

Partner Operations in Syria

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

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Cover photo: Reuters/Goran Tomasevic. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters stand in line during a funeral of SDF fighters killed by Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham militants in Raqqa, at Tal Abiad, Syria June 23, 2017.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2015, then President Barack Obama announced that he had sent “dozens” of special operations forces to Syria to begin preparations to take back territory from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).¹ The decision came nearly two years after Central Command asked Special Operations Command Central for options to conduct an unconventional warfare campaign in Syria to help secure suspected chemical weapons sites and address growing instability.² The United States is now committed to using the “by, with, and through” approach to defeat ISIS. To do so, the special operations forces have partnered with local forces to take territory back from the terrorist group. The results of the military campaign have been impressive. The assault on the group’s last major urban stronghold, Raqqa, began in late May 2017, and US partner forces are certain to take the city in due time.

The US experience with its local allies has differed across Syria. This report details two efforts to achieve US objectives—with elements trained in Turkey, as part of the Train and Equip program, and through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the dominant local force in northeastern Syria. The Train and Equip program failed to meet its objectives, while the SDF has been a tactical success. The military successes, however, have created broader political problems with Turkey, a US treaty ally, and a key external actor in northern Syria. The different outcomes make these two programs worth studying in depth. This report is based on a series of interviews with US officials and provides lessons learned for US policy makers.

- The Syrian civil war is complex and US forces were tasked with fighting ISIS, without overthrowing the Syrian regime. These dynamics challenged the doctrinal definition of unconventional warfare, resulting in the term Train and Equip. The focus on ISIS, in turn, impacted the type of local forces that the United States could then partner with to achieve the objective of defeating ISIS.
- The authorities for military action were drafted independent of the formulation of the military’s operational concept, and without a clear understanding of the forces that were viable candidates for American training.
- The result was an overly ambitious set of objectives for the Arab-majority force trained in Turkey, based on a concept of operations that may not have been feasible.
- The US success with the Syrian Democratic Forces stems from the role played by the People’s Protection Units. This Kurdish-majority militia is well-trained, has a cohesive command structure, and has “out of the box” capabilities.
- The Kurdish-majority forces, however, are linked to a US-designated terror group, currently involved in an insurgency in neighboring Turkey, a NATO ally.
- The tactical necessity of partnering with the SDF to fight ISIS has undermined relations with Turkey, and thus impacted broader aspects of US foreign policy.

1 Helene Cooper and David Sanger, “Obama Sends Special Operations Forces to Help Fight ISIS in Syria,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/obama-will-send-forces-to-syria-to-help-fight-the-islamic-state.html>.

2 Mark Grdovic, “Perspectives on the Syrian Train and Equip Campaign,” paper distributed to the author, June 2017.

INTRODUCTION

In eastern Syria, US special operations forces (SOF) are providing advice and assistance to a local, indigenous partner ground combat force. Syrian militiamen compose the ground combat component of an American-led international coalition seeking to eliminate the presence in Syria of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS): the terrorist organizational offspring of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The American military has refused to describe the campaign against ISIS as unconventional warfare, which involves “operations and activities . . . conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”³ ISIS, in this context, may be considered an “occupying power,” but the US military has not been directed to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The result has thus been a Turkey-based Train and Equip (T&P) program, intended to conduct a more narrowly focused counterterrorism mission, aimed solely at ISIS.

“The complexities of internal conflict in Syria have . . . greatly complicated the military mission of defeating ISIS. . .”

The complexities of internal conflict in Syria have, however, greatly complicated the military mission of defeating ISIS, and the composition of the ground combat component in this battle has produced a significant and potentially dangerous policy split with an important NATO ally: Turkey. US-Turkish tensions stem from the United States’ anti-ISIS partnership with the Syrian Kurdish-majority People’s Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an insurgent organization that has fought in Turkey

for political autonomy since 1984. Turkey views US support for the YPG as a national security threat, fearing that lessons learned by the YPG in Syria will aid the PKK’s operations in Turkey. The YPG, meanwhile, is essential to the US military’s approach of working with local actors to achieve objectives, because it has emerged as the most capable force in the fight against ISIS. The Donald Trump administration’s May 2017 decision to further strengthen that partnership and directly arm the YPG is, therefore, operationally defensible but fraught with political difficulties.

The relationship between the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and the YPG began to take root when ISIS sought, in September 2014, to take the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani, on the Turkish border. American aircraft operated effectively against ISIS in conjunction with YPG fighters on the ground. The siege of Kobani was broken and ISIS’s casualties were significant. An operational relationship was born. The midwife was tactical necessity. Larger issues of national security objectives, overall strategy for Syria, and an important bilateral relationship with a NATO partner were made subordinate to the singular focus on attacking ISIS.

The Trump administration’s decision to accept and seal a 2014 tactical arrangement came after years of debate about how to balance Turkish interests against a self-imposed timeline to launch simultaneous assaults on Mosul and Raqqa,⁴ a debate often portrayed as a straightforward choice between a NATO ally and a local militia. Debate within the US government about the US-YPG partnership and accommodation for the referendum on changes to the Turkish constitution delayed the assault on the Syrian city of Raqqa, the ISIS “capital” in Syria. Moreover, the operation was slowed by concerns that a Kurdish-majority force would exacerbate ethnic tensions in eastern Syria and allow ISIS to retain a foothold in the population even after it is driven out.⁵ These ethnic sensitivities prompted calls for the United States to build a Sunni Arab-majority local force, culled from displaced Raqqa-wis or tribal elements from

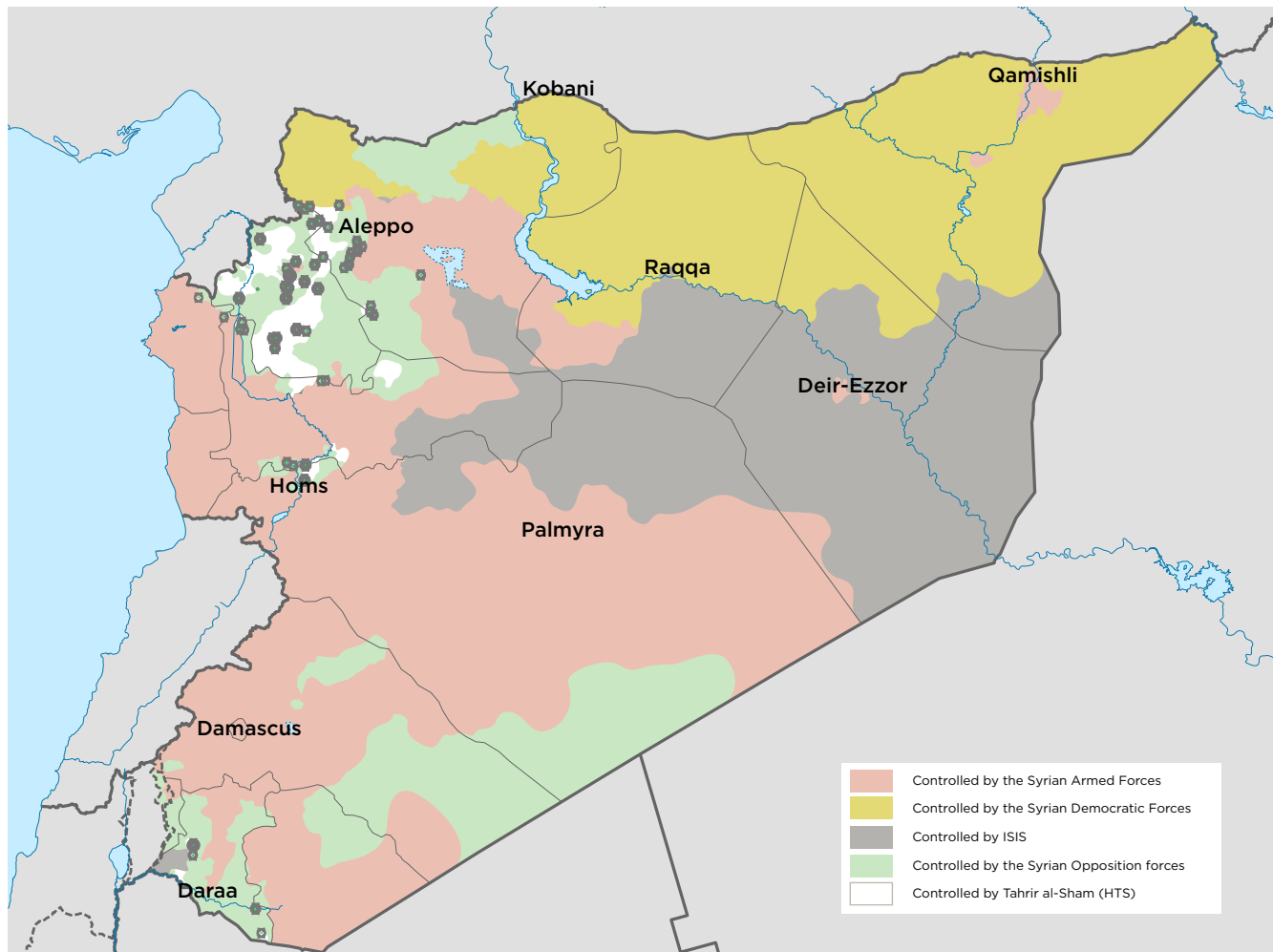
3 U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Unconventional Warfare*, Joint Publication 3-05.1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 15, 2015), http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

4 Andrew Exum, “Donald Trump Wants to Defeat the Islamic State—So He’s Arming the Kurds,” *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/turkey-kurds-trump/525984/>.

5 Kyle W. Orton, “The Error of Arming the Syrian Kurds,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/opinion/syria-kurds-isis-raqqa.html>.

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Map 1. Control zones in Syria as of late June 2017



Map credit: Ermanarich/Wikimedia.

eastern Syria, to retake Raqqa.⁶ In turn, the United States sought to create Arab-majority elements, grafted onto the YPG, to enhance the effectiveness of post-conflict local governance and to ameliorate Turkey's concerns.

This report seeks to illuminate how and why in Syria a tactical military decision arrived at in late 2014 seems not to have been fully vetted in a broader foreign policy context. No doubt the military doctrine being applied on the ground against ISIS represents, in large measure, the wave of the future for American military intervention abroad. Two programs in particular will be examined: US efforts east of the Euphrates River to graft Arab fighters onto the YPG, and the T&E program to create Arab-majority units to fight ISIS in northern Aleppo. The raising of Arab militias to fight alongside the YPG

has been a tactical success in eastern Syria, but US efforts to build forces from scratch in other parts of the country have been unimpressive, without the benefit of the YPG to serve as a backbone. Lessons from these two experiences could inform US policy makers about the difficulties of marrying political objectives with military operations, and the bureaucratic challenges that result from overlapping efforts carried out by different elements of the same command.

The political challenges with Turkey serve as a case study for the problems US forces may face in future asymmetric conflict environments, where uniformed advisors are tasked with enabling local groups in an environment rife with broader political contradictions. Policy makers must understand the tactics that the US military has adopted for

⁶ For one such example of this approach, see Jennifer Cafarella, Kimberly Kagan, and Frederick Kagan, U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda, The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP), March 14, 2017, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW-CTP%20Recommended%20Course%20of%20Action%20in%20Syria%20and%20Iraq%20March%202017_1.pdf.

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fighting counterinsurgent campaigns, particularly its employment of precision airpower with limited special operations forces on the ground.

The tactics can produce positive results: they can minimize the American footprint and American casualties. They must not, however, dictate national security strategy and broader foreign policy considerations. They appear to have done so in Syria. Clearly there is a need to define the role of special operations⁷ forces in low-intensity combat, and to understand how a small number of US forces paired with a relatively low-risk air campaign may impact broader US foreign policy goals and produce unanticipated, unintended consequences.

This report is divided into five analytical sections, a findings section, and a conclusion. The first section details the mission assigned to the special operations forces in Syria and the congressional authorities governing the campaign to train and equip elements of the Syrian opposition. The second describes the negotiations with Turkey to

open Incirlik Air Force Base and the genesis of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the US-backed ground force currently fighting to take control of Raqqa from ISIS. The third section discusses the bureaucratic efforts to create an Arab-majority force to take territory west of the Euphrates River, and the operational and geopolitical challenges with the Train and Equip program. The fourth section documents the Russian efforts to challenge US and Turkish actions in northern Aleppo Province, first around Azaz and then near Manbij, and the implications for US policy. The fifth section discusses four potential Turkish reactions to the US decision to deepen its relationship with the SDF, through the provision of weapons to the YPG. The findings section provides lessons learned from the two case studies discussed in the aforementioned sections, before concluding with some of the broad lessons learned and potential challenges in future conflicts.

⁷ This issue has grown more acute in recent deployments; other elements of the SOF community are now working side by side with partner forces, when they are actually trained, equipped, and task organized to conduct unilateral operations—not combined operations. Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, May 27, 2017.

SYRIA: SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AND THE TASK AT HAND

At the outset of the October 2015 deployment,⁸ the small contingent of US special operations forces in Syria were tasked with identifying local forces to fight ISIS, while simultaneously pursuing counterinsurgent, counterterror, and hostage rescue activities. From the outset of the deployment, the campaign focused on counterterrorism⁹ and, through the adoption of the term Train and Equip, ruled out regime change as a goal of US military action.¹⁰ This military campaign is separate from a covert US program under the control of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that is designed to provide lethal assistance to Arab-majority opposition groups present in the western part of the country.¹¹

The distinction between the Department of Defense (DoD) and CIA programs is related to a broader legal debate over Title 10 and Title 50 of the US Code. In general, Title 10 enumerates the legally defined role of each military branch and DoD.¹² Title 50, in contrast, is typically associated with covert activities linked to the CIA, but also has some provisions for the DoD's own intelligence-gathering operations.¹³ In Syria, Title 10 forces were placed under the direction of what would become the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent

Resolve (CJTF-OIR), and Title 50 forces under direction of the CIA.¹⁴

Bureaucratic considerations are central to understanding the direction of the Barack Obama administration's Syria policy, and the approach that the Donald Trump administration inherited. The authorities for US military action in Syria are contained in the National Defense Authorization Act, fiscal year 2015, Section 1209, which gives the "authority to provide assistance to the vetted Syrian opposition."¹⁵ The Obama administration first proposed funds from Congress in June 2014, as part of its fiscal year 2015 defense authorization bill,¹⁶ after which the congressional debate narrowed the scope of the program to explicitly focus on ISIS (rather than the Assad regime, albeit with language that allowed the opposition to defend itself, with US assistance, from unspecified adversaries).¹⁷

US-Turkish negotiations to open Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey to host aircraft and personnel to conduct anti-ISIS air strikes took place concurrent to the authorization and funding processes. As such, the debate about these authorities is deeply intertwined with the negotiations over this base. Then Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Ankara in November 2014 for discussions with then Foreign

8 The planning for this began in 2013, after Central Command tasked Special Operations Command Central to come up with options to address growing instability in Syria. Author Interview, Former Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

9 According to President Obama, using another name for ISIS, the objective is: "[To] degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy." See: "Statement by the President on ISIL," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, September 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>; President Trump articulated the objective, saying, "It is the policy of the United States that ISIS be defeated." See: "Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, January 28, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/28/plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq>.

10 According to a US military official, describing the current effort in Syria: "There are definitely aspects of UW in Syria in that we are attempting to coerce, disrupt, and overthrow an occupying power (ISIS). It is, however, not done in a traditional UW manner. The effort is heavily focused on the guerrilla/kinetic aspect but does not address the larger concern of the population." Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

11 Erika Solomon, "The Rise and Fall of a US-Backed Rebel Commander in Syria," *Financial Times*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/791ad3bc-ecfc-11e6-930f-061b01e23655/>.

12 According to Joseph B. Berger, "Military operations are DoD activities conducted under Title 10, including activities intended or likely to involve kinetic action. Pursuant to an order issued by the Secretary of Defense, they are conducted by military personnel under DoD command and in accordance with the law of war." Joseph B. Berger III, "Covert Action: Title 10, Title 50, and the Chain of Command," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 57, 4th Quarter, October 2012, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jfq/jfq-67.pdf>, 34.

13 *Ibid.*, 33-34.

14 All military elements supporting the Train and Equip program are under Department of Defense control, and therefore are Title 10 forces.

15 See: H.R.3979 - Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3979/text>.

16 *Ibid.*

17 For more background, see Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco, "Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, June 9, 2015, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43727.pdf>.



Fighters of the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the Syrian Democratic Forces on the bank of the Euphrates east of the city of Raqqa in northern Syria. *Photo credit:* Voice of America.

Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Feridun Sinirlioglu, and then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on a joint effort to clear ISIS from the border.¹⁸

The discussions were bogged down over Turkey's demand that coalition aircraft protect Aleppo from regime bombing¹⁹ and enforce a no-fly zone over all of northern Syria, which the United States steadfastly refused to commit to.²⁰ The two sides did reach an agreement to train up to two thousand opposition fighters at camps inside of Turkey,²¹ and

in December 2014, Congress approved the Obama administration's \$500 million funding request for the program. The authorities spelled out in Section 1209 required that the assistance be used for "defending the Syrian people from attacks" by ISIS, and that the vetted opposition have no ties to terrorist organizations, such as those linked to al-Qaeda, or Shia militias with ties to Iran.²²

18 Author Interview, Former US Government Official, Washington, DC, February 2017.

19 Ibid.

20 Colin Kahl, who previously served as the deputy assistant to the president to President Obama and national security advisor to the vice president, explained the Obama administration's approach on Twitter. See Colin Kahl, "I wanted to specifically respond to Charles's point that Erdogan wanted a no-fly zone in 2014-2015 to help anti-ISIS fight. See below. 2/2," Twitter, May 14, 2017, <https://twitter.com/ColinKahl/status/863743513267236864>.

21 Adam Entous, "U.S., Turkey Narrow Differences on Islamic State Fight," Wall Street Journal, December 1, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-turkey-move-closer-in-talks-involving-bases-air-zones-1417414812>.

22 Public Law 113-291, *Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015*, passed on December 19, 2014, <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf>.

HOW WE GOT HERE: TENSIONS WITH TURKEY ABOUT STRATEGY

In June 2014, ISIS overwhelmed Iraqi security forces in Mosul and took the city with ease.²³ The dramatic victory prompted President Obama to direct US Central Command (CENTCOM) to begin military operations against ISIS.²⁴ The campaign's rapid start posed early problems for US Army Central, and imposed troop caps slowed the early efforts to fully staff the Joint Task Force in charge of the campaign.²⁵ The air and ground campaigns initially focused on Iraq, with ground forces focused on rebuilding the Iraqi security forces.

Attention expanded to Syria, however, as ISIS began to move some of the equipment it had seized from the Iraqi security forces back into Syria to sustain its war effort in both countries.²⁶ ISIS sought to use this equipment to consolidate its position along

the Turkish-Syrian border by capturing Kobani, a Kurdish-majority border town. The ensuing battle has had a profound impact on US strategy in Syria.²⁷

ISIS began to besiege the town of Kobani in early September 2014, compelling the YPG units to advise remaining civilians to flee to Turkey.²⁸ Anti-ISIS coalition strikes began on September 27, but the United States and Turkey had not yet reached an agreement to open air bases in Turkey. The Turkish government did allow for unmanned reconnaissance flights from Incirlik Air Force Base, where the United States had previously deployed four MQ-1B Predator drones in 2011²⁹ to enhance Turkish targeting of the PKK with US imagery assistance.³⁰ As part of the broader discussions over Incirlik, Ankara had changed the rules of engagement governing the

23 The fall of Mosul may provide an unintended lesson learned for future operations in Iraq. The finding falls outside the scope of this paper, but is still worth mentioning. US conventional forces, along with National Guard and Reserve units, trained Iraq's conventional force up until 2011. In Mosul, these units collapsed, despite having a 3-4:1 manpower advantage over ISIS. US Special Forces, in contrast, trained the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), a force that has performed well and is now spearheading the Iraqi fight against ISIS. However, in the battle to retake Mosul, "CTS combat power suffered 40 percent battle losses." As the US begins to appropriate funds to rebuild CTS—and continues with efforts to retrain elements of the regular Iraqi Army (ISF)—the US would be wise to incorporate elements of the Special Forces-CTS approach into the regular ISF training program. Army Special Forces are training Iraqi CTS units, while the 82nd Airborne's Third Brigade is leading the ISF training. Author Interview, US Special Forces Soldier, Washington, DC, May 2017; See also Justification for fiscal year 2018, Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2017, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2018/fy2018_CTEF_J-Book_Final_Embargoed.pdf.

24 In as early as 2013, CENTCOM tasked Special Operations Command to begin "proposing a course of action to conduct unconventional warfare, focused on developing indigenous forces to seize chemical storage sites of concern and to provide border security." Author Interview, Former US Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

25 "ARCENT Transition to Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve: Lessons and Best Practices," The Center for Army Lessons Learned, Initial Impressions Report, No. 16-10, March 2016, <http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/16-10.pdf>.

26 The proliferation of small arms and light weapons will continue to be an issue in post-ISIS Iraq. As the group reverts to a more prototypical insurgency, the ability to procure weapons from Syria and Iraq will help sustain the expected insurgency. See: CJ Chivers, "Facebook Groups Act as Weapons Bazaars for Militias," New York Times, April 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/world/middleeast/facebook-weapons-syria-libya-iraq.html?_r=0; "Islamic State Weapons in Kobane: Analysis of Weapons and Ammunition Captured from Islamic State Forces in Kobane," Small Arms Survey, April 2015, http://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Islamic_State_Weapons_in_Kobane.pdf.

27 "As Special Forces, we don't make resistance forces, but we really find good potential and then harness them." Author Interview, Former Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

28 According to a BBC timeline of the Kobani battle, "in just four days, the [United Nations] says over 130,000 people have fled across the border into Turkey as IS[IS] forces advance through the countryside and surround Kobane." See "Battle for Kobane: Key events," BBC News, June 25, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>.

29 Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Military Drone Surveillance Is Expanding to Hot Spots beyond Declared Combat Zones," Washington Post, July 20, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-drone-surveillance-is-expanding-to-hot-spots-beyond-declared-combat-zones/2013/07/20/Oa57fbda-ef1c-11e2-8163-2c7021381a75_story.html?utm_term=.b34287a40884.

30 According to Craig Whitlock, "Previously undisclosed diplomatic cables show Turkey has become highly dependent on the Predators, U-2 spy aircraft and other U.S. intelligence sources in its conflict with the PKK. The Kurdish group, which is fighting to create an autonomous enclave in Turkey, has launched cross-border attacks from its hideouts in northern Iraq for years. Turkey has responded with airstrikes and artillery attacks but has also sent ground troops into Iraq, further destabilizing an already volatile area." See: Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Considering Ankara's Request to Base Predators in Turkey to Fight a Kurdish Group in northern Iraq," Washington Post, September 10, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-considering-ankaras-request-to-base-predators-in-turkey-to-fight-a-kurdish-group-in-northern-iraq/2011/09/09/gIQA5R1fIK_story.html?utm_term=.b3827d47032d.

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use of these drones to facilitate missions over Syria in 2014. However, at that point in the war, the United States and the coalition were flying strike aircraft from bases in Gulf countries.³¹

To coordinate air strikes against ISIS in Kobani, the US military trained YPG elements to spot targets by using a Samsung tablet and Google Maps.³² The YPG sent the coordinates to US forces, who then tasked aircraft to conduct strikes against ISIS positions.³³ This arrangement helped turn the tide of the battle, largely because the YPG showed considerable determination in fighting ISIS. The US-YPG partnership, which strengthened parallel to the difficult negotiations with Turkey, presented an alternative arrangement for the United States to fight ISIS.³⁴

According to multiple US government officials, the real change in Turkish policy vis-à-vis the United States, ISIS, and the status of the Incirlik base came months later, when the YPG closed in on Tel Abyad,³⁵ a Syrian border town that had served as a key smuggling route for ISIS's foreign fighters, and supplies to sustain the caliphate.³⁶ Tel Abyad fell to the YPG in mid-June 2015. The implications of the YPG's rapid advance were profound: The United States and YPG had demonstrated that they had the strength to close the border without Turkish participation, an approach that would inadvertently result in a contiguous YPG-dominated entity on Turkey's longest land border.

In early June 2015, a Turkish ISIS member detonated a crude explosive at a Kurdish political rally in Diyarbakir, Turkey, killing four people. On July 20, a man from the same Turkish ISIS cell detonated a suicide vest at a gathering of leftists in Suruc, the Turkish town opposite of Syria's Kobani, killing thirty-three.³⁷ In response, the Kurdistan Workers' Party killed two Turkish police officers. Tensions between the Turkish government and the PKK grew for months, as many of Turkey's Kurds presumed the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) helped ISIS in its battles against the YPG in Syria.³⁸ The PKK's retaliation prompted a heavy-handed response, triggering the resumption of the insurgency and intense fighting in Turkey's southeast, which led to the destruction of numerous urban areas and the displacement of four hundred thousand people³⁹ from the region in the summer of 2016.⁴⁰

This series of interrelated events, which demonstrated how elements of the Syrian conflict spilled over the border into Turkey, prompted Ankara to place a greater emphasis on combatting ISIS.⁴¹ Up until this point in the war, the government had treated ISIS as a symptom of the broader Syrian conflict, and thus prioritized the fight against the Assad regime to undercut the appeal of ISIS in eastern Syria. This change in Turkish policy led to increased efforts to crack down on ISIS, beginning with several arrests in March 2015 and a considerable increase in raids throughout Turkey in June.⁴² The Turkish government also took further steps to close the border, which until this point in the war had been largely left open, allowing for large numbers

31 Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Relies on Persian Gulf Bases for Airstrikes in Iraq," *Washington Post*, August 26, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-relies-on-persian-gulf-bases-for-airstrikes-in-iraq/2014/08/25/517dcde0-2c7a-11e4-9b98-848790384093_story.html?utm_term=.b739060def74.

32 According to a US official, "In Afghanistan, the calling in of airstrikes helped to establish 'instant rapport' between USSOF and the Northern Alliance that normally takes longer to build in traditional UW models. It also helps to establish the tactics, techniques, and procedures." Author Interview, US Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

33 Rukmini Callimachi, "Inside Syria: Kurds Roll Back ISIS, but Alliances Are Strained," *New York Times*, August 10, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-islamic-state-kurdish-militia-ypg.html?_r=0.

34 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, January 2017.

35 "Kurdish Forces Seize Border Town of Tal Abyad, Cutting Off Key ISIS Supply Line," *Guardian*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/kurdish-fighters-cut-key-supply-line-to-islamic-state-capital-raqqah>.

36 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Work Force: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail>; Conflict Armament Research, *Tracing the Supply of Components Used in Islamic State IEDs*, February 2016, http://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Tracing_The_Supply_of_Components_Used_in_Islamic_State_IEDs.pdf.

37 Aaron Stein, *Islamic State Networks in Turkey*, Atlantic Council, October 3, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/islamic-state-networks-in-turkey>.

38 Noah Blaser, "Trench Warfare in Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/29/trench-warfare-in-turkey-kurds-pkk/>.

39 "Güneydoğu'daki operasyonlar yuzunden 355 bin kişi göç etti," *T24*, February 28, 2016, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/guneydogudaki-operasyonlar-yuzunden-355-bin-kisi-goc-etti,329927>.

40 Aaron Stein, "Kurdish Militants and Turkey's new Urban Insurgency," *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/kurdish-militants-and-turkeys-new-urban-insurgency/>.

41 Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Two-Front War," *The American Interest*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/02/04/turkeys-two-front-war/>.

42 According to open source data collected by researcher Noah Blaser and a blogger who writes under the name North Caucasus Caucus, the number of ISIS arrests in Turkey increased in June 2015. The number of raids per month has remained consistent ever since, suggesting ongoing law enforcement efforts to roll up the group's Turkey-based networks.

of foreign fighters to transit Turkey to Syria and for ISIS to procure items from Turkey to support its operations.⁴³

For the United States, the change in Turkish policy helped finalize the deal for Incirlik Air Base. The first US strike from Incirlik in early August 2015, with an armed MQ-1B, was in support of YPG-affiliated forces. The strike was meant to send a message to Turkey that support for the YPG east of the river would continue amid negotiations for a joint solution to the ISIS problem west of the Euphrates.⁴⁴

In October 2015, US special operations forces deployed to northeastern Syria sought, among other things, to establish an Arab-majority militia grafted onto the YPG for anti-ISIS operations east of the Euphrates in preparation for the eventual assault on Raqqa. In conjunction with the specialized USSOF deployment, the YPG announced it had merged with a slew of Arab-majority Free Syrian Army (FSA) units collectively dubbed the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC). The YPG-SAC merger formed the nucleus for what would become Syrian Democratic Forces. The emergence of this umbrella organization appears linked to the deployment of the US special

“This series of interrelated events, which demonstrated how elements of the Syrian conflict spilled over the border into Turkey, prompted Ankara to place a greater emphasis on combatting ISIS.”

operations forces, as the SAC provided a legal entity for the United States to provide weaponry and support to the opposition per the Section 1209 authorities’ vetting standards.⁴⁵ Despite Turkish statements prohibiting YPG presence west of the river and amid continued US-Turkish consultations about how best to close the “Manbij pocket,” a strip of territory along the border spanning from Azaz to the Euphrates River, the SDF appeared at the outset focused on operations west of the Euphrates.⁴⁶

43 Dodwell, Milton, and Ressler, “The Caliphate’s Global Work Force: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighter Paper Trail”; Conflict Armament Research, “Tracing the Supply of Components Used in Islamic State IEDs.”

44 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, February 2016.

45 Author Interview, Former US Government Official, Washington, DC, March 2017.

46 “The SDF did have western areas such as Manbij as a priority but this was balanced with other priorities such as securing the Tishreen Dam and Ash Shaddadi.” Author Interview, Person familiar with CJSOTF-S operations in Turkey, Washington, DC, June 2017.

TRAIN AND EQUIP: SEEKING TO CLOSE THE POCKET WITH ARAB FORCES

The United States' Turkey-based Train and Equip program stems from this same debate: How do you cut ISIS off from the border without a Turkish ground force or a militia that would violate Turkey's stated red line? The T&E program fell under the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Syria (CJSOTF-S)⁴⁷ in support of CJTF-OIR, and had to navigate host-country sensitivities.⁴⁸ For example, Ankara's preferred approach was to directly arm groups in the Manbij pocket with minimal training, according to Turkish officials;⁴⁹ but this proposal apparently ran afoul of the legal authorities to train and equip the vetted opposition. Under CJSOTF-S, the T&E program appears to have had a reporting line that made it susceptible to micromanagement from the National Security Council and CENTCOM.

The authorities to train Arab and Turkmen forces in Turkey are the same as those that govern the provision of weapons and training to the SAC, and the funding comes from the same \$500 million allocation. All authorities for special operations forces are overt, although many can be clandestine if units are placed under Title 50 authorities. As such, the SDF program, headed up by a specialized USSOF organization (sometimes referred to as the Task Force) composed of Syria-based "black special forces," had more autonomy to conduct missions.⁵⁰ Absent clear guidance from the commander in chief, the specialized USSOF organization could dictate policy outcomes, based on their own preferences, in ways that its CJSOTF cousin could not.

Organizational Challenges for the T&E Program

The T&E and SDF programs faced challenges inherent to the composition of their partner forces

and constraints on their missions. YPG members were generally motivated to fight well beyond their villages and home countries of origin largely because the group is, at its core, an ethno-nationalist, political movement fighting for political autonomy.⁵¹ The Arab-majority forces, in contrast, fought for various reasons, ranging from the formation of a new government (divided by competing visions of how that government should be structured) to cash payments, resulting in limitations to their motivation. Moreover, as an ethnically homogenous force with an internal intelligence and command and control structure, the YPG could effectively screen out ISIS- or al-Qaeda-linked sympathizers.⁵² The various Arab groups did not have these capabilities, making the vetting process more challenging and the threat of ISIS infiltration more acute.

The CJSOTF-S and USSOF organization were, however, unequally prepared to manage characteristics of the forces they were training. The YPG were, according to multiple interviews, "ready to go" right out of the box as a capable force to fight ISIS,⁵³ whereas the Arab-majority groups (both with SAC and in T&E) were less capable of fighting ISIS outside of their home villages, and therefore not ideally suited to help the United States achieve its objectives. While the USSOF organization and CJSOTF-S experienced similar challenges with the Arab-majority forces, the former operated in-country and the resulting rapport made it more able to address these challenges.⁵⁴

The limits of the Section 1209 authorities impacted the Train and Equip program more significantly than the SDF program given the structure of the former. The authorities required that partner forces pledge to fight ISIS, rather than only fighting the Syrian regime, which further undercut efforts to establish

47 The "S" in CJSOTF-S denotes the location as Syria, as compared with different Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces in other parts of the world.

48 See "Organization," Operation Inherent Resolve, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-Us/Organization/>.

49 Author Interview, Turkish Official, Ankara, March 2015.

50 Email Interview, US Military Official, February 2017.

51 International Crisis Group, Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria, Report No. 151, May 8, 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarius-rise-syria>.

52 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, January 2017.

53 Email interview, US Military Official, February 2017.

54 CJSOTFS, not initially based in-country and using Skype or other tools to connect with commanders in Syria, struggled to build rapport with militia leaders, further limiting the effectiveness of the initial training efforts. See Ibid.



Syrian Democratic Forces fighters carry their weapons as they stand in Raqqa's western neighborhood of Jazra, Syria in June 2017. *Photo credit: Reuters/Rodi Said.*

rapport with the Arab-majority forces being trained.⁵⁵ The United States supplied recruits with American weapons, rather than the more ubiquitous Russian origin designs, which required recruits to travel to the Turkish border for resupply. The fighters, as such, saw the weapons as a means to compel them to acquiesce to American demands, rather than as a tool to aid in their fight. This perception undercut morale and efforts to build rapport.⁵⁶ Further still, the T&E program at its outset focused on recruiting individuals rather than leaders from established groups in the area. The recruits were responsible

for getting to centralized training sites in Turkey for the twelve-week training program,⁵⁷ a duration that meant attendees had to be inessential to the ongoing fight in Syria.⁵⁸

The focus on ISIS undercut these groups' support from the broader anti-Assad insurgency and made them a target of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The presence of al-Qaeda and Ahrar al-Sham,⁵⁹ a rival Salafi group that, in certain cities and towns shares governance responsibilities with Nusra,⁶⁰ within the broader Syrian insurgency

55 The inability to align US goals with those of a local ground force is a serious problem for any Train and Equip strategy. To increase the likelihood of success, goals must first be aligned and the US trainers willing to tolerate the partner force doing certain things that the US does not like for the sake of achieving the primary mission. Author Interview, US Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

56 Author Interview, Former Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Sam Heller, a Beirut-based analyst, described Ahrar as "the vanguard of a revisionist school that is contesting the nature of the jihadist movement," albeit one that "remains more politically and philosophically embedded inside pan-Islamist jihadism." Heller concluded that "Ahrar al-Sham will not be the malleable new 'Awakening' for which U.S. policymakers are forever hoping" to act as a counterweight to al-Qaeda in Syria. See Sam Heller, "Ahrar al Sham's Revisionist Jihadism," War on the Rocks, September 30, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/ahrar-al-shams-revisionist-jihadism/>.

60 In July 2016, Nusra rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham; then, in January 2017, it changed its name to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. See Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is Starting to Swallow the Syrian Opposition," Foreign Policy, March 15, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition/>.

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deprived the T&E program of a potential recruiting pool.⁶¹

The Arab-majority forces that made up the SDF, in contrast, had always focused their efforts on ISIS as their principal enemy, and the YPG had maintained a pragmatic relationship with the Syrian regime with the aim of realizing its primary goal: defeating ISIS in northeastern Syria to consolidate political and military control over an autonomous area. This was not an accident. The YPG's recruitment efforts focused on Arab tribes and families that were not committed to regime change.⁶² The SDF's sole focus on ISIS may have made the United States more willing to provide the group air support,⁶³ and the strikes, in turn, further enhanced rapport.⁶⁴ The role of airpower, however, is a double-edged sword. The number of US strikes is viewed as a metric of support for opposition groups. Thus, groups on the ground demanded greater air support (even when not necessary, or when the aircraft were tasked for a different set of targets) before attacking ISIS-related targets.⁶⁵

Graduated elements of the T&E program were intended to push from strongholds north of Aleppo, spanning from Azaz to Marea (collectively dubbed the Marea line), to close the Manbij pocket. Jabhat al-Nusra attacked the first batches of trained fighters, causing one group to hand weapons over to Nusra forces.⁶⁶ The political controversy over the handoff of American weapons to an al-Qaeda affiliate undercut the already tepid support for the program and prompted the Obama administration to change

its focus.⁶⁷ Despite the program's overall failure, the US-trained fighters, in at least one instance, had successfully relayed Nusra positions to the coalition operations center,⁶⁸ which then tasked aircraft to hit the targets⁶⁹—a notable tactical success.⁷⁰

Following the mission change, the CJSOTF-S forces remained in Turkey but instead coordinated with and trained individuals to join existing opposition groups. CJSOTF-S's continued presence and direct dialogue with elements of the Turkish-backed opposition remain valuable to US policy makers for situational awareness of events west of the Euphrates River, and to assist with intelligence collection for target identification. Despite these benefits, the program, overall, failed to achieve its ambitious goals.

Geopolitical Challenges for the T&E Program

The multi-faceted nature of the Syrian civil conflict impacted the program's development. As the T&E program was taking shape, Russia deepened its involvement in the Syrian civil conflict. The Russian military deployed aircraft to Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia Province in September 2015 to initiate an air campaign in support of the Syrian regime.⁷¹ Two months later, in late November, a Russia SU-24 bombed Turkmen Mountain in northern Syria, a Turkmen rebel stronghold that has a profound domestic political resonance for right-of-center Turkish political parties.⁷² The Turkish Air Force downing of the Russian jet prompted Russia to

61 These two groups are specifically listed as unauthorized in the Section 1209 authorities, and Title 10 forces are barred from working with them, or giving assistance to groups that work closely with them.

62 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

63 Paul D. Shinkman, "U.S. Bombing Legions of ISIS Fighters," US News and World Report, October 17, 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/10/17/us-general-us-targeting-isis-leaders-legions-of-forces-in-kobani>.

64 Author Interview, US Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

65 Author Interview, Former Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017; See also Mike Benitez and Mike Pietrucha, "Political Airpower, Part II: The Seductive Allure of Precision Weapons," War on the Rocks, November 30, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/political-airpower-part-ii-the-seductive-allure-of-precision-weapons/>. The SDF, for example, often will not begin battles until US air strikes begin. In certain instances, the United States uses expensive precision-guided munitions to hit dirt road intersections to prevent vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks. The same is true in Iraq, where US munitions strike targets in support of advancing troops without the threat of VBIED actually materializing. This raises the costs of US action and has caused controversy with the elements of the US military responsible for overseeing air strike requests (Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, July 2017).

66 "U.S.-Trained Syrian Rebels Gave Equipment to Nusra: U.S. Military," Reuters, September 26, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-equipment-idUSKCNORP2HO20150926>.

67 Michael D. Schear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS," New York Times, October 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>.

68 Roy Gutman, "What Really Happened to the U.S. Train-and-Equip Program in Syria?" McClatchy, December 21, 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article50919765.html>.

69 For an overview of how these strikes are conducted, see Michael Zenko, "The U.S. Air Campaign in Syria Is Suspiciously Impressive at Not Killing Civilians," Foreign Policy, November 25, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/25/the-u-s-air-campaign-in-syria-is-suspiciously-impressive-at-not-killing-civilians/>; See also the AR-15 report on civilian casualties, November 2, 2016, http://www.centcom.mil/portals/6/media/redacted_final_xsum_memorandum__29_nov_16___clear.pdf.

70 Email Interview, US Official, June 2016.

71 "Syria Group: Russia Expanding Major Syrian Airport," Military Times, September 13, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2015/09/13/syria-group-russia-expanding-major-syrian-airport/72209558/>.

72 Sam Heller and S.G. Grimaldi, "A Cause for All Turks: Turkey and Syria's Turkmen Rebels," War on the Rocks, January 21, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/01/a-cause-for-all-turks-turkey-and-syrias-turkmen-rebels/>.

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expand its bombing campaign to include Turkish-backed opposition supply lines to Aleppo, which ran through the back-basing areas for the T&E fighters. Following this incident, Turkey also stopped flying strike and surveillance missions over the Marea line, which had been augmenting artillery along the border in support of T&E-trained elements.⁷³

Russia also gave direct support to the Efrin-based YPG⁷⁴ as part of its strategy to punish Turkey and break the back of the Aleppo-based insurgency. After nearly two months of heavy Russian bombardment along the Marea line, the regime cut Azaz from Aleppo, severing Turkey's overland route to the city. Shortly thereafter, in mid-February, Russian airpower facilitated the Efrin YPG's taking of Menagh Air Force Base from Turkish-backed rebels.⁷⁵ One week later, the YPG and Russia worked together to take Tel Rifaat.

The Russian bombing of the Marea line ended in late February after having a devastating impact on the T&E forces and the broader Turkish-backed insurgency. The loss of these cities and the SDF capture of Tel Abyad changed Turkey's calculus and sharpened its focus on ISIS.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the United States continued to use T&E forces in attempts to close the Manbij pocket. Despite the US commitment of up to 50 percent of strike and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) sorties to the Marea line⁷⁷ and Turkish shelling of ISIS positions along the border, the groups struggled to take sparsely populated towns with minimal ISIS presence. Moreover, the fractured groups could not hold the towns they had taken, retreating en masse against ISIS counterattacks.

The poor performance prompted a shift in American tactics favoring the use of the SDF, in direct violation of Ankara's stated red line about the composition of forces operating west of the Euphrates.⁷⁸ The SDF's April 2016 announcement of its creation of the Manbij Military Council (MMC) foreshadowed the forthcoming late May offensive, during which the

SDF pushed north from the Tishreen Dam to encircle and siege the city. The fight slowly proceeded in urban terrain before the city fell in mid-August.⁷⁹ Despite methodical execution, the SDF reportedly lost some 300 fighters, with another 1,200 injured in the urban battle.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, the fall of the town provided the group with the means to move on al-Bab, a goal that the SDF articulated when it announced the creation of a council to govern the town in mid-August.⁸¹

Turkey Reacts: Train and Equip Is Repurposed for Turkish Needs

The problems associated with the T&E program, combined with the overly ambitious mission of closing the Manbij pocket, may have set the program up for failure. However, the cadres of US-trained personnel proved useful for Turkey during Operation Euphrates Shield, the cross-border military operation Turkey launched on August 24, 2016. The impetus for Euphrates Shield was twofold: To clear ISIS from the Manbij pocket, and to prevent the SDF from moving west from Manbij towards Efrin.

After the fall of Manbij, Turkish artillery stationed along the border began to target SDF positions north of the city.⁸² The shelling was in preparation for a Turkish military-led invasion, backed by various rebel groups based in Turkey or transferred from Idlib. Two of the more effective brigades, Mu'tasim and Hamza, were part of the US training program, and were outfitted with equipment paid for with T&E funds. Turkey sought to keep the invasion secret from the United States, but US intelligence caught wind of the cross-border operation up to two weeks before it took place, according to two sources interviewed for this report.⁸³ To facilitate the cross-border move, Ankara first had to secure Russian permission. The two countries' relationship had improved significantly since the Turkish downing of the Russian SU-24 the previous November and the subsequent Russian counter-escalation in Syria.

73 Abdulkadir Selvi, "Suriye ile savaşa mı giriyoruz?," *Yeni Safak*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/abdulkadirselvi/suriye-ile-savaa-mi-giriyoruz-2014751>; Author Interview, US Government Official, February 2017.

74 These Kurdish fighters are part of the same YPG that the US gives support to, but this cadre is not geographically connected to YPG territory west of the Euphrates.

75 Suleiman al Khalidi, "Kurdish Forces Said to Take Air Base near Turkish Border," *Reuters*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VK0E8>.

76 Author Interview, US Government Official, February 2017.

77 Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, November 2016.

78 "Turkey Says West of Euphrates 'Red Line' in Northern Syria," *TRT World*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-says-west-euphrates-red-line-northern-syria-3972>.

79 Chase Winter, "Syrian Kurds Look West after Manbij Victory," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, August 14, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/syrian-kurds-look-west-after-manbij-victory/a-19473564>.

80 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, April 2017.

81 Jiyar Gol, "IS Conflict: Syria's Kurds Set Sights on al-Bab after Fall of Manbij," *BBC News*, August 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37093856>.

82 Turkish artillery, since at least January 2016, has also shelled YPG positions west of Azaz and, at times, SDF positions in Manbij.

83 Author Interview, US Government Official, August 2016; Author Interview, Former US Government Official, February 2017.



Demonstrators in Istanbul shout slogans against the ruling AK Party as they hold banners during protests against the July 2015 bomb attack in Suruc. *Photo credit: Reuters/Umit Bektas.*

Turkish officials traveled to Moscow on August 9, probably to brief Russia on the proposed invasion plan. Ten days later, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu traveled to Tehran for discussions, most likely to brief officials on Euphrates Shield. According to this timeline, the United States was the last to be told. Still, as the invasion began on the morning of August 24, CENTCOM Commander Joseph Votel tasked Turkey-based aircraft to support the invasion, though US forces were not permitted to cross the border. This changed on September 17, when some forty special forces operators crossed into Turkish-held territory near al-Rai, establishing a presence inside Syria. The US deployment came amid US-Turkish talks, reportedly about the scope and intent of Operation Euphrates Shield.

With ties to Mu'tasim and Hamza, CJSTOF-S could monitor the operation's progress—an unintended but necessary benefit from the US training effort because the Turkish government restricted its communication with the United States.⁸⁴ It is unclear when the United States learned that Turkey intended to push towards al-Bab, a town some forty kilometers south of al-Rai. President Erdogan clarified the intent of the operation after it began, telling the Turkish press that the Turkish military would push towards al-Bab, and then on to SDF-held Manbij.⁸⁵

Amid the expanded scope of the operation, the various Arab forces fighting alongside Turkish troops showed a considerable lack of skill and discipline. Meanwhile, the Turkish fighting force did not have enough manpower to manage the multiple

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Erdogan: Menbic'i PYD'den temizleyecegiz," BBC Turkce, October 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37773388>.

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front lines and was ill-prepared for the assault of al-Bab. Turkish forces reached the outskirts of the city's northern entrance in mid-November, before beginning to advance on the western outskirts of the town in an attempt to take Sheikh Akil hill, the high ground west of the city. In the subsequent battle that began in mid-December, the Turkish armored units supporting special operations forces and a smattering of FSA groups demonstrated poor combined arms tactics, attempting to push into towns with armored elements with little to no support from infantry units.⁸⁶ In total, Turkey lost at least eight Leopard 2A4 tanks, one Sabra M60T tank, two Otokar Kobra vehicles, and two armed personnel carriers in an ISIS counterattack.⁸⁷

Concurrent to an ISIS counterattack at Sheik Akil hill, the Turkish forces launched an offensive to retake Qabasin, a small town nine kilometers north of al-Bab. The assault was successful, prompting Ankara to increase the number of forces in the conflict to retake al-Bab. Turkey also moved artillery into Syria and increased its daily bombardment of the city to the extent that two coalition members expressed a general concern about war crimes taking place, with tactics that resembled the Russian assault on Grozny in 1999.⁸⁸

In the latter stages of Turkey's military intervention, the political leadership in Ankara directed its ire at the coalition for not providing adequate support for Turkish and allied ground forces.⁸⁹ The coalition had previously deployed special forces to Turkish-controlled territory, but authorized these soldiers to move only some twenty kilometers deep into Syria. From the outset, coalition aircraft had been

striking ISIS supply lines south of the city, but these strikes were not in direct support of Turkish or allied Turkish forces on the ground. To be sure, the United States was irritated with Turkey for its cross-border military action, and therefore sought to use air strikes to coerce changes in Turkish policy. However, as the fight continued, the argument within the US government shifted towards a "win-for-win" strategy, wherein the United States would give Turkey more support in exchange for greater concessions on the forthcoming offensive for Raqqa. The United States, therefore, did move to offer greater assistance with targeting and intelligence collection.⁹⁰ Ankara was wary of accepting the offer, demanding restrictions on US flight operations over al-Bab, which would require the United States to conduct strikes without getting eyes on target.⁹¹

The Turkish military gained control of remaining key outlying villages in late February 2017, signaling readiness for the assault of al-Bab. While Turkey had trouble taking and holding the city, the regime, with Russian support, advanced its forces south of al-Bab. Ankara, in turn, exaggerated the support Russian fixed wing aircraft provided in the area⁹² to put pressure on the United States, first to signal that Ankara had other partners, and second to hasten CJTF-OIR support for the battle for al-Bab.⁹³ Despite Turkish-backed troops ultimately succeeding in taking al-Bab, the results of this approach were decidedly mixed: Russian support targeted ISIS, but it also facilitated the movement of regime forces in cutting off any conceivable Turkish route to Raqqa—a goal President Erdogan often articulated.⁹⁴

86 Author Interviews, Multiple US Army Tank Drivers, Washington, DC, September 2016-May 2017.

87 For a more detailed assessment, see Christiaan Triebert, "The Battle for Al-Bab: Verifying Euphrates Shield Vehicle Losses," Bellingcat, February 12, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/02/12/battle-al-bab-verifying-turkish-military-vehicle-losses/>.

88 Author Interview, Non-US Member of the Anti-ISIS Coalition, Washington, DC, January 2017; Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, February 2017.

89 President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, told a news conference in December 2016, "The international coalition must carry out its duties regarding aerial support to the battle we are fighting in al-Bab. Not giving the necessary support is unacceptable." Turkish criticism noticeably increased as the fight was bogged down around al-Bab in December 2016. See "Turkey Asks U.S.-Led Coalition for Air Support at Syria's al-Bab," Reuters, December 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-airforce-idUSKBN14FOKE>.

90 Michael R. Gordon, "Top U.S. General Discusses Syria with Counterparts from Russia and Turkey," New York Times, March 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deconfliction.html?_r=0.

91 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, March 2017.

92 "Russian and Turkish Jets 'Bomb ISIL' in Syria's Al Bab," Yahoo News, January 18, 2017, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/russian-turkish-jets-bomb-isil-syrias-al-bab-170727283.html>.

93 According to a US official, "You can't just turn on close air support for a partner force at the flip of a switch. That [close air support] has to know the exact front-line trace of the unit they're supporting, or else they're likely going to end up striking friendly targets by accident. They'd need to be able to communicate with the aircraft, which you would do by coordinating the communications ahead of time, making sure they can talk to the aircraft, making sure you had people on the ground who knew what they were doing." Author Interview, US Official, Washington, DC, June 2017; The Russian Air Force, on February 9, 2017, mistakenly bombed Turkish positions near al-Bab, killing three. Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Daren Butler, "Russian Bombing in Syria Mistakenly Kills Three Turkish Soldiers," Reuters, February 9, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-albab-idUSKBN15O100>.

94 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: El Bab'tan sonra Rakka'ya gireceğiz," Star, October 27, 2016, <http://www.star.com.tr/politika/cumhurbaşkanı-erdogan-el-babtan-sonra-rakkaya-girecegiz-haber-1153155/>.

RUSSIAN COUNTER-ESCALATION: MANBIJ AND THE TURKISH PLAN FOR RAQQA

A period of uncertainty for the Turkish military in Syria followed the fall of al-Bab. To support combat operations, the Turkish military has built a large base near Dabiq, as well as a series of small forward-operating bases near the front lines with the regime east of al-Bab.⁹⁵ In addition, Turkey operates a training base near Soylu for individuals to join the brigades supporting Euphrates Shield or to serve as police officers in Turkish-controlled territory.⁹⁶ The units were also intended to spearhead the operation to take Manbij.

After the consolidation of the front lines around al-Bab, militia forces allied with Turkey began to clash with the SDF west of Manbij, which Turkish artillery supported, although it is unclear if Turkish officers based in Syria were involved in planning the offensive.⁹⁷ The clashes continued until mid-March, when, according to multiple American officials, Russia intervened at a trilateral summit with the United States and Turkey in Antalya to demand an end to Turkish military clashes around Manbij.⁹⁸ This demand coincided with Russia brokering a deal with the SDF in Manbij to move regime forces and a handful of Russian advisers into a small ribbon of territory west of the city, effectively creating a Russian deterrent force to prevent Turkish military action.⁹⁹

Moscow had used this tactic previously during clashes between the YPG and Turkish forces near Tel Rifaat, but the action in Manbij was more overt and broadcasted more publicly. It also appears that President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed the Russian position from the Antalya summit to President

Erdogan at a meeting in Moscow on March 10. The day after the two presidents met, all clashes in the area stopped.¹⁰⁰ Later that month, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim confirmed that the operation had ended, but held out that the Turkish military could expand its operation under a new code name.¹⁰¹

The end of Operation Euphrates Shield shifted the debate to Raqqa and the complicated political efforts to construct a force to take and hold the city from ISIS. The United States made clear in its initial deployment of special operations forces in October 2015 that part of the effort was to prepare local forces to assault Raqqa. In this sense, the SDF proved to be a military success. Through the recruitment of local Arab forces, the once YPG-dominant force now has a considerable composition of Arab forces, likely outnumbering any comparable force in the area or elsewhere. The numbers, however, belie the importance of YPG networks to sustain combat operations. CJSOTF-S members who trained Arab elements of the SDF note that the same problems that plagued T&E are also present with the Arab elements of the SDF.

The YPG also plays a significant role in identifying militias to join the SDF. By assisting US forces in the vetting process, the YPG can control those that join and influence the political direction of the SDF. This setup also enables the YPG to exert control over the councils that are selected to govern ISIS-held territories taken by the SDF.¹⁰² The YPG has also proved more effective at recruiting fighters than other Arab-majority units. As such, the SDF

95 Open source satellite imagery confirms the presence of these bases.

96 The feeder program moves fighters into bigger groups, each based on a different front within Turkish-occupied areas. On the eastern front, the fighters join the Levant Front. On the southern front with regime-occupied Tedef, they join Faylaq al-Sham. On the eastern front, the fighters join Sultan Murad, suggesting that they are Turkmen. Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, March 2017.

97 A contact who visited the back base for Euphrates Shield just after al-Bab got the sense that the operation had concluded, and that any expansion of military operations would be carried out under a new operational code name. Author Interview, Turkey-based source who visited the Turkish officers in charge of Operation Euphrates Shield, March 2017.

98 Author Interviews, US Government Officials, Washington, DC, March 2017.

99 Aaron Stein, "How Russia Beat Turkey in Syria," MENASource, Atlantic Council, March 27, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/component/content/article?id=34974:how-russia-beat-turkey-in-syria>.

100 "Erdogan Meets Putin in Moscow," Deutsche Welle (DW), March 10, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-meets-putin-in-moscow/av-37892424>.

101 "Turkey Ends 'Euphrates Shield' Operation in Syria," Al Jazeera, March 29, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/turkey-ends-euphrates-shield-operation-syria-170329211428970.html>.

102 In Manbij, as an example, the Manbij Military Council is predominantly Arab but nonetheless tied to the YPG's civilian wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

now represents one of the largest local Arab fighting groups in the country. Moreover, according to two US government officials, the SAC cannot fight without YPG logistical support,¹⁰³ making it unlikely that a SAC-only force could have taken Raqqa despite outnumbering ISIS fighters in the city. SAC's inability to fight without the YPG has limited US options for the battle to take Raqqa, and complicated Turkish efforts to convince the United States to use elements trained for Euphrates Shield, grafted onto SAC networks, as an alternative force for the battle.

In late February 2017, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joe Dunford met with his Turkish counterpart, Fikri Isik, at Incirlik Air Force Base to discuss US plans for Raqqa and hear an updated Turkish counter-proposal.¹⁰⁴ Dunford visited a Turkish training camp during this visit but was not allowed to meet with any of the recruits, reportedly because of their anti-American views.¹⁰⁵ The counter-proposal would use Turkish-backed elements from the Euphrates Shield operation along with a combination of Turkish armored and special operations forces to move to Raqqa via SDF-held Tel Abyad.¹⁰⁶ Shortly thereafter, Turkey updated this plan to include the Arab elements in the SDF.¹⁰⁷

This proposal was problematic for the United States, which knows very little about whom the Turks are recruiting, preventing proper vetting and assessments of the Turkish-backed force's size and capabilities.¹⁰⁸ According to CENTCOM estimates, the force needed to take the city is

“The US military determined that Turkey would struggle to sustain an operation around Raqqa in the absence of considerable US assistance.”

approximately eighteen thousand, with another twelve thousand to hold the city.¹⁰⁹ The Turkish-backed force reportedly includes three thousand fighters culled from the broader pool of the Turkish-backed opposition in Syria, now being trained to join the three major factions in control of northern Aleppo. The performance of Turkish forces in al-Bab is yet another complicating factor. The US military determined that Turkey would struggle to sustain an operation around Raqqa in the absence of considerable US assistance. The final factor, of course, is that the United States would struggle to create a safe corridor for Turkish forces to move from Tel Abyad to Raqqa. This proposed route would entail the movement of Turkish-backed rebels and soldiers through SDF-held territory, which would effectively bisect the Kurdish cantons of Kobani and Jazira and risk Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

The United States ultimately chose to go with CENTCOM's preferred approach, resulting in President Trump issuing a letter to the relevant congressional committees to make legal the direct arming of the YPG for the fight in Raqqa.

103 Author Interviews, US Government and Military Officials, Washington, DC, April and March 2017.

104 “Top Turkish, US Soldiers Meet at Incirlik to Discuss Anti-terror Fight,” Hurriyet Daily News, February 17, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/top-turkish-us-soldiers-meet-at-incirlik-to-discuss-anti-terror-fight-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=109861&NewsCatID=358>.

105 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, March 2017.

106 Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkey Sets Out Raqqa Operation Plans to U.S.: Report,” Reuters, February 18, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-syria-idUSKBN15X0C7>;

107 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, April 2017.

108 Stringent vetting is required to understand the goals of the local force, lest otherwise risk the US military enabling elements of an insurgency to pursue its own goals. Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

109 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

TURKISH COUNTER-ESCALATION: FORECASTING ANKARA'S RESPONSE

The Turkish government has made clear its intention to take cross-border military action against the PKK. Concurrently, the Turkish military remains engaged in a low-level counterinsurgency in southeastern Turkey against Turkey-based PKK networks and members.¹¹⁰ Turkey trained upwards of three thousand militants as part of its initial effort for Operation Euphrates Shield, and subsequently as the potential force to take Raqqa.¹¹¹ This cadre of recruits reportedly received training in cross-border assaults, which has led to speculation that Turkey could use it to spearhead an invasion of SDF-held Tel Abyad or Kurdish-controlled Tel Rifaat in northern Aleppo. This report is focused on potential Turkish actions east of the Euphrates river, where US forces are present. The United States does not have any presence in Tel Rifaat, and thus has no real tools to deter a Turkish military operation in the area. In Tel Abyad, the United States does not have a larger military presence to deter cross border Turkish action. However, in response to clashes, US Rangers have been sent to do deterrence patrols in the city. A Turkish invasion of Tel Abyad would likely divert YPG elements from Raqqa front lines, impeding SDF and US efforts to take the city.

Alternatively, the Turkish government has also suggested that it could invade Iraq to target a PKK-trained, Yazidi-majority militia, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS).¹¹² The PKK has managed to carve out a foothold in Sinjar with the YBS after the rise of ISIS and the threat of ISIS-orchestrated genocide. The Turkish Armed Forces have a slew of bases in northern Iraq stemming from agreements reached in the 1990s with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).¹¹³ Turkish Special Forces are training KDP-allied Zeravani Peshmerga, which train the Rojava

Peshmerga (Roj Pesh), a KRG-based group of Syrian Kurds that fled PYD-controlled areas. The Roj Pesh and YBS clashed in Sinjar in early March, sparking a conflict between the rival Kurdish blocs.

An assault on Sinjar, however, would require the Turkish military to augment its presence in Iraq for the approximately two hundred-kilometer push from the border. Turkey would likely receive permission from the KDP, but not from the Iraqi central government. Such a Turkish move would have three interrelated aims: First, ousting the YBS from Sinjar and installing Roj Pesh and KDP-allied forces; second, controlling the border crossing with PYD-held Syria, allowing for a near total KDP-Turkish blockade of Syrian-Kurdish territory; third, projecting power into Tel Afar and Mosul, both of which will be under the control of anti-Turkish forces allied with the Iraqi central government after ISIS's defeat. The Iraqi central government would likely see the latter outcome as a threat, given that the Sinjar-Tel Afar highway is critical for controlling the flow of goods and people into Mosul, giving the force in control of these two cities sway over the direction of Mosul in a post-ISIS conflict scenario. To further complicate matters, the bulk of the Iraqi forces fighting near Tel Afar are members of the Popular Mobilization Units, or state-sanctioned militias, some of which have strong ties to Iran.¹¹⁴

Turkish F-16s struck PKK-related targets in Iraq's Sinjar and Syria's Karachok on April 25.¹¹⁵ The Turkish Air Force gave the United States a fifty-minute warning,¹¹⁶ and the strikes were conducted outside the coalition's air tasking order, through which the coalition air commander controls and directs air forces in a joint environment. The strikes

110 For an overview of the fighting in Nusaybin, Turkey, see "Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin," Report No. 243, International Crisis Group, May 2, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/243-managing-turkeys-pkk-conflict-case-nusaybin>.

111 Author Interview, US government official familiar with the Turkish proposal, Washington, DC, April 2017.

112 Alex MacDonald, "Sinjar Becomes Proxy Battle amid Rising Kurdish Tensions," Middle East Eye, March 8, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-sinjar-becomes-proxy-battle-amid-rising-kurdish-tensions-1123337257>.

113 Akin Unver, "Mosul: Turkey's Fulda Gap," War on the Rocks, December 29, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/mosul-turkeys-fulda-gap/>.

114 Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights, "Mini-Hizballahs, Revolutionary Guards Knock Offs, and the Future of Iran's Militant Proxies in Iraq," War on the Rocks, May 9, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/mini-hizballahs-revolutionary-guard-knock-offs-and-the-future-of-irans-militant-proxies-in-iraq/>.

115 "Turkish Jets Strike Kurdish Fighters in Syria, Iraq's Sinjar," Reuters, April 25, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-turkey-iraq-idUKKBN17ROCA>.

116 Josie Ensor, "US Troops Seen Patrolling Syria-Turkey Border as Washington Tries to Stop Turkish Air Strikes on Kurds," Telegraph, May 1, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/01/us-troops-seen-patrolling-syria-turkey-border-washington-tries/>.

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killed some twenty-five fighters, including five Zeravani Peshmerga forces manning the front line with the YBS in Sinjar. The incident suggests, as in al-Bab, some deficiencies in Turkish targeting. The United States criticized the strikes, and a second coalition member privately condemned the action as shortsighted and certain to push the YPG to take retaliatory steps toward cooperation with the regime and Russia.¹¹⁷ In Tel Abyad, YPG forces targeted two Turkish tanks with anti-tank guided missiles, fired from the Syrian side of the border. Thus far, the strikes have been one-offs, though the United States responded with Ranger¹¹⁸ patrols along the border to deter cross-border clashes, further deepening the overt US presence with the YPG along Syria's border with Turkey.¹¹⁹

The locations of the Turkish air strikes also suggest a third potential response: A move into northeastern Syria and across the Iraqi border. The Syrian incursion would be limited, and carried out in areas where the KDP's Syria-based affiliate, KDP-S, has local support. Turkish ground forces could then push into Sinjar and gain control over key border crossings, allowing Turkey to facilitate the movement of Roj Pesh units from Iraq into Syria, although reliable estimates of the group's strength are hard to come by.

A fourth possibility is that Turkey will continue to follow its current policy of periodically shelling SDF positions while training Arab and Turkmen fighters to enter Euphrates Shield territory. It could then threaten to use these elements to invade Tel Abyad as part of a "low risk" effort to foment ethnic and political divisions in SDF-run territory. However, Turkey's training program appears to have similar deficiencies to the US experience with Train and Equip. The Turkish military is training individuals, at times culled from the Syrian refugee population in-country, to join with larger groups.¹²⁰ The training program is slow and weapons are used to compel the groups to follow Turkish directives. This effort has failed to unify the opposition in Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo, and may have indirectly created fissures for the regime to exploit by offering higher salaries to fighters who switch sides.

For Turkey, none of these options are risk free. The least costly approach is to try and foment internal dissent in SDF-controlled areas. Such an effort could have potential second-order effects on post-conflict stabilization, or on broader SDF-led governance efforts in the city.

117 Author Interview, non-US member of the Anti-ISIS Coalition, Washington, DC, May 2017.

118 Meghann Myers, "Army Rangers on the Ground in Syria for Liberation Fight," *Military Times*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/articles/army-rangers-on-the-ground-in-syria-for-liberation-fight>.

119 Shawn Snow, "US Forces Patrol Syrian Border amid Clashes between Turkey and Kurdish Militants," *The Military Times*, April 28, 2017, <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/us-forces-patrol-syrian-border-amid-clashes-between-turkey-and-kurdish-militants>.

120 Rao Komar, "Turkey's Syria Intervention: No Guarantee of Easy Victory at Al Bab," *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/turkeys-syria-intervention-no-guarantee-of-easy-victory-at-al-bab/>.

MATCHING ACTIONS AND OBJECTIVES: LESSONS LEARNED FROM MILITIA BUILDING IN SYRIA

The battle for Raqqa began in June 2017, after months of deliberations—spanning two administrations—about how to manage Turkey. Central to this debate are self-imposed restrictions related to the political costs of dramatically increasing the number of US forces in Syria, and broader US government concerns about implementing a policy that would require a long-term commitment to rebuild Syria’s institutions. The military’s hesitance to deeply commit itself to post-conflict operations is understandable. This phase in both Iraq and Afghanistan has bogged down the US military in protracted and costly low-intensity counter-insurgency¹²¹ and nation-building efforts. The outcome has been detrimental to readiness and has contributed to life cycle issues for military equipment and platforms.

The SDF-centric, by-and-through approach in Syria is linked to the reluctance to commit US forces to long-term nation-building missions. Yet, even this limited-involvement approach has generated a debate regarding the execution of post-conflict and stabilization assistance in SDF-held areas in northeastern Syria. The US military would like the Department of State to take the lead in this effort,¹²² a decision that could further complicate diplomatic relations with Turkey. The SDF is pushing for greater post-conflict reconstruction assistance for its nascent governing structure, which would have profound implications for future governance in northeastern Syria. Meanwhile, the

Turkish government is already maneuvering to close international nongovernmental organizations, many of which had operated in Syria for years.¹²³ Turkey could also take a step further and shut down American assistance platforms in Turkey (START), or put pressure on the small office in Kobani, dubbed START Forward.¹²⁴ The KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, similarly, has antagonistic relations with the PYD, which frequently closes the border crossing. These conditions may force planners to fly in reconstruction assistance through US-operated air bases, which further implies a longer-term military presence in Syria.

The United States is likely to try and manage these conflicting efforts and priorities. The debate is instructive: the military includes post-conflict operations in its doctrine, but is not trained, organized, or equipped to fulfill this mission requirement.¹²⁵ The most probable US policy will be an attempt to manage expectations of all parties involved by aiming to establish a relatively stable northeastern Syria that is politically tolerable to policy makers in Ankara.¹²⁶

The post-conflict debate is broadly analogous to previous debates about arming the YPG directly. The most obvious lesson learned is that the political environment will shape outcomes, despite all relevant partner forces sharing the goal of defeating ISIS.¹²⁷ US military action in Syria could result in the creation of quasi-independent, Kurdish-dominated governing institutions, anathema to Turkish security

121 Writing in 2001, then Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Votel (now the commander of CENTCOM), described the frustration with increased deployments, “spanning the spectrum of conflict from major theater war to peacekeeping to humanitarian aid.” According to Votel, “Increased deployments, especially those outside the realm of theater combat, are a source of frustration and concern for professional military officers as they affect long-term readiness and question the basic philosophy and purpose for military forces.” See: Lt. Colonel Joseph L. Votel, Strategic Implications for Shared Constitutional War Powers in the 21st Century, Research Paper, Army War College, April 10, 2001, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA389866>.

122 The joint doctrinal definition of the stabilization phase assigns responsibility to the Department of State “to plan and coordinate [US government] efforts in stabilization and reconstruction.” See Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operation, Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 17, 2017, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf, VIII-25.

123 “Some 700 INGOs [international nongovernmental organizations] and foundations have been closed since July 2016,” according to an INGO worker based in Turkey. Ankara also appears intent on funneling all aid delivered to Syria through the Prime Ministry’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency or the Islamist Humanitarian Relief Foundation in order to prevent the distribution of goods in SDF/YPG-held areas; Author Interview, Washington, DC, May 19, 2017.

124 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Sends Civilian Team to Syria to Help the Displaced Return Home,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/us/politics/syria-trump-civilian-humanitarians.html>.

125 Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

126 Author Interview, US Government Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

127 See David A. Broyles and Brody Blankenship, “The Role of Special Operations Forces in Global Competition,” CNA, April 2017, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DRM-2017-U-015225-1Rev.pdf.

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interests. According to CNA analysts David A. Broyles and Brody Blankenship, this outcome would be an “unintended, desired outcome,” wherein the military “get[s] an outcome that we wanted, but not how we expected. This outcome matches [the] ‘objective,’ but it equates to ‘the right answer for the wrong reason,’ and it suggests that we do not understand the environment or know how our actions will play out.”¹²⁸ In Syria, the United States is all but certain to territorially defeat ISIS. The defeat, however, may also help midwife a political outcome that prompts future Turkish military action—an outcome that would bog down an American ally in an asymmetric conflict it would struggle to win, and one that would give ISIS room to move back into lost territory. Turkey, a NATO ally, could then ask for assistance, placing the United States in the position of having to provide—or deny—aid to a military against a group it had recently supported.¹²⁹

The T&E program and concurrent efforts to train Arab elements to join the SDF point to two interrelated lessons learned. First, it is difficult to build local forces willing to fight for objectives incongruent with their own ambitions. Second, the enabling of local forces, capable of achieving narrowly defined military goals, does not necessarily mean that they are congruous with broader foreign policy goals. This is not unique. The partnering with local forces to achieve the state mission requires the alignment of end-goals. To do so, the United States has to be prepared to tolerate its preferred partner forces doing things that are not perfectly aligned with US objectives.¹³⁰ The vetting process, therefore, is extremely important. The United States must understand the forces it is working with, lest otherwise risk serving as an enabler for political or military outcomes that are incongruous with the mission objectives. The training program, too, should be built around the needs on the battlefield. A truncated program for fighters trained in Turkey could have increased the number of recruits. However, it is unclear whether such a force could have ever been capable of achieving the mission objective: closing the Manbij pocket. This reality suggests the need for civilian policy makers and military commanders to better align their own goals,

based on a realistic assessment of the capabilities of the intended partner force, and curtail policy options around a clear understanding of the proposed partner force’s capabilities. Otherwise, the United States will set itself up for failure.

The difference in outcomes underscores how the two programs were unequally effective. The Syrian Arab Coalition, for example, succeeded because it is grafted onto a coherent, and militarily capable, insurgent group, the YPG. The YPG, in turn, is a top down organization with a clearly defined leadership with which the United States can work and broadly align its goals (counter ISIS) to achieve objectives. The Train and Equip groups, by contrast, operate in an even more complicated environment that lacks a dominant partner force that the United States can work with.¹³¹ Furthermore, the restrictions placed on the T&E program exacerbated these key deficiencies. Most notably, the United States worked with individuals, rather than units, at the outset of the program. The lack of unity amongst these groups, too, made more difficult the alignment of US goals with the partner forces being trained. Further still, the United States sought to compel these groups to adopt an objective (the defeat of ISIS), rather than their preferred target (the Assad regime).

The incongruity in goals points to a fundamental problem: The Train and Equip mission tasked the US military with conducting elements of unconventional warfare with ground forces that were not interested in fighting ISIS without first toppling the Syrian regime. The military, then, hesitated to adopt all elements of an unconventional warfare campaign, settling on the Train and Equip mission. Further still, this decision was not rooted in a clear understanding of the groups operating in Syria, but instead on an assumption about the number of fighters that could theoretically be trained per month.¹³² The result was a faulty assumption about the expected strength of US-trained elements before the program began. The congressional authorities, in turn, were developed independent of the operational concept. The result was a mismatch of objectives with the theoretical capabilities of the potential ground forces the United States intended to train.¹³³

128 Ibid., 16.

129 For options to mitigate the possibility of a Turkish-Kurdish confrontation in northern Syria, see Aaron Stein, “Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 13, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/report/reconciling-us-turkish-interests-northern-syria>.

130 Author Interview, US Military Official, Washington, DC, May 2017.

131 This conclusion is not anomalous, and is in fact reflected in academic studies on armed national movements. According to Peter Krause, “Hegemonic national movements with one significant group are more likely to be strategically successful. This movement structure provides incentives for the dominant group to cement its position in the movement hierarchy through strategic gains; reduces counterproductive violent mechanisms from within and foreign meddling from without; and improves the movement’s coherence in strategy, clarity in signaling, and credibility in threats and assurances. Power thus drives both actions and outcomes in national movements.” Peter Krause, “The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness,” *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Winter, 2013/2014).

132 Author Interview, Former US Military Official, Washington, DC, June 2017.

133 Ibid.



The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, third left, and Turkey's Chief of Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar, right, talk during a meeting in Incirlik Airbase in Adana, Turkey, February 17, 2017. *Photo credit: AP.*

The SDF, in contrast, was a willing and capable ground force that shared immediate US objectives, which led to considerable military successes. However, the YPG's link to the PKK posed legal and political challenges, both of which contributed to the diminished relationship with Turkey. Train and Equip was not militarily successful, although it did result in a beneficial outcome for the United States: The US military now has sustained contact with elements within the Syrian opposition, which should aid in intelligence collection to plan air strikes¹³⁴ and, ideally, in mediating local disputes with disparate elements of allied forces in Syria.

Thus, a key lesson learned is that civilian policy makers should be well versed in all aspects of the operating environment before making the decision

to use military force, otherwise risk tactics driving strategy. The congressional authorities should not be drafted independent of the operational concept, lest risk an incongruence of ways and means to achieve the objective (defeat ISIS). The model in Syria is backwards. Reliance on the SDF is a consequence of this approach, as the force is best suited to achieve the objective articulated: the defeat of ISIS with a small US military footprint. The implementation of this objective necessitates management of the resulting political environment, often creating ad-hoc alliance structures, or, in the case of Turkey, straining ties with a NATO ally.¹³⁵ The broader lesson that needs to be learned is that by, with, and through is not cost-free, and may result in unintended—and sometimes negative—consequences for broader US foreign policy goals.¹³⁶

134 Mike Benitez, "It's About Time: The Pressing Need to Evolve the Kill Chain," *War on the Rocks*, May 17, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/its-about-time-the-pressing-need-to-evolve-the-kill-chain/>.

135 A good case study in this regard is the United Kingdom.

136 Ball, "From Successful Defense to Problematic Offense: The Devolution of Unconventional Warfare," 2.

CONCLUSION: THE NEXT STEPS AND THE FORTHCOMING CHALLENGES

The outcome of the battle for Raqqa is not in doubt. The United States has escalation dominance over ISIS, with the means to increase its own involvement in the fight should the SDF become bogged down. The fundamental antagonism, however, between the US war effort and Turkey will continue even after Raqqa falls, when the debate about post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction becomes more acute. The United States may find that the fall of Raqqa will not decrease its reliance on a controversial partner force or remove the need for a sustained US presence in the area.

ISIS and its predecessors have operated in the Euphrates River Valley for over a decade, running clandestine networks to sustain smuggling networks to and from Iraq.¹³⁷ To keep pressure on the group following its territorial defeat, the US military could soon face a similar decision to that of Manbij or Raqqa: whether to ally with the existing partner (the SDF) despite the resulting impact on the US-Turkish relationship. This option may be the most appropriate for this limited objective. The SDF has logistics and a “backbone force” superior to any potential alternative in the area.¹³⁸ The SDF and its security structures could, in theory and with US backing, impose order and prevent the return of ISIS to areas cleared. The relationship could also expand to include reconstruction activities, resulting in a sustained—or more robust—US presence in northeastern Syria. Pursuit of this objective—to rebuild conflict-ridden areas containing a YPG presence—however, could prompt Turkish reactions that could undermine the US military’s efforts.

The two programs examined underscore the challenges involved in relying on and building partner forces, both from a bureaucratic standpoint and in the context of a multi-faceted civil conflict. The persistent challenges in northeastern Syria reinforce the need for a more thorough understanding of the capabilities of potential partner forces in conflict areas; an understanding that must take hold before military force is authorized. This task falls on civilian and military leaders responsible for studying policy options for employing military force in insurgency conflicts—and then matching legal authorities with tactics the military needs to do the job, working

within a shared strategy. The with-and-through approach has changed the way the United States fights limited wars of choice, but the implications of this approach must also be internalized for policy makers. “By, with, and through,” for example, does not necessarily mean “easy, clean, and efficient” or risk-free for broader US foreign policy.

While civilian policy makers should not dictate tactics, civilian leaders, wary of involving themselves in protracted wars, are almost certain to remain enamored with the light footprint approach. This likely predisposition requires that policy makers better match actions and objectives. The actions are easy to foresee: partner force-building and the application of airpower with small numbers of special operations forces. Yet neglect of the political implications in identifying partner forces in the Syrian cases resulted in one failed program, Train and Equip; and, in the case of the successful effort to build the SDF, the approach escalated tensions with Turkey. The political challenges should have influenced early decisions about the use of military force as a critical part of the operating environment, rather than after US operators began the task of preparing the battlefield for Raqqa in October 2015.

The problems discussed herein are not exclusive to the United States. Indeed, Turkey is experiencing many of the same problems in its zone of control in northern Aleppo province. However, the United States sits at the center of a web of alliances that, collectively, contributes to US power around the world. Policy makers must learn lessons from the Syrian conflict and recognize the challenges posed by the American way of war in wars of choice. A greater emphasis should be placed on identifying and understanding the policy implications of potential partner groups before the use of force is authorized. This is not to suggest that the United States should curtail its battle plan around the potential political difficulties with an ally (in this case, Turkey). Instead, these expected challenges should be weighed against broader US foreign policy goals to determine whether the immediate priority is more important than longer-term goals. If so, the United States may take actions to mitigate expected tensions, rather than react to unfolding events.

¹³⁷ For a history of ISIS focused on the group’s bureaucracy, see Patrick B. Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq 2005-2010* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016).

¹³⁸ Author Interview, US Government Official, April 2017.

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