

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

*Alexander Sehmer*

**BRIEFS**

p.3

*Abubakar Siddique*

**Taliban Victories in Helmand Province Prove Test for Afghan Government**

p.6

*Jessica Moody*

**The Niger Delta Avengers: A New Threat to Oil Producers in Nigeria**

p.8

*Wladimir van Wilgenburg*

**U.S. Backing Gives Kurds Cover for United Federal Region in Northern Syria**

## LIBYA: CLOSING IN ON ISLAMIC STATE'S STRONGHOLD

*Alexander Sehmer*

Libyan forces have had a run of luck against Islamic State (IS) fighters in recent weeks, with two separate militias capturing several towns and closing in on the extremists' stronghold of Sirte.

The Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), the unit set up to protect Libya's oil installations, took control of the town of Ben Jawad on May 30 and moved on to capture Nawfiliyah, forcing IS fighters back towards Sirte ([Libya Herald](#), June 1). Misratan-led militias, meanwhile, have closed in on Sirte from the west and the south. As June got under way, they were apparently as close as the al-Gardabiya airbase, just 20km away, and have continued to advance since ([Libya Observer](#), June 4). Progress for both the PFG and the Misratan-led forces has been relatively slow as IS has reportedly mined the surrounding area. Despite this, Sirte now potentially faces a three-pronged attack ([Libya Herald](#), June 8).

If that attack comes – which as of June 9, following somewhat of a lull, looks likely – there could be a long

battle ahead. IS is thought to have heavily fortified Sirte. The advancing forces will face thousands of fighters and potentially suicide bombers and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). There also remains the question of just how unified an assault will be. The Misratan-led forces have been brought together under the Bunyan Marsous Operations Room (BMOR), established by Prime Minister Faiez Serraj, head of the Government of National Accord (GNA) ([Libya Herald](#), June 8). According to BMOR, they are working with the PFG. Amid Libya's fractious politics, however, it is unlikely to be that simple.

The PFG is not a natural ally for the Misratans, and the PFG have a separate command. As the PFG closed in on Nawfiliyah, Serraj, and Ahmed Maiteeq, a deputy prime minister met with Salem Jadhnan, the mayor of Ajdabiya and brother of PFG commander Ibrahim ([Libya Herald](#), June 1). Although this was officially about run-of-the-mill municipal affairs, Salem Jadhnan was likely hoping to secure reassurances for his brother if he continued to pursue IS.

Meanwhile, the Libyan army, which pursued IS fighters as they fled from Derna in April, has maintained its distance. It is unclear if it will join an offensive. The army's leader, General Khalifa Haftar, has so far refused to fall in

line with Serraj and the GNA, and his troops may hang back. A successful assault on Sirte without him could leave him isolated and dangerous. There is a possibility that the increasingly successful military campaign against IS could come at the expense of the battle for political unity in Libya.

## **SOUTH AFRICA: U.S. TERROR WARNING TROUBLES PRETORIA**

*Alexander Sehmer*

The United States and Britain issued a revised terror warning on South Africa this month. The British Foreign Office upgrading the risk of a terrorist attack to “high,” while the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria warned its citizens of possible Islamist attacks in Cape Town and Johannesburg. South Africa, which has a limited history of Islamist violence, was displeased.

David Mahlobo, South Africa’s state security minister, announced that there was “no immediate danger” ([eNCA](#), June 6). The foreign ministry released a statement calling the intelligence “dubious and unsubstantiated”, and President Jacob Zuma moved to reassure the media that relations with the United States were still cordial ([eNCA](#), June 9).

The precise nature of the threat is unclear. Neither Nigeria’s Boko Haram nor Somalia’s al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabab – a more likely candidate for an attack in South Africa – have carried out attacks there in the past. Furthermore, the local Muslim population is relatively well integrated. There is also a feeling that South Africa maybe protected from terrorist attack since so much financing for extremist groups flows through the country ([Mail & Guardian](#), February 4, 2015). South Africans speculate that, amid racial division, a terror attack is more likely to come from a different direction, possibly a racist attack. That would certainly be more in line with the country’s past experience of terrorism such as the 2002 Soweto bombings, which were carried out by a white supremacist group.

Such an attack was not the focus of the U.S. warning, and the South African security services would do well not to ignore the threat. The country has been a hiding place for Islamists in the past. Samantha Lewthwaite, the so-called White Widow, lived in Johannesburg under a false passport for several years, even giving birth to her fourth child in at a private clinic there ([The Citizen](#), October 25, 2013). Meanwhile, documents leaked to Al Jazeera make clear the South African security services are highly politicized and have little focus on preventing Islamist terror attacks, whether from abroad or by lone-wolf operators at home ([Al Jazeera](#), February 24, 2015).

Sources close to South African intelligence let it be known they view the intelligence behind the recent U.S. warning as coming from a “discredited” East African businessman ([News24](#), June 7). Nevertheless, it has to be assumed the British and Americans believe their intelligence to be credible. Neither nation has reason to be scaremongering, especially when dealing with Africa’s second largest economy.

## Taliban Victories in Helmand Province Prove Test for Afghan Government

*Abubakar Siddique*

Days after a U.S. drone strike killed the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur in southwestern Pakistan on May 21, Afghan lawmakers warned of the impending collapse of Afghanistan's largest province. "Helmand is on the verge of collapse; 58 people were martyred during a single night; isn't it shameful? Isn't it a shame for the [Afghan] minister of defense, president, chief executive and minister of interior?" Senator Hashim Alokzai asked in Kabul ([Tolo TV](#), May 31).

His views were echoed on ground in Helmand where Karim Atal, the head of Helmand’s provincial council, told journalists on May 30 that Lashkar Gah, capital of the southern Afghan province of Helmand, might be soon overrun by the Taliban. “If we don’t get air support and reinforcements, Lashkar Gah and Helmand will fall within 48 hours,” he said, warning “it is a mistake to view the ongoing fighting in Helmand as routine” ([Gandhara](#), May 30).

The claim of Afghan lawmakers that Afghanistan’s largest province was on the cusp of falling to the Taliban immediately set alarm bells ringing. An immediate influx of special forces and air strikes ultimately prevented Lashkar Gah, a city of 150,000, from falling to the Taliban. The group has ramped up efforts to capture the province, the epicenter of the multibillion-dollar global opium trade and long seen as a coveted prize by the insurgents.

In a sign of things to come, the May 21 killing of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur has barely dented the Taliban’s efforts in this regard. Atal’s claim shows just how close the Taliban are to overrunning Helmand.

### **Taliban Advance**

By providing a bulk of recruits and funding through its drug trade, Helmand was central to the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. When amid a civil war, the student militia quickly swept the Pashtun-populated regions in

southern and eastern Afghanistan and conquered most of Afghanistan before the demise of their regime in late 2001.

After the end of major NATO combat operations at the end of 2014, which entailed the withdrawal of thousands of international troops, the Taliban set their sights on reclaiming Helmand. Bordering Pakistan and located in close proximity to Iran, this region has a territory of more than 58,000 square kilometers, larger than Switzerland. Most of the world's opium is grown and processed into heroin here, and the drugs are then smuggled to the West and the Middle East through Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Control over, or a major share in, this multi-billion dollar illicit industry could boost the Taliban's strategic prospects.

The group notably refined their 2015 spring offensive, which typically follows the harvesting of opium crops in Helmand in multiethnic northern Afghanistan, making advances and briefly capturing the city of Kunduz in September.

In Helmand they made more steady progress. At the beginning of 2015, the insurgents controlled only two of Helmand's 15 districts – the desert district of Dishu in the south, near the Pakistani border, which has been a base for drug trafficking since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the desolate mountainous region of Baghran in the north – both of which have been under de-facto insurgent control since 2001 ([Gandhara](#), June 24, 2015). By the end of the year, at least three more districts were in Taliban control, and another six were being contested.

### **Operation Zulfiquar**

The Afghan military offensive to prevent the Taliban from expanding control in rural Helmand, known as Operation Zulfiquar, largely failed to stop the downward spiral in northern Helmand. Local lawmakers blamed the central government, apparently overwhelmed by political infighting and the biggest Taliban offensive in years. Abdul Majid Akhundzada, who represented the northern Kajaki district on the provincial council, warned of an imminent Taliban takeover of his constituency in June 2015: "The threat persists because nothing is being done to turn the Taliban tide," he said. "We have not seen any government reinforcements or other measures

to push the Taliban out of our district" ([Gandhara](#), June 24, 2015).

By July 2015, the Taliban were on the march across the rural agricultural regions of Kajaki and four surrounding districts of Nawzad, Sangin, Nahr-e Saraj, and Musa Qalah. Sharafuddin, an Afghan police commander who like many Afghans goes by one name only, complained that his men were exhausted after defending one of Afghanistan's major hydroelectric dams in Kajaki district for two weeks straight. "My soldiers are not lions. How long will they hold out against this unending onslaught?" he asked ([Gandhara](#), July 02, 2015). The commander said the Taliban had rallied a special force called Red Division, which attacks security forces from all sides and has a constant supply of new fighters. "We don't have any tanks or air support," he said. "A few days ago, one of my soldiers died from his wounds because we had nothing to stop his bleeding or to evacuate him from Kajaki" ([Gandhara](#), July 02, 2015).

Afghan security officials, however, downplayed the Taliban victories. "They were saying that they will topple the Afghan government this year, but you can see no such thing is happening," said Brigadier General Dadan Lawang, an Afghan army commander in Helmand ([Gandhara](#), July 02, 2015).

While the government somehow defended the dam in Kajaki, the loss of Musa Qalah and Nawzad districts after intense battles in August 2015 proved a significant blow. The loss of Musa Qalah, in particular, gave the Taliban control over poppy cultivation and trafficking. The Taliban had repeatedly fought to reclaim Musa Qalah since 2001, leading to a major battle in 2007 against British and U.S. forces. Gaining control in August 2015 put them in a position to overrun all of northern Helmand and the entire province. "Unfortunately, Musa Qalah is now in the hands of the Taliban. It is a [strategically] vital district, and its fall implies the fall of Helmand," Abdul Hai Akhundzada who represents Helmand in the lower house of Afghan Parliament said ([Gandhara](#), August 26, 2015).

Over the course of just a few months, the Taliban added the districts of Nawzad, Musa Qalah, and Nawmish to the Dishu and Baghran districts they already controlled. Breaking with the past, the Taliban and Afghan forces kept fighting over Nad-e Ali, Kajaki, Marjah, Khanashin, Sangin, and Nahr-e Saraj district despite the winter. This

meant the insurgents were inching closer to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah in central Helmand. In an open letter to President Ashraf Ghani via Facebook, Helmand Deputy Governor Mohammad Jan Rasoolyar requested urgent reinforcements in late December 2015, urging immediate reinforcements to stop the Taliban's "rapid advance" ([Gandhara](#), December 20, 2015).

### **Enter General Qahraman**

At the beginning of this year, alarmed by the Taliban's advances, President Ashraf Ghani appointed former Lieutenant General Abdul Jabar Qahraman as the "operational commander" of all Afghan forces in Helmand on January 27. Qahraman, who represented Helmand in the lower house of Afghan Parliament, distinguished himself in the 1980s by launching some of the most successful counterinsurgency operations against the mujahedin, the Islamist guerillas backed by the United States and Pakistan at the time.

"People of Helmand, I promise you I will take away a general's uniform if he fails to [protect] you," Qahraman told Helmand residents ([Gandhara](#), January 27). He pledged to do away with personal rivalries, endemic corruption, and a lack of coordination among the estimated 32,000 government forces, which are made up of national and local police and the Afghan National Army.

Qahraman's return to the scene was aided by some 500 U.S. soldiers who mainly focused on retraining thousands of Afghan Army soldiers operating under the umbrella of the Afghan National Army's 215th Maiwand Corps in Helmand. As Qahraman went on to improve the discipline, morale, and coordination of his troops, U.S. and NATO forces worked on increasing their capacity. By April, the 215th Corps had its own drone fleet to surveil Helmand from the air. The military effort was aided by a covert offensive by Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, which created a secretive unit of 300 operatives to infiltrate Taliban ranks to take advantage of infighting among Taliban factions. "We have built the military capacity to face any eventuality in Helmand," Qahraman said ([Gandhara](#), April 18).

### **Resurgent Taliban**

Helmand's battlefield, however, painted another picture. By May, the Taliban's virtual siege of Lashkar Gah had

been in place for nearly two months. The Afghan forces lost a precious opportunity to attack insurgents that month while a majority of Taliban fighters were busy harvesting poppies, a highly labor-intensive exercise. "We urged the government forces to abandon their defensive positions and attack the Taliban fighters who were busy harvesting poppies," said Abdul Tawab Qureshi, a military expert in Helmand, "but they preferred to remain bunkered, which encouraged the Taliban to mount a bold offensive." [1]

The emboldened Taliban mocked Qahraman. "The battle is now raging in Baba Ji, the door to Lashkar Gah and part of its fourth district, and it is consuming the enemy soldiers," read a Taliban statement sent to the media on May 10. [2] Locals see the Taliban control of Musa Qalah and their stranglehold over the region's drug trade as the key factor in pushing their offensive forward. "The Taliban can find enough recruits from among Musa Qalah's estimate 400,000 residents," said Abdul Baseer, a local tribal elder. "In the northern parts of the district, they have established large training camps and are ramping up their war effort." [3]

Helmand Governor Hayatullah Hayat said winning back control of Musa Qalah is a priority in order to reverse the Taliban advance. For Helmand residents, however, the government is running out of time. In an interview on Radio Free Afghanistan on June 2, Lashkar Gah resident Abdul Rauf Meharpur said: "The longer the government fails to establish security and reverse the Taliban's gains, the more they will lose people's faith and good will." [4]

In early June, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited Helmand to boost the morale of his troops and reassure locals that Kabul is paying full attention to the fighting in the region. "Those who say Afghanistan is in danger should think again. Because the security and defense forces are safeguarding this soil by sacrificing their lives," he told soldiers and officers at 215th Corp's headquarters in Lashkar Gah ([Tolo TV](#), June 4).

It will be a difficult fight. A Helmand-based journalist said that after filling their coffers with drug money, the Taliban are now paying nearly \$100 in monthly stipends to their fighters and are openly pressing farmers to donate a portion of their poppy proceeds in the name of Islamic taxes. Proceeds from the drug trade have helped the Taliban arm fighters with newer weapons. [5] Sources in Helmand say the insurgents have recruited

2,000 more fighters, including foreign jihadists, for their next attempt to overrun the province.

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## NOTES

[1] From a Radio Free Afghanistan (Pashto) broadcast, May 30, 2016

[2] Qya Ahmadi, e-mail to author, May 10, 2016

[3] From a Radio Free Afghanistan (Pashto) broadcast, June 2, 2016

[4] Ibid.

[5] Author's interview, Mohammad Ilyas Dae, May 2016

# The Niger Delta Avengers: A New Threat to Oil Producers in Nigeria

*Jessica Moody*

Since the start of 2016, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), a hitherto unknown group, has claimed responsibility for increasingly frequent attacks on oil infrastructure in the Niger Delta. According to Nigerian Oil Minister Emmanuel Ibe Kachikwu, the attacks have resulted in oil production dropping by 800,000 barrels per day (bpd) to a 20-year-low ([Premium Times](#), May 16; [Leadership](#), May 30). Both Shell and Chevron are reported to be evacuating staff as a result of the attacks, with Shell also declaring *force majeure* at its Forcados Terminal after an attack on its subsea crude export pipeline in February ([The Guardian \[Nigeria\]](#), May 21; [The Guardian \[Nigeria\]](#), February 22).

The violence, and the resulting disruption to the oil sector, has raised fears of a return to the days of the Niger Delta insurgency, waged by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) between 2004 and 2009. That conflict – which quietened considerably as a result of a 2009 presidential amnesty program (PAP) under which many former insurgents grew extremely wealthy – halved Nigeria's oil production to 1m bpd ([NTA](#), June 2).

With the emergence of the NDA, the question is whether there is now a possibility of a return to the previous level of violence.

## Links to Former Militants

The NDA appears to be a relatively small insurgency made up of Delta residents angered by the continuing failure to redistribute oil wealth from the elites to those living in the region. Although former militants are almost certainly involved in the group, it is unlikely that the NDA has been able to recruit vast numbers of ex-fighters, since many of those who previously fought in the Delta have become wealthy through the PAP and are weary of fighting. Retired General Paul Boroh, Buhari's special adviser on the Niger Delta, said that militants who accepted the amnesty had "disassociated" themselves from the 2016 violence and were actively assist-

ing in tracking down the militants involved in the latest attacks ([The Guardian \[Nigeria\]](#), January 23).

That fits with posts on the NDA's website, where the group repeatedly states it will do a much better job of liberating the Niger Delta than the previous insurgency and that it has no intention of killing innocent people or conducting kidnappings as previous militant groups have done ([Niger Delta Avengers](#), April 17; [Niger Delta Avengers](#), May 12).

The circumstances surrounding the latest violence, however, suggest there are still strong links with some of those from the earlier insurgency. Ex-MEND leader Government Ekpemupolo (a.k.a. Tompolo) has stated on several occasions that he has nothing to do with the NDA, but days before the first attack took place, Abuja issued an arrest warrant for him on 14 charges of money laundering and theft, equivalent to \$171m ([Premium Times](#), January 14). That prompted Tompolo to go into hiding, swiftly followed by the outbreak of attacks on oil facilities. References in the NDA's manifesto to Buhari's one-sided anti-corruption crackdown further underscores the likely involvement of the former commander and his affiliates ([Niger Delta Avengers](#), February 13).

Policy shifts under President Buhari present other obvious triggers for the resurgence in violence. Abuja has angered former fighters by changing the terms of the PAP. Buhari agreed to renew the amnesty, but he halved monthly stipends for former fighters, with a view to removing them completely in 2017 ([Daily Post](#), February 16). The president has also refused to renew several lucrative pipeline security contracts with amnesty program participants ([Naij](#), June 31, 2015). Anger over these changes are evident in the NDA manifesto where the group demands the continuation of the amnesty program with full funding for the foreseeable future ([Niger Delta Avengers](#), February 13).

### **Potential for Further Attacks**

Although the NDA appeared to begin as an ad hoc movement aimed at forcing a change in Buhari's policies, the frequency and intensity of the group's May assaults suggests it has greater ambitions. The group's aims, however, remain unclear. The NDA's social media presence is amateur and posts on its website oscillate between demands that oil wealth be redistributed to the

Delta and calls for an autonomous Niger Delta state with UN recognition ([Niger Delta Avengers](#), May 12).

As time goes on and the group generates more support among Delta communities, it will likely be able to carry out attacks on the scale of the previous insurgency. The potential following available to the group was underscored in mid-May when another militant group calling themselves the Red Egbesu Water Lions emerged and vowed to join the NDA in their fight ([This Day Live](#), May 18).

The problem is compounded by the vast array of weaponry at the NDA's disposal. As a result of ineffective disarmament programs carried out at the end of 2009, would-be-militants in the Delta have large stocks of weaponry at their disposal. Tompolo's purchase of six haulk-class missile boats from Norway during the amnesty period underscores this point ([Premium Times](#), December 13, 2014). Nigerian journalist Fidelis Mbah says that disarmament efforts have been so poor that the weaponry available in the Delta now is greater than during the 2000s conflict. [1]

Although it is unlikely that there were large numbers of fighters behind the recent NDA attacks, several of the assaults demonstrate a high degree of sophistication. The attack on Shell's subsea export pipeline would likely have required high-tech detonators, well-trained fighters, and potentially also a diver. Additionally, the bombing attack on Chevron's offshore facility in May further emphasized the involvement of experienced militants – working offshore requires considerably more skill than opportunistic onshore attacks.

### **Need for Community Support**

In May, the government announced it planned to hold talks with leaders in the Niger Delta to address their grievances, and Buhari has sought to improve development initiatives in the Delta ([Naija Details](#), May 29). These programs, however, are slow to be implemented and continue to be vehicles for embezzlement and corruption ([Premium Times](#), August 19, 2015). Without rapid development, communities in the Delta, where jobs and education are lacking, are likely to form easy recruitment bases for the NDA.

The Delta's creeks and pipelines are also hard to protect without the support of local communities, gang leaders,

and the militants themselves. The government has little support in the Delta, not least because of its heavy-handed attempts to crack down on the fighters thus far. In May, troops raided the Delta village of Oporoza in search of militants. Locals reported that troops harassed and wounded residents and prevented children from going to school ([Vanguard](#), May 30).

Despite reported arrests, government efforts to crack-down on militancy and prevent attacks have proven ineffective. Without sustained negotiations, an extension to the 2009 amnesty, or mass development in the Niger Delta, the NDA's insurgency is likely to expand and further attacks can be expected over the next 12 months.

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## NOTES

[1] Author's Interview, Nigerian journalist Fidelis Mbah, March 31, 2016

# U.S. Backing Gives Kurds Cover for United Federal Region in Northern Syria

*Wladimir van Wilgenburg*

After months of negotiation, the United States finally gave the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - which is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and includes the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) - the green light to launch its offensive to take the Syrian town of Manbij, a key Islamic State (IS) stronghold northwest of Aleppo. The operation began on May 31, coming only after General Joseph Votel, the head of U.S. Central Command, visited both the Syrian Kurds on May 21 and Turkish officials on May 23 ([ARAnews](#), May 22; [Hurriyet](#), May 25).

The move further squeezes IS forces in Syria. It also brings the Kurds closer to their goal of establishing a contiguous territory on the Syrian-Turkish border, something the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) have been hoping to do since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and the Turkish government has been trying to prevent ([Kurdistan24](#), June 1). Turkey is concerned about the ties between the PYD and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been fighting an active insurgency in Turkey's southeast since the breakdown of the ceasefire in July 2015. Ankara has tried to convince international powers to create a safe haven or a buffer zone inside northern Aleppo in order to prevent Kurdish advances, but Turkey's Western allies have been cold to this idea.

## Kurdish Strategy

The Syrian Kurds will try to use the Manbij operation to create a contiguous territory on Turkey's border in cooperation with local Arabs. Turkey's options are limited due to the popularity of the Kurd's strategy of working with local Arabs and ethnic groups to share power on a community level and the weakness of Turkish-backed rebels in Syria. On May 27, the Islamic State almost overran the last strongholds of Turkish-backed rebels in Marea and Azaz in Northern Aleppo ([Daily Sabah](#), May 29).

Kurdish officials have been clear that the current operation intends to unite the Kurdish-controlled Syrian enclaves. In June 2015, they linked the canton of Cizere (Hasakah) with the canton of Kobani with U.S. support by taking Tal Abyad ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 16, 2015). Now they want to link Kobani to Afrin.

"Today we are in Manbij, but tomorrow we will be in Afrin, and we will link all the three cantons [Jazira, Kobane and Afrin]," Ismet Sheikh, a senior defense official in Kobani, said during a funeral ceremony on 2 June ([ARAnews](#), June 2).

Saleh Haji Mohammed, the deputy co-head of the Manbij civilian council, similarly announced: "The liberation of Manbij means the complete liberation of the areas of the northern countryside, and also the Shahba [northern Aleppo] region" ([Hawar News](#), June 1). His comments echo those of Talal Silo, the official SDF spokesperson, from May 31 ([Hawar News](#), May 31).

This, however, does not mean that the SDF-forces have no interest in defeating IS in Raqqah or Deir ar-Zour. Ismet Sheikh, a senior defense official in Kobani, insisted: "As we promised all our martyrs and all our people, we will eliminate IS where they are. It doesn't matter if it's Manbij, Jarabulus, or other areas." [1]

### **U.S.-PYD relations**

Syrian Kurds are spread out over the Kurdish enclaves of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira. Realizing they would have difficulty imposing Kurdish rule across an entire federal region that is not predominantly Kurdish, the PYD early on adopted a multi-ethnic strategy. It has incorporated Christians, Turkmen, and Arabs into their local administrations, working with local Arab tribes, Christian parties, and smaller Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups. The PYD has also recruited many Arabs to the YPG forces and the local police. In October 2013, the YPG worked with the Shammar tribe to capture the Yaroubiya border crossing from IS even before working with the U.S.-led coalition ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 13, 2013). Moreover, the Kurds formed a joint command room with FSA fighters in September 2011 to expel IS from Raqqah and the Kobani countryside ([ARAnews](#), September 12, 2014). This led IS to besiege Kobani, which was finally liberated on January 26 with the support of FSA and Peshmerga reinforcements from the Iraqi Kurds and continued U.S.-led airstrikes ([Kurdistan24](#), January 28, 2015).

After this, the United States backed the Arab-Kurdish coordination model for several reasons, not least because moderate Arab rebels were defeated in both Hasakah province and Raqqah. As a result, the only way to battle IS was through Kurdish-held territory. Moreover, unlike FSA rebels, the major goal of the Kurds was to fight jihadists and to create a multi-ethnic federal region, rather than get rid of President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. This aligned with the U.S. strategy to fight jihadists rather than impose regime change. FSA groups cooperated initially with extremist groups such as Ahrar as-Sham, al-Nusra, IS, and the Islamic Army to defeat Assad. The Kurds, on the other hand, rejected any form of cooperation with Islamist rebels.

The YPG-led SDF is not only interested in Kurdish areas. It also fights in non-Kurdish areas; the SDF defeated IS in Hasakah, Tal Abyad, Shadadi, al-Hawl, Tal Brak and Tel Tamr. It plans in the future to fight in Deir ar-Zour and Raqqah and has recruited many Arabs from these areas. The only real sticking point for the United States was Turkish criticism that the YPG is linked to the PKK and the PKK insurgency in Turkey.

### **Joining the Dots**

The U.S. alliance with the Kurds made it possible for the Kurdish-led SDF forces to cross the Turkish red lines. Prior to the U.S.-backed SDF's capture of the Tishreen dam on December 27, 2015, Turkey made clear that any incursion west of the Euphrates River by Kurdish forces would be crossing a Turkish red line ([TRTworld](#), July 1, 2015). Turkish tanks and artillery have previously fired on YPG and YPG-aligned FSA rebels in Aleppo and Raqqah province. Due to U.S. backing, however, the SDF now controls Tisreen and will eventually capture Manbij.

Syria's rebels now worry that the United States will push FSA-groups in northern Aleppo to join the SDF alliance and that under U.S. pressure Turkey will give up preventing the Kurds from connecting their enclaves. Abdurahman Harkoush, a former spokesperson of the Islamic Army wrote on Twitter: "The rebel controlled area from Azaz to Jarabulus has become from the past. The new plan is to merge the VSO rebels in Azaz and Marea with YPG" ([Twitter](#), June 3).

In March, the PYD and its allies announced plans to establish a federal system for Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) and

northern Syria within six months. They appointed Mansour Saloum, an Arab from Tal Abyad, and Hediya Yousef, a Kurd, as co-leaders for this new federal region for northern Syria ([ARAnews](#), March 19). The Kurds are also setting up local councils for Arab-dominated areas, led by Arab tribal leaders, in areas under IS control such as Jarabulus and Manbij, or in areas recently captured from IS, like al-Hawl and Shadadi.

Moreover, they also set up a council of elders for the Shabha region, suggesting the ongoing Manbij operation has wider aspirations for all of northern Aleppo ([Cantonefrin](#), January 31). Thus far Turkey has accepted the operation because of U.S. assurances the operation is dominated by Arabs, but it is unlikely Ankara will accept planned Kurdish advances towards al-Bab and Jarabulus. Despite this, the Kurds already have plans to set up councils for both cities ([Dailysabah](#), June 2). This could prompt Turkey to carry out cross-border operations to create a safe-zone, although it would only find backing from Russia and the United States if it could be portrayed as being established against IS ([Daily Sabah](#), June 3).

### **The Long View**

The multi-ethnic strategy of the PYD could succeed in establishing a federal region in northern Syria, despite Syrian political opposition. Such a zone would fall strongly under U.S. influence and could, in the long-term, lead to the defeat of IS in all of northern Syria, including Raqqah.

The biggest challenge for the PYD would be winning the local acceptance of Arabs and rival Kurdish parties to the project, opening it up for democratic elections, and building relations with Iraqi Kurds and neighboring Turkey, which has now closed its border. The PYD hopes to end this embargo by building relations with Iraq across the Syrian-Iraqi border, but the Kurds know this will not be enough. That the PKK ended their fight against the Turkish state in the city of Nusaybin one day before the northern Raqqah operation suggests the Kurds want to have good relations with Turkey ([IMC tv](#), 26 May). Turkish acceptance of the Manbij operation and the development of the social contract of the Manbij council suggests they may have a chance ([ANHA](#), June 1).

In the long-term, there is the possibility of better relations with the Turkish state if a new peace process is re-

opened in Turkey with the PKK. That will be important since it is unlikely the PKK will be able to control any territory by fighting an insurgency against the Turkish state.

Turkey may still try to create a Cyprus-style intervention in northern Syria to prevent the linking of Kurdish administrations and establish a "safe zone" on its border. It might also come round to the idea. Ankara initially rejected Kurdish autonomy in Iraq in 2003, before deciding it was better to have good relations with the autonomous Kurdistan region.

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### **NOTES**

[1] Author's interview, Ismet Sheikh, the local defense minister for Kobani, Kobani, May 24, 2016