

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XV, ISSUE 12

p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

Michael Horton

**Yemen: A Dangerous
Regional Arms Bazaar**

p.6

Sunguta West

**The Threat al-Shabaab
Poses to Kenya's Elec-
tion**

p.8

Aris Roussinos

**After Raqqa: The Chal-
lenges Posed by Syria's
Tribal Networks**

MALI: LIMITED PROGRESS ON SAHEL JOINT FORCE

Alexander Sehmer

The proposed anti-terror joint force of the Sahel G5 nations — Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger — received a boost this month when the EU pledged the equivalent of \$56 million to bolster security efforts in the region ([EU News](#), June 5). However, plans for the unit to be operational before the end of 2017 appear to be ambitious.

The joint force was proposed at a G5 meeting in Bamako in February, held in the wake of a devastating suicide attack on a camp in Gao that housed Malian soldiers and rebels — nearly 80 people were killed ([Maliweb](#), February 6; [Maliweb](#), January 19).

In a speech in May, Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop said the proposed force would be ready by the end of the year ([APA](#), May 4). It is expected to be made up of up to 10,000 personnel — an original proposal has said 5,000 — and will be led by Mali's chief of the general staff, General Didier Dacko, a veteran of the country's battle against Islamist extremists (Sahel Standard, June 11). Few other details, however, have emerged of

what this regional force will look like.

A possible model is the Chad-based multi-national joint task force established to battle Boko Haram. The proposed G5 force, however, would have a much wider remit. It would operate in all five countries, with a focus on the border areas. As well as counter-terrorism, it is envisaged that the force will combat trafficking and organized crime.

There is a pressing need for cross-border initiatives to tackle militants in the Sahel. In March, fighters thought to be part of al-Qaeda's broad *Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* alliance attacked a military post in Boulikessi, which sits on Mali's border with Burkina Faso, killing 11 soldiers ([Maliweb](#), March 6). Burkina Faso, which is battling a homegrown jihadist threat in *Ansar ul Islam*, is dependent on its neighbor's efforts, while Chad is the only of the G5 states with anything like a functioning air force. A joint effort makes a good deal of sense.

Coordination between the Sahel partners, however, remains poor, and each still lacks the capability to adequately tackle extremist networks. But the proposed joint force's broad remit and disagreements on over how it will be funded are also holding up its establishment.

Although heavily promoted by the French, whose own Operation Barkhane has been active in the region since August 2014, there are genuine concerns that handing wide-ranging powers to military units in a region where it is often hard to distinguish the affiliations of armed groups could be counterproductive. It seems international forces, including the United Nation's own Mali mission, MINUSMA, will need to remain in place for some time to come.

UNITED KINGDOM: INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES FACE SURVEILLANCE CHALLENGES

Alexander Sehmer

The United Kingdom has weathered three terror attacks over the course of three months, with the attackers in each case having previously been known persons of interest to the authorities in some form. With the Brits considering their intelligence services among the most sophisticated in Europe, the attacks have raised some serious questions about their capacity to maintain what has become an unprecedented number of investigations.

On June 3, three men rammed a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then attacked bystanders with knives, killing eight people and injuring dozens of others. Khuram Butt, the group's ringleader, had links to the banned al-Muhajiroun group and was previously investigated after he was reported to an anti-terror hotline in 2015 ([The Telegraph](#), June 6). That investigation was later downgraded.

Salman Abedi, who killed 22 people and injured 120 others when he blew himself up at a pop concert in Manchester on May 22, had reportedly been under surveillance in Libya for more than a month prior to the attack ([Manchester Evening News](#), June 13). But poor coordination with their Libyan counterparts meant UK authorities knew him as a petty criminal ([Manchester Evening News](#), May 30).

Khalid Masood, who on March 22 killed four people and injured 50 others by ramming them with a car on Westminster Bridge in London and then fatally stabbed a police officer outside the parliament building, was known to have a violent past and an "interest" in jihad ([The Guardian](#), March 27).

Britain is not the only country in Europe to have found itself in this position. The suicide bombers who killed 32 people in coordinated blasts in Brussels in March last year also had criminal pasts. One of them, Najim Laachraoui, had even spent time in Syria where he interrogated hostages held by Islamic State ([L'Echo](#), April 22, 2016).

"These days in Europe you have returning fighters, you also have homegrown extremists, you have hate

preachers. It's a huge number of people for the authorities to watch," said Thomas Renard, a senior research fellow working on counter-terrorism at the Egmont Institute in Brussels.

"It's a difficult task for Belgium, and other small countries in the EU, to monitor so many individuals thoroughly. In larger countries too, like Germany and France, the numbers are just too big. After the attack in Brussels, some people liked this comfortable explanation that the Belgians were simply amateurs, unable to cope with this new threat, but now I think we see that the situation is more complicated and more widespread across Western Europe" (Author's interview, June 8).

In the aftermath of the UK attacks, it emerged that British intelligence agencies have disrupted a series of potential terror plots, but they are running about 500 investigations covering 3,000 individuals, with another 20,000 people on their radar kept under review ([The Telegraph](#), May 25). These kinds of numbers are unprecedented and, in the short term at least, the chances are that they will only continue to grow.

Yemen: A Dangerous Regional Arms Bazaar

Michael Horton

Yemen is the second most heavily armed country in the world after the United States. Before the current civil war began, there were an estimated 54 guns for every 100 residents. [1] Now, the number of small and medium arms in the country is far higher. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who are the primary external participants in the war, have flooded Yemen with weapons of all types. These weapons, which range from assault rifles to anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), are being provided to a range of disparate militias so that, in theory, they can fight the Houthis who control northwest Yemen. In reality, there are almost no safeguards in place to monitor the end-use of these weapons. [2] Consequently, many of them, including sophisticated medium arms like ATGMs, are sold on to whichever organization or individual will pay the highest price. [3]

Before the start of the conflict, Yemen was already a regional arms bazaar, but the country's well-established smuggling networks have been reinvigorated by the influx of weapons. These networks have contacts throughout the region and move significant quantities of arms to Somalia and further afield, but it is not only Yemen's arms dealers who are profiting from the inflow of weapons. Groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Somalia-based al-Shabaab are also benefiting. In the case of AQAP, the group has never been better armed or better funded. While al-Shabaab has long suffered from a dearth of weapons and materiel, this may not be the case for much longer. What is certain is that the consequences of indiscriminate weapons transfers to Yemen will have a profound effect not only on Yemen but also on the region as a whole in the months and years to come.

From Submachine Guns to Gently Used Tanks

Yemen's arms markets are a paradise for organizations that want to stock up on anything from the latest high-end Heckler and Koch submachine guns to secondhand but barely used tanks. Even when Yemen had a functioning government, it was unable, and largely unwilling, to impede the illicit trade in weapons.

Yemen's largest arms market is in the village of Jihana, a mere 40-minute drive from the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. There — and at other markets — buyers can find a dizzying array of small and medium arms. Heavy weapons — such as tanks, artillery pieces and armored vehicles — are also easily procured.

Most civil wars create a shortage of weapons and materiel, but Yemen's conflict has resulted in a glut of arms. Prices for less desirable assault rifles, like the Steyr AUG used by Saudi forces, have plummeted. These rifles now cost less than \$60. Of far more interest to most buyers are the advanced weapons systems that have only recently been made available. These include ATGMs and, perhaps most worryingly, surface-to-air missiles like the SA-7 Grail and its variants. However, it is the ATGMs that are most in demand by all sides in the conflict and have proved to be decisive in various battles around Yemen. Most of the more advanced weapons, like the third-generation ATGMs, have come into the country in the last two years. In addition to weapons, advanced kit like night-vision goggles, hand-launched drones and encrypted communication devices are also widely available.

There are numerous claims that Iran is providing weapons to the Houthis. However, it is the UAE and Saudi Arabia that are providing the vast majority of these more advanced weapons. While they may be intended for anti-Houthi militias and reconstituted units of the part of the Yemeni Army aligned with Yemen's government-in-exile, the leaders of these forces simply sell much of it on the open market ([Daily Star](#), May 1). These militias and army units are poorly paid — if they are paid at all — and the sale of weapons provides a source of funds for both the men and their officers.

There is a long history in Yemen of military units selling weapons and materiel. Between 2004 and 2011, during the Houthis' six wars with the Yemeni government, led by then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the rebel's primary source for weapons and ammunition was the Yemeni Army they were fighting.

While recently supplied weapons are being sold by the militias and army units, all sides in the conflict have seized weapons during battles and from Yemeni army stockpiles. These seized weapons, those that are deemed to be in surplus and not readily needed, are

sold to arms dealers, third parties and, in some cases, even rivals.

AQAP and the Arms Trade

After the start of the Saudi intervention in Yemen, which began on March 26, 2015, AQAP went on the offensive across much of the southern part of the country. One of the organization's primary objectives was the seizure of government stores of weapons. AQAP succeeded in seizing stockpiles of weapons from sites around the port city of al-Mukalla, among other towns, and captured weapons from fleeing Yemeni Army units.

AQAP's leadership has been tied into the illicit networks that traffic everything from arms to people. These networks have ready access to Yemen's long and unguarded southern coast, allowing them to move all manner of illicit (and licit) goods in and out of Yemen.

The weapons became a ready source of funds for AQAP. The organization kept and stockpiled the ones it most required and sold off those it did not. Unlike the Saudi- and UAE-funded militias and army units, AQAP's operatives are generally well and consistently paid. While AQAP substantially boosted its funding when it seized an estimated \$100 million from a branch of the Yemeni Central Bank in al-Mukalla, weapons sales and "taxes" imposed on smugglers are also significant sources of income for the group ([Reuters](#), April 8, 2016). On top of this, AQAP uses its access to weapons, especially ATGMs and (potentially) surface-to-air missiles, as a way to build influence with other al-Qaeda franchises like al-Shabaab.

Regional Proliferation

Relative to Yemen, there are far fewer weapons available in Somalia. This is because Somalia has often acted as a conduit for arms and materiel to other destinations in Africa. As a consequence of this, and the decades of its own civil conflict, weapons command far higher prices in Somalia than in Yemen.

Access to adequate supplies of weapons and materiel has long been a problem for al-Shabaab, and in particular the organization has only ever had limited access to more advanced weapons. Greater access to ATGMs, advanced night vision equipment, lightweight man por-

table mortars and hand-launched drones would make al-Shabaab a far more lethal opponent.

The leadership of AQAP and al-Shabaab have exchanged top-level operatives, and both organizations have learned from one another over the past five years. AQAP has refined and expanded its intelligence wing, learning from al-Shabaab's own intelligence organization, the Amnnyiat. [4] It is almost certain that al-Shabaab will in turn benefit from AQAP's increasing experience in operating and deploying a wider array of weapons. It is also likely that al-Shabaab will benefit from AQAP's access to these weapons.

Al-Shabaab will not be the only group in Somalia to benefit from the outflow of weapons from Yemen. Somalia's pirate gangs, which have had a working relationship with parts of the al-Shabaab organization, may also gain.

Somalia's pirate gangs have been greatly weakened over the last four years due to the efforts of the international community and by the governments of Somalia and Somaliland. Meanwhile, many shipping companies have taken action, hiring armed security teams for their ships. Somalia's pirates have historically been poorly armed, relying on assault rifles and RPGs. If these gangs were to gain access to ATGMs, which can be easily repurposed, or other advanced weapons, it could make them far more of a threat to ships transiting the Bab al-Mandeb and the Somali coast ([al-Jazeera](#), March 15).

Outlook

Al-Shabaab and Somalia's pirate gangs are but two groups that stand to benefit from the availability of weapons in Yemen. Undoubtedly, as the war continues, there will be many more. Yemen's coast is extensive and unguarded. Weapons and materiel are being exported with ease from Yemen to Somalia. It is likely that they are traveling even further afield.

Quite apart from the dangers posed by an unchecked outflow of weapons, including some relatively advanced armaments, the trade is a ready source of cash for al-Qaeda's most capable franchise. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's large scale exporting of arms to Yemen will have grave repercussions for both them and the region as a whole.

While personal ownership of weapons in Saudi Arabia is highly regulated, a thriving black market for weapons exists there. Given that Saudi Arabia has little control of its border with Yemen, it is likely that some of the weapons there are making their way across the border to be re-sold in Saudi Arabia to terrorist cells and other organizations that oppose the House of Saud.

The war in Yemen and the weapons provided to its various actors have the potential to reshape and intensify piracy and other regional threats. The outflow of weapons from Yemen is itself of great concern, but knowledge and experience of how best to use them is also being exported. The policy of supplying tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars worth of weapons to ad-hoc militias in a country as unstable and strategically located as Yemen will result in a host of unintended and deadly consequences.

Michael Horton is a senior analyst for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. He is a frequent contributor to Jane's Intelligence Review and has written for numerous other publications including: The National Interest, The Economist and West Point's CTC Sentinel.

NOTES

[1] See: Small Arms Survey. The US has 88.8 guns for every 100 residents. Yemen has 54.8 guns per 100 residents. These numbers only take into consideration small arms and not the medium and heavy arms that are readily available in Yemen.

[2] The US government lost track of 500 million USD worth of weapons and equipment that it provided to Yemen after the outbreak of civil war ([Washington Post](#), March 17, 2015).

[3] Much of the information in this article is based upon multiple interview with a range of Yemen based analysts and journalists conducted in April and May 2017.

[4] See: "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *CTC Sentinel*, January 23, 2017.

The Threat al-Shabaab Poses to Kenya's Election

Sunguta West

With Kenyans heading to the polls on August 8, voting once again against the backdrop of the security threat posed by al-Shabaab, the recent supposed theft by militants of an electronic voting kit has raised fears that the group could seek to directly target the election process.

While fears of some form of electronic threat are overstated — and possibly owe something to the hacking claims that have followed elections in the West — al-Shabaab could still seek to disrupt the polls in a more traditional manner.

Hacking 'Threat'

Kenya introduced some electronic voting measures in 2013, in response to recommendations made by the Kriegler Commission in its report on the deadly violence that followed the 2007 presidential election. These have since been codified, and Kenya goes into its 2017 election using a biometric voter registration system, candidate registration system and electronic voter identification. These could all be targeted, according to some government officials.

Allegations of the potential threat to the elections emerged as far back as December 2016, when the country was debating the merits of using an electronic voting system ([The Star](#), Dec. 29, 2016). At the time, Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) Cabinet Secretary Joe Mucheru warned that al-Shabaab, or any cybercriminal group, could target electronic voting methods. He advised against using the system, pointing out similar systems had failed in various countries and suggesting that Kenya should not consider itself to be an exception ([The Standard](#), December 31, 2016).

Those fears are not unfounded. In 2012, a hacker known as Direxer brought down 103 government of Kenya websites. In May 2016, hacking collective Anonymous carried out a sophisticated hack on the Kenyan ministry of foreign affairs, stealing data and confidential files, including email conversations and security related communications, and posting them on the dark web.

The issue appeared to come to a head in February this year when suspected al-Shabaab fighters reportedly stole biometric voter registration kits belonging to Kenya's elections manager, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) ([Nairobi News](#), February 2). The militants attacked a local police station in Mandera, over-powering the 21 police officers manning the station before making off with the kits, three guns, ammunition, a police vehicle and a motorcycle ([The Star](#), February 2; [Daily Nation](#), February 8).

The incident further fueled speculation that the group had an interest in directly targeting the elections, but al-Shabaab later denied the voting kits were among the items it had seized, instead saying the government needed to come clean and admit it had simply lost the equipment ([Daily Nation](#), February 6).

Unjustified Fears

Whether al-Shabaab poses a real threat to the election is the subject of intense debate in Kenya.

Ali Hassan Joho, the Mombasa governor and a member of the opposition Coalition for Reforms and Democracy alliance, has said the debate simply bolsters al-Shabaab's credentials as a terror group. He warned that making the militants part of the election discourse gives them a degree of prestige that they did not deserve. The governor questioned the militant's abilities to jam any electronic system and charged that the debate simply exposed Kenya's weakness.

Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that al-Shabaab has acquired the technology to deploy a cyber or electronic attack. The group is not known to have executed one in the past, although it has targeted telecommunication installations. On May 11, the militants destroyed a telephone mast in Amuma area near the Somali border, as they carried out an attack in El-Wak town. The attack left a quarry mineworker dead ([The Star](#), May 16). And in December 2016, militants destroyed four telecommunication masts belonging to mobile companies Safaricom and Orange, in Mandera County in a single week ([Daily Nation](#), December 13, 2016; [The Star](#), December 16, 2016). The move cut the region off from the rest of the country for months and left local residents fearing the militants were isolating them in order to carry out sustained attacks.

More likely, the threat from al-Shabaab is of a more traditional nature. The group recently stepped-up attacks in the border areas of Garissa, Mandera and Wajir, carrying out attacks in regions that are by and large poorly policed.

On May 15, suspected al-Shabaab gunmen attacked Omar Jillo, a small town center in Lafey sub-county in Mandera, killing a local chief and abducting two Kenya Police Reservists ([Capital FM](#), May 16, 2016). Omar Jillo, like other towns in the area, is under a dawn-to-dusk curfew to try to curb militant activity.

Queuing voters at polling stations are a potential soft target for the militants. In the past, they have used grenades and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to attack public places, the police, churches and other institutions. Polling centers, which are usually poorly policed or set-up without considering the possibility of a strike by militants, could be a relatively easy targets.

Furthermore, the kidnapping of election officials cannot be ruled out. The militant group is known to kidnap aid workers, tourists and other officials for ransom. In April, fighters kidnapped four aid officials working for the World Health Organization in central Somalia ([Hiiraan Online](#), April 4). Five years ago such abductions prompted Kenya to send its troops into Somalia.

Potential for Disruption

Until recently, al-Shabaab had not commented on Kenya's elections, but in March the militants accused President Uhuru Kenyatta of plotting to use the security services to rig the polls.

Ali Mohamoud Rage (a.k.a. Ali Dheree) told the Somalia-based Radio al-Furqan that Kenyatta had armed the police and bought armored vehicles to suppress and intimidate any opposition. Dheree pointed to Kenyatta's surprise visit to Kenyan forces in the border town of Dhobley, saying the visit showed Kenyatta was fearful of the political opposition and was desperately trying to shore up support from a military he had long-neglected and left to suffer heavy losses in battles with al-Shabaab ([Harar 24 New](#), March 23).

Dheree's statement at least confirmed that the militant group was closely monitoring electoral developments in Kenya.

Analysts say that by targeting the electronic process, the militants would be attempting to turn public opinion against the government by showing its inability to secure the election process. In a country that has seen significant electoral violence in the past, that could ignite tempers and even drive calls for the withdrawal of KDF in Somalia in order to bolster security at home. An effective attack of this nature could disrupt and destabilize the country.

However, the chances of a cyber-attack are slim. The government will need to ensure it takes steps to secure the electronic voting system, as well as step up its data protection measures. But that is simply a matter of good practice.

In reality, the threat al-Shabaab poses to the polls on August 8 is more likely to come from grenades, guns and explosives than in the form of an electronic attack.

Sunguta West is a journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya.

After Raqqa: The Challenges Posed by Syria's Tribal Networks

Aris Roussinos

As the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) approach the northern suburbs of Raqqa, the long-running policy debate over the advisability of using as a primary U.S. partner a militia that is dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG), has reached fever pitch. Dire warnings have been made of the risks to eastern Syria's future stability that may result from a reliance on a Kurdish-led force with links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), to storm the city and possibly even govern it once it has been captured.

The increasingly bitter tone of the debate is only partly a reflection of the complex social and cultural dynamics of the diverse population of northern and eastern Syria. Instead, it is primarily a result of the intractable conflict north of Syria's border, in Turkey's restive and overwhelmingly Kurdish south-eastern provinces. Turkey's failure to field a viable rebel force for the Raqqa operation has led to a deepened U.S. engagement with the YPG, sharpening Turkish fears that northern Syria will become a PKK training and logistics hub ([al-Monitor](#), March 27).

In its search for a local solution to the problem of north-east Syria, the United States has found itself increasingly held hostage to dynamics outside its own control, with the growing risk that American troops will be drawn into a conflict they cannot adequately manage. In seeking to defeat Islamic State (IS) and establish stable governance in what is fast becoming an unofficial mandate territory, the United States will have to manage the expectations of both its Kurdish and Turkish allies, as well as their respective Arab proxy forces.

Expanding the Arab-Kurd Binary

For primarily political reasons — both local, in ensuring the compliance of Arab populations, and regional, in assuaging Turkey's concerns of Kurdish dominance — the SDF has placed great emphasis in putting an Arab face on the Raqqa operation, recruiting Arab fighters in ever-growing numbers ([Rudaw](#), March 28).

Some Arabs have joined purely Arab militias, such as the Manbij Military Council or the Shammar tribal outfit *Jaish al-Sanaddid* ([ANHA](#), April 18; [ANHA](#), July 15, 2015). Increasingly others, however, have joined the ranks of the predominantly Kurdish YPG and Asayis gendarmerie forces ([ANHA](#), February 27). Yet the precise ethnic balance between Kurds and Arabs within the SDF, despite its political and tactical importance, remains unknown to outside observers, with differing estimates given even by the coalition.

It has become axiomatic among advocates for the Syrian rebels that only predominantly Arab forces can hope to take or hold Raqqa. There is little evidence for this position. Identical claims were made about the YPG's ability to capture or hold the predominantly Arab cities of Tal Abyad and Manbij. However, in the years and months since their capture from IS, no military or political resistance to Democratic Union Party (PYD, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) rule has taken hold.

Instead, the PYD has devolved government to local Arab-led civilian councils, and recruitment to predominantly Arab SDF militias has proceeded at a steady rate ([ARANews](#), August 10, 2016). It is reasonable to consider that an excessive focus on ethnic conflict between Kurds and Arabs in northeast Syria, fuelled by often simplistic coverage that reduces the region's complexities to binary Kurd-Arab hostility, is as much a spoiling effort to prevent PYD expansion as it is based upon genuine concern for local stability, or indeed on any appreciation of local realities.

Yet as the SDF move south into the tribal Arab heartlands of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the U.S. troops accompanying and supporting them are moving into unknown territory, tasked with ensuring the pacification and compliance of tribal Arab populations whose loyalties and political aspirations are almost wholly unknown. In the ensuing policy debate, the Arab tribes of northern and eastern Syria have been treated like blank sheets upon which the political desires of local and regional actors have been projected. What they themselves want remains largely unknown.

Regime Loyalties

The tribes of northern and eastern Syria were little studied before the war, and inaccessible to impartial re-

searchers after ([Syria Deeply](#), December 11, 2015). Where they have come to the world's attention, it is only as instruments of propaganda, swearing fealty to the Syrian regime, IS or PYD, as determined by the ebb and flow of the frontlines. It is unclear to what extent the war's hardships have revitalised the bonds of mutual defense among tribesmen that segmentary theory would suggest; or whether the ever-growing array of external sponsors has encouraged greater division within tribal units, as rival chiefs battle for supremacy, or youths discard the age-old tribal loyalties for the new bonds of duty and affection offered by armed groups with more ambitious goals.

In rural Deir Ezzor, the case of the Shaitat tribe affords a vivid example of the choices tribal units make under the pressures of war. One of eastern Syria's most powerful tribes, with around 90,000 members, the Shaitat joined the rebellion at the outset and took control of many of the region's lucrative oil wells.

As IS conquered almost all of eastern Syria in 2014, the Shaitat bore the brunt of some of the bitterest intra-jihadist fighting of the war in a bloody summer campaign along the lower Euphrates Valley ([al-Monitor](#), June 25, 2014; [Syria Deeply](#), August 1, 2014). At least 800 Shaitat tribal fighters were massacred by IS forces ([al-Monitor](#) July 2015). Many survivors fled to regime territory, and they have since reconstituted themselves as a warlike and highly-motivated loyalist militia defending the beleaguered Deir Ezzor SAA garrison from frequent IS assaults ([The National](#), November 11, 2014; [Youtube](#), September 25, 2015).

In Hasakah, meanwhile, the PYD has struggled to win the loyalties of tribes long affiliated with the regime through decades of patronage and clientelist politics ([Zaman al-Wasl](#), March 29, 2016). Despite an ongoing Arab tribal outreach effort on the PYD's part, the Tayy tribe has remained loyal to Damascus, providing the bedrock, along with a section of the region's divided Christian population, of the local loyalist National Defense Force (NDF) militia (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 24).

Dangers of 'Weaponizing' Tribal Structures

Rumours of the existence of loyalist underground militias years after the city's fall to the rebels and some months into IS rule suggest that once in Raqqa the PYD will, af-

ter the city's liberation from IS, find itself competing with the Syrian regime for the loyalty of its inhabitants ([Ay-menn Jawad](#), July 29, 2014). Furthermore, local tribes may use the comparative strength and reach of the regime and the PYD's competing external sponsors of Russia, Iran and the United States as bargaining chips as they weigh up the costs and benefits of loyalty to one faction or another, or indeed of inter-tribal competition.

Even within the Arab tribe most committed to the PYD project, the Shammar confederation, it is apparent that the SDF umbrella contains two politically distinct militias with perhaps widely differing political desires.

On the one hand, the SDF's long-time allies, the Jaish al-Sanaddid, led by Sheikh Humaydi Daham al-Hadi, are utilized primarily as a mobile gendarmerie to provide security over thinly populated desert areas, appearing to view this as an opportunity to re-establish their long-lost historical suzerainty over the eastern Syrian desert. On the other, the Syrian Elite Forces, composed of Shammar and Shaitat tribesmen and led by former Syrian National Council head and Shammar aristocrat Ahmad Jarba, seem keen to establish a notional rebel-branded autonomy within the framework of SDF rule ([NOW Lebanon](#), May 26, 2016). This militia has perhaps set its sights on a governance role in either Raqqa or Deir Ezzor.

In seeking to weaponize Syrian tribal structures against IS, the United States will have to approach tribal politics with a keen anthropological eye, taking care to ensure it is not laying the foundation for future clashes between tribe and clan factions in the aftermath of the current conflict. Managing the divergent political aspirations of disparate factions within a broad multi-ethnic coalition is a complex task, and the United States should analyze local political divisions carefully before disbursing weapons and ammunition in significant quantities.

The ability of the United States and its SDF allies to win over tribes like the Tayy or Shaitat, or at least avoid the need to confront them, will depend greatly on what concrete advantages in wealth or influence cooperation with the new governing power will grant them, as well as upon the hope that Russia, Iran or Damascus — or even some new form of jihadist insurgency — will not seek to wreak havoc in the Euphrates Valley for its own ends.

Cautious Disengagement

As the SDF sweeps into Raqqa city, and perhaps rural Deir Ezzor, the U.S. troops supporting them will find themselves providing military and logistic support to a Kurdish-led indirect-rule project of uncertain duration over local Arab tribes. The political desires of those tribes are largely unknown, and the tribes themselves may well be deeply divided.

Given that the Syrian regime, various rebel factions and an al-Qaeda offshoot drawn from local tribes have each been unable to hold these regions, the ability of what will likely be seen as a doubly foreign occupying force to do so without being sucked into a gruelling counterinsurgency campaign is an open question.

U.S. policymakers need to be clear on the U.S. exit strategy and what the desired end-state is for the Euphrates River Valley region, before being pulled into an open-ended occupation by the power vacuum the retreat of IS-established borders will create.

The longstanding, if fragile, coexistence between the PYD and the Syrian regime in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah may present an opportunity for U.S. forces to disengage from the region in the near-to-medium future ([al-Araby](#), August 26, 2016; [Syria Direct](#), April 26).

While advocates for the Syrian rebels will likely see a U.S. presence in the region as an opportunity to establish some form of rebel rule under military protection, the advisability of enforcing failed rebel governance structures in this volatile border region by force of U.S. arms remains questionable at best.

Aris Roussinos is a journalist and analyst with a specific focus on north-eastern Syria.