Raqqa Will Not Fall Until Arab Tribes Fight the Islamic State

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Jun 3, 2016
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Brief Analysis

The tribes in eastern Syria have been driven in different directions by the Assad regime, outside actors, and their own self-interest, leaving the coalition with a complex web to untangle before it can fully uproot IS.

This week, Kurdish and Arab fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces pushed west into Islamic State-controlled territory in a bid to seize the town of Manbij. Only days earlier, however, the beginnings of a longer southward campaign -- to retake the IS "capital" of Raqqa -- were set in motion when the SDF began attacking IS positions in Balikh Valley, about fifty kilometers north of the city.

The latter offensive is far from a blitzkrieg that will bring the SDF to the outskirts of Raqqa promptly; for one thing, the Kurds may be distracted by their oft-stated goal of continuing westward toward Afrin in order to link up their two border enclaves (see PolicyWatch 2542, "The Die Is Cast: The Kurds Cross the Euphrates" **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-die-is-cast-the-kurds-cross-the-euphrates)**). Yet the SDF's main military patron, the United States, has another reason to be cautious about the Raqqa timeline -- before the coalition even thinks about launching a final push on the city, it must rally the Arab tribes in the area, some of whom have pledged allegiance to IS. Any such effort will require a thorough understanding of the evolving role that tribes have played there, first under the Assad regime and now under IS rule.

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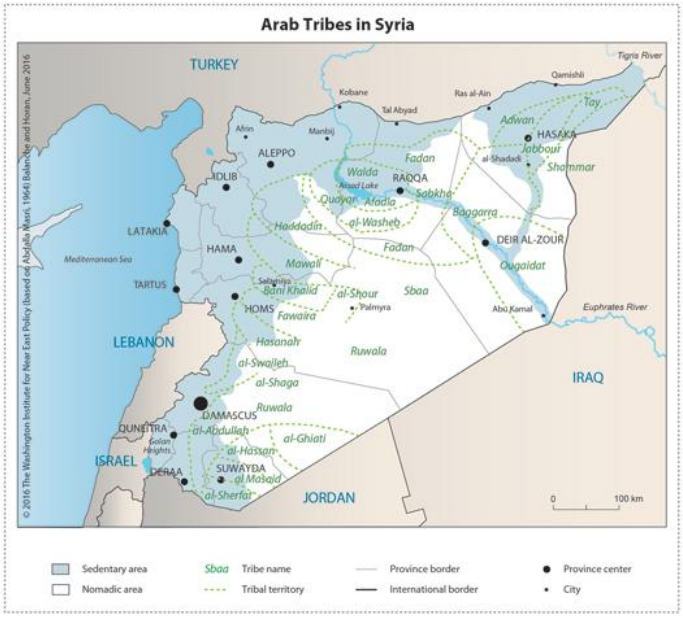

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TRIBAL STRUCTURE IN SYRIA

In Syria as in other countries, a tribe (*ashira*) is an ancestral network comprising anywhere from a few thousand to tens of thousands of members, subdivided into clans (*shabba*). Although clans generally compete for control of their tribe, they show solidarity in the face of outside danger.

During the Ottoman period, some tribal federations (e.g., the Shammar) were powerful enough to avoid paying imperial taxes, earning them the moniker "noble" tribes. Those who did pay are regarded as "common" tribes in the Bedouin hierarchy. Many common tribesmen still harbor animosity against their "noble" counterparts after being dominated by them for centuries.

While the noble tribes have retained their transnational nature and patronage ties with Saudi Arabia, the common tribes are more rooted in the Syrian state and have largely abandoned their nomadic lifestyle. These differences shaped their response to the 2011 uprising. When anti-regime protests first emerged, tribes with Saudi links took part early on, which explains why Deir al-Zour province rapidly shifted toward the opposition. Yet Raqqa province remained loyal for longer because common tribes are more numerous there, and they had benefited from decades of agrarian reform and development projects launched by the Baath regime.

THE REGIME'S APPROACH TO TRIBES

In the 1960s, the Baath regime was very hostile toward representatives of major tribal confederations, actively dispossessing them of their land. In response, some leading sheikhs left the country, while those who remained in Syria were eventually coopted.

The construction of Thawra Dam and the launch of the Euphrates Valley Irrigation Program in the 1970s greatly facilitated this process. The regime integrated tribal elites by giving them positions in the state apparatus, and some were quick to appropriate the best irrigated fields. As expert Myriam Ababsa pointed out in a 2010 paper, this led to the emergence of a Baathist tribal generation that used its newfound political weight to gain power within the tribal hierarchy, which in turn fostered deeper tribal allegiance to the regime.

Ultimately, however, this new framework did not work in the national interest because many of the coopted tribesmen were simply using state resources to further their own local interests. As a result, the regime's irrigation program became an economic fiasco, with tribal politics taking precedence over development. By the time Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father Hafiz in 2000, the project was collapsing -- the government could not afford to extend the irrigation system any further, and efforts to reform agricultural and water policies were blocked by bureaucracy and political patronage (**see PolicyWatch 2622, "Water Issues Are Crucial to Stability in Syria's Euphrates Valley" (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/water-issues-are-crucial-to-stability-in-syrias-euphrates-valley)**). Tensions were further exacerbated by the area's high fertility rate, which was essentially doubling the population every twenty years.

In short, the Euphrates project allowed the regime to rent -- not buy -- the local tribes. Although the Raqqa region was loyal to Assad until as late as 2013, years of agrarian policy failures and the influx of money from Gulf countries ultimately pushed most tribal leaders toward the opposition. Even so, some sheikhs remain loyal today and have fled to Damascus, where they enjoy protection because the regime hopes they will be useful once it retakes the Euphrates Valley.

The regime has also employed military means to coopt tribes. The army began recruiting heavily in the Euphrates area during the 1980s, and many residents of this underdeveloped region came to view military service as a social elevator. That same decade, Hafiz al-Assad used the

Haddadin tribe to fight the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, eventually destroying the rebellious city. Today, the Haddadin are helping his son fight rebel forces and protect the Aleppo supply road east of Hama, while prominent sheikh Fahd Jassem al-Freij serves as Bashar's defense minister. Similarly, the younger Assad did not hesitate to distribute weapons to Arab tribes in Jazira when facing a Kurdish revolt in 2004. These tribes -- the Jabbour, Adwan, Tay, and Ougaidat -- are still fighting with him today because they fear their enemies will take revenge if he loses power. This explains why the army is able to control a pocket in the middle of Kurdish territory south of Qamishli.

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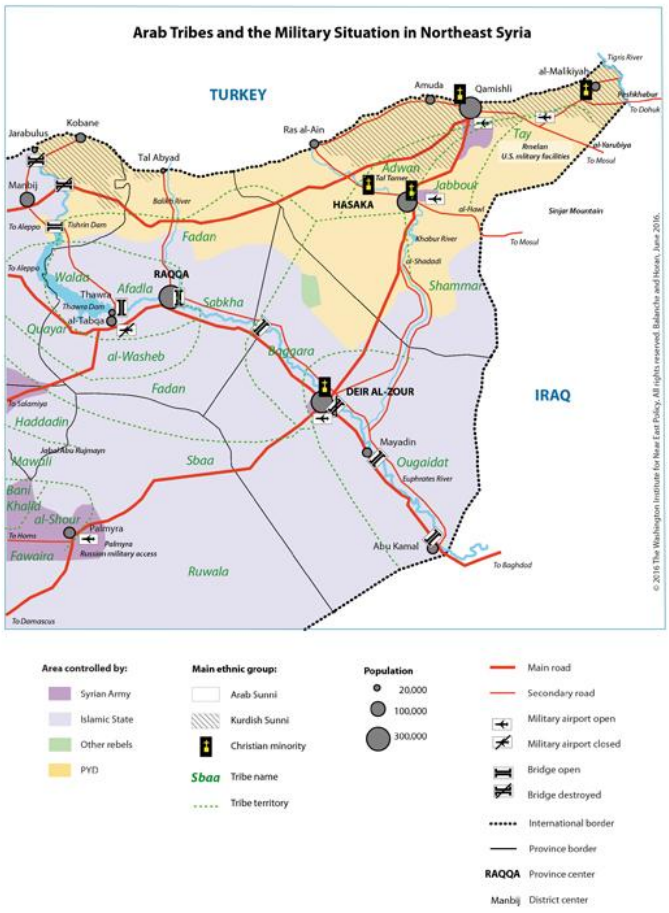

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THE ISLAMIC STATE'S TRIBAL POLICY

After establishing itself in eastern Syria during the war, IS quickly integrated the tribes into its own system. Once local sheikhs pledged allegiance to the supposed IS "caliph," they were asked to marry their daughters to high-ranking IS members and send their sons to fight with the group. IS gave oil wells, land, and other benefits to those who voluntarily joined it, but attacked those who resisted its hegemony (e.g., massacring 700 members of the Sheitat tribe in August 2014).

Like the Baath regime before it, IS has sought to create an independent social base out of the traditional tribal hierarchy. If an elder sheikh is hesitant to cooperate, the group promotes a younger son or a secondary clan within his tribe. But it focuses its most intense efforts on adolescents, who are drawn into camps for ideological indoctrination and military training. Over the past three years, thousands of young men have been radicalized and detribalized, which will raise a serious rehabilitation problem once IS has been defeated.

The group also uses conflicts between tribes to impose its power. In Jarabulus, IS supported Tay tribesmen against the Jais tribe, forcing the latter to leave the city and seek refuge in Turkey (it is unclear what relationship the attackers had with the main Tay tribal stronghold on Syria's far northeastern border, though the war has at times spurred groups of tribesmen to leave their traditional territory). And in August 2013, IS helped the Arab tribes of Tal Abyad defeat Kurdish fighters from the People's Defense Units (YPG), expel all Kurds from the district, destroy their villages, and redistribute their land to Arabs. Interviews with local observers confirm the Islamic State's objective in such cases: to play on Sunni Arab fears of Kurdish irredentism.

LOSING POPULAR SUPPORT

Even if the different actors in the war make the Islamic State their main target, they will still need the local population to reject the group if they hope to fully defeat it. Existing factors will help in this regard, such as local economic deterioration, the group's heavy repression, and its gradual loss of legitimacy. But rallying the sheikhs will also require giving them money, political positions, and judicial immunity.

In the beginning, IS generously distributed food by emptying state grain silos. The price of bread was cheaper in Raqqa than in the rest of Syria, and fuel cost less because it was produced and refined locally. Yet the group's strict price controls are no longer curbing inflation, especially as agricultural production decreases -- a function of scarce fertilizers and pesticides, heavier taxation on farmers to compensate for declining oil revenue, and an irrigation system beset by infrastructure damage and mismanagement. Farmers in irrigated areas are subject to the same unpopular constraints they faced under Assad, but with decreased income.

Meanwhile, the myth of an Islamic order that provides justice to all of the faithful has faded. Recent interviews with refugees from Deir al-Zour and Raqqa provinces indicate that IS courts are just as corrupt as Assad's, with the group's members and their families receiving preferential treatment despite the occasional token execution of corrupt IS fighters. Conscription and enlistment of adolescents has provoked protests (e.g., in Manbij in November 2015), spurring IS to increase repression to keep the population in check.

Given their growing desire for revenge (*intiqaam*) and their traditional tendency to preserve tribal interests above all else, many individuals and entire clans are ready to help those fighting IS, whether the SDF or the Syrian army. For example, 200 members of the Sheitat tribe joined the army in Deir al-Zour after the 2014 massacre, and tribal collaboration helped the regime retake Palmyra this March. As the army and SDF approach Raqqa, tribal defections around Deir al-Zour and Manbij are multiplying.

PREVENTING TRIBAL WAR AFTER THE ISLAMIC STATE

The United States has been backing the SDF via the YPG and its Kurdish parent organization, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and such support -- namely, the promise of air support and better weapons -- is essential for encouraging tribes to join the anti-IS coalition. Arab tribes from the Fadan federation have already joined the YPG in Raqqa province, while several Shammar tribes in Hasaka province helped YPG units capture al-Hawl and al-Shadadi from IS last winter. These tribes have always had good relations with the Kurds; for example, they refused to help Assad repress the Kurdish uprising of 2004. Yet they are relying on Washington to moderate the PYD's hegemonic tendencies and ensure their own share of power once IS has left.

The same process is taking place in the northern part of Raqqa province, but with many more obstacles. Some tribes remain fiercely on the Islamic State's side (e.g., the Afadla and Sabkha), and those who have been expelled from their lands by IS-backed tribes are not ready for quick reconciliation (e.g., the Jais and Sheitat). As a result, the SDF is reaching the limit of how many more tribes it can integrate, and spurring a general uprising against IS would be very difficult without neutral foreign troops on the ground. The level of violence has been so high since 2011 that the traditional tribal measures of regulating it are no longer adequate -- several clans and tribes will be forced to flee to avoid collective vengeance, such as the Tay in Jarabulus and the Sbaa in Sukhna (who originally helped IS capture Palmyra).

To stem intertribal violence and chaos after IS, the coalition will need to fill the political vacuum immediately. But conducting free elections is not feasible in the near term, so the new authorities will have to coopt local notables to manage cities and districts during the transition, as Gen. David Petraeus did in Mosul, Iraq, in 2003. The question is whether this is possible without a neutral military force present. The PYD cannot simply transplant its administrative experience from Hasaka and Kobane to non-Kurdish cities such as Raqqa and Deir al-Zour; in fact, the group has been accused of ethnic cleansing in the predominantly Arab town of Tal Abyad.

The alternatives present problems as well. If Arab tribes in the Euphrates Valley are left to organize themselves, they could easily devolve into fighting over cities, land, and water -- especially around Thawra Dam, the key to local irrigation and power generation. The Kurds would likely stay out of such conflicts because they have no territorial ambitions in that area, but IS could return, perhaps under a different name. The Syrian army is also close to both the dam and Deir al-Zour, so Assad has not lost hope of exploiting tribal loyalties and fears to regain control there. In short, stabilizing the Euphrates Valley post-IS will be a major financial and political challenge.

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