-Sanadid.

Jaysh al-Sanadid is a textbook example of how an Arab tribal leader can mobilize a force out of his tribesmen, providing an important auxiliary to a larger military organization such as the SDF in this case. Sheikh Humaidy's Jaysh al-Sanadid possesses many of the characteristics that the SDF, and by extension the PYD, are seeking from an Arab tribal force that has not fully subordinated itself into the structure of the YPG. That is why the PYD (and by extension the PKK) stood up Sheikh Humaidy as their Arab partner. He works with them for money and any power that can accrue from his relationship with the U.S. military, through his connection to the PYD and the role of his Jaysh al-Sanadid in the SDF.

His biography is therefore important to consider, and to reflect upon, because Sheikh Humaidy is the textbook example of a type of Arab tribal leader who can "cut a deal even with the devil himself," the PYD and by extension the PKK, to circumvent state power and to become personally powerful. Sheikh Humaidy's personal biography demonstrates how an Arab tribal leader who is remote from the centers of state power, in this case from Damascus and the SARG's satellite base in Qamishli, can utilize weak state authority to achieve power and authority. Sheikh Humaidy's tribal section, the Jarba, is particularly powerful in the Sunni Arab-majority areas of southeastern al-Hasakah governorate, with significant tribal social networks

into northwestern Iraq's Ninewah governorate, where there is also a large presence of the Shammar confederation. The Shammar confederation are historical rivals to the 'Anaza confederation, of which the al-Saud rulers of Saudi Arabia are members. This historical rivalry, and sometimes animosity, between Shammar and 'Anaza, which in the context of the region that would become Saudi Arabia played out between the 'Anaza al-Saud dynasty and the Shammar al-Rashid dynasty, is constantly referenced by Sheikh Humaidy, who frequently states that he wants to work towards the collapse of the al-Saud in favor of the return to power of the sheikhs of the Shammar of Saudi Arabia. This one thing (perhaps the only thing) that his cousins, Sheikhs Khalid and Falah, the sons of Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim, would agree with.

Sheikh Humaidy is a native of the village of Tal 'Alo, which is located southeast of Qamishli in an ethnically mixed, oil-rich area of the governorate. He descends from a notable lineage of the Jarba that has commanded significant authority over their fellow tribesmen in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. His father, Daham al-Hadi Jarba, was a powerful Iraqi Shammar sheikh in northwestern Iraq who also had authority over tribesmen in northeastern Syria who worked closely with the British during the Mandate era. Eventually settling in Tal 'Alo, Sheikh Daham al-Hadi al Jarba leveraged his British patronage into wealth that facilitated his ability and that of his son Humaidy to reinforce and strengthen their ties of patron-client among the Shammar tribesmen that accepted their authority. It is estimated that perhaps one-in-seven Syrian Shammar tribesmen view Sheikh Humaidy as their paramount sheikh, which provides Jaysh al-Sanadid with a potentially large pool of reserve manpower to draw from.

Sheikh Humaidy, a businessman by trade, has lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and the KRI, and he is reported to have maintained particularly close ties to Qatar's government at one point. During the coalition occupation of Iraq from 2003–2011, Sheikh Humaidy was interviewed by the popular, pan-Arab satellite television station al-Jazeera, in 2005, where he served as part of a panel on the Middle East's Arab tribes. At the time of this al-Jazeera interview, Sheikh Humaidy was in a form of exile from Syria, reportedly due to pressure applied against him by the SARG because he was working with the Kurdish population of northeastern Syria, which at the time was undergoing significant repression. During the interview, Sheikh Humaidy referenced that he would return to Syria "on an American tank"—a statement which is held against him and was further used to refer

to him as a client subordinate to foreign powers, by his Sunni Arab opponents, including the family of Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim Al Jarba who contest Sheikh Humaidy's claim of leadership over the Shammar.

Like many Arab Sunni tribal sheikhs, both Sheikh Humaidy and his father reportedly facilitated the SARG efforts to subvert the Syrian Arab tribal system to the security needs of the Syrian state, and are derogatively referred to by their opponents, particularly among competing cousins, of the Jarba subtribe, as "client sheikhs." However, although his claims of leadership over the Shammar of Syria are met with skepticism by competing family members, Sheikh Humaidy's position as the overall commander of Jaysh al-Sanadid provides him with authority over what is a useful Arab tribal force, now for the SDF and in the future potentially for the SARG. Jaysh al-Sanadid, which is estimated to have approximately 3,000 fighters, was first mobilized by Sheikh Humaidy in late 2013 to displace the Islamic State (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham-ISIS) from the important Syrian border town of al-Yaroubiya, which is a major transit point between Syria and Iraq.

Like his PYD allies, Sheikh Humaidy has maintained tenuous ties to the al-Assad government's remaining security structures in Hasakah province, and Jaysh al-Sanadid's early operations against ISIS around al-Yaroubiya were reportedly initially conducted with the approval and coordination of the Assad regime's security forces. Despite these notable early operations against ISIS, Jaysh al-Sanadid first gained notoriety in late 2014 for its role in the YPG-led offensive campaign against ISIS around Tal Hamis—a strategic town located in an oil-rich area of southeastern Hasakah province. However, credible reports of the displacement of local Arab residents from Tal Hamis and its surrounding area by the Kurdish-dominated YPG, in cooperation with Jaysh al-Sanadid, has colored the Arab perception of Jaysh al-Sanadid and Sheikh Humaidy. ISIS has taken advantage of this perception in the past to utilize the sometimes fraught Kurdish-Arab relations in the governorate as a recruiting tool among local Arab tribes.

Perhaps ironically, one of Sheikh Humaidy's greatest strengths is his ability to coordinate closely with the PYD under the Federal System that underlies current al-Jazeera governance. He has consistently positioned himself as an Arab tribal leader who could reach out to and work with the diverse population of the governorate, including Kurds, Assyrians, and Armenians. A pragmatic leader, Sheikh Humaidy's tolerance for the Kurds' preeminence in the al-Jazeera, even as the SARG maintains patchwork authority centered

in the governorate's two major cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli, marks him as a unique figure in the Syrian Civil War.

Therefore, Sheikh Humaidy is an important Arab tribal leader in the al-Jazeera, and importantly for the PYD, has accepted its current domination of the politics of this region of Syria. His primary role within that governance structure is symbolic of its potential diversity, bringing Kurds, Arabs, and other sectarian and ethnic groups together. Sheikh Humaidy appears frequently at PYD events, and was sent to the Iraqi city of Sinjar to liaison with local Kurdish and Arab forces, and to meet local civilians from minority communities such as the Yazidis that survived the Islamic State's rule. These trips to Iraq are also meant to position Sheikh Humaidy as a transnational leader among the Shammar, and more broadly as a Sunni Arab tribal leader who not only rejects the Islamic State and has a militia capable of pushing back against it, but who is also willing to accommodate minority populations.

In this capacity, Sheikh Humaidy is positioning himself, and the section of the Syrian Shammar that he leads, to be both cooperative within, and autonomous from, the PYD-dominated, Kurdish-run administration that is developing in the al-Jazeera. There are potential inhibiting factors that would prevent Sheikh Humaidy from rising to a position of authority and prestige, higher than he currently holds. The first limiting factor is that his closeness to the PYD-run governing structure in northeastern Syria further reinforces the notion that he is a client sheikh, of the Kurds broadly, and the PKK, in particular. A second limiting factor is that the reality of Syrian Arab tribal structures is that the Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party and the SARG have weakened these structures, and forced them from being multi-regional confederations to highly localized tribal groups.

While Sheikh Humaidy may be seeking to position himself as a leader of the entire Shammar confederation in Syria, the likely reality is that his authority is more limited, more localized, and subject to competition from competing sheikhs of the Jarba sub-tribe within the larger Shammar confederation in Syria. This reality would prevent Sheikh Humaidy from fully mobilizing the Syrian Shammar. Further, Jaysh al-Sanadid is highly dependent on the personality of Sheikh Humaidy for its mobilization and its continued relevance. In the event of Sheikh Humaidy's death, either by natural causes or by assassination, or if he becomes disempowered by the PYD-run

administration in the al-Jazeera, there is the potential for the collapse of Jaysh al-Sanadid.

The lesson that should be drawn from the case of Sheikh Humaidy is that it is possible for an enterprising, lesser tribal leader to position himself as a paramount leader of a tribal confederation, when in fact he has influence over a limited part of the tribe. The Shammar tribal confederation has been in contact and friendly with the tribal Kurds of al-Jazeera since the period the Kurds first entered the region some hundred years ago. In fact, the wife of Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim Al Jarba and mother of Sheikh Khalid is from the Gergeri, a Kurdish tribe found in Syria and Iraq.

What is important to understand is that the U.S. military reached out to Sheikh Humaidy because he appeared to have the leadership attributes they were looking for (i.e. an Arab Sheikh from a major tribe who would fight with the YPG). However, what the U.S. side failed to understand is that Sheikh Humaidy has the loyalty of perhaps 14 percent of the Shammar of Syria and further, that he is “somebody” only because he works with the PYD/PKK.

An alternate or secondary approach that the U.S. military could have employed would have been to reach out to the sons of the last paramount Sheikh (Sheikh Ajil who died in 2007) who have the loyalty of slightly more than 85 percent of the Shammar of Syria. Why? If for no other reason than the sons of Sheikh Ajil, particularly Sheikh Khalid who lives in Hasakah full time, represent the interests of the largest tribal confederation with a single tribal leadership family in the region. The Turkish border is about 15 miles from the home village of the sons of Sheikh Ajil Abdol Karim Al Jarba, the last sheikh al masheikh (paramount sheikh) of the Shammar in Syria. The name of this village is Nurik. In the words of Sheikh Khalid Ajil Abdol Karim al-Jarba, his family has close ties with most of the Kurds now considered Syrian, who entered northeast Syria from Turkey about 80 years ago, including those not aligned with the PYD or PKK. Sheikh Khalid and his brother Sheikh Falah—more likely than Sheikh Humaidy—will be able to negotiate agreements with either the SARG or the U.S. military and the SDF on behalf of the Arab Sunnis of the region (see figure 14).

In sum, in the absence of actual, sustainable economic opportunity, sheikhs and other notables will leverage their human capital to appear as credible leaders to garner fleeting external support to achieve short-term advantages over others in their areas of influence. While presenting the alluring image of stability, actors willing to sell their loyalties could be swayed to

defect to the highest bidder, such as the SARG or Iran, should their relative influence decline. The most difficult aspect of Eastern Syrian politics will be to imagine a system that binds local family interests in a governance order with the interests of elites whose interests will likely be different. Such a system is possible, but relying on tribal leaders able to mobilize for short-term gain against a common threat, such as ISIS, will not yield the medium to long-term stability U.S. interests demand to avoid an explosion of the Eastern Syria pressure cooker.

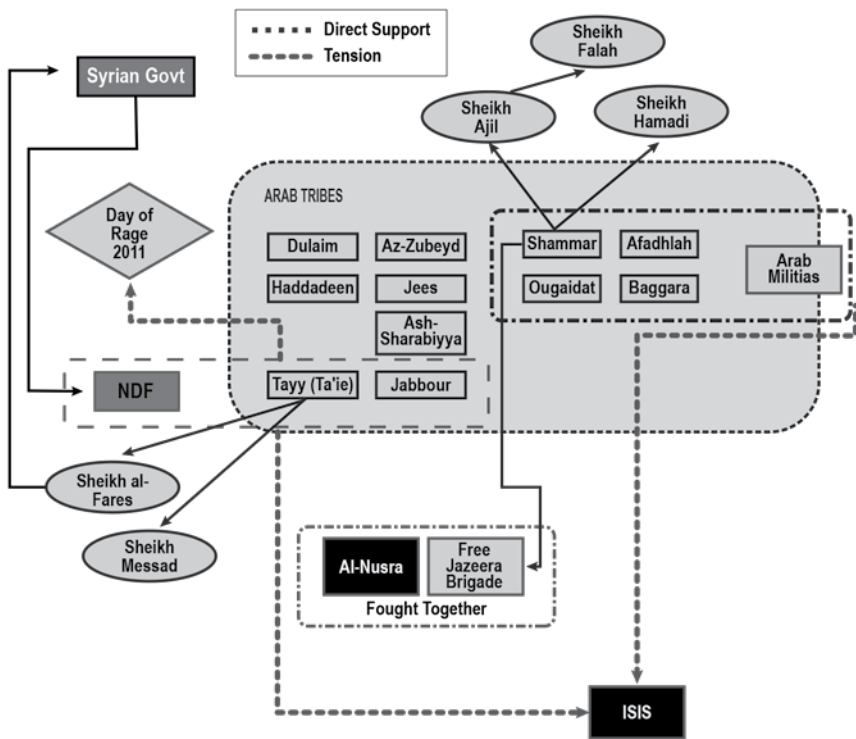


Figure 14. Depiction of Bedouin Arab tribal leaders and their relationships in the current conflict. SOURCE: AUTHORS

Chapter 5. Possible Futures

Based on the Eastern Syria's sociocultural and political dynamics, four general scenarios are feasible over the medium to long-term (1–5 years). It is impossible to forecast precisely which will come to pass, but the exercise enables the development of Indicators and Warning as to which way the system is trending. While there is a degree of path dependence to the trends, the actions taken by the U.S. and its allies can significantly alter the trajectory. Without a doubt, the SARG and Iran have implemented and are implementing a strategic political plan to leverage ties with the Arab tribes and the PKK-backed PYD to reassert SARG sovereignty. Left unchecked, this trend will likely succeed over time, thereby completing Iran's Shi'a Arc strategy.

However, the Achilles' heel of the Assad Regime, and by extension Iran, is the Syrian population's remaining discontent with the regime's repressive state apparatus. Eastern Syria presents the opportunity to recreate the intention and meaning of the March 2011 Syrian Uprising, but the political dynamics in Eastern Syria require immediate and substantial attention if it is to become reality.

This chapter concludes the study by offering four different possible scenarios ranging from the future most favorable to U.S. interests to the most damaging. Each scenario discusses why it is possible, contributing enablers for the scenario to materialize, and obstacles that might prevent them from occurring.

West Berlin in Eastern Syria

The West Berlin in Eastern Syria future is about the demonstration effect that a functioning, though imperfect, opposition-area representative government could have on the strategic positioning of the Assad regime and Iran. Governing opposition-held areas well and in line with the seemingly dormant 2011 Syrian Uprising principles could steadily erode support for the Assad regime over time and undermine Syrians' acceptance of the regime's Persian Iranian patron. Should the Syrian population under Assad regime control witness Eastern Syria establishing and abiding by a governance structure rooted in the principles of 2011—however complicated and messy—they

will have no choice but to compare their political circumstances to that of opposition-held areas. The Assad regime knew in 2011 that the Syrian Uprising's principles constituted an existential threat to the regime then, and they continue to pose an existential threat to it now.¹⁸⁸

Moreover, a politically viable Eastern Syria would significantly complicate or interrupt Iran's Shi'a Arc strategy as it would make the northern approach less hospitable and apply pressure to the southern approach through Arab tribal influence. This future could also see the return of significant numbers of Syrian refugees currently putting stress on European societies and fueling ultra-nationalist political parties in response.

Why It Is Possible

The 2011 Syrian Uprising started as an attempt to reform the political system by entrenching freedom of expression, eliminating the oppressive police apparatus, and making party representation meaningful in legislation all while maintaining Bashar al-Assad as the president of the SARG. The principles sparking the uprising lost traction as the war dragged on and as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS ascended as opposition forces, but they remain relevant as inspiration for the fight and persist as a rationale for the Syrian opposition's suffering even after seven years of conflict. While the conflict currently appears to be sectarian in nature, with a largely Sunni opposition fighting against an obscure Shi'a sect in alliance with Shi'a Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, it is crucial to remember that all elements of Syrian society, including Christians, Druze, secularists, and even some Alawi, all rose up in favor of political reform throughout 2011–2012. While the minority sects ultimately opted by 2013 to stay with the Assad regime due to fears of Sunni Islamist domination, many among them likely still harbor a desire for the principles espoused in March 2011.¹⁸⁹

The Assad regime realizes that it cannot liberalize the political system and persist, particularly after the bloodshed it precipitated through its 2011 crackdown. The regime's internal security is dependent on foreign support, namely Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and foreign Shi'a militia forces, not indigenous Syrian capability.¹⁹⁰ Iran is now so heavily invested in the Assad regime as a client state and is so implicated in the continued repressiveness of the regime that it will be almost impossible to divorce itself from the discontent the Syrian population might feel for the Assad regime. In short, if

anything happens to the Assad regime, Iran is strategically weakened along with its proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah.

The West Berlin in Eastern Syria future is possible for six important reasons.

Northern Syrian Civilizational Zone

Under Ottoman rule, Syria was divided into three regions: (1) the Aleppo Vilayat civilizational zone running from Antioch through Aleppo all the way to Raqqa, Hasakah, and Mosul, (2) the Damascus Vilayat civilizational zone running from Beirut to Damascus and Deir ez Zour into Southern Iraq; and (3) the Syrian Desert, which was essentially left to the Bedouin tribes. The Syrian opposition holds territory running all across the historic Aleppo Vilayat and could have access to markets with port access through Turkey.

Moreover, Eastern Syria contains Syria's most important natural resources, including its oil, best sources of water, electricity coming from the Raqqa Dam, cotton, and other staple cereal crops. Much of Eastern Syrians' discontent with the regime flowed from the fact that it accounted for a significant portion of the regime's economic base without the reinvestment in the population and infrastructure. Improving governance and reinvesting in this civilizational zone could lead to a polity that sees relatively rapid economic growth once conflict abates.

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Organic Governance in Eastern Syrian Villages

As previously mentioned, organic village-level local governance sprouted in this region between 2011 and 2014 as the Assad regime consolidated its forces to protect its core regime areas in western Syria. Local governance was village-based, often included interethnic and inter-sectarian representation, and engendered trust through the personal relationships born of common struggle against resource scarcity and the Assad regime. This organic form of local governance was functional until the PYD eliminated the political space for it because the PYD viewed it as a competitor to its own grand vision for a Kurdish-dominated region.

2011 Syrian Uprising Principles and Kurdish Ideologies

The establishment of local governance early in the conflict illustrates the local population's desire to create a political order in line with the principles of the 2011 Syrian Uprising. On the surface, the PYD's Federal System and PKK's Democratic Societies ideology accommodate well those principles of governance, as does the KNC's platform. However, in practice the PYD demonstrates a more ominous autocratic tendency, which is to say that it provides some political space so long as it is not openly challenged. While populations might accept this arrangement in response to a more immediate threat, such as anarchy or ISIS, over time it will become less palatable and could lead to new balancing behavior, especially by Arab tribes, which could enable the Assad regime to return to power in short order.¹⁹¹ When viewed from the larger opposition-held areas, including Idlib and parts of Aleppo governorate, it might be possible to balance out the influence of the PYD as the percentage of Arabs in the opposition system increases. But this will require strong external political influence, especially by the U.S. military, to ensure the PYD contributes to an open political system representative of the 2011 principles in form, not just in rhetoric.

Functioning security apparatus through YPG and differences in interest between YPG and PYD/PKK

For the time being, it remains with the SDF, and by extension the YPG, to be the avenue for improving the relationship between Kurds and Arabs in the al-Jazeera. Since September 2014, the YPG has increasingly recruited larger cohorts of Arab fighters into its ranks, and the security and intelligence apparatus of the Federal System has also mobilized more Arabs and members of the other ethnic and sectarian minority communities to work in their home areas in the al-Jazeera. The authors' interviewees indicate that Arab civilians who fled the fighting against ISIS, are treated well by the YPG and are appreciative of the security that it provided them against ISIS.

However, a challenge that interviewees report is that the YPG has become more ideological at present than it was as an organization in the time between the summer of 2012 and late 2014. According to the reports of these interviewees, it seems that a uniform requirement for YPG leadership is to have experience in a cadre associated with the PKK, which was a ready way to learn how to command in conflict. At this point in time it is not clear whether this seeming requirement for battle experience with the PKK for

officers in the YPG will change with time as a new cohort of YPG recruits who learned to fight in the Syrian conflict climb up the ranks. However, for the YPG, and by extension the SDF, to be a more inclusive army for the Federal System, it will need to incorporate more Arabs and members of other ethnic and sectarian groups in its leadership ranks.

Bridging Personalities between Arab and Kurdish Leaders

The SDF leadership is seeking to build bridges between the Kurds and the other identity communities in the al-Jazeera, and there have been some successful examples of how intercommunal engagement of the kind practiced by the SDF, and encouraged by the Democratic Societies ideology of the PYD, could provide a foundation for a stable al-Jazeera in the future. Despite difficulties between Kurds and some of the Arab tribes, such as the Jabbour, Tayy (Ta'ie), and other smaller tribes, the SDF has achieved success with some sections of the Shammar, the Baggara, the Afadlah, the Albu Nasr, and the Shaytat, Damim, and Bu Kamal tribes of the 'Egaidat confederation of Deir ez Zour. The relationship between the SDF and some other identity communities, particularly the Circassians and Chechens that live in Ras al-Ain and Manbij have been more difficult because of the long-running animosity between the Kurds and these communal groups due to the history of the Circassians and Chechens as key security instruments of the Ottoman Empire that were frequently used against the Kurds.

Further, although the YPG is seen widely as the military wing of the PYD and its allies TEV-DEM, and therefore is under the strategic command of Aldar Khalil, a PYD member with deep ties to the PKK leadership in Qandil, the authors' interviewees state that the leadership of the YPG is changing how it operates after more than three years of relationship with the U.S. military. Two of the most senior commanders within the YPG, Redo Khalil, who is based in Qamishli, and Sipan Hemo from Afrin, both battle-hardened commanders that have proved competent and that have long-time links to the PKK leadership in Qandil, are now demonstrating independence in how they approach Syria. Sipan Hemo, also a native of Qamishli, is particularly important because he was one of the founding members of the proto-YPG, which was formed in relative secret by Syrian Kurds from Qamishli and Hasakah in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Qamishli soccer riots. The authors' interviewees state that these two commanders, even though they are linked to Qandil, have also sought to modify the orders from Qandil

to suit the local Syrian reality. There are now direct interactions every day between these commanders and the U.S. military. This is changing their outlook and how they approach building relations with other communities, particularly Arabs.

The impact of the U.S. military on the SDF, and by extension the Syrian leaders of the YPG, is reported by the authors' interviewees to be significant. Under U.S. guidance, the SDF has developed structures to better empower Arabs and members of the other ethnic and sectarian communities in the al-Jazeera. The SDF learned from the experience of capturing, and then failing to effectively manage, Arab-Kurdish tensions in the city of Tal Abyad in northern Raqqa province. It learned that it is better to achieve the buy-in of other communities, or else risk creating outright communal conflict in areas that it captured from ISIS. Presently, the SDF has developed a recruitment strategy for Arab outreach that is now based on engagement at the community level. The way this strategy is carried out is that representatives of the SDF, usually from the community that is being captured from ISIS, will go speak to the notables of the local population soon after ISIS has been forced to withdraw from it. Officers of the SDF will arrange to speak to the community notables in a focus group-type setting, talk to them, and allow them to ask questions about the SDF. These sessions are used to emphasize that it is not only Kurds who are part of the SDF, but that it is a multi-ethnic force. These sessions, which usually feature a U.S. military representative, are a positive development, and are credited with easing some of the tension between the Kurds and the other communal groups in the al-Jazeera areas that are being captured from ISIS.

Turkey's Need to Balance the PYD/PKK

From the start of the uprising, Turkey has positioned itself in opposition to the Assad regime, but the steady empowerment of the PKK-backed PYD and YPG also prompted a policy conflict with its NATO ally, the United States. In principle, Turkey recognizes the value of an opposition area, but it cannot be supportive of one politically inspired and influenced by its archenemy, Abdullah Öcalan. Turkey therefore has an interest in supporting an alternative series of political parties and interests that can dilute the influence of the PYD/PKK. One such alternative is to widen the political space so that groups with which Turkey has a positive relationship, such as Barzani's KDP-S, have the room to operate and build alliances. Incorporating predominantly Arab,

western Syrian opposition interests into a governance structure, such as Idlib and remnants of Aleppo Province, will also discourage PYD adventurism while expanding the political bargains that could be negotiated amongst Kurdish and Arab interests.

Contributing Enablers

For the West Berlin in Eastern Syria future to occur, three enabling conditions will need to be put into place.

Armistice

So long as an active fight is engaged both against the Assad regime and ISIS, the YPG and the PYD will be *de facto* necessities for the majority of Eastern Syrians. Under such circumstances, the population will be forced to support the most effective fighting organization, and the PYD will use the pretext of the war to maintain control over the political space. Freezing the conflict along current fronts achieves two interrelated objectives: (1) it turns the attention inward toward building good governance structures for which both ISIS and autocratic political parties are ill-suited, and (2) it enables the narrative to return to the principles of the 2011 Syrian Revolution and give meaning to the seven years of suffering. If a demonstration effect can in some way undermine the Assad regime and Iranian influence, it must first have a clear opposite and the time to build as an alternative. While in a strict sense there are not two recognizable sides with whom an armistice can be signed, it is possible to replicate the intent of an armistice, perhaps with a future date set for a reunification referendum some years later, in order to end the human suffering, establish governance, and promote economic growth.

Some might ask why the Assad regime would permit such a move since it owns the high ground from an international law perspective. In truth, the only way it can effectively retake territory is with the support of Russian air power. Syrian and Iranian air power are insufficient to the task, but Russia does not necessarily have an interest in furthering the conflict beyond securing a client regime, which it has achieved. A hard diplomatic push for an armistice and referendum along humanitarian grounds—in concert with a Western guarantee of a no-fly zone—would effectively blunt future military recovery of opposition areas. The Assad regime could feasibly buy its way back into the area through arrangements with Arab tribes, but only if the

opposition governance structures prove to be a worse alternative than the Assad regime itself—an unlikely but possible proposition.

Turkish and Jordanian Lines of Communication

With Western Syria and Iraq surrounding it, opposition-held Syria must essentially operate like a land-locked entity. It must have access to international markets for imported and exported commodities, and with oil and cotton, it likely will have the opportunity for international commerce. Gaining access to the regional markets through Turkey and Jordan will be essential to the viability of Eastern Syria.

Moreover, having this access would also reduce the ability of the Assad regime to establish leverage over Eastern Syria. Just as ISIS and the Assad regime conducted business on a regular basis, it is likely that under an armistice arrangement, trade in oil, electricity, and other commodities would also occur, but having other available markets would create a better system of negotiation for opposition-held areas.

A Bottom-Up Governance and Economic Growth Strategy

The RAND Corporation's comprehensive analysis of role of Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq concluded that it was slow to promote the development of local governance in the critical first year of U.S. occupation of Iraq (May 2003–June 2004).¹⁹² For example, in May 2003, less than a month after the famous statue of Saddam was pulled down in Baghdad, the Marine battalion responsible for administering Najaf sought to hold an election to replace a CIA-installed mayor who was unpopular with the city's residents. One day before the registration process was formally to begin, the Marines were instructed to cancel the election.¹⁹³ The CPA feared that elections "could create a legitimate counter authority to the CPA, *making its ability to govern more difficult.*"¹⁹⁴ CPA Administrator L. Paul Bremer subsequently wrote to the commander of the coalition forces: "In order to insure a consistent application of election policies and procedures, I request that you advise all subordinate military personnel that they should no longer initiate any election activity, including the calling of elections for any office whatsoever."¹⁹⁵ Instead, the CPA favored using appointed authorities when creating town councils or, if appointments were not deemed possible or desirable, using consultations and caucuses as a fallback.¹⁹⁶ Iraqi officials working with the CPA complained about the lack of clarity regarding their authority.

A frequent complaint of local Iraqi officials was that the lack of resources delegated to local governmental bodies left them unable to solve problems and gain the trust of their constituents. "You give us no responsibility," a sheikh on the Maysan Provincial Council told the CPA's governorate coordinator. "The people come to us demanding things and we cannot deliver."¹⁹⁷ Despite the CPA's pronouncements about local ownership, public opinion polling showed that most Iraqis did not think a local advisory council existed for their neighborhood.¹⁹⁸

The CPA compounded this early error by establishing an ethnic, sectarian and gender-based "check list" approach to governance, a trend promoted by the Kurdish and Shi'a leaders of the Iraqi opposition in exile after they returned to Iraq with U.S. forces. In this regard, the CPA sought to achieve an Iraqi Governing Council that "balanced Shi'ite and Sunni, Arab and Kurd, religious and secular, exiles and "internals," and included minorities and women."¹⁹⁹ On July 13, 2003, the CPA announced a multiethnic 25-person council. Notably, the members could not agree on a single candidate and chose instead to have a nine-man presidency that would rotate monthly.²⁰⁰ By late 2003, in the context of beginning to draft the interim constitution or Transitional Administrative Law, it became apparent that domestic and foreign political forces outside the Governing Council demonstrated an ability to block or require change in key provisions. As a result, political influence moved away from the Governing Council and toward leaders of the most important ethnic and religious communities, to include the Iran-backed religious Shi'a leaders.

Holding local elections in Iraq in that first critical summer of 2003 would have encouraged authentic indigenous leadership to emerge, including in the Sunni areas of Iraq, where so many of the elites had gone underground. It was clear that where Iraqis were able to hold local elections in 2003, they overwhelmingly selected local governance council members on the basis of their technical/professional competence and reputation in the community –not on the basis of sect or ethnicity.²⁰¹ It is argued here that the kind of "paint by numbers" approach to diversity employed by the U.S. officials in the context of establishing representative governance in post Saddam should be avoided in al-Jazeera and other communally mixed areas of Syria. A better approach is one that might be termed "autochthonous." In this approach locals are empowered to select those whom they consider fit to govern, without being

locked into an inflexible “politics of identity” framework dictated by outside norms and agendas.

Open Political Space

Whether it meant to or not, the United States is now an active, “local” actor in the al-Jazeera, and it is the relationship that was built between Burkan al-Furat and the U.S. military that has allowed the PYD, and its allies among the local population in this region, to begin the development of the Federal System. As USSOCOM General Thomas discussed in his July 21, 2017 presentation at the Aspen Security Forum, the SDF and the Federal System are unique, local U.S. partners because they “govern in their wake.”²⁰² The implication of General Thomas’s remarks is that he personally, and potentially the U.S. military writ large, approves of the governance efforts of the Federal System, which means that by extension the United States is supporting the PYD’s goal to build Öcalan’s Democratic Societies model inside the al-Jazeera. If the U.S. military is going to continue to maintain a residual force in the al-Jazeera region of Syria for counterterrorism operations and to support other U.S. government agencies in stabilization operations, it should consider some painful lessons that were learned from Iraq.

Likely Obstacles

Of course, there are a number of internal obstacles to the development of a viable opposition-held system of governance, and many of them are the political norm at this point. Moving the trajectory of the system in a direction more favorable to U.S. interests will require intervention in order to overcome many of these factors.

PYD Political Domination

The most significant challenge for the West Berlin in Eastern Syria future is that PYD cannot act like a hegemon within the Federal System and expect that its actions will support greater stability in the al-Jazeera and the realization of the revolutionary society that it is trying to create. In the period between 2012 and 2014, the PYD could succeed by acting like a hegemon because a large enough part of the Syrian Kurdish community in the al-Jazeera was more fearful of Turkish-backed, mainly Arab armed opposition groups, followed by the rise of ISIS and the Salafi jihadi group’s successful recruitment of many of the Arab tribesmen within the communities

neighboring core Kurdish areas. And although the leaders of the PYD are pragmatic and realize that they will need the other identity communities in the al-Jazeera to build their Democratic Society, there remains an ideological impediment in their approach that could be the undoing of their project.

Kurdish Nationalism

Further, it is reported that the many Syrian Kurds have inculcated a certain high degree of Kurdish nationalism, which runs counter to the Democratic Societies ideology of the PYD and the Federal System it is building from the ground up. This Kurdish nationalism, it is believed by the authors' interviewees, is a byproduct of a victim mentality that many Syrian Kurds have developed after more than half a century of repression by the state authorities, and the communal conflicts between the Kurds and their neighboring identity groups, particularly Arabs. ISIS in Syria effectively utilized Arab ethnic animosity towards Kurds as a recruiting narrative, and the Kurdish communities that border the Arab Belt, and in the areas of southern Hasakah province and in and around Kobani, still have deep emotional scarring from the actions of their Arab tribal neighbors for supporting ISIS in its operations against Kurdish communities and for joining in battle with ISIS against the YPG.

With the Federal System, the leadership of the PYD is trying to apply a very important element of Abdullah Öcalan's theories of governance, and in so doing, the PYD is being forced to face the reality that ethnic nationalism, which frequently turns into chauvinism, is not disappearing in the al-Jazeera. In reaction to this ethnic chauvinism, the PYD continues to adopt an authoritarian mindset because the members of the party believe that they are the vanguard of an epoch-making movement in history that will change the human condition. This means that the PYD treats everyone—Kurds, Arabs, and members of the other ethnic and sectarian communities—as a type of second-class citizen if they are not part of the PYD or allied with it ideologically. The authors' interviewees believe that this a systemic flaw of the PYD's approach to governance, and unless the PYD determines that it will need to change its viewpoint, there will continue to be difficulties with the sustainability of the Federal System.

Objections to SDF Recruitment

A persistent and future challenge to the U.S military's stabilization operations in the al-Jazeera will be the support that local Syrian Kurds provide both for the SDF to become a regional security force, and for the Federal System to be an inclusive governing body for all the different communities of this region. The first challenge is that many Syrian Kurds understand the SDF in the abstract, but are hesitant to send their children to die to liberate Arabs in areas of Syria that are outside the core Kurdish regions, i.e. in Raqqa and Deir ez Zour provinces. In the context of Raqqa, the many Syrian Kurds see the sacrifices of his or her community there for the purposes of defending the boundaries of the Kurds' new statelet in northeastern Syria. However, when it comes to protecting areas further away from the Kurdish self-administered zone that is constituted by the Federal System, many Syrian Kurds are not supportive. Instead, they would like to see the U.S. military double down on investing in humanitarian assistance, civil society capacity building, and reconstruction support for areas of the al-Jazeera likely to be controlled by the SDF into the foreseeable future.

The authors' interviewees report that the most difficult challenge for the SDF is effectively recruiting more fighters, particularly Kurds, for future military duties. More and more the security forces of the Federal System are depending on conscription, sometimes by seizing youth at checkpoints, to fulfill the manpower requirements. This situation is creating deep tension between local Syrian communities and the SDF, which is directed at the YPG since it is the force receiving conscripted Kurdish youth.

Other Futures

While the future described above is possible, it requires intervening in the system to break the path dependency of current ethno-sectarian and tribal dynamics in al-Jazeera. Absent the dedicated effort to improve the population's experience with local and regional governance, three other possible futures seem more probable. They are presented in a rough order of probability.

More of the Same

The More of the Same scenario recognizes the political pincers the Assad regime and Iran have steadily put into place with both the Arab tribes and

the Kurds through ties with the PKK, and potentially the KDP-S via Nechirvan Barzani, which could restore the regime's sovereignty over the area as a means of balancing ethno-sectarian fears. Recall earlier that the Assad regime's governing strategy in al-Jazeera has historically been to keep a low level of resource and ethno-sectarian conflict active in the region so that the regime would have value to Arab tribes. It is conceivable that Arab tribes discouraged by PYD dominance of the political system could turn to the Assad regime as a better alternative. Nor is it too far afield to think that Assad could encourage Turkey to strike against the PYD/PKK until it is so weakened that it has to make an arrangement with the Assad regime for protection once again. Turkey's 2018 incursion into Afrin, Syria against the PKK and threats against Qandil, Iraq represent the very type of threat that could induce a negotiated return to Syrian sovereignty over al-Jazeera.

It is conceivable that Arab tribes discouraged by PYD dominance of the political system could turn to the Assad regime as a better alternative.

Moreover, Syria's conflicts have a history of being resolved first by scorched Earth military campaigns followed by negotiated settlements in the hinterlands. For instance, the Great Syrian Revolt (1925-1926) witnessed similar dynamics as the 2011 Syrian Uprising, with the French struggling to suppress a rural revolt until they resorted to aerial bombardment to break the military capability of a disorganized resistance in the West. The French then relied on negotiated settlement with the Arab tribes in the al-Jazeera as means of bringing the revolt to an end. In effect, the Assad regime never abandoned its strategy of dividing and conquering in al-Jazeera; rather, it has adapted its long-term strategy for reasserting control by playing off regional ethno-sectarian fears.

Working through the Tayy and Jabbour tribes, Assad could steadily increase his influence in al-Jazeera amongst the Arab tribes, which would possibly lead to the Shammar deciding to negotiate. Similarly, the Iranians could potentially offer the Kurds some semblance of political cover through their influence over the PKK and KDP-S to assuage their fears of the Assad regime. Over time, this strategy would effectively return al-Jazeera to the *status quo ante* and wash away the gains and meaning of the 2011 Syrian Uprising, and it would likely meet with minimal armed resistance once Arab tribal leaders and Kurdish parties sign on.

Slow Burn

The Slow Burn scenario assumes that ethno-sectarian identity conflict becomes entrenched in al-Jazeera with two potential manifestations. On the one hand, it is possible that the PYD is able to hold the SDF framework together sufficiently to prevent the Assad regime from reasserting sovereign control over al-Jazeera. In this situation, Arab nationalist tribes chafe under Kurdish political domination. While they are not strong enough to overturn the system, they are able to engage in periodic attacks upon Kurdish interests. ISIS, or new variants thereof, could leverage this discontent as a new base of recruits or find new relevance as an arms supplier at a minimum.²⁰³

On the other hand, it is possible that Arab Alawite Assad regime retakes control over al-Jazeera by force, but Sunni Arab and Kurdish nationalist aspirations against it never completely dissipate. In this situation, low level attacks against regime interests prevent full regime freedom of movement leaving ungoverned spaces for insurgent networks to survive or propagate. It might be possible for Kurds and regional Sunni Arab tribes to continue to work against the regime as a resistance force.

In either case, the underlying dynamics of identity conflict amongst the ethno-sectarian groups remains a key factor in motivating alliances. Fear of near, local enemies will keep the system unstable and have cross-border implications for both Iraq and possibly Jordan given regional tribal dynamics. Indeed, external support and smuggling will be key factors in stoking the conflict, which could theoretically occur through Turkey and Iraq if either government sees a threat inside Syria. While not an existential threat to any country in the region, the resulting securitization of the borders would likely contribute to animosity within Turkey and Iraq at a minimum.

Conflagration

The Conflagration scenario is less likely given past Syrian history, but could manifest with a few possible regional dynamics with catastrophic results for U.S. interests. First, Kurdish nationalism in Syria could move beyond the PYD and PKK's capacity to harness the population's energy. Should this happen, the cross-border impacts in Turkey, Iraq, and possibly Iran would cause a militarization of the Kurdish areas by predominantly Turk, Shi'a Arab, and likely Persian Iranian military and militia forces. The

ethnic dynamics would be destabilizing and contribute to fear-based alliance building.

Additionally, Kurdish Islamists, represented currently by Turkey-based Kurdish Hezbollah and possibly Iraq-based Kurdish Islamic Group or Kurdish Islamic Union, might find common cause with Arab Islamists in a fight against Shi'a-backed Syrian and Iranian military and militia forces. Such a union already occurred in 2014 when a Kurdish Salafi jihadi organization, Ansar al-Islam, pledged allegiance to ISIS and perpetrated cross-border attacks from Iraq into Iran in 2017 and 2018.²⁰⁴ The jinni of Kurdish-Arab Islamist common cause cannot easily be put back in the bottle as it would provide Islamist jihadis with access to new populations and resources in an area already difficult to govern.

The Conflagration scenario also depends the willingness of external powers to provide weapons and other materiel to combatants. Given current dynamics, it seems possible that broad based active conflict across Syria, Iraq, and possibly Iran would again stress security services and open rat lines enabling a protracted conflict. While seemingly unlikely, Turkish incursions into Syria and Iraq, along with pervasive Iranian presence across Syria and Iraq and a history of Cold War regional balancing through proxies make it possible to imagine a more significant militarization of an already fragile region.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

It is cliché to argue that Syria finds itself at a crossroads, but it truly is at a defining moment in its history. Despite the many claims about Sykes-Picot being irrelevant in the Middle East, the truth is that Syrians have a national identity, a common experience, and a complicated history with the state, but they also know they are not Iraqis, Turks, Jordanians, or Lebanese. They are bound together in a struggle for political space, representation, and economic opportunity, and they have desires for a better future. The 2011 Syrian Uprising was in no small measure a challenge to the Assad regime to redefine what it means to be Syrian, not to reject the identity altogether.

In this vein, the thesis of this text asserted that the operational mandate of United States SOF to defeat ISIS in Syria through partner forces superseded a political strategy to augment the Syrian opposition's coherence and capability thereby undermining the optimal UW effect. The sociocultural and political factors presented here illustrate that the dynamics causing Turkey, many al-Jazeera Kurds, and al-Jazeera Arabs great anxiety were readily knowable and alternative political structures were possible to cultivate as part of a political line of operation aligned with the kinetic line of operation. As it currently stands, placing full faith in the PYD/YPG because they governed in their wake was a temporary solution because it: (a) quickly divided Turkey and the U.S. in their support to the opposition thereby diminishing its coherence against the Assad regime and Iranian interests; (b) effectively disenfranchised many Kurds and Arabs because the PYD/YPG's ability to govern was due to an authoritarian infrastructure; and (c) left the outcome of the campaign in the hands of the PKK to determine how it would balance its ambitions relative to its historical ties to the Assad regime.

What's more, the Assad regime recognized all of these dynamics were in play and was content to allow the U.S. to combat ISIS in al-Jazeera while it concentrated its effort in central and southeast Syria in the drive to Deir ez Zour during the temporary pause in the fighting in western Syria under the guise of the Astana Agreement.²⁰⁵ Events in western Syria demonstrate the Assad regime is working on restoring its authority through Arab tribal forces. Arab tribal leaders in al-Jazeera have clear and legitimate concerns about the PYD/YPG, which has provided the Assad regime the access and

placement it needs to negotiate its influence back into the region. Whether it reasserts authority through strategic alignments or militarily defeating the opposition, the Assad regime now enjoys the political advantage over the medium term. Resource scarcity sets the conditions and interethnic and intersectorian distrust set the scene.

Notwithstanding these political realities, the Assad regime has created the very conditions for the type of polity that it sought to suppress with the opposition in effect ethnically and ideologically cleansed into a contiguous piece of territory. Ironically, the people crammed into Idlib, parts of northern Aleppo, and spread out across al-Jazeera, could establish the human capital necessary to create a West Berlin in Eastern Syria. Clearly, militant Islamist organizations confound the situation in Idlib and northern Aleppo at present, but there are millions of Syrians within these provinces that still yearn for nonauthoritarian or nontotalitarian governance. They have demonstrated this drive consistently even in the face of Islamist repression.²⁰⁶ The grand mistake early in the conflict was the assumption by the West that exiled and expatriate Syrians could form the nucleus of a government for the opposition. This was a miscalculation and will likely fail in the future.

Instead, the seeds of legitimate governance already exist across the al-Jazeera. What is needed for them to grow is interventions designed to overcome the path dependent conflict weeds the Assad regime planted decades ago and upon which it intends to rely to reassert its influence over time. First, the West Berlin strategy must recognize that resource scarcity is the single most critical dynamic driving behavior between Arabs and Kurds in the al-Jazeera. Amplifying local, already legitimate dispute resolution mechanisms is essential for a governance project in the area. Second, the PYD is

Amplifying local, already legitimate dispute resolution mechanisms is essential for a governance project in the area.

a necessary ally in the current conflict, but it cannot by any means be the only ally. It is seen by Turkey to be an agent of an insurgent group aligned against its interests, and it has already demonstrated, despite its rhetoric, the same autocratic behavior the population rejected from the Assad regime. When placed upon ethnic fault lines, the PYD's foundation is already tenuous at best. There already exist intra-Kurdish political differences, and there are even Kurdish parties to

which Turkey does not object. Yet it is the policy of privileging the PYD that motivates Turkey's concern about the opposition in Syria. Third, effective

governance in Eastern Syria will be dependent upon creating the political space for a variety of constituencies to be heard. Some of those will be tribal, others ethnic. Yet, most importantly, most will be functional or issue-based and therefore provide the opportunity for people of different ethnicities and tribes to link together in common cause.

The key is to focus on the secondary socializations that bridge ethnic and sectarian divisions. These opportunities abound and some were identified in chapter 1, such as rain dependent agriculturalists, threatened cultural minority, politically and economically marginalized citizens, and oppressed local residents. Certainly others exist that are known currently only to the populations living in the al-Jazeera, but they can be discovered if the right questions are asked. By reviewing the Kurdish and Arab political platforms, it is also possible to imagine how common principles of governance can be established with trust relationships reinforced where they exist followed by negotiated integration among localities and groupings over time. Absent a third-party balancer, such as the U.S., this is not likely to occur due to the cultural distrust resulting from the Assad regime's history of a divide-and-conquer governing strategy.

While this text is written as though the Assad regime has effectively put in motion the conditions necessary for it to reassert full authority over the territory and population of Syria, the future is still an open question as to whether al-Jazeera's Arabs and Kurds choose cooperation or contestation with one another. In many ways it depends on how the U.S. opts to continue with its UW campaign. It already missed a number of opportunities to advance its interests and those of the Syrian populace, and the trends currently bode ill for the broader region.

With the Assad regime incentivized to stoke ethnic conflict as part of a strategy to reassert its authority, continued strife is likely and it will be difficult to prevent it from crossing borders. It would not be surprising if this trend results in future U.S. SOF deployment to the region yet again to fight a new terrorist network. There is still the possibility of breaking this cycle, but it will take a dedicated effort to reform the politics of the current PYD/YPG-based political system. Otherwise, the Syrian Civil War of 2011 could very well end in the same way as the Syrian Rebellion of 1925 with, as Michael Provence stated, the "slow and inexorable reassertion of government control over the devastated countryside, district by district and village by village."²⁰⁷ ↑

Acronyms

AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
GOI	Government of Iraq
HAMO	Human Aspects of Military Operations
HASI	Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDP-S	Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MiT	Turkish intelligence agency (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı)
NDF	National Defense Forces
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Movement
PUK	Patriotic Union Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SARG	Syrian Arab Republic Government

SDF	Syrian Defense Forces
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
UW	unconventional warfare
YPG	People's Protection Units

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93. Population statistics on the Kurds are notoriously unreliable. Kurds tend to inflate their numbers in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, while states tend to significantly underestimate them. Reliable estimates are that there are 15–20 million Kurds in Turkey, 6–8 million Kurds in Iraq, and 9–10 million Kurds in Iran and 2.5–3.5 million in Syria.
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96. Ziadeh, "The Kurds in Syria," 7.
97. Ziadeh, "The Kurds in Syria," 6; Wieland, *A Decade*, 113.
98. Interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a freelance journalist and expert on the Syrian Kurds, who is currently based in Kobani, Syria on 21 July 2017. The interview was conducted via Viber.
99. Hafez Al Assad expelled PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan (aka Apo) from Damascus in 1998. During the summers of 1980–83, author Carole O'Leary noted the presence of what was to become the PKK in Bir Imam Koy, a small Kurdish

village on the Euphrates (near the town of Samsat which, like Bir Imam Koy, is now under water due to the flooding of large areas of southeast Turkey under the Atatürk Dam project). It was not until 1984 that the name "Kurdistan Workers Party" or PKK became linked to this Kurdish insurgency movement in Turkey.

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102. Personal communication (Fall 2013) with Dr. Omar Sheikhmous, a Syrian Kurdish intellectual who also served as an advisor to Jalal Talabani, a former president of Iraq.
103. Liz Sly, "U.S. Military Aid is Fueling Big Ambitions for Syria's Leftist Kurdish Militia," *The Washington Post*, 7 January 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-military-aid-is-fueling-big-ambitions-for-syrias-leftist-kurdish-militia/2017/01/07/6e457866-c79f-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html?utm_term=.4ee8ef999f2e; Wes Enzinna, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html>.
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119. Ongoing conversations with University of Tehran Professors and Iran-U.S. relations experts, Dr. Nasser Hadian and Dr. Hadi Semati. Dr. Hadian and Dr. Semati are in regular communication with U.S. think tank experts and academics, media, and Iran specialists in the U.S. government.
120. For example, with covert Iranian support, members of the radical, al-Qaeda-linked Kurdish group Ansar al Islam attempted to assassinate Dr. Barham Salah, a high-ranking figure in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party (PUK) in 2002.
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123. TEV-DEM is the Movement for a Democratic Society, the multiethnic coalition led by the PYD that governs the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.
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125. These figures are from late 2012–early 2013.
126. Author's personal communication with KRG minister of interior, Karim Sinjari, January 2012.
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181. This paragraph is based on information from Viber conversations with Tayy (Ta'ie) tribal members that are residents of the Haret Tayy sector in Qamishli. Interviews conducted periodically between March 2015 and September 2017.
182. This paragraph is based on information from Viber conversations with Tayy (Ta'ie) tribal members that are residents of the Haret Tayy sector in Qamishli. Interviews conducted periodically between March 2015 and September 2017.
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