

Maintaining the U.S. CT Mission in Southern Syria

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Brief Analysis

Despite the end of CIA support to the rebels, Washington can still counter the Islamic State by coordinating more deeply with Israel and Jordan, and by managing other regional actors.

In July 2017, the Trump administration ended the four-year-old CIA program that provided direct assistance, in the form of salaries and arms, to various Syrian rebel groups fighting the Islamic State (IS) and the Assad regime. Some of these groups are now essentially defunct, but elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are still actively fighting IS affiliates in the western countryside of Deraa province. Furthermore, the regime is currently cut off from the IS pocket on Jordan's northern border, leaving IS forces there relatively unmolested, with the exception of interstitial conflict with rebels and occasional Jordanian shelling. This pocket will have to be cleared if the goals of Operation Inherent Resolve, the mission that spans anti-IS efforts in Syria and Iraq, are to be achieved. On August 21, U.S. secretary of defense James Mattis met with Jordanian officials in Amman to discuss the next phase of anti-IS strategy.

FSA Successes, Vulnerabilities

In late 2011, a number of regional actors were independently supporting rebels in southern Syria, coalescing by 2013 in the Amman-based Military Operations Center (MOC), from which Arab and Western intelligence officials coordinated such efforts. During the height of MOC support, the FSA in southern Syria outperformed its counterparts in other regions in staving off widespread infiltration and capture by Islamist or jihadist groups. To various extents, the FSA survived in the south because of its competitive resourcing compared to jihadist groups, demonstrated success against the regime, and the local character of many of its sub-fighting groups.

Nevertheless, the southern FSA groups exhibited some of the same troubling dynamics that doomed their counterparts elsewhere in the country. These included losing fighters to jihadist groups, coordinating actively with the jihadists, and even relying on suicide attacks from such unsavory partners to break hardened regime positions

to start an operation. Even if these southern rebels avoided full capture by jihadists, they were still interstitial allies with entities deemed unacceptable by the United States.

Some of the previous distance between the southern FSA and jihadist groups reflected a response to U.S. and regional pressure, begging the question of whether greater cooperation will follow given the absence of U.S. support. Even more worrying, could a shuffling of patrons result in a rapprochement between the Islamic State and more-mainstream groups?

Current State of Play

Two important recent developments changed conditions in Deraa: on July 9, a ceasefire took effect over large parts of Syria's south, and on July 18, hundreds of Russian observer forces arrived to monitor the ceasefire. Moreover, regime forces, which along with Hezbollah and other Iran-backed fighters are present further north in the Golan Heights, are currently cut off from the Islamic State pocket by rebel forces, and the front between these two -- rebels and regime forces -- is not active. These developments build upon a longer period of relative calm over the past year, during which U.S. and Jordanian sponsors have succeeded in limiting conflict between the FSA and the regime, with the exception of clashes inside Deraa city.

The Islamic State, for its part, has shown its commitment to being the sole stakeholder in areas where the regime is absent, and will not relent in its campaign against the rebels. In the weeks after the Trump administration halted the CIA program, IS demonstrated clearly that it would not pursue peace with formerly U.S.-backed elements. The jihadist group besieged the FSA-held town of al-Hayat and more recently launched a suicide attack on the Nasib border crossing that killed at least twenty-five Islamist fighters. Although IS will absorb smaller battalions, and always accepts defectors from other forces, it will not tolerate direct competition. Furthermore, IS has so victimized communities in Deraa's west that rebel elements there are committed to fighting the group in order to maintain their relationship with the antigovernment public.

With the United States no longer providing direct support, one can find decent prospects with Jordan, which retains good relations with the southern rebels. Indeed, Amman has shown a greater commitment to policing its partners' associations with jihadists than other sponsors such as Ankara or Riyadh. Yet there is a high risk that, with the U.S. partnership ended, the southern rebels could pursue greater coordination with hardline Islamists and even Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), despite the possibility of angering their Jordanian sponsors. Closer integration with these groups could help the FSA, particularly by offering greater access to suicide bombers who can break through regime lines. Equally unsettling, little evidence suggests that the southern FSA would pay a price with the Syrian public for such coordination. In many cases, the civilian population is demanding just such closer ties with hardliners.

U.S. Path Forward

Given the cessation of the CIA program and the growing irrelevance of the MOC, Syria's southern rebels are actively courting new regional patrons. Although such diversified support is perhaps unlikely given Turkey and Qatar's other priorities, a new incentive structure could emerge whereby greater coordination with hardline groups is encouraged or at least accepted. Yet even without a direct relationship with the southern rebels, the United States can take a number of steps to deter greater coordination between rebels and jihadists and to support the overall counterterrorism fight:

- *Increase support to Jordan in its efforts to manage its own border.* The United States already shares intelligence and provides financial support for Jordanian efforts in Syria, but opportunities exist to increase such a commitment. In his August 21 visit, Secretary Mattis implied the possibility of deeper coordination by asserting that the United States would stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the kingdom in the fight against the Islamic State. Greater cooperation, meanwhile, could take the form of anti-IS aerial missions coordinated with Jordan but not the southern FSA. Although

the Deraa skies are currently owned by Russia and the Syrian regime, Washington could negotiate with Moscow through Amman to launch anti-IS strikes from Jordanian airspace, solely in the areas along the kingdom's northern border.

- *Make clear to Turkey and America's Gulf allies that support for jihadist groups or support for more-moderate rebels that incentivizes coordination with HTS will draw a U.S. response.* This response could be relatively minor -- as simple as public statements decrying such developments -- but even such a modest step would have been impossible while the CIA was bolstering some of the same actors.
- *Work with both Jordan and Israel to prevent long-term access to the Israeli border by Hezbollah, the IRGC, or other Iran-backed forces already present in the province.* Such coordination is particularly crucial given currently stressed relations between Israel and Jordan (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/killings-fray-jordan-israel-ties>). Lacking a proxy, the United States will need to consider more diverse options, such as airstrikes, to prevent a long-term encampment by Hezbollah near the Israeli border. Even without U.S. help, the Israelis will likely ward off such an outcome, but Washington should attempt to collaborate in any Israeli effort. Israeli actions in the Golan, particularly those close to the Jordanian border, have the potential to further damage Israel-Jordan relations. To counter such potential deterioration, the United States should seek to form a united front with Jordan and Israel in targeting terrorist groups along both borders.

Despite ending direct CIA aid to the Syrian rebels, the United States can still influence the situation in the south by supporting Jordan and Israel and deterring other would-be sponsors. The second of these tasks may prove more troublesome, but regional actors may not see the area as an essential void to fill in any case. Ultimately, the severing of CIA ties to Syrian rebels could even provide greater flexibility toward the goal of defeating the Islamic State in the south.

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