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KENYA: MOMBASA A FOCUS FOR ISLAMIC STATE

Alexander Sehmer

Police in Kenya's coastal region arrested two suspected members of Islamic State (IS) on February 18. The pair had reportedly returned from Syria and their arrests serve as a reminder that while al-Shabaab remains the major threat in East Africa, IS continues to maintain a small but dangerous foothold in the region.

The two individuals — named as Nasra Hyder Faiz and Salim Mohamed Rashid — were arrested in police raids in Mtwapa in Kilifi county and the Kinzingo district of Mombasa respectively ([Standard](#), February 18). They had apparently travelled to Syria and were picked up by Turkish authorities in November 2016 as they crossed the border on their way out of the country ([Capital News](#), February 18). The Turkish authorities subsequently deported them to Kenya, where their family members possibly helped them to avoid the authorities ([Standard](#), February 21).

According to the police, the two were set to issue instructions to local IS operatives to attack one of Mombasa's shopping malls ([The Star](#) [Kenya], February 18).

That brings with it a chilling reminder of the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in the capital Nairobi, in which more than 60 people were killed. That attack was perpetrated by al-Shabaab. IS, by contrast, has yet to make real inroads into Kenya, but its efforts may now be gathering pace.

In August last year, two medical students were arrested in Malindi over alleged ties to IS. They were reportedly trying to obtain false documents and cross the border into Somalia ([Capital News](#), August 29, 2016). Then in September, IS claimed its first attack in Mombasa, when three women stabbed a police officer and burnt down a police station in the port city ([Standard](#), September 14, 2016). Meanwhile, in October, a man reportedly affiliated with IS was shot and killed outside the U.S. embassy in Nairobi after he stabbed a Kenyan policeman ([Standard](#), October 30, 2016).

Kenya's coastal region is home to both separatist elements and radical Islamists, but in recent years the Islamists have proved a greater threat. Government efforts to dislodge al-Shabaab militants from the Boni Forest began to see success in 2015, forcing the militants out of the area. And in recent months, Kenyan

troops have been joined there by U.S. Special Forces ([The Star](#) [Kenya], February 10).

The success of the Boni Forest operations has meant many of the al-Shabaab fighters there have gone to ground or left the country, some possibly heading to Tanzania. The authorities' focus on al-Shabaab, however, may mean that Kenya has taken its eye off IS.

The police station attack and the recent arrests suggest IS is beginning to target Mombasa, which is of particular concern as the infiltration of radical Islamists from Somalia and simmering socio-political tensions with Nairobi make the port city particularly vulnerable to IS recruitment efforts.

PAKISTAN: LOOKING TO THE DOMESTIC THREAT

Alexander Sehmer

Pakistan regularly blames neighboring Afghanistan for harboring militants that carry out attacks on its soil, but a recent series of suicide blasts has prompted the authorities to launch a major counter-terror offensive at home.

The Pakistani militant group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed a suicide bombing that left at least 13 people dead at an anti-government rally in Lahore, in Pakistan's Punjab province, on February 13 ([Dawn](#), February 14). Officials said the blast was intended to target Shehbaz Sharif, Punjab's chief minister ([Dunya](#), February 14). Jamaat-ul-Ahrar said the attack was retaliation for raids against militants in the tribal regions along the border with Afghanistan.

The next day, the group carried out a suicide attack on the Mohamand Agency administration's headquarters in Pakistan's tribal region, killing five people ([Geo TV](#), February 15). With another devastating bombing (claimed by Islamic State) just days later at the Lal Shabaz Qalandar shrine in southern Sehwan, which killed at least 70 people, most of them Sufi devotees, it has been a bloody few weeks for Pakistan ([Dawn](#), February 17).

The recent death toll has left the authorities jumpy, particularly in Lahore where counter-terrorism officials quickly declared a blast in a commercial district on February 23 that killed 10 people a terror attack ([Dawn](#), 23 February). It later emerged the explosion had been the result of a gas leak ([al-Jazeera](#), 24 February).

One of Pakistan's wealthiest cities with few of the tensions that surface elsewhere, Lahore for years avoided major attacks, but in recent years it has become a target for Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. The group, which split from the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan in 2014, is not the only Islamist faction operating in Lahore. It is, however, one of the most violent groups active in Lahore, carrying out a suicide bombing last year in the city's Gulshan-i-Iqbal park that killed more than 70 people ([Dawn](#), March 29, 2016).

Pakistan's immediate response to the Lahore and Sehwan attacks was to close border crossings and shell areas in Afghanistan where it claims Jamaat-ul-Ahrar is holed up ([Dawn](#), February 18). It claims the shelling has had some success, but bombing its neighbor is of only

limited use. Pakistan needs to crack down on Islamist militants closer to home.

The authorities say they are doing this. On 22 February, the government launched operation “Radd-ul-Fasaad,” which is expected to see security forces deployed on counter-terrorism missions across the country ([Dawn](#), February 22). The government also approved a request by the Punjab administration to deploy 2,000 Rangers – a Pakistani paramilitary force – across the province. It remains to be seen how effective these efforts will be.

The United States Faces Limited Options for Assault on Raqqa

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

The new U.S. administration has put on hold a plan proposed by former-President Barack Obama, and backed by the Pentagon, to directly arm the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) ([al-Monitor](#), February 2). The intention is to review other options, with President Donald Trump saying during his election campaign that the ideal situation would be to get Kurds and Turks to work together. This move, however, could be a difficult one, as Turkey considers the YPG as linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and wants to weaken their presence in northern Syria ([Rudaw](#), July 22, 2016).

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, meanwhile, has indicated he wants to re-engage with Turkey, while at the same time calling the Syrian Kurds the United States’ greatest allies in Syria ([Daily Sabah](#), January 11; [ARA news](#), January 14).

Closer cooperation with Russia, the main backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is also possible in the fight against Islamic State (IS), although it seems unlikely the administration would want to work with the Syrian government.

Nonetheless, the United States face some tough choices if it is to accelerate its campaign against IS and defeat the group in Raqqa, its de-facto capital in Syria and the base from where it coordinates its attacks abroad.

Unlike in Iraq, where there is a partnership with the Iraqi army, in Syria, U.S. options will likely come down to the choice between backing a non-Syrian Turkish force, or backing a Kurdish group with links to the PKK.

Wrath of Euphrates Option

One option is to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force established in October 2015, in coordination with the U.S.-led coalition.

With U.S.-backing, the SDF captured the IS-held town of Manbij on August 13, 2016, in a campaign that lasted over two months. On November 5, with coalition support, it launched the Wrath of Euphrates campaign, aimed at isolating Raqqa and clearing a total of 3,410 square kilometers of territory ([ARA news](#), February 10).

Now, only four kilometers from Raqqa, the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition says SDF forces have almost surrounded the city and are ideally placed for an approach.

There are problems, however. Although according to the coalition, Arabs or Turkmen make up half of the SDF's estimated 50,000 forces, critics of the SDF stress that it is led by Kurds, who the Syrian opposition and Turkey are opposed to arming.

The main commanders of the Wrath of Euphrates campaign are indeed two Kurdish female fighters — Rojda Felat and Cihan Sheikh — but the SDF insists that 80 percent of the campaign forces are Arabs ([Syria Direct](#), November 7, 2016).

There are also independent Arab groups fighting with the SDF. These groups include Syrian politician Ahmad Jarba's 3,000 fighters from the Syrian Elite Forces, led by Muhedi Jayila, and the Sanadid Forces made up of more than 4,500 fighters, led Bandar al-Hamadi Daham, as well as smaller Free Syrian Army groups ([ARA news](#), February 6; [Rudaw](#), October 11, 2016).

Nevertheless, the SDF and YPG face a serious manpower shortage, and as a consequence have for the first time included around 500 military conscripts, most of which are Kurds ([Hawar News](#), February 5).

Another serious problem for the coalition ahead of an assault on Raqqa is the lack of armored vehicles and heavy weapons needed for the urban campaign. So far the Turkish opposition has meant the SDF has received only limited weapon supplies. However, the United States said it supplied armored vehicles to the Arabs within the SDF for the first time in January, possibly indicating that a greater level of support can be expected ([Rudaw](#), 31 January).

The Euphrates Shield Option

An alternative would be for the new U.S. administration to work with Turkey.

Turkey launched its Euphrates Shield campaign on August 24, 2016 with the dual goal of tackling IS and preventing the Kurds from linking up their local administrations ([Daily Sabah](#), November 13, 2016). On February 12, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said the goal of the campaign is to clear IS from the town of al-Bab, before moving on to Raqqa and Manbij ([Daily Sabah](#), February 12).

Al-Bab has proved more difficult to liberate than expected. Turkey was forced to increase its military presence from 3,000 to 7,000 Turkish soldiers, as well as to build three garrisons inside Syria and deploy its own tanks ([Milliyet](#), 5 January).

The delay has been in part due to the limited effectiveness of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels, and the Turkish military's inexperience fighting IS in built up urban areas. Over 64 Turkish troops were killed, as well as 469 Syrian rebels, in an operation that has lasted six months ([Milliyet](#), February 16).

According to official estimates, there are currently 3,000 fighting with the Turks ([Hurriyet](#), August 24, 2016). Moreover, Turkey is reportedly training 5,000 Syrians, and has sent 450 recruits to Jarabulus, but the number of Turkish soldiers is still greater than the number of rebels ([Middle East Eye](#), January 23; [Hurriyet](#), January 25).

Waiting for the training and recruitment of more Syrian rebels could significantly delay an assault on Raqqa and might require more U.S. boots on the ground. This is not without risks. U.S. Special Forces embedded with the Syrian rebels at the start of the Turkish operation were chased out and threatened with beheading in September ([ARA news](#), September 17, 2016).

While Coalition Special Forces have good relations with the SDF coalition, these do not extend to Islamist rebels. The Turkish rebel coalition includes Salafist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, co-founded by al-Qaeda's top envoy in Syria, Abu Khaled al-Suri, and Ahrar al-Sharqiya, created by Abu Maria al-Qahtani, who split from al-Qaeda's Nusra Front but was killed in December 2015 ([al-Monitor](#), August 9, 2016). Al-Qahtani had previously fought against U.S. troops as part of the Jihadist movement in Iraq ([al-Akhbar](#), June 3, 2014; [al-Araby](#), December 15, 2004).

Furthermore, the Turkish-backed FSA are currently about 210 kilometers from Raqqa, while the SDF forces are just 4 kilometers away.

Turkey has proposed to attack Tal Abyad through SDF-held territory. This would bring their forces 20 kilometers from IS, but would also break up the link between the local Kurdish administrations in Hasakah and Kobani ([Yeni Safak](#), February 10). Furthermore, the Syrian army, backed by Iran and Russia, launched an operation on January 15 that could block the Turkish route to Raqqa ([ARA news](#), January 16). This could be also be a reason for the Turks to head to Tal Abyad, since Ankara does not want a conflict with Russian-backed Syrian forces and would rather focus on the YPG and SDF.

Difficult Partnerships

It is unlikely Assad, Turkey and the Kurds will be able to work together to defeat IS without some form of a political agreement. While all three profess the intention of fighting IS, for the Syrian government the defeat of Syrian rebels is a priority, for Turkey the aim is to prevent the Kurds gaining territory, and for Syrian Kurds the priority is to achieve recognition for their local administrations.

The United States could attempt to broker some kind of alliance, possibly by backing a Turkish safe zone in Syria, in exchange for guarantees the Kurds will not be allowed to link up their territories. At the same time, the United States could give more political recognition to a local Kurdish-led Syrian federation (excluding northern Aleppo) and demand guarantees that Turkey refrain from attacking Kurdish enclaves, such as Efrin.

The United States could also empower more independent Arab groups within the SDF, such as the forces of former opposition chief Ahmad Jarba, and give the Arabs more autonomy within SDF-held areas in Raqqa and Deir-ar Zour.

Weaker options include using 5,000 to 10,000 Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the SDF, trained by Iraqi Kurdish forces, to serve as a bridge to lessen tensions with Turkey by, for instance, patrolling the Syrian-Turkish borders. It is unlikely, however, that the YPG would accept this, and the Rojava Peshmerga will not fight in Arab-dominated areas such as Raqqa.

Meanwhile, choosing to back Turkish-backed forces over the SDF will lead to delays in an attack on Raqqa that will only serve to strengthen IS.

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Tunisia's Counterterrorism Efforts Hampered by Weak Institutions

Stefano M. Torelli

About 800 suspected jihadists have returned to Tunisia from abroad, putting pressure on the Tunisian authorities and potentially undermining Tunisia's political transition. The country is struggling to establish a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy and, beyond the immediate security concerns, institutional constraints are stymieing efforts to tackle domestic terror threats.

Perhaps as a consequence, Tunisia has produced the highest number of foreign fighters — both in absolute terms and per capita — in the world. According to official data from the Tunisian interior ministry and the United Nations, since 2013, about 6,000 individuals left Tunisia to join jihadist groups, the majority joining Islamic State (IS) in Syria, Iraq and Libya.[1]

A further 12,000 have been prevented from travelling abroad. [2] Recent public debate in Tunisia, however, has been focused on the issue of returning jihadists, with public opinion divided on suggestions of an amnesty for returnees.

Contradictory Policies

The case of Anis Amir, the Tunisian man accused of perpetrating the Berlin lorry attack on August 19, 2016, is instructive. Amri's case revealed Tunisia's contradictory policy regarding the repatriation of its citizens when they are expelled from other countries. Both Italy, where Amri was detained for four years between 2011 and 2015, and Germany, where he requested but was denied asylum in 2016, had tried to deport Amri back to Tunisia, but the Tunisian authorities refused to accept him.

In the case of the Italian requests, Tunisian authorities denied Amri was a Tunisian citizen; while in the German case, the request was delayed by the turgid Tunisian bureaucracy (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, December 22, 2016). Amri reportedly had no passport when he applied for asylum in Germany, and Tunisian officials were slow to issue replacement documents (*Der Spiegel*, December 22, 2016).

In recent months, Tunisia has equivocated over the policies it should adopt toward returning militants. On the one hand, the government is routinely detaining returning jihadists under the country's 2015 Counterterrorism Law. Meanwhile, it has also sent contradictory messages about a possible pardon, a move that caused massive protests.

In December 2016, Tunisia repatriated two jihadists from Sudan and from Italy. The first, Moez Fezzani, was repatriated on December 23 and is accused of having taken part in organizing the Bardo Museum attack, and of having attempted to perpetrate a bombing attack against the Habib Bourguiba mausoleum in Sousse in 2013 (*Kapitalis*, December 24, 2016). [3] The second, Nasredine Bin Dhiab, was repatriated from Italy on December 29 and is accused of having organized a jihadist cell in Italy (*Kapitalis*, January 7, 2017). According to Italian investigators, Bin Dhiab declared loyalty to IS and last November was ordered to carry out a Paris attacks-style operation in Italy in retaliation for Italian operations in Libya against IS.

The arrests are in apparent contrast to a statement by Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi, who, while on a visit to France on December 2, declared that returning jihadists would not be automatically detained (*L'Orient Le Jour*, December 2, 2016). Such leniency, however, provoked outrage from both the public and the police unions and continues to inform current popular debate.

Tunisia's Islamic-oriented Ennahda party has called for a de-radicalization program that would treat returning jihadists as individuals who require physical and psychological support. The most prominent and influential national union, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), meanwhile, declared its objection to any form of pardon for the returning jihadists, calling for them to be processed under the 2015 Counterterrorism Law.

Members of the ruling Nidaa Tounes party and the liberal Afek Tounes party also expressed their concern over returning jihadists and don't want them back. The security forces and police unions have taken even harder positions, with some calling for the withdrawal of citizenship for those found guilty of terrorism offences, although such a measure would likely be prohibited by Tunisia's new constitution, approved in 2014, which

states in Article 25 that no citizen shall be deprived of citizenship or exiled.

De-radicalization Initiatives

In order to defuse the controversy, Essebsi announced returning militants would be processed according to the provisions of the 2015 Counterterrorism Law. That, however, is problematic. According to Tunisian and international civil society organizations, the law is unsuited to deal with the kind of terrorist threat Tunisia faces. [4] Indeed, the law is often considered too focused on security and overly repressive, providing for some controversial measures, such as the re-introduction of the death penalty for terrorism-related offenses. It also fails to take into consideration the political, social and economic causes of radicalization. Indeed, the law makes no provision for the de-radicalization of suspected jihadists.

Civil society organizations have proposed some initiatives on this point. The Rescue Association of Tunisians Trapped Abroad (RATTA), for example, has detailed a proposed de-radicalization program based on the identification of five different levels of radicalization. [5]

Under RATTA's proposal, the top three levels of individuals identified — those who have committed terrorist acts and killed others; those who have received training, but have not carried out an attack; and those who have been indoctrinated, but have not received training — are to be kept within de-radicalization centers, where they will follow a program intended to reintegrate them into society.

Below these, the lower two levels are reserved for individuals who show early signs of radicalization, but have not been fully indoctrinated. Some will remain in de-radicalization centers but carry out community work in the day, while those of least concern would be released but must undergo periodic psychological evaluation. The proposal has yet to be implemented, and RATTA complains of a lack of cooperation from government institutions.

Institutional Difficulties

Another concern is structural difficulties at an institutional level. In terms of managing national security, it is not always clear which offices have responsibilities, neither is the role of the president or the prime minister clearly

defined in this regard. The result is overlapping, or possibly even conflicting, responsibilities that only stand to get worse when the president and prime minister belong to different political parties.

It is unclear whether the president could promulgate specific executive orders in the field of counterterrorism, or whether the head of the government could bypass the president by promoting laws and creating ad hoc commissions.

Tunisia's bureaucratic difficulties and institutional weaknesses are perhaps most evident in the overlapping of responsibilities of the National Guard and the army.

The main driver of jihadism in Tunisia is the infiltration of militants across the border from Libya, a result of the increasing influence of jihadist groups linked to IS there. The emerging "Libyan connection" is borne out by the fact that about 70 percent of Tunisian jihadists received training in Libya. The National Guard — which answers to the interior ministry — and the army do not have a clear mandate over border operations, creating a major obstacle to counterterrorism efforts.

Without a de-radicalization program or an amnesty, returning jihadists are likely to face imprisonment. Here Tunisia faces a logistical problem — the authorities say there is not enough space to safely detain all returning and domestic militants (Webdo.tn, December 3, 2016). There is also the concern that prisons themselves are places of radicalization.

According to data from Tunisia's ministry of justice, currently there are 1,647 people being held for terrorist offenses in Tunisia, some of which could become recruiters of newly radicalized young people.

Tunisia's institutional systems are impeding its counterterrorism efforts, and public opinion is divided on the issue. Against this background, the 2015 Counterterrorism Law has been unhelpful. Meanwhile, a national commission on counterterrorism has been appointed and is due to outline a new strategy, but this has yet to be published.

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NOTES

[1] See Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, The Soufan Group, (December, 2015). Available [here](#).

[2] Author's interview with Tunisian officials, Tunis (February, 2016)

[3] See "Un kamikaze se fait exploser à Sousse et un autre attentat déjoué à Monastir", Leaders (30 October, 2013). Available [here](#).

[4] See Amnesty International, *Tunisia Annual Report* (2015/2016). Available [here](#).

[5] Author's interview with RATA Director, Tunis (February 2016)

Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation: al-Bab and Beyond

Göktuğ Sönmez

Turkish troops and Syrian rebels have claimed almost complete control of the Syrian town of al-Bab, including the town center, pushing back Islamic State (IS) fighters who have held the area since late 2013 and opening up a path to Raqqa, IS' de facto capital in Syria ([Hürriyet](#), February 23).

That battle has been hard fought, but the defeat of IS is only part of the Turkish objective, the other being to halt the territorial gains of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Rather than immediately pursue IS to Raqqa, Turkish success in al-Bab, according to Turkish officials, is likely to be followed by an offensive on Manbij to ensure the PYD withdrawal there is completed. Afrin and Raqqa may then follow.

However, whether the diplomatic, political and military dynamics will allow these next steps requires further analysis. Meanwhile, the anti-IS coalition's unwillingness to engage in the al-Bab offensive, despite Turkish calls for air support, has put strains on an important counter-terrorism alliance.

Operation Euphrates Shield

From mid-2016, Turkey re-adjusted its foreign policy, reconciling to a degree with Israel and Russia. Mending fences with Moscow in particular enabled Turkey to carry out airstrikes in Syria and increase its level of direct involvement in the country, including launching Operation Euphrates Shield in August of that year.

The declared goals of the operation were to fight IS in Syria and tackle the PYD, which, after capturing Manbij, was getting closer to merging its territory to form a belt along the Turkish border from Afrin to Kobane. Turkey was concerned this would create a PYD-controlled zone along its border from which the PKK could operate.

Turkey declared it would advance through the Azaz-Jarablus line and establish a "safe zone," a move it had

been discussing with the anti-IS coalition for some time to no avail. This allowed it to prevent a merger of PYD-controlled cantons, as well as push back IS and prevent the group's mortar and rocket attacks on Turkish cities along the Syrian border. Within the context of the operation, Turkey not only supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA), it also engaged its own air and ground forces in Syria.

Since the operation began, Turkey and Turkish-backed FSA forces have cleared the Turkish-Syrian border of IS. Some 1,900 square kilometers (km) were cleared and more than 1,700 IS fighters were killed ([Anadolu Ajansi](#), December 22, 2016; [TCBB](#), December 26, 2016).

The al-Bab offensive was the next stage of the operation.

Capturing al-Bab

Al-Bab, just 30 km from the Turkish border, was a stronghold for IS in Syria, the most significant after Raqqa. It stands in a strategic location on the M4 highway toward Iraq, and serves as a key route to Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir-al-Zour. Its capture is also a critical step toward preventing the merger of the PYD-controlled cantons in Syria, the other main aim of Operation Euphrates Shield. The increased number and frequency of attacks in Turkey by the Kurdish Freedom Falcons (TAK), which has links to the PKK, should be seen in this context.

To capture al-Bab, Turkish armed forces closed in on it from the north, east and west in a joint effort with FSA fighters. About 64 Turkish soldiers have been killed and 386 injured since Operation Euphrates Shield began. Some 469 FSA fighters have also been killed and another 1,700 injured, while on the IS' side more than 1,700 militants have been killed.

More than half of these deaths and injuries, on all sides, were from the offensive on al-Bab ([al-Jazeera Turk](#), December 24, 2016; [BIK](#), December 21, 2016). One of the most recent Turkish airstrikes killed some of the leading IS figures in the town, including 18 at the level of "emir" ([HaberTürk](#), December 25, 2016).

Around the end of December, the Turkish military-FSA alliance succeeded in capturing the Aqil Mountain and the al-Bab hospital — one of IS' main headquarters and

ammunition stores in the town — for several days. For weeks, the mountain and the hospital became one of the frontlines of the offensive, captured and re-captured by both sides but eventually came under the TAF and TAF-backed FSA control.

Capturing the Aqil Mountain, which overlooks the town, was key for Turkish forces as it allowed their howitzer and artillery fire to be more effective. Turkey's recent deployment of a new batch of 155mm howitzers and improved armored personnel carriers seems far from coincidental. For several weeks, none of the fighting parties were able to claim the area confidently. Likewise, a key challenge was the IS' presence in Qabasin and Bzaa, and their use of these two towns as frontlines in order to avoid being completely surrounded by Turkish-FSA forces. The capture of Suflaniyah village in the east of al-Bab was regarded as an important step, but was followed by a withdrawal in the early days of the offensive. It was only recaptured in the second phase of the battle with increased direct Turkish military support and the deployment of additional opposition fighters ([South Front](#), January 13).

Urban warfare presents particular challenges. IS, which has held al-Bab for more than three years and Mosul in Iraq since mid-2014, has experience in defending the urban centers it has captured. The group plants improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in homes, ditches and along incoming routes, deploys vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) and uses tunnels to move fighters and carry out surprise VBIED and suicide attacks. The group's use of the urban population as human shields made the operation even more complicated. Images have also shown the use of IEDs and T4 explosives disguised as rocks, suggesting that even after capturing the town, making it safe will take some time.

Turkey has considerable experience in urban warfare from its campaign against the PKK in Cizre, Sur and Nusaybin, experience that will likely equip Turkish forces for the challenges in capturing and holding al-Bab. However, tactics are constantly evolving. Just as the PKK have used some of the urban warfare strategies employed by the PYD, it is only realistic to assume IS closely monitors the use of new tactics and will integrate them into its strategy where necessary.

The deployment of around 500 Turkish commandos, as well as of 1,400 opposition fighters from Idlib, is an indi-

cator of just how difficult Turkey judged the capture of al-Bab to be and demonstrates a growing realization on Turkey's part that the next stage of Operation Euphrates Shield will require even greater military power ([Hürriyet](#), December 26, 2016). Moreover, this deployment shows that even though the fighters on the ground from the opposition forces can help buy Turkey time to fortify required positions and deploy necessary additional units, complete reliance on them for further advances seems impossible for now. With the arrival of fresh manpower, permanent control over the Aqil Mountain and the surrounding of the town centers of Qabasin and Bzaa (the latter captured from IS on February 23), as well as holding Suflaniyah has been achieved. Turkey has increased the area its forces captured from IS from 20-25 percent in mid-January to more than 40 percent in mid-February ([Liveuemap](#), January, 17; February 17). According to reports from the field on February 23, al-Bab is now almost completely controlled by Turkish forces and their rebel allies ([Milliyet](#), February 23).

Cracks in the Coalition

Although IS withdrew from Jarablus, al-Rai and Dabiq with relatively little resistance, the group has not had that option in al-Bab. Following the loss of Aleppo, IS has had nowhere to retreat and the battle for al-Bab was particularly hard-fought as a result.

A major deterrent to Turkey's advance against IS was that the group had acquired man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs) and anti-tank missiles (ATGMs), captured from opposition forces and the PYD.

The al-Bab offensive was further complicated for Turkey by decisions made by its allies in the anti-IS coalition. First, the coalition announced that it would delay an attack on Raqqa until April, a move that enabled IS to move its fighters to al-Bab to bolster its defenses ([T24](#), December 26, 2016). Second, the coalition's decision not to support the Turkish offensive with air support made the capture of al-Bab more difficult.

In December, Turkey's presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin stated: "As for our operation in al-Bab, the international coalition should assume its responsibilities, especially when air support is concerned" ([Hürriyet](#), December 26, 2016). The call was in part an attempt to draw the coalition into the fight against IS, the objective around which it was formed in the first place. The coal-

ition claimed that it showed its "muscle" with sorties while Turkish troops were fighting, but it provided little real support ([BBC Türkçe](#), January 3). The recent statement by coalition spokesman Colonel John Dorrian that reconnaissance flights were made as well as bombings in support of the offensive in places "close to al-Bab" has not improved the situation.

As a result, Turkey has moved closer to Russia, further straining its relationship with the coalition. Russian air strikes south of al-Bab — even though these were neither coordinated with the Turkish offensive nor made in direct support of the Turkish and FSA forces — contributed to the image that Russia is a more supportive ally to Turkey than the United States within the context of this particular front ([Anadolu Ajansı](#), January 18; [Middle East Eye](#), December 29, 2016).

Next Steps and Changing Dynamics

For IS, falling back to Raqqa offers a short-term solution following its defeat in al-Bab, but an attack on IS' de facto capital carried out simultaneously by the PYD on the one hand and Turkey-FSA forces on the other — even if uncoordinated — would be a two-front war that IS has neither the capability nor the resources to win. However, whether the PYD or Turkey-FSA forces will carry out that offensive is unclear.

The dynamics on the ground in Syria change almost on a daily basis. Talks promoted by Turkey, Iran and Russia, which have taken place in Moscow and the Kazakhstani capital of Astana, may be one of the most significant recent developments. Iran and Russia could put pressure on the regime of Bashar al-Assad and act as guarantors of the outcomes of any negotiations. All the parties will need to put pressure on their proxies, but the trilateral negotiation framework was an important factor behind the evacuation of 37,500 people from Aleppo, and so went some (limited) way toward addressing the humanitarian tragedy in the city.

It is noteworthy that the Assad regime's stance towards the PYD has grown harsher as the regime feels more secure ([Daily Sabah](#), December 27, 2016). However, the killing of three Turkish soldiers by the Russian air force in a friendly fire incident, and a Kurdish conference held in Moscow this month attended by representatives of the PYD, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Gorran and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), suggest the Rus-

sia-Turkey relationship is not entirely without tensions ([Hürriyet](#), February 10, [Rudaw](#), February 16).

As far as Turkey's advance is concerned, Turkey has so far succeeded in clearing its border of IS forces. Likewise, it has established a de facto safe zone protecting its border towns and cities from IS mortar and rocket attacks, and it claims to have complete control over al-Bab.

Following the offensive on al-Bab, Turkey's next target was previously declared to be pushing YPG forces east of the Euphrates, which most likely means mounting an offensive on Manbij. Statements from the coalition about YPG withdrawal from Manbij are disbelieved by Turkey and not taken all that seriously by the YPG. Meanwhile, the United States' stance against support for Turkey taking on the YPG in Manbij complicates U.S.-Turkey relations and is an area that the new U.S. administration will need to address.

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