



## EYEING RAQQA: A TALE OF FOUR TRIBES

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**I**N RECENT STATEMENTS, both the U.S.-backed and Kurdish-based Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield have stated their intention to take the Islamic State (IS) capital, Raqqa, raising questions about what entity will replace the jihadist group in eastern Syria. Whatever the outcome, tribes in and around Raqqa will be central not only to defeating IS but also to ensuring it doesn't return. Indeed, the sentiments of Arab tribesmen are hardly uniform, and are affected by clan and other internal rivalries, making them hard to predict. But these groups constitute the traditional political and social structure in eastern Syria, and their opinions on IS and other outside players will be pivotal in shaping a more stable order in the area.

With this in mind, a recent visitor to Raqqa city and province, who will remain anonymous for security reasons, conducted interviews with a half-dozen tribal sheikhs and figures from each of the city's four most prominent tribes: al-Bayattrah, al-Ajeel, al-Breij, and al-Na'im; three of these tribes belong to some of the largest extended tribes in eastern Syria—Aqidat, Jabbour, and Afadla. The interviews were



aimed at determining goals and attitudes toward IS and the four outside forces seeking to replace the group: the United States, Turkey, the PYD, and the Assad regime with its backing Shiite militias.

While not conducting a formal poll of all tribes in the Raqqa area, the interviewer yielded answers, alongside the interviewer's impressions, indicating the degree to which success in "destroying" IS will depend on the makeup of the liberating forces. Potentially explosive issues that remain include Arab-Kurdish tensions as well as increasing concern over the involvement of Iran-sponsored Shiite militias.

## ● IS RULE AND RAQQA'S TRIBES

In January 2014, the Islamic State militarily wrested control of Raqqa by playing Arab and Kurdish tribes against each other with much effectiveness. But not all tribes have cozied up to the "caliphate." Many interviewees reported that their fellow tribesmen have fled for safety to Turkey or Assad regime areas. On IS, other tribes appear split between an older generation that benefited from former president Hafiz al-Assad's patronage and youths marginalized by current president Bashar al-Assad's crony capitalism and thereby ripe to be influenced by Salafi clerics. Key to dislodging IS's foothold will be understanding rivalries and learning from the rise to power of its Raqqa "governor," or wali, Abu Luqman.

### ● Al-Bayatrah

According to interviews and meetings with figures from al-Bayatrah—the largest tribe in Raqqa city, with 10,000 members before the 2011 uprising, and a branch of the Aqidat, the largest extended tribe in eastern Syria—few of its members joined Jabhat al-Nusra (and its successor, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) or the Islamic State. None of those interviewed expressed any support for jihadists.

In early 2013, dozens of the tribesmen—from the religiously oriented al-Farhan, al-Haj, and al-Mattar families—joined the rebel groups Ahrar al-Sham, Ahrar al-Raqqa, and Hudhaifa bin al-Yaman to liberate their city from the Assad regime. About four months after the liberation, Jabhat al-Nusra—an al-Qaeda affiliate—became the strongest power in the city and subsequently cracked down on civil society and moderate rebel groups. Around the time that IS took Raqqa in

## THE TRIBES AT A GLANCE

### Al-Bayatrah البياطره

- Largest tribe in Raqqa city, with 10,000 members overall\*
- Members own many buildings and small businesses in the city
- Broadly anti-Assad, with communist, Iraqi Baathist, and Islamist currents
- Branch of the Aqidat, the largest tribal federation in eastern Syria

### Al-Ajeel العجيل

- 50,000 members, settled on eastern bank of the Euphrates River, west of Raqqa city
- Regime patronized the clan with agricultural policies in the 1980s
- The IS governor of Raqqa, Abu Luqman, is from al-Ajeel
- Branch of the Jabbour, the largest tribe in Hasaka province

### Al-Breij البريج

- Tribe of 40,000, mostly farmers, living in the Euphrates Valley, east of Raqqa city
- Historical ties to the Iraqi Baath Party led to persecution by Syrian regime
- Now a bastion of IS support
- Branch of the Afadla, the largest tribe in eastern Raqqa

### Al-Na'im النعيم

- 15,000 members, living in fertile region between Raqqa and the Turkish border
- Well-off farmers; competition for agricultural land led to historical animosity with Kurds
- Previously pro-regime, but IS has played upon anti-Kurdish sentiments to recruit from the tribe

\* This and other numbers are dated to before the 2011 uprising.

January 2014, a third of the tribesmen fled to Turkey and the regime-held areas to secure shelter for their families and education for their children.

The lone al-Bayattrah family to pledge allegiance to IS consisted of Hassan al-Dily al-Jasim and his brother Dily al-Dily al-Jasim, along with their sons and grandsons—in all, about fifteen men and ten women, who joined the IS women’s brigade known as al-Khansa. A poor family with little political or educational background, its members evidently joined IS to boost themselves economically. Whereas before joining the jihadists the family was not religious, with many of the young men known to drink alcohol and the women to dress liberally, most became radicalized afterward.

### ● Al-Ajeel

The 50,000-strong al-Ajeel belong to the Jabbour, the largest extended tribe in Hasaka province, and reside on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in the area between the cities of Raqqa and al-Tabqa. Previously, this tribe professed support for Assad and the Baathists, fearing the regime’s security service. Correspondingly, parents encouraged their sons not to engage in anti-government political or religious activities.

But over the last two decades or so, dozens of tribal members moved to Aleppo to attend university, where they interacted with Wahhabi and Sufi figures who hailed originally from Aleppo city, rural Aleppo, and Idlib. Returning to their home areas, these tribesmen spread their new religious ideas, resulting in the radicalization of some. In turn, some were arrested by the government security apparatus, and some traveled to Iraq to counter the U.S.-led invasion, which began in 2003.

The best example of such a figure is Abu Luqman (formal name: Ali Moussa al-Shawakh), Raqqa’s Islamic State governor. Abu Luqman was born in 1973 in the village of al-Sahel, thirty kilometers west of Raqqa city on the Raqqa–Aleppo highway. While studying in the law faculty at the University of Aleppo, he encountered various religious scholars and students, eventually developing strong ties with Abu al-Qaqa (formal name: Mahmoud Qul Aghassi), a radical Sufi close to the regime’s security operations in Aleppo and Damascus who was then sending jihadists and Arab fighters to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion. Abu Luqman joined this operation and was responsible for hosting, trafficking, and smuggling the Arab fighters from Syria to al-Qaeda-held areas in Iraq.

Although visiting Iraq often between 2003 and 2010, he spent most of this period in Syria, during which time Syrian security forces arrested and released him multiple times. He was held at the infamous Said-naya Prison, Syria’s first military prison, along with the most hardline al-Qaeda jihadists. The last such release occurred after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in early 2011, at which point he returned to Raqqa city to participate in anti-Assad demonstrations. He then joined Jabhat al-Nusra and became second-in-command to Abu Saad al-Hadrami, the JN leader in Raqqa.

A year later, Abu Luqman personally killed Hadrami, purportedly to demonstrate his freshly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. He subsequently became IS’s most trusted leader from Raqqa province. Abu Luqman would bring in several lieutenants, including Abu Ali al-Shara (Fawaz al-Ali), the group’s “dirty hand” in Raqqa, and Abu Abdul Rahman al-Amni, who served as security chief in the city.

Abu Luqman cemented the Islamic State’s hold over Raqqa province and convinced many of JN’s Raqqa fighters to defect to IS. Interestingly, his name is never published on official IS orders or announcements. Unconfirmed reports indicate he changed his name to Abu Ayub to hide his identity from local Raqqa tribesmen who would otherwise recognize him.

### ● Al-Breij

The Islamic State has made strong inroads with the al-Breij, whose 40,000 tribesmen are centered fifteen kilometers east of Raqqa city and belong to the Afadla, the largest extended tribe in eastern Raqqa. A handful of Wahhabi and Salafi families from the al-Breij were influenced by Sheikh Muhammad al-Khaddir, a well-known Wahhabi cleric from the Raqqa town of Maadan. Having traveled to Saudi Arabia for work, some al-Breij families were influenced by Wahhabi thought and, upon their return, disseminated Wahhabi tenets among their relatives and neighbors.

During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, dozens of Wahhabi and pro-Saddam youth from al-Breij traveled to Iraq to defend the Baathist regime. This tribal affinity for the Iraqi strongman was rooted in ties with the former al-Breij sheikh Breij al-Abdulahadi, who lived in Baghdad, where Hussein courted his favor with a fancy house, cars, drivers, and other markers of status.

Al-Brej tribesmen were not initially sympathetic to al-Qaeda jihadists, but following Jabhat al-Nusra's 2013 seizure of Raqqa, hundreds of young men from the tribe joined IS, becoming its enforcers among the city's residents.

Generally, al-Brej tribesmen have a reputation for toughness, setting the standard in Raqqa. If, for instance, two cousins have a dispute over land, such a disagreement could well prove fatal. Recognizing this reputation, IS sent hundreds of al-Brej fighters to difficult fronts such as Kobane. According to estimates from the tribe itself, it has lost about a thousand fighters for IS, some two hundred of whom originally from the town of al-Karameh, known as the al-Brej "capital."

### ● Al-Na'im

The 15,000-strong al-Na'im is one of the largest extended tribes in Syria, with members living in Raqqa, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Golan provinces. While most of its members have been irreligious or moderate Sufi Islamists, the Islamic State has cultivated extensive al-Na'im support by exploiting a tribal rivalry with local Kurds over valuable agricultural land. The al-Na'im counts few Wahhabi or Salafi families among its ranks, save for a handful who traveled to Saudi Arabia for work opportunities, thereafter returning to their hometowns. Unlike the al-Brej, however, attempts by these returnees to persuade their relatives and neighbors of the merits of Wahhabi ideology have met with little success.

Because of their land dispute with nearby Kurds, al-Na'im tribesmen were the first Islamic State supporters in the Tal Abyad region. They hosted IS leaders and helped the group smuggle foreign fighters into the country from Turkey and later into Iraq. IS's foremost supporters among the al-Na'im belong to the extended al-Agal family, whose members hosted the first IS meetings in their Quneitra village (distinct from the city of the same name in the Golan region), with the particular goal of rallying support for the jihadist group in the Tal Abyad region. Al-Na'im's Sheikh Muhammad al-Agal and Hassan al-Suleiman, a key social figure in the tribe, were pivotal in encouraging al-Na'im tribesmen to join IS.

According to al-Na'im tribesmen, about a hundred tribal leaders now hold prominent administrative or military roles with the Islamic State. In October and November of 2014, dozens of al-Na'im IS fighters were

killed near Kobane during clashes with the Kurdish YPG militias.

### ● Conclusions

Although the Islamic State may heretofore have been able to exacerbate Kurdish-Arab rivalries in Raqqa, other forces are now approaching the city from all sides, which will likely prompt tribesmen to eventually explore their options. For U.S.-backed forces, rallying support from tribes whose members have kept clear of the Islamic State is a good start, but understanding the generational divide prevalent in particular tribes will also be important. Most tribesmen are motivated by pragmatic factors: what comes next for their community, the degree of their involvement and control, and the sustainability of the situation.

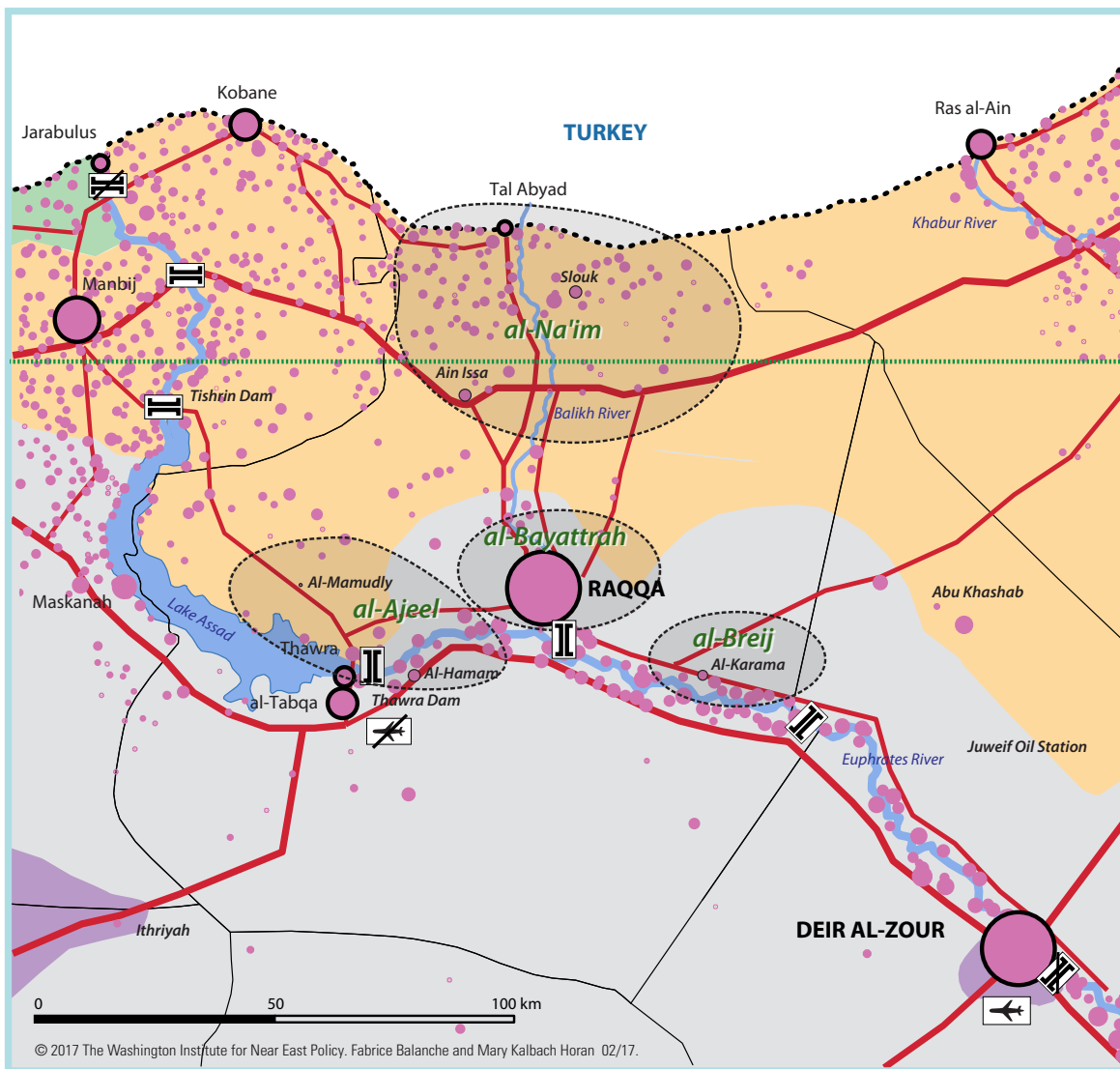
## ■ INDIRECT U.S. OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE RAQQA TRIBES

Arab tribes around Raqqa have a generally poor opinion of the United States, reinforced by collateral damage from the anti-IS air campaign, indicating that a sizable direct U.S. military role in eastern Syria to "defeat and destroy" the Islamic State would likely face resistance and possibly an insurgency. But understanding tribal leaders' criticism of the Obama administration's Syria policy may hold out considerable opportunity for the Trump administration. In at least two cases, tribal leaders are willing to let bygones be bygones if the United States indirectly supports the tribes in taking back IS territories. Central to success with the tribes and avoiding clashes with the Kurds will be developing a clear plan to hand IS areas over to an Arab tribal and Kurdish administration.

### ■ Al-Bayatrah

In the city of Raqqa, the greatest opportunities could lie with the al-Bayatrah, which has no ideological grievances with the United States. In interviews, tribal leaders are highly critical of former U.S. president Barack Obama's Syria policy and his "weakness" in dealing with the country's crisis, expressing their view that Obama's passivity strengthened Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime. Such views owe, in no small

### Arab Tribes In Raqqa Province



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<b>AREA CONTROLLED BY:</b>		<b>TYPE OF LOCALITY</b>	
Syrian Army	Main road	Urban	<b>POPULATION</b>
Islamic State	Secondary road	Rural	
Other rebels	Military airport open	100	
PYD	Military airport closed	1,000	
<b>TRIBAL AREA:</b>	Bridge open	20,000	
<i>al-Ajeel</i>	Bridge destroyed	100,000	
	International border	300,000	
	Province border		
	<b>RAQQA</b> Province center		
	Manbij District center		
	Rain Line 10		

part, to the tribe's anti-Assad sentiments, rooted in the regime's seizure and redistribution of its lands over the past four decades. Their leaders voiced hope that a new administration would demonstrate more strength and seriousness in dealing with the Syria crisis. Indeed, the al-Bayatrah could even be the bedrock for post-IS governance in Raqqa: in addition to the group's members forming a sizable proportion of downtown, where many own businesses, Nabil al-Fawaz, the head of Raqqa's short-lived Local Council—the independent governing body active between the city's liberation in March 2013 and the IS takeover in January 2014—belongs to the al-Bayatrah.

### ■ Al-Ajeel

Interestingly, the United States may also have opportunities with the al-Ajeel, the tribe of the Islamic State's Raqqa governor, Abu Luqman. Interviews with tribal leaders indicate that they do not oppose the United States and actually would welcome a U.S.-led and organized offensive against IS-held Raqqa. Interviews also suggest that key social figures within the tribe would prefer U.S. and Turkish support for the Arab tribesmen and rebel groups, rather than support from Kurdish forces, to liberate Raqqa from IS.

These sources caution, however, that the United States should not repeat the mistakes committed through direct military intervention in Iraq. Thus, they would prefer that U.S. forces conduct military operations indirectly and send only "military leaders and advisors," not soldiers. More specifically, al-Ajeel leaders say the real fighters to liberate Raqqa should be local tribesmen with direct support from Turkey in the form of funding, arms, and Turkish troops. Such an approach, they argue, will help build local support and cooperation against IS.

But not all al-Ajeel members feel the same way. Many were supportive of or at least sympathetic to the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, himself a Sunni tribesman. As already noted, dozens of al-Ajeel tribesmen traveled to Iraq to fight for Saddam's regime against the U.S.-led invasion, where they made contact with al-Qaeda fighters in eastern and northern Iraq, thereafter adopting radical religious and anti-American views. Tribal members say Abu Luqman himself returned from Iraq to Syria with "al-Qaeda ideas." His subsequent detention at the Saidnaya military prison facilitated his encounter with hundreds of other imprisoned al-

Qaeda-linked figures. Upon his release in 2011 and his return to his hometown, al-Sahel, he began contacting his fellow tribesmen to establish the first al-Ajeel armed groups in Raqqa.

Another source of tribal anti-U.S. sentiment consists of the dozens of students who attended university in Aleppo, where they interacted with Wahabbis and Sufis. Many returned home with extremist views and have since joined IS or al-Qaeda.

### ■ Al-Breij

Few if any opportunities exist with the al-Breij tribe, whose members vehemently oppose any U.S. role in Raqqa or broader Syria. Most of its members are either communists or former supporters of Saddam Hussein, and thus blame the United States for his death and the ascent of pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite militias.

Other al-Breij grievances center on the U.S. failure to supply weapons and money to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) opposition group as well as on U.S.-led coalition airstrikes on their villages.

The unlikelihood of successful coordination with the al-Breij is highlighted by its sheikh, Tobad Breij al-Abdulahadi al-Hajo, who has mobilized large numbers of his fellow tribesmen to join the Islamic State. With ties, inherited from his father, to Iraqi Baathists who turned to the jihadist group, Hajo shaped his tribe into the most pro-IS tribe in Raqqa.

### ■ Al-Na'im

The al-Na'im tribe holds anti-U.S. sentiments similar to those of al-Ajeel, albeit for different reasons. In particular, most of those interviewed were highly critical of the United States and its support for the Kurdish militias, which have in the past clashed with Arab tribesman.

A prominent, educated social figure in al-Naim explained that such sentiments were reinforced by the nature of Washington's attempt to arm the Syrian opposition against the Islamic State. According to this figure, U.S. officials asked for names of moderate tribesmen, who would be trained in Turkey. This individual along with someone from another tribe thus supplied the United States with lists of "7,000 to 10,000" names via Turkey and the FSA's command. But the Americans conditioned their support on fighting only IS and not the Assad regime or Kurds, echoing the Iraqi *sahwa*

campaign against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the IS predecessor group. This condition compelled all tribesmen to withdraw from the U.S.-sponsored training camps.

Al-Na'im tribesmen also evince resentment over the U.S.-led war to depose Saddam Hussein. One interviewee vented that "the U.S. gave Iraq to Iran and the Shiite militias, and killed thousands of Sunni tribesmen on the pretext of fighting al-Qaeda and radicals." U.S. support for the Kurds in Syria and for Iraqi Shiites post-Saddam has led most al-Na'im tribesmen to reject U.S. involvement.

## ■ Conclusions

The United States has limited opportunities with the tribes of Raqqa as a result of both Obama and George W. Bush administration policies in Syria and Iraq. Nearly all tribal elements reject the notion of direct U.S. military intervention in Syria, a claim bolstered by the experience of many tribesmen who traveled to Iraq and fought against U.S. forces during the 2003 invasion. They also resent U.S. arming of the YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters during Obama's tenure. But in at least two cases, indirect intervention would be welcomed. Arming and supporting the al-Bayatrah, whose members hold considerable anti-Shiite, anti-Iran, and anti-Assad-regime sentiments, would help wrest Raqqa from the Islamic State's grip. Al-Bayatrah members also have local influence that would help stabilize the city following IS's eventual expulsion. When it comes to al-Ajeel, undermining IS's leadership in Raqqa—namely, that of IS governor Abu Luqman—while taking and holding the city's southern and western flanks would entail exacerbating generational fissures. In particular, such a course would empower the older tribal leadership against Abu Luqman, other tribesmen who fought and learned under AQI, and younger tribesmen who studied in Aleppo. Neutralizing such obstacles would require a clear plan with clear incentives involving U.S. and coalition guarantees for the al-Bayatrah and al-Ajeel in areas liberated from IS.

The United States has a real challenge with the al-Na'im, whose leaders are enraged over the U.S. policy of supporting the Kurdish YPG to their north as well as the failed U.S. train-and-equip program for the broader opposition. Keys to success with the al-Na'im include reevaluating U.S. military support for the YPG and a willingness by Washington to arm tribesmen without the

precondition of fighting only IS. Central to such an effort would be developing a clear political and military plan to keep Arab tribesmen from fighting the Kurds following IS's ouster. As noted, few if any opportunities exist with the al-Brejij, indicating that areas due east of Raqqa could remain a durable safe haven for the Islamic State or the center of a sustained insurgency in a post-IS environment.

## ▼ CONFLICT BETWEEN YPG/SDF AND THE RAQQA TRIBES

All four major tribes of Raqqa are hostile to the Kurdish YPG and skeptical of the SDF—the YPG-based alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters supported by the United States to retake the Islamic State capital of Raqqa. As for the prevailing dynamic between the Kurds and Raqqa's Arab tribes, it appears to be that familiarity breeds contempt; indeed, only the tribe farthest from Kurdish areas and south of the Euphrates, the al-Ajeel, is willing to even contemplate a future Raqqa in which the YPG/SDF would play a major role. This could be driven by the SDF's failure to enlist almost any members from Raqqa's Arab tribes. Encouraging the SDF to welcome such members could indeed help its chances of taking and holding the IS capital.

## ▼ Al-Na'im

The most hostile tribe to the YPG/SDF is the al-Na'im, whose lands, north of Raqqa, include those captured by the YPG in 2015 south of Tal Abyad. According to one al-Na'im tribesman, the group's members "hate Kurds more than Israelis."

The divisions between Kurds and Arabs in Tal Abyad long predate the 2011 Syrian crisis, with one longstanding disagreement involving the purchase of land, including farmland. Al-Na'im tribesmen consider it shameful to sell land to a Kurd. According to a former Syrian government source, only 27 of 630 villages and farms—with a farm consisting of about five houses—are Kurdish in the areas west and southwest of Tal Abyad, Ain Issa, and Suluk.

Local Arab tribesmen claim the Kurds have become "greedier" over the last two decades and that rich Kurds have sought to buy up land and farms, at almost any price, north of Rainfall Line 10—a fertile area stretching from some thirty kilometers south of the Turkish border

to seventy kilometers north of Raqqa—while refusing to buy any land south of this line. Amounting to about 8,000 square kilometers, and roughly equaling the area of Lebanon, the lands within Rainfall Line 10 are considered the best for agricultural use in northern Syria. Currently, the YPG is seizing these lands, even though they are occupied by 95 percent Arabs, with the rest of the population consisting of Kurds and Armenians who fled their homes after IS took Tal Abyad.

### ▼ Al-Breij

Al-Breij tribesmen likewise have extremely negative views of the Kurds. Today, tribal leaders are preparing for an assault on Raqqa by Kurdish YPG forces that they believe will result in the confiscation of lands, houses, and vehicles. Such an outcome is likely, they say, because each al-Breij family has at least one member fighting with the Islamic State. Here, observers see the potential for future animosity, if not slaughter, between al-Breij and YPG/SDF forces. Some al-Breij families go so far as to say they would prefer the Assad regime to the YPG.

Offering circumstantial evidence for Kurdish ill feelings toward the al-Breij, one Kurdish YPG military leader said in an interview that he dreams of going to Raqqa province solely to kill al-Breij tribesmen who joined IS and attacked his hometown of Kobane. He expressed no outward hostility toward any Arab tribe except the al-Breij. Unlike the long-running al-Naim bitterness toward the Kurds, the al-Breij, sharing no borders with traditional Kurdish areas near Qamishli and Kobane, had no conflictual relationship with the Kurds before the 2011 Syrian uprisings.

### ▼ Al-Bayatrah

Like the al-Naim and al-Breij, the al-Bayatrah tribe rejects any U.S.-backed YPG/SDF advance toward Raqqa. Demonstrating this point, no leaders interviewed said they would accept any future Kurdish role in Raqqa.

Al-Bayatrah tribesmen said the Kurdish PYD's "Kurdization" of the Arab towns of Tal Abyad and Manbij boded poorly for the YPG's *idara thatia* (self-administration) strategy. With significant real estate holdings in Raqqa city, the al-Bayatrah also have the most to lose should Raqqa be taken by the YPG, especially given accusations of YPG land appropriation in Arab towns already retaken

from IS. The tribal leaders also claim that the YPG coordinates with the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia, thereby suggesting the YPG/SDF will likely return Raqqa to the Assad regime following the Islamic State's defeat.

### ▼ Al-Ajeel

The al-Ajeel tribe lives west of Raqqa, far from Kurdish areas, and has no historical relationship with Kurdish communities. Nevertheless, al-Ajeel tribesmen, too, oppose the YPG campaign to take Raqqa, preferring that U.S.- and Turkish-backed Arab tribesman conquer the city. If such a course is unfeasible, however, they might accept a U.S.-led Kurdish offensive.

The al-Ajeel tribesmen interviewed express no trust in the Kurdish YPG militias, having heard reports from relatives in Azaz, northeast of Aleppo, of YPG transgressions against Arab families. One university-educated member of al-Ajeel, echoing the al-Breij prediction, said he expected YPG seizure of tribal lands, houses, tractors, and livestock on the pretext that tribesmen are "pro-IS," especially given that Raqqa's IS governor, Abu Luqman, hails from the al-Ajeel. They also expect the YPG to conscript their women into armed groups, a move al-Ajeel tribesmen vehemently reject.

### ▼ Conclusions

As the previous sections have shown, most tribesmen interviewed oppose the YPG/SDF alliance, but for different reasons, each of which is likely to complicate YPG/SDF military offensives to take and hold Raqqa. With tribes living close to YPG-controlled territory, most notably the al-Na'im, familiarity has bred contempt, with tensions over Kurdish purchases of Arab land north of Rainfall Line 10 exacerbated by the YPG forces' alleged misconduct between their cantons of Kobane and Qamishli. The accusations include YPG ethnic cleansing of Arab tribesmen.

Considerable concern, particularly among the al-Na'im and al-Bayatrah, also centers on a Kurdish "project" in Syria—code, evidently, for the YPG's local administration model that Arab tribes fear will absorb more and more of their land, in addition to enlisting their women into armed groups, a redline for Arab tribes. Such impressions, as well as supposedly temporary operations near Manbij—namely, the seizure of the city in August 2016, during which the YPG/SDF com-



mitted violations against Arab residents—undermine YPG/SDF claims that they do not seek territorial expansion at the expense of Arab tribes.

Fears of retribution for associating with the Islamic State, particularly among al-Brej and al-Ajeel tribesmen, also severely hinder the prospects of a YPG/SDF mission to take and hold Raqqa. Likewise complicating such a mission are Arab fears the YPG/SDF would return the city to Assad after taking it.

To mitigate such skepticism, Arab tribesmen and members of the FSA who moved to Turkey after IS took control of Raqqa could be enlisted to expand SDF membership, a move that would likely yield some success.

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## ★ PROSPECTS FOR EUPHRATES SHIELD AND RAQQA'S TRIBES

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On the expansion of the Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield operation to include retaking Raqqa, tribal leaders and other figures interviewed indicated cautious optimism. To some, Turkey represents a seemingly nonexpansionist counterweight to the YPG/SDF forces, which many Arab tribesmen fear will eventually spread beyond Kurdish areas. Those tribesmen skeptical of Turkey's role say they have been impressed by the degree to which Euphrates Shield leaves local people to their own affairs. However, Euphrates Shield may continue to have problems with the al-Brej, whose members have long been instrumentalized by the Assad regime, as well as now by the Islamic State, against the FSA and Turkish-backed units.

### ★ Al-Bayatrah

Al-Bayatrah tribal members are very welcoming of Turkey and the FSA brigades organized under Euphrates Shield, with no parties rejecting Turkey's advance in the Raqqa area. While remarking that the FSA's gunmen are not "very honest" and that "their hands aren't clean," al-Bayatrah figures say they feel more comfortable dealing with the FSA as opposed to with the PYD and the Assad regime and its militias. Much of this inclination owes to lineage: many FSA fighters are Arab tribesmen and some are from the al-Bayatrah, while the Kurds and regime forces are outsiders. Thus, the latter two hold a weak position in Raqqa, the Islamic State capital, and with its Arab Sunni residents.

### ★ Al-Ajeel

Almost all al-Ajeel tribesmen were receptive to a Turkish role in Raqqa province and its support of FSA brigades. They believe Turkey has no interests in occupying Syrian territory and that it entered Syria only to block the YPG's attempt to establish its own federal area.

According to different al-Ajeel figures, the FSA's fighters are easy to engage with, whereas, by contrast, dealing with the Islamic State and the Assad regime's militias and forces is considered impossible.

Further, al-Ajeel figures say the FSA's gunmen are mostly Arab tribesmen who thus know how to deal with the tribes, while respecting their traditions and laws. They fear that if Kurds, Shiite militias, and Alawite forces enter the region, these forces will persecute and crack down on the tribesmen under a variety of pretexts.

### ★ Al-Brej

Overall, whereas other Arab tribesmen showed a general receptivity to Euphrates Shield, al-Brej figures were divided: some welcomed the Turkish effort, others indicated complete opposition, while yet another group had no clear position.

As revealed in interviews, al-Brej tribesmen do not support the FSA. During the first anti-Assad demonstrations in Raqqa city in 2011, the regime used al-Brej tribesmen, Baath Party members, and uneducated tribal youth to act as "thugs" to intimidate protestors. This position gave the al-Brej a bad reputation among anti-Assad activists and later among those tribe members who did join the FSA.

Today, Turkey is recruiting, training, and equipping hundreds of former FSA gunmen for redeployment to Raqqa, a move that could place further stress on al-Brej–FSA ties. Al-Brej tribesmen know that the rebels will not deal gently with them given their opposition to Turkey and the FSA and given their IS affiliations.

### ★ Al-Na'im

Al-Naim tribesmen of Tal Abyad, who live along the Turkish border, express gratitude for Turkish efforts in the war.

Al-Na'im tribesmen say they were not surprised when Turkey took a strong position against the YPG and its "genocidal crimes against Arabs." They are also grateful to Turkey for hosting one-third of al-Na'im tribesmen,

who, fleeing the Islamic State and PYD, settled in the southern Turkish towns of Sanliurfa and Akcakale.

Moreover, according to tribesmen, the Euphrates Shield offensive to take the border town of Jarabulus established a positive precedent for a Turkish role in Syria. The tribesmen said that Turkey succeeded in leading the FSA, whose fighters slept in the street rather than commandeering houses or disrupting civilian activity in other areas such as farms. Euphrates Shield fighters also paid for everything they ate and drink, encouraging the Arab tribesmen, including from al-Na'im, to enter Tal Abyad.

Reflecting the view of other tribes, al-Na'im members expect Turkey to lead the hundreds of Arab tribesmen—the figure is as high as two thousand, according to other sources—now being trained in Turkish camps back to Syria via Tal Abyad and then to liberate Raqqa province from IS. They say that the YPG militias, despite having considerable forces in the area, enjoy little support from the tribesmen.

According to a tribesman who formerly belonged to the SDF, about a thousand Arab tribal members are now part of this force—a figure far below informal U.S. estimates, at around five thousand. Participating groups include the Raqqa Shuhada Martyrs Division, the Raqqa Tahrir Division, and the Shammar tribe's Jaish al-Sana-did, which is led by Sheikh Duham al-Hadi al-Jarba.

In the view of tribesmen, the low number of Arab tribal SDF fighters demonstrates weak tribal support for the PYD, as opposed to stronger support for Turkey, which is reportedly training 1,700 to 2,000 Arab tribesmen fighters in its camps near Sanliurfa.

## ★ Conclusions

If Euphrates Shield gives local tribesmen their desired autonomy, they may be motivated to fight and displace the Islamic State southward along the Euphrates Valley. Turkey's training of Raqqa tribesmen in southern Turkey for an operation against IS has made a strong favorable impression. Despite moving its armed forces into Syria, Turkey has convinced many of those interviewed that Ankara is not eyeing a long-term occupation—a conclusion that appears, nevertheless, to be based on wishful thinking, especially considering that a long-term Turkish presence may be necessary for stability operations. Separately, should Euphrates Shield move into Raqqa, areas east of the city under the al-Breij will likely

see an insurgency—unless Ankara and the tribe strike some sort of deal beforehand.

## ▲ RAQQA TRIBES AND THE ASSAD REGIME

Those interviewed from the four Arab tribes near Raqqa indicate a shift toward anti-Assad sentiment owing to the Syrian president's brutal approach to his country's uprising, combined with the regime's increased reliance on Iran-sponsored Shiite militias. But nostalgia for regime "stability" and state support for agriculture may provide Assad with cards to play as he seeks to triumph in the complicated game of recapturing and ruling Raqqa and the Euphrates Valley.

### ▲ Al-Bayatrah

Al-Bayatrah tribesmen interviewed expressed a very clear rejection of the Assad regime, Iran, and Shiite militias, including Hezbollah. Such opposition included resistance to any attempt from the Assad forces and Iran-run militias to retake Raqqa province. Many offered that they viewed the Islamic State and the Assad regime as two sides of the same coin, both of them detestable.

### ▲ Al-Ajeel

Historically, al-Ajeel tribesmen have been strong supporters of the Assad family and the Baath Party, but Syria's civil war has changed their views. Interviews with different Baathists of the al-Ajeel revealed the switch to be linked to persecution by Assad's army and Shiite militias as well as a perceived war against Sunni Syrians.

Those interviewed also cited the Assad regime's recent attempt to move into Raqqa province, during which forces advanced to eight kilometers from the al-Tabqa airfield and about fifteen kilometers from al-Ajeel tribal areas. In June 2016, about 75 percent of the tribesmen between fifteen and sixty years old fled their villages because they expected Assad's forces and militias would arrest, torture, and kill them, underlining the al-Ajeel's lack of trust in Assad.

One older tribesman did say he welcomed the Assad forces only for the sake of regaining stability and security. Nostalgic for the days of regime control, some tribesmen who are current or former govern-

ment employees want to collect their state salaries. The sons of these tribesmen, however—and, in this case, the government workers are mainly men—are strongly anti-regime and argue with their parents, asserting that Assad will punish them and accuse them of being Islamic State sympathizers.

### ▲ Al-Brejij

Most al-Brejij tribesmen are vehemently opposed to Assad, Iraqi Shiites, and Iran, and they profess readiness to go to Iraq to fight the Shiite militiamen they hold responsible for Saddam Hussein's death. Educated, secular tribesmen of the al-Brejij also voice deep hatred for the Assad regime and Iran's militias, vowing to resist any regime or Iran-directed offensive targeting Raqqa.

Some communist members of the al-Brejij hold more moderate positions on the regime, based on their desire for any party, "even Satan," to save them from the Islamic State. To find common ground with the regime is difficult but not impossible, in their view, but they simultaneously air their concerns that the Assad regime will arrest and kill hundreds of their tribesmen because of their support for IS.

Many al-Brejij tribesmen suspect that Iranian and Iran-backed forces and Iraqi Shiite militias will be deployed to Raqqa via Iraq after the Mosul offensive is completed. For that reason, dozens of IS-affiliated al-Brejij tribesmen traveled to Mosul to fight the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) and other Shiite militias.

### ▲ Al-Na'im

Interviews with al-Na'im tribesmen indicate that they distinguish between the Baath regime and its Syrian Arab Army on one side and the pro-Assad Syrian militias and Iran-backed militias on the other.

While nearly all those interviewed expressed dislike for Bashar al-Assad, half of al-Na'im tribesmen still welcome the Syrian regime out of nostalgia for the stability and security it provided, allowing for agricultural and economic growth, before the 2011 crisis.

Furthermore, al-Na'im interviewees relate disapproval of the regime's postuprising military and security crackdown, but they have not thus far suffered a great deal for it, given that Assad has not launched airstrikes against Raqqa's rural areas.

Interviewees, however, do evince deep fears over

pro-Assad Alawite and Shiite militias. These tribesmen say they are ready to fight Iran- and regime-backed militias because of their perceived sectarian crimes, theft, and thuggery.

On the Assad legacy, a former Baathist tribesman from the al-Na'im put his views this way: "If you open the al-Na'im tribesmen's hearts, you will see how much they like the late president Hafiz al-Assad, who gave everything to Syrian farmers and subsidized all their fuel, chemical fertilizers, and seeds. They cannot easily forget these good deeds and achievements."

### ▲ Conclusions

The Assad regime's brutality and reliance on Iran-backed Shiite groups has caused some Raqqa tribes to embrace the Islamic State. But the jihadist group's viciousness, as well as the chaos over which it prevails, has rekindled some tribes' nostalgia for a more stable and prosperous time under Assad's rule. Still, fears of regime revenge against tribesmen cooperating with IS are likely to be a major impediment to reconciliation with the regime. Another such obstacle is the regime's reliance on Shiite militias from Iraq, against which many Raqqa tribesmen have fought in neighboring Iraq. In engaging these tribes, the United States would do well to highlight its support for stability and governance projects in other Arab areas of Syria, and clarify that it backs both Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq, not only the Shiite-dominated PMUs.

## TRIBE PROFILES

### Al-Bayattrah البياطره

#### TRIBAL STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP.

Al-Bayattrah is a branch of the Aqidat tribe, the largest in eastern Syria, whose members reside in Deir al-Zour, Raqqa, Hasaka, eastern Hama, and Homs. The Hifel family is the primary family in the Aqidat.

Al-Bayattrah itself is subdivided into seven large branches, some of them already introduced in some detail: al-Fawaz (head family), al-Hamad, al-Haj, al-Farhan, al-Handi, al-Mattar, and al-Dily.

**GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY.** The largest tribal presence in Raqqa city is the al-Bayattrah clan, whose

members account for half the population of the city's downtown/old city, where they own many of the markets, shops, and buildings. Before the crisis began, the al-Bayattrah numbered around 10,000. Six other tribes—the al-Ojely, al-Bashri, al-Hassoun, al-Akrad, al-Shabil Salamah, and al-Goeder—in addition to a handful of additional small tribes fill out Raqqa city's population. The tribesmen send their sons and daughters to the city's schools, where they study to become physicians, engineers, and teachers. Many open their own small businesses, while others travel to the Gulf states to work, sending remittances back to their family in Raqqa.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH REGIME.** The tribe's relationship with the Assad regime has been antagonistic since the Baathists came to power in a coup in 1963. Shortly thereafter, the new leaders seized tribal land and property under the pretext of developing the city through the construction of roads, parks, and government offices.

In 2011, during the initial anti-Assad protest movement in Raqqa, demonstrations were organized and launched from al-Bayattrah neighborhoods. Tribe members also sheltered fleeing protestors in their homes when security forces cracked down on the demonstrations. By one reckoning, about 50 predominantly younger pro-Assad Baathists can be found out of 10,000 al-Bayattrah members.

**POLITICAL DISPOSITION.** While the tribe is broadly anti-Assad, three main political trends can be identified among its members: communist/leftist, communist/Iraqi Baathist, and Islamist. The tribe's leading family is al-Fawza, whose two brothers—Asad Sadiq and Ismael Sadiq—are its effective heads. Asad is a businessman in Damascus who has maintained ties with the regime, if only to maintain his business and tribal interests. Ismael lives in Raqqa city, where his son was an early leader among the FSA, although he has since left for Turkey. Ismael is opposed to the Islamic State, but he also makes efforts to not run afoul of the group.

Other prominent members of the Fawaz family include Ahmad Fayez al-Fawaz, an anti-Assad communist who spent seventeen years in prison for his association with Riad al-Turk's opposition Syrian Socialist Party. Fawaz was also involved in the regime-critical 2005 Damascus Declaration.

The first head of Raqqa's Local Council—the independent governing body that emerged after rebels took

the city in March 2013—was Nabil al-Fawaz, also a communist, who spent sixteen years in prison for his political beliefs.

Another notable al-Bayattrah communist, this one from the Hamad family, is Muhammad Abd al-Hamid al-Hamad, an intellectual who died in early 2017 and had written extensively on Syria's ethnicities, sects, and tribes.

The Darwish family, likewise part of the al-Bayattrah tribe, includes both communists and Iraqi Baathists. Suleiman Saleh Darwish was a communist figure who was sentenced to death but escaped to Holland, where he still lives with his Moroccan wife; the late Ali Darwish was an Iraqi Baathist; and Khalaf Darwish, living in Qatar with his sons, is a leading pan-Arabist Nasserite whose sons sponsored anti-Syrian-regime protests and organization.

The tribe's Islamist trend is represented by the al-Farhan, al-Haj, and al-Mattar branches. Both Homs al-Farhan and his father were leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Raqqa province. Homs al-Farhan, a religion teacher by trade, along with his sons Mohanad and Hazim, led and financed anti-Assad demonstrations in 2011. Currently, he lives in Turkey, where he is an anti-Assad and anti-IS organizer. Ahmed al-Mattar is a Muslim Brotherhood supporter who, along with his brothers, also lives in Turkey. Saleh al-Haj likewise supports the Brotherhood, and lives in Saudi Arabia with his sons.

## العجيل Al-Ajeel

### TRIBAL STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP.

The al-Ajeel tribe is part of the larger Jabbour tribe, the biggest in Hasaka province, whose territory stretches all the way to Iraq's Salah al-Din province.

The al-Ajeel consists of eight sub-branches, with the leading family being part of the tribe's leading Foui branch. In Raqqa province, the family's preeminent sheikh is Karim al-Ali Zaiter al-Shabib, who lives in the village of al-Hamam, thirty-five kilometers west of Raqqa. The family's supreme sheikh is Ahmad Abdullah al-Mustafa, a resident of Azaz, northeast of Aleppo. The following comprise the tribe's eight branches:

1. **الفوي** Foui
2. **الغنام** Al-Ghannam, led by the family of Ibrahim Hindi al-Moussa, a late member of the Baath Party's regional leadership and former governor of Suwayda; branch members live in the villages of

Abu Harirah, al-Baroudah, al-Tabqah, Gub al-Ghouli, and Haddag. The earlier-mentioned Ibrahim al-Hanadi is from this family.

3. **Al-Salamah** السلامه, led by the al-Sumir family, in al-Mahmoudli
4. **Al-Oun** لعون, led by the al-Ajeel family, living in the town of al-Mansoura
5. **Al-Hassan al-Hamad** الحسن الحمد, led by the al-Harmoush family, also living in al-Mansoura
6. **Al-Assaf** العساف, led by the al-Alian family, living in the village of al-Houra
7. **Issa al-Ghanim** عيسى الغانم, led by the al-Laig family, living in Abu Qabia, al-Sahel, and Azaz
8. **Al-Kubissen** الكبيسين, led by Haj Khalaf al-Muhammad al-Assaf, living in the town of al-Sahel. Abu Luqman belongs to this branch.

**GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY.** The al-Ajeel is a large tribe, with around 50,000 members living on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River prior to the 2011 uprising. The tribe's fifty-square-mile territory includes the villages of al-Mahmoudli, Gaabar, Eid Sagher, Eid Kabir, al-Hamam, and al-Sahel, home village of Abu Luqman, the Islamic State governor of Raqqa.

Most al-Ajeel members are uneducated farmers who live in their ancestral villages, growing wheat, barley, cotton, corn, and sugar beets. The tribesmen have thousands of sheep from which they produce milk, butter, and yogurt, some of it sold to shops in Raqqa city. Most of the al-Ajeel have fled Raqqa since the start of the war. They now live in Turkey and regime-held areas.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH REGIME.** Because the tribe traditionally consisted of uneducated and apolitical farmers, its members were brought into the regime's fold through government employment and the construction in the 1980s of the Baath and al-Tabqa dams, which irrigated the adjacent al-Ajeel agricultural land.

The story of al-Ajeel member Ibrahim al-Hanadi is illustrative of the Baathist inculcation of the tribe. When the government established the province's first sugar beet factory in Raqqa, Hanadi was named its director. He, in turn, brought hundreds of al-Ajeel tribesmen to work in the factory. Later becoming secretary of Raqqa's Baath Party, he secured positions for his

tribesmen in the party. Hence, today few of the tribe's families are involved in politics beyond supporting the Baath regime, resulting in their reputation in the province as regime clients.

A handful of al-Ajeel families, however, harbor Islamist leanings, including the most powerful tribal figure in Raqqa to join the Islamic State, Abu Luqman, who serves as the group's provincial governor.

## Al-Brej al-Brej

### TRIBAL STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP.

The al-Brej, part of the broader Afadla tribe—the largest in eastern Raqqa—is divided into three branches:

#### 1. Al-Hassan al-Brej الحسن البرج

Listed by village, the leaders are

- *Fatisah Lakson*: Najjam al-Fajjar
- *Fatisat al-Deeb*: Yusuf al-Deeb (both Ismael al-Hajo and Tobad Brej al-Abdulahdi al-Hajo are members of this sub-branch)
- *Fatisah Biram*: Fasih al-Ali al-Biram
- *Maazellah*: Mashog al-Balikh
- *Tal Saman*: Muhammad al-Sarhan
- *Al-Thamriah*: Gumah al-Battha

#### 2. Al-Hussein al-Brej الحسين البرج

Led by Sheikh Mahmoud al-Khabur, the tribesmen of this branch live in the villages of Jdeidat Kahett, Jdeidat Khabur, and Jdeidet Baldeh.

#### 3. Al-Gaber الجابر

The tribesmen of this branch—belonging to the al-Harir, al-Galo, al-Zeidat, and al-Sahin families—live in the village of Jdeidet Kahett and are led by Sheikh Mahmoud al-Mikhliif.

**GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY.** Prior to the 2011 uprising, the 40,000 members of the al-Brej tribe, mainly farmers, were living on the fertile lands of the Euphrates Valley. Their primary town is al-Karameh (population 8,000), fifteen kilometers east of Raqqa. The tribe's territory runs from the village of Fatisah Lakson, ten kilometers east along the northern bank of the Euphrates River, to Jdeidat Khabur, including the villages of Fatisat al-Deeb, Fatisah Biram, Maazellah, and Tal Saman.

Despite the good farmland, where tribal members grow wheat, barley, cotton, corn, and vegetables,

they are not wealthy. Since the Syrian war began, several hundred of the tribe's youth have left for Turkey and Europe.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH REGIME.** The al-Brej is viewed with contempt by the Syrian regime for its historical ties with the Iraqi Baath Party. Breij Abdulhadi, a member of the prominent tribal family led by Yusuf al-Deeb al-Hajo, opposed the Syrian regime, leading him to flee to Iraq in the 1980s, where he signed on with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Baathists. As more al-Brej members joined Syrian communist parties and the Iraqi Baath Party, the regime responded by imprisoning dozens of them and denying others government jobs and positions in the party.

**POLITICAL DISPOSITION.** The al-Brej is generally affiliated with the Syrian Communist Party—in particular, the wings led by the late Yusuf Faisal and the late Khalid Bakdash—and, as noted, the Iraqi Baath Party. The regime-recognized head of the tribe is Ismael al-Hajo, a seventy-year-old Communist member of parliament.

However, many other tribe members consider Tobad al-Brej, the thirty-five-year-old son of Breij Abdulhadi, to be the tribe's true sheikh, and he has mobilized much of its membership to join the Islamic State. Born in Iraq, Tobad returned to Syria after the 2003 U.S. invasion, whereupon he earned significant sums of money from large construction projects in Raqqa city.

When the unrest began in Syria, Tobad started organizing al-Brej tribesmen, distributing money to back anti-Assad demonstrations, and later acquiring weapons for nascent armed groups. After 2011, all four police officers who belonged to the al-Brej, part of a generation that had been warming to the regime, defected to the moderate opposition. They now live in Turkey.

As Syria fell further into chaos, Tobad reached out to his father's friends—Iraqi Baathist officers who had become leaders of IS—and he himself, in the process, became chair of the IS-run "Tribal Council." He also functions as the Raqqa liaison for the Saudi IS leader who runs the so-called Office of Tribes.

In turn, Tobad convinced his tribesmen to join IS's military and administrative wings alike, making the al-Brej the most supportive pro-IS tribe in Raqqa. Also prominent in the IS hierarchy is Fawaz al-Ali (aka Abu Ali al-Shari), a tribesman who serves as the group's head Islamic judge in Raqqa. Previously a member of Jabhat al-Nusra, Ali is responsible through his judicial

rulings, according to tribal sources, for killing at least a thousand secular and anti-IS activists as well as former FSA fighters. Unconfirmed reports suggest he was killed in a U.S. airstrike on April 10, 2016.

## Al-Na'im النعيم

### TRIBAL STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP.

The leading al-Na'im family is Sheikh Ahmed, whose Sheikh Inizan Sheikh Ahmed (aka Abu Ahmed), in his mid-sixties, still lives in the eponymous family village of Sheikh Ahmed. The al-Na'im consists of five main branches:

1. **Al-Bayin** البين, led by Sheikh Gassim al-Muhammad al-Masttou. Some al-Na'im tribesmen consider al-Masttou to be the true leader of al-Na'im in the Tal Abyad region.
2. **Al-Agal** العجال, whose members live primarily in the village of Quneitra, in Raqqa province, and who are led by Sheikh Muhammad al-Agal. Hassan al-Suleiman, an influential IS sharia judge, belongs to al-Agal.
3. **Al-Tublis** التوبلس, led by the al-Digel family
4. **Al-Qaddiah** القديج, led by al-Hayas family, who live in Raqqa city
5. **Al-Breidat** البريدات, led by the al-Amshat family, who live in Tal Abyad

**GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY.** The al-Na'im tribe includes residents of Raqqa, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Golan provinces. And while its members—15,000 in Syria preprising—make it only the fifth-largest tribe inhabiting the region around Tal Abyad and along the Syrian-Turkish border, the Islamic State has made greatest inroads with the al-Naim by exploiting land and other rivalries with neighboring Kurds.

In addition to Tal Abyad, al-Na'im members inhabit the nearby towns and villages of Shab Dagh, Misherfa, Sheikh Ahmed, Ain Issa, Suluk, Tal Saman, as well as Tal Abyad. The larger neighboring tribes are, in order: Qais, Abu Assaf (the tribe of anti-Assad writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh), al-Mashuhur, and al-Turkman.

The high rainfall in the areas populated by this tribe contributes to fertile land and productive farming on sizable tracts. Tribesmen can harvest large crops of wheat and barley without the high costs associated with irrigation. Before the Syrian conflict began, the Tal Abyad

region, roughly the size of Lebanon in square kilometers, was responsible for 60 to 70 percent of Raqqa's production of wheat, barley, and cotton. One al-Na'im member reported that the poorest farmer in the tribe still owned five hectares (about twelve acres), enough to comfortably support a family.

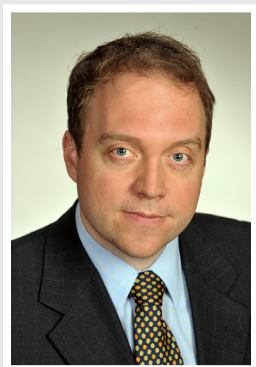
The al-Na'im tribe also benefited from the period of improving Syrian-Turkish ties between 2005 and 2011, during which time Tal Abyad witnessed a boom in industrial and agricultural investment. For example, two cement factories were opened in the region, in addition to hundreds of large private farms using modern irrigation methods.

**POLITICAL DISPOSITION.** The al-Naim is generally apolitical, but has worked with the Assad regime historically. By exploiting a land dispute between the tribe and neighboring Kurds, the Islamic State garnered many early al-Naim supporters. About a hundred tribesmen now hold prominent positions in the group.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH REGIME.** Whereas neighboring tribes have historically been more politically active, the al-Na'im has been largely apolitical. The tribe's older generations were drawn to Sufi orders, believing that the al-Naim could trace its lineage to the Prophet Muhammad's family via the well-known medieval Sufi sheikh Ezzeddine Abu Hamra.

When the Baath Party gained power in Syria in 1963, the al-Na'im became loyal clients.

To the extent that the tribe engaged in politics, this involved local jostling for favor with other pro-regime tribes, playing into the leadership's divide-and-conquer strategy. Some tribesmen took government jobs in both Tal Abyad and Raqqa city, and along with other Baathist tribesmen from Tal Abyad, the al-Na'im developed a reputation for having "good handwriting," a euphemistic reference to the volume of reports they filed to the regime's security services.



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