



Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa

Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°53

Northern Syria/Northern Iraq/Brussels, 28 April 2017

Overview

In Raqqa the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State (ISIS) faces its toughest test to date in Syria. The primary challenge in capturing the majority-Arab city on the Euphrates river lies not in the fight itself, though that may well prove costly. Rather, it arises parallel to the offensive and will increase the day after: first, how to handle the explosive geopolitical dynamics surrounding the battle; these already have spurred the 25 April Turkish airstrikes against U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria and their comrades in nearby north-western Iraq, and the risk of further escalation is high. Secondly, how to secure and govern Raqqa once it is wrested from ISIS. And finally, how to address a potentially more pivotal battleground with ISIS in oil-rich Deir al-Zour province downstream.

A major headache lies in the U.S. choice of partner in its push for Raqqa. Since September 2014, Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG) have coordinated with the expanding, though still modest, U.S. military role in northern Syria, both supported by airstrikes carried out by a U.S.-led military coalition. This cooperation has yielded significant military successes against ISIS but also dramatically extended the area the YPG controls. The YPG may be an essential partner for Washington, but it also is a highly problematic one, because it is the armed Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, which the U.S. lists as a terrorist organisation, and which is locked in a round of violence with Turkey, a NATO member that is indispensable to U.S. counter-terror efforts and to any attempt to de-escalate and ultimately end the Syrian civil war.

The YPG now operates under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella grouping designed to facilitate recruitment among Arabs and provide an additional nominal degree of separation between U.S. support and the PKK. While the SDF has grown in recent months to include a notable number of Arab recruits, in practice it remains squarely under YPG command and wholly reliant upon the PKK-trained Kurdish fighters who form its backbone. That is obvious to anyone dealing with the SDF, and indeed to Turkish officials, whose frustration over their NATO ally's empowerment of a PKK affiliate has soared in proportion with that affiliate's military progress.

Within this alphabet soup of acronyms lie difficult, potentially crucial decisions for the Trump administration. Turkey is pressing the U.S. not to use the SDF to take Raqqa, suggesting it should partner with Ankara and its Syrian rebel allies instead. But U.S. officials see the YPG-led SDF as more capable and much better positioned, and coordination between U.S. and SDF forces on the ground is already deep. Few in Washington view the Turkish counter-offer as a viable alternative if the U.S. wishes to take the city within the next several months.

By most accounts, the U.S. administration appears to have concluded that the benefits of driving ISIS from Raqqa as soon as possible justify the potential costs of further damaging Washington's strategic alliance with Ankara and the risks associated with attempting to seize an overwhelmingly Arab city of some 200,000 with a Kurdish-dominated force. Two critical questions remain: what options are available to mitigate those costs and risks? And how to prepare for even steeper challenges awaiting further east in Deir al-Zour?

This briefing outlines four key points to consider and four recommendations to help address them. It draws on four Crisis Group research trips to northern Syria, two to Sinjar in northern Iraq, another to PKK headquarters in Iraq's Qandil mountains, extensive discussions with senior YPG, PKK, Turkish and U.S. officials, and Crisis Group's ongoing conversations with a broad range of the conflict's other actors and influencers.

I. Many Acronyms, Same Chain of Command

The YPG and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), are the PKK's Syrian affiliates, and there is little prospect for their organic link with the mother party to change in the foreseeable future. Qandil-trained and battle-hardened PKK cadres with years – in some cases decades – of experience in the organisation's struggle against Turkey hold the most influential positions within the YPG and, by extension, within the SDF's chain of command; within the PYD-run civil governing bodies that administer YPG-held areas; and within the security forces, such as the Asayesh (security police), which are the backbone of that governance. While most of these cadres are Syrian Kurds (though notable roles are also played by Kurds from Turkey and Iran), loyalty to the PKK's internal hierarchy appears to override relations to local society. Many also operate largely behind the scenes, or with titles that understate their actual authority, while nominally responsible officials lacking direct ties to the organisation are reduced to placeholders. Though this gives the PKK presence in northern Syria a local face, the reality of who wields power is evident to those living there and should be to external observers as well.¹

¹ For recent Crisis Group reporting on the subjects of this briefing, see inter alia, Statement, "Syria after the U.S. Strike: What Should Come Next?", 11 April 2017; Special Report N°3, *Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, 22 March 2017; Middle East and North Africa Report N°175, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, 14 March 2017; Middle East & North Africa Briefing N°49, *Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, 8 April 2016; Europe & Central Asia Report N°77, *A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks*, 17 December 2015; and Middle East & North Africa Report N°158, *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting*

For the U.S., this presents a singular dilemma. While the YPG is indispensable to defeat ISIS, there is no avoiding the fact that the U.S. is backing a military force led by PKK-trained cadres in Syria, while the PKK itself continues an insurgency against a NATO ally. True, Turkey also bears considerable responsibility for the escalation with the PKK that has occurred since 2015. But Turkish officials point out what they consider U.S. double standards: the U.S. continues to treat the Syrian jihadist group Hey'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly known successively as Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) as an al-Qaeda affiliate, arguing that their shared ideology, joint objectives and loyalty to a common leader (Ayman al-Zawahiri) render HTS's disavowal of organisational ties to al-Qaeda meaningless. Turkey is applying similar logic toward the PKK's relationship with the YPG and PYD.

PKK-trained cadres' experience, discipline and effective command-and-control structures have enabled the YPG to punch above its military weight, smoothly expand its ranks and secure areas under its control – which now include a broad swath of territory encompassing most of north-eastern Syria and, separately, the Afrin canton north of Aleppo. Since September 2014, these factors have also rendered it an especially appealing partner to the U.S. military effort, particularly in comparison to less organised, more divided and less militarily experienced Syrian rebel factions that have benefitted from U.S. support elsewhere in the country.

The PKK's ideology – the product of imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan's evolving philosophy and the personality cult constructed around him – also provides certain advantages. Indoctrinated YPG members fight with a zeal rivalling that of the war's most hardline jihadists, and Öcalan's emphasis on broadening the PKK's agenda beyond Kurdish nationalism provides an intellectual framework for incorporating new recruits – within the SDF and even the YPG itself – from other components of Syrian society. (Whether those recruits connect with the PKK's ideology, however, is another story – SDF officials acknowledge that many do not.)

Yet for all this success, the PKK's approach to governance and continued prioritisation of insurgency within Turkey leave its Syrian affiliates with key vulnerabilities that will become more acute as they attempt to seize and control Raqqa.

II. The YPG is Risking Overstretch

The role of PKK-trained cadres is similarly central to governance. They hold the most influential positions in the Asayesh security forces that control these areas and the “Democratic Self-Administration” that administers them. Rhetoric aside, their governance essentially entails single-party rule built on a social contract of three pillars: military success, security and provision of a bare minimum of services necessary to sustain daily life. The Self-Administration has created a multi-layered array of local bodies designed, in theory, to foster broad participation in governance; in practice, these do not hold meaningful authority or political influence. They are best understood as mechanisms that co-opt locals through access to services.

In majority-Kurdish areas, this model appears sustainable for the time being. Complaints are common, especially concerning mandatory conscription, the Self-Administration's chaotic handling of the school system, infrequent electricity and arbitrary arrests of the PYD's Kurdish political opponents. Another huge problem is the economy, which is deeply constricted by Turkey's closure of its border with YPG-held areas. On the Iraqi border, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG, controlled by the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, a close ally of Turkey), limits trade to a small and unreliable trickle. That said, judging by the dismal standards of wartime Syria, the net governance result nevertheless appears positive: YPG-held areas are far safer and better administered than those controlled by opposition factions, and the security services are much less brutal than those of the regime and ISIS. Moreover, there is palpable Kurdish pride, even among some critics, in the YPG's military accomplishments and in the extent to which those have transformed Kurdish language and culture from suppressed to locally dominant.

Outside majority-Kurdish areas, however, this governance model appears fragile. Thousands of Arabs now participate in YPG-led military efforts – whether due to conscription, need of salaries or desire to liberate home areas from ISIS. But they are doing so on behalf of an organisation whose militantly secular culture clashes with local norms, whose Kurdish identity many view as a threat and which has shown no inclination to share power meaningfully.

Efforts by the YPG (and its Self-Administration) to achieve Arab buy-in to its project have been partial and haphazard and do not amount to a meaningful share in governance. Official rhetoric signals inclusiveness and pluralism, but YPG flags and posters of Öcalan adorn streets and town squares (including in majority-Arab areas) in a manner typical of autocratic, single-party rule elsewhere in the region. Arab figures willing to participate in the Self-Administration are handed impressive titles but no real authority. Local governance bodies function as channels to convey complaints and petitions rather than as platforms for effective participation, while ultimate power of decision rests with the Qandil-trained PKK cadres. Beyond that, these institutions are limited to the distribution of meagre services that are unlikely to purchase the loyalty of otherwise sceptical citizens.

That leaves the Self-Administration's security provision as the primary pillar for its claim to legitimacy. Yet, even this asset can turn into a liability: residents appear relieved at the degree of safety and order provided, but wary of the PKK cadres-led, Kurdish-dominated Asayesh security forces that uphold it. During a March 2017 Crisis Group visit to the majority-Arab town of Tel Abyad and nearby areas, the Asayesh's efforts to staff checkpoints with local Arab personnel, while notable, were deemed insignificant by Arab residents. As an Arab professional participating in the Self-Administration put it, "most of the problems the Self-Administration is asked to solve have been created by the security forces in the first place". Another added: "The Arab recruits have no authority; people's [problems] come from the Asayesh cadres". Arbitrary detentions are a particularly common complaint and a reminder that the success of the YPG and Asayesh in limiting ISIS attacks must be measured against the heavy-handed tactics they employ, which themselves can drive new recruits toward ISIS.

As a result, it is easy to imagine how the expansion of YPG control to additional Arab population centres could strain its governing capacity to breaking point. If the

YPG and its allies do indeed capture Raqqa, stabilising and controlling it with the organisation's current model could backfire, enabling the post-ISIS re-emergence of a jihadist insurgency (and accompanying racketeering networks) in asymmetric form – the very method that allowed the organisation's predecessor (al-Qaeda in Iraq) to survive and rebound from apparent defeat ten years ago.

III. Northern Syria Remains Tied to the PKK-Turkey Conflict

Serious though the governance challenge may prove, it is the PKK-Turkey conflict that poses the biggest threat to the YPG and thus to U.S. counter-terror objectives in Syria. This fact was underscored by the 25 April Turkish airstrikes on YPG and PKK targets in north-eastern Syria and Sinjar (in north-western Iraq), which reportedly killed twenty YPG fighters and, in an apparent mistake, five members of the KDP's peshmerga force, which split control of Sinjar with rival PKK-backed forces in a tense cohabitation. More extensive Turkish military action could seriously hamper a U.S.-backed SDF offensive on Raqqa city by forcing the YPG to divert resources toward its own defence. And even if the Raqqa campaign proceeds smoothly, the threat Turkey poses will remain.

In contrast to the mountainous areas where the PKK mainly operates in Turkey and northern Iraq (where the organisation has its headquarters), the Syrian territory the YPG controls is largely flat and does not lend itself to the guerrilla warfare in which its fighters excel. If Ankara were to launch a major military intervention against the YPG-PYD in northern Syria, there is little the PKK and its affiliates themselves could do to stop a rapid advance by the capable, well-equipped Turkish army. Their hope has been that the presence of U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Russian personnel in YPG-held areas would deter such an attack. That always was a gamble, and – as the Turkish strikes demonstrate – one that will only grow riskier over time.

While the Turkish leadership's public rhetoric has fluctuated dramatically (particularly in the build-up to the 16 April referendum on presidential powers), the message conveyed by Turkish officials in private has remained relatively consistent: The YPG-PYD are part and parcel of the PKK; the PKK has deployed the YPG's Syrian manpower, resources, tactics and newly acquired battle skills in military operations within Turkey (an allegation difficult to verify); and so long as the PKK's armed insurgency continues, the YPG-PYD will remain in the Turkish military's crosshairs. Turkish officials depicted the 25 April strikes as aimed at disrupting alleged PKK efforts to move fighters and weapons across the Syrian and Iraqi borders in support of operations in Turkey. But Ankara is also concerned that a lead role for the YPG in Raqqa will deepen its alliance with Washington, add to its international legitimacy and thus strengthen the PKK's strategic hand; given the timing of the strikes, disrupting preparations for a YPG-led Raqqa offensive may have been another central motivation.

Prior to the strikes, the YPG's on-the-ground cooperation with the U.S. and Russia appeared to be the main factor limiting direct violence between it and Turkey. The most notable example occurred in February-March 2017, as Turkey began press-

ing against YPG-backed local forces outside Manbij, a city west of the Euphrates taken by the YPG-led SDF from ISIS in August 2016. YPG fighters subsequently withdrew to the town's perimeter, leaving locals as the face of security and governance. Yet, this is a particularly sensitive area for Turkey, which understands Manbij to be an essential chain in the YPG's efforts to connect its north-eastern holdings to Afrin, and views the YPG's thinly-disguised continued control as a breach of earlier U.S. assurances that the group would withdraw to the river's east bank. In this case, both Washington and Moscow manoeuvred, apparently without coordination, to successfully deter Turkish attack: the U.S. dispatched clearly marked armoured vehicles to patrol sensitive areas along the front, while Russia brokered a deal between the YPG and Syrian regime to deploy a small contingent of regime and Russian personnel as a buffer between YPG and Turkish-backed forces.

While such manoeuvres have succeeded in averting further escalation in some cases, the PKK has been running a huge risk in continuing insurgency inside Turkey while expecting Washington and Moscow to protect its Syrian affiliates from Turkish retribution. Though the U.S. has strong incentive to safeguard the YPG while offensives against ISIS continue, ultimately it will likely view relations with Turkey – a NATO member and critical ally – as more important to its broader strategic interests. In turn, Russia's calculus is informed primarily by its desire to preserve its ally, the Syrian regime, which itself seeks to reassert authority within YPG-held areas once it has regained the capability to do so. The fact that U.S. objections failed to deter Turkey's 25 April strikes should serve as a warning for what could lie in store. If and when ISIS's remaining eastern strongholds are captured and the urgency of the jihadist challenge begins to recede, the YPG may find itself dangerously exposed.

Even in the short term, risk of additional escalation is real and could spiral higher if PKK attacks in Turkey re-escalate following a winter lull. More extensive Turkish action against the YPG in Syria is possible, especially if tensions soar further. Perhaps more likely, however, is additional Turkish intervention on the Iraqi side of the border, where the PKK has maintained a significant presence in Sinjar since it helped take the Yazidi town from ISIS in November 2015. Extending its control there to link with Iran-backed Shiite militias nearby could open a road connecting YPG-held areas of Syria with Baghdad – a trade route enabling the YPG to escape economic strangulation and potentially establishing a corridor between Iran and the Mediterranean under control of Tehran's allies ("Popular Mobilisation" militias and the Syrian regime), the PKK and the YPG.

Turkey views the deepening of Iranian-PKK ties so close to its border as a threat, fears that Sinjar mountain could become a new PKK logistics base and may doubt the capacity of its own Kurdish ally, the KDP, to contain the PKK on its own. Notably, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan already has said that Turkish military operations will continue in order to prevent Sinjar from becoming a PKK base. Further Turkish action there could reverberate violently in northern Syria and Turkey; it may also exacerbate domestic pressures on Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, whose rivals could exploit any violation of Iraqi sovereignty to which he does not respond in order to undermine him.

IV. A Tougher, More Important Battle Lies Further East

While Raqqa has garnered Western attention as ISIS's de facto capital and supposed nexus of international planning, the future of Deir al-Zour will likely prove more important to the group's fate and more consequential for the further course of the war. Located on the Euphrates river between Raqqa and the Iraqi border, Deir al-Zour city is eastern Syria's largest urban centre (with a pre-war population of around 240,000), and the surrounding province – most of which remains under ISIS control – contains the country's most significant oil fields. The Syrian regime still controls its airport and a chunk of the city on the river's western bank, but its forces (and an estimated 72,000 civilians living in these areas) are completely besieged by ISIS and thus reliant on supplies ferried by regime and Russian aircraft.

Deir al-Zour city and the riverbank towns to its south east – including al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal – are the geographic nexus of ISIS territory spanning eastern Syria and western Iraq, and their importance will only grow as it loses Mosul, Raqqa and other territory on its periphery. Already there are reports of ISIS moving families, personnel and resources from Raqqa to these areas as SDF forces approach the former. By the time a U.S.-backed campaign seizes Raqqa, the functional aspects of its role as ISIS's de facto capital may have largely shifted. In other words, the fight for these areas could prove decisive in eliminating the group's space and capacity to govern territory.

However, the stakes in Deir al-Zour extend far beyond ejecting ISIS. They include the future of governance for roughly one million Syrians living under (or besieged by) ISIS – an Arab Sunni population among which the 2011 anti-regime uprising took root and which experienced some of the fiercest and most traumatic violence among local rebel factions and ISIS as the latter seized control of the province in 2014. There is also oil, which provides an immediate source of income for whoever controls it and potential leverage in any eventual negotiations over Syria's future. And there is Deir al-Zour's strategic location, a point that warrants particular emphasis: whoever captures Deir al-Zour and the riverbank towns to its east controls a key crossroads between Syria and central Iraq (where ISIS still holds territory adjacent to the Syrian border).

For U.S. policymakers, Deir al-Zour presents dilemmas commensurate with its importance. Even if asserting control over Raqqa proves easier than expected, attempting to capture Deir al-Zour by relying primarily on the YPG-led SDF would be extremely dangerous: the aforementioned overstretch risks and demographic challenges are much greater there. ISIS certainly will attempt to exploit the SDF's reputation as a Kurd-dominated force, and may succeed to rally otherwise critical locals to its side against the shared threat of a perceived invader. A successful defence could allow the group to rebound, boosting its efforts to appear as a defender of Sunni Arabs who see themselves at the losing end in both Syria and Iraq. And even if the offensive succeeded, governing the area would require managing complex tribal and local dynamics in a society far removed from the Kurdish communities in which the YPG-PYD's administration has proven most successful, while addressing the potential challenges of asymmetrical insurgency and persisting regime presence. The situation contains all the ingredients of a treacherous morass.

A U.S. decision to sit back in the expectation that the regime and its allies will regain control appears equally problematic. First, the regime's capacity to defend its foothold in the city is already under strain and will be tested further if additional ISIS fighters move to Deir al-Zour from Raqqa. Secondly, the regime's chronic manpower shortage suggests that any serious attempt to take Deir al-Zour would rely to a significant extent on Iran-backed Shiite foreign fighters – forces even more likely to drive locals into ISIS's arms than is the SDF, and boost the group's "Sunni" credentials regardless of the outcome.

If the regime and its partners were to prevail and establish control over Deir al-Zour, gains by Iran-backed Shiite militias against ISIS on the Iraqi side of the border potentially could establish a contiguous land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean – a preferable route to the Sinjar route described above, as it essentially would be controlled by Tehran's close allies (rather than passing through PKK and YPG areas). Washington's regional partners undoubtedly would view this as a serious strategic setback, as would a U.S. administration determined to contain Iran's influence. Equally likely, however, is that relying on the regime to deliver the final blow to ISIS could simply turn into a drawn-out wait: so far Damascus has evinced little desire to go on the offensive in the east, and, from its perspective, it may appear more cost-effective to simply maintain its presence in the city, particularly since shifting forces toward Deir al-Zour could leave openings for rebel advances elsewhere.

A third potential force consists of anti-ISIS rebel factions based in the southeastern desert and the adjacent Eastern Qalamoun mountains. These include a key contingent of fighters originally from Deir al-Zour province who were driven out by ISIS some three years ago and hence may have a better chance to win local support. These factions gained ground against ISIS in March 2017 and already receive material support from the U.S. and other states backing the opposition – most via the covert operations room managed in cooperation with Jordan and other opposition sponsors, while a smaller group participates in an overt program run by the Pentagon. Their numbers currently are far from sufficient to take the lead in Deir al-Zour; nor would they possess the military capacity or cohesion to do so in the foreseeable future. Arguably, however, expanded U.S. support could enable them to play an important role there as part of a broader U.S.-backed coalition of forces that also would include SDF elements (see recommendations below).

In considering whether to invest in such an effort, U.S. officials face familiar obstacles. True, some of the problems that have bedeviled support for rebels elsewhere are less of a factor in the south east: coordination among state backers via Jordan is better than that which occurs via Turkey to northern rebels; a smaller number of relevant factions makes for easier management; and HTS jihadists are not a significant player in the area. Still, the absence of established hierarchy and dominant leadership renders the risk of fragmentation higher than within the SDF and complicates the prospect of providing tactical battlefield support. There is also the additional challenge of how to address the regime's control of much of Deir al-Zour city (assuming it is able to defend its besieged foothold as additional ISIS fighters likely shift to the area), and the possibility that regime and allied forces might race from regime-held Palmyra to pre-empt or disrupt U.S.-backed opposition efforts in Deir al-Zour.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Gaining some degree of Turkish consent for the Raqqa operation against ISIS is critical. This is true not only because of Ankara's spoiler potential (as highlighted by the 25 April air strikes), but also because Turkey's control of Syria's northern border and leverage with non-jihadist rebel factions render it an essential partner in any effort to weaken HTS, the other leading jihadist group in Syria. Further erosion of Washington-Ankara relations would also present opportunities for Moscow to fish in the muddied waters. But if the Trump administration is unable to secure adequate Turkish buy-in, the following recommendations could mitigate fallout with Ankara and improve prospects for U.S.-backed efforts against ISIS throughout the Euphrates River Valley.

1. Aim for a halt in major PKK attacks in Turkey by pressing PKK-trained cadres in Syria to see the crossroads ahead

Ultimately, the PKK will have to decide between prioritising its insurgency inside Turkey despite the risk, or scaling back its military activities in Turkey to protect its Syria project. U.S. support on the ground and in the air in Syria may be delaying that decision point by temporarily (and only partially) deterring Turkish attack. Yet, when asked how they plan to address their Turkish problem once the U.S. turns its attention away from northern Syria, leading figures of the PKK and its affiliates tend to respond with misplaced optimism. Over time, one narrative suggests, the current Turkish leadership will alienate its Western partners enough to make them choose an alliance with the YPG over Ankara. Another common response posits that "Turkey today resembles Syria in 2011", and that the country is headed for a multi-actor civil war that will create new opportunities for the Kurds.

U.S. officials meet regularly with YPG and PYD counterparts. They should continue to rebut these illusions and help the YPG understand the geopolitical constraints within which it is operating: the U.S. views Turkey as essential to its efforts to contain Iran, balance Russia and counter jihadist groups, and it thus will remain a key ally. A full halt to PKK attacks is highly unlikely in the absence of mutual agreement by both the Kurdish organisation and Ankara – a prospect that, at this stage, appears distant. Still, the U.S. should ensure that the YPG is aware that it understands the depth of YPG/PKK ties, and warn it that continued major PKK bombings in Turkey – such as those that have targeted security forces in crowded areas of Ankara, Istanbul and Diyarbakır – inevitably will carry direct, negative consequences for U.S. relations with its Syrian affiliates.

2. Attempt to mediate a deal in Sinjar

The KDP-controlled Kurdistan Regional Government's limiting of trade between northern Iraq and YPG-held areas of Syria carries an unintended consequence: it increases the strategic importance of the PKK's presence in Sinjar, which the YPG views as a means to open a road to Baghdad that would limit its dependence on trade routes controlled by Damascus.

In principle, a potential deal could address all sides' concerns: a PKK withdrawal from Sinjar (as desired by the KDP and Turkey) in exchange for the KDP fully open-

ing the border to trade (which would alleviate economic pressure on YPG-held areas). This will not be easy to attain, but close U.S. relations with both the YPG and KDP render it worth pursuing. If achieved, it at least would remove one fuse in this explosive multi-party, cross-border conflict. The U.S. already has shown its ability and willingness to use its leverage in northern Iraq when it temporarily shut down all military assistance to the KRG after the KRG halted U.S. arms supplies to the YPG in March 2017; the KRG promptly reopened the arms channel.

3. Push the YPG to establish a new governance model in Raqqa, and provide planning and resources to make it possible

If the YPG-led Raqqa campaign proceeds, a significant increase in U.S. engagement on governance will be necessary to mitigate the risks of overstretch outlined above. Using a conditional offer of increased “stabilisation” support to areas under their control as leverage, the U.S. should press the YPG/PYD to:

Rebrand its local governance, beginning in Raqqa and potentially extending to other majority-Arab areas under its control. Symbolically, it should put an end to the Öcalan posters and YPG flags. More substantively, it should restructure, rename and streamline local governance bodies, taking care to ensure that nominally senior local officials are capable, credible and better able to demonstrate added value than their counterparts in other YPG-held areas. In Raqqa, governance should avoid the impression, prevalent elsewhere, that behind each Arab figurehead sit PKK-trained cadres monopolising real authority via trusted local Kurdish liaisons.

Entrust security in Raqqa to local forces trained by members of the U.S.-led international coalition. The U.S. should play a lead role in this training, in recognition of the essential role credible, effective, locally-rooted security will play in preventing the re-emergence of jihadist cells. The U.S. should make clear that this effort intends to establish a security force that reflects Raqqa’s social composition to the greatest extent possible, and is capable of operating autonomously of the cadre-led Asayesh. Progress toward that end will help earn local buy-in for post-ISIS governance and could signal to Turkey and sceptical Syrians alike that the SDF’s capture of territory no longer entails the arrival of single-party YPG-PYD rule. Besides a careful crafting of command structures, a viable concept to secure future funding for the force appears key. If security forces – or any non-YPG components of the SDF – are left to fund themselves locally, conflict over sources of income could damage credibility and invite violence, resulting in opportunities for radicals to exploit.

4. Develop a new coalition of forces for Deir al-Zour

Given the costs and risks of attempting to capture Deir al-Zour province with an exclusively YPG-led force, the U.S. should move now to prepare an alternative. One idea floated in Washington is to work with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to incorporate some of their forces with, and thus bolster the capacity of, rebel groups. That would be problematic. Aside from questions related to the effectiveness of such Arab forces (some of which already are bogged down in Yemen) and to that of opposition groups, any such intervention in Syria likely would raise the risk of regime, Iranian and possibly Russian measures to undermine what they would view as a hostile offensive.

A better option would be for the U.S. to seek to combine and divide responsibility among rebel forces currently in the south east and Arab elements of the SDF. This combined force would operate under a new banner (ie, not the SDF) and be led and organised by the U.S. YPG forces potentially could play an important supporting role, much as Kurdish peshmerga have in the battle for Mosul in Iraq; but they should neither lead the offensive nor take charge of post-capture governance, which should develop separately from the YPG-PYD's Self-Administration.

This option would entail increased investment from Washington and a deeper role than the U.S. has played – or signalled willingness to play – thus far. Assuming regime forces maintain a foothold in Deir al-Zour, it also would require U.S. engagement with Moscow to avoid a mutually-damaging fight between regime and rebel forces that inevitably would redound to ISIS's advantage. None of this will be easy. But amid an array of bad choices, such a scenario arguably is the best, least hazardous and most sustainable option to expel ISIS from the area between Deir al-Zour city and the Iraqi border.

Northern Syria/Northern Iraq/Brussels, 28 April 2017



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