Regional Conflict Report

Ras al-Ain

February 18, 2013

About the Project:

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project is an initiative launched by The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. Funded jointly by The Skoll Global Threats Fund and The Carter Center, the initiative examines the massive amounts of citizen-generated information related to the Syrian conflict that is available online. Specifically, the project:

1. details the growth of armed opposition groups in each govornorate within Syria;
2. illuminates the evolution of armed opposition hierarchies at the local, regional, and national levels;
3. shows the current geographic delineation of pro and anti-government forces; and
4. provides up-to-date analysis on the current state of the conflict.

All estimates regarding the number of opposition fighters operating in any given area are based on tallies of fighters visible in online videos. While such announcements via YouTube have become common for the Syrian opposition, our estimates cannot account for individual fighters and fighting units which have not announced their establishment on the internet, and should therefore be viewed as the minimum estimates available. The data, while not exhaustive, should be seen as representative due to the fact that many of the largest and most capable armed groups operating in Syria have a strong online presence.

For best visibility, it is strongly recommended that these reports be viewed online or printed in color.

Acknowledgements:

The Carter Center has received support for the Syria Conflict Mapping Project from a multitude of individuals, companies, and organizations. The following organizations and individuals stand out in the contributions they have made to the success of this project.


Lockheed Martin's LMEnsemble has been enormously useful in gathering and making sense of information coming out of Syria. Their platform has helped the Center stay up to date on developments throughout the world at every level of detail, and have automated much of the data gathering required to undertake this project.

Archives of armed group formations kept by researchers of the Syria Conflict Monitor have been an enormous help to The Carter Center's Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed archives have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

Special thanks go out to Russell Shepherd, whose programming skills and expert knowledge of network analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center's analysis.
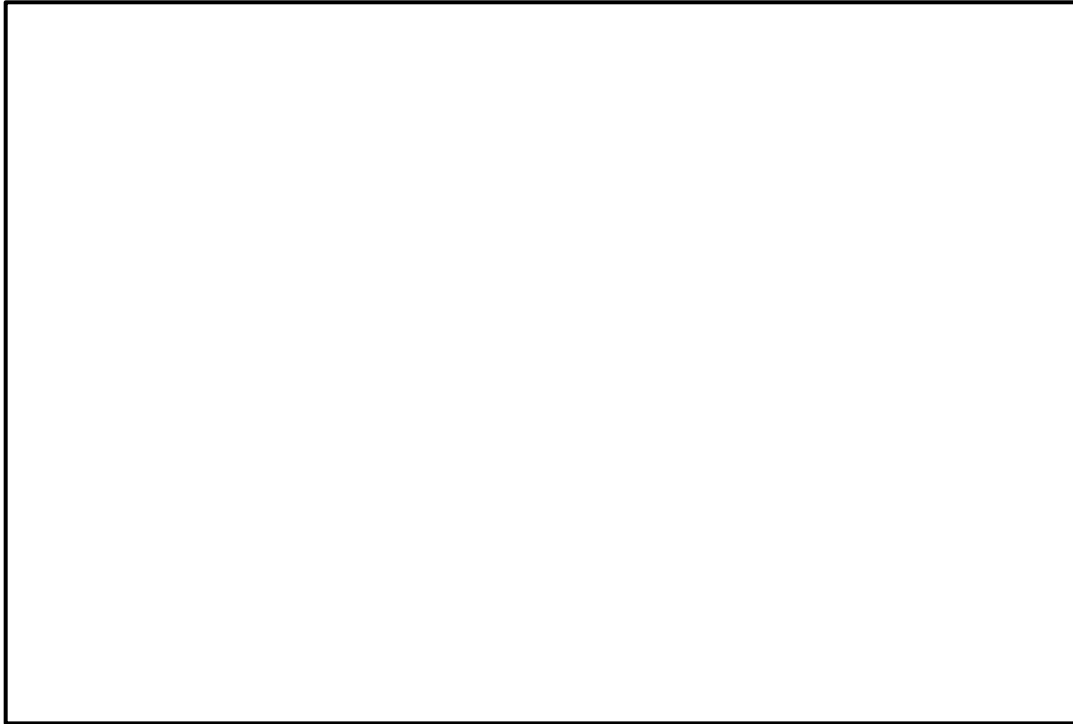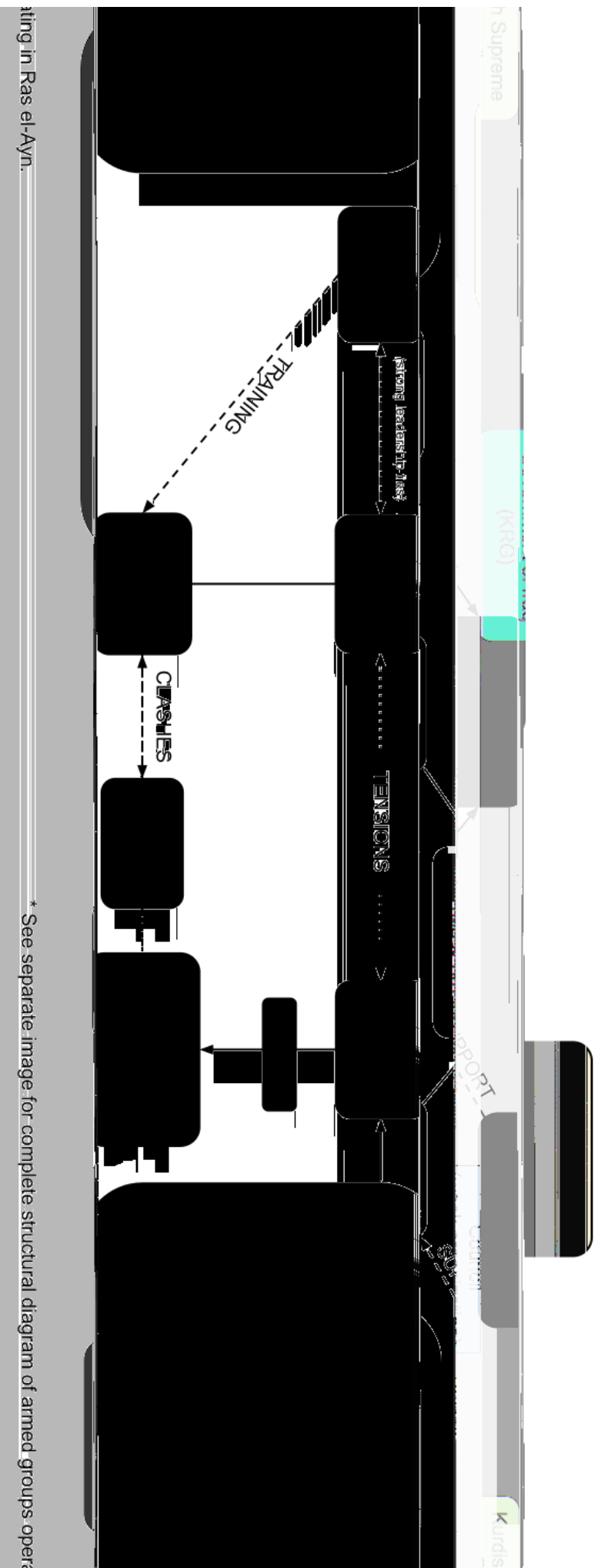
Ras al-Ain Backgrounder

Ras al-Ain is a border town in every sense of the word. Positioned on the western border of the Hassakah governorate, it straddles both the Turkish border as well as the ethnographic boundary between majority Kurdish and Arab areas of Syria. The town also boasts a diverse population of Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, and Turkmen, as well as a number of different confessions.

Summary of Major Events

In the summer of 2012, the Syrian regime made the bold strategic move of pulling the majority of its troops out of the northeastern, heavily-Kurdish Hassakah governorate. The vacuum left in the wake of these troops' departure was filled so quickly by the Democratic Union Party (PYD)'s People's Defense Units (YPG) that many in the opposition accused the organization of collaborating with the Assad regime. While such collaboration is unlikely, the question remained as to how the Kurds, who had remained relatively quiet until this point in the conflict, would play their hand.

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* See separate image for complete structural diagram of armed groups operating in Ras el-Ayn.

Structure of Armed Groups

As mentioned earlier, the YPG is the only substantial Kurdish force in Syria. There have been reports of a number of independent Kurdish units fighting with opposition forces throughout the Hassakah governorate, as well as a handful of militia members that claim to be independent of the YPG, however these units appear to be the exception rather than the norm. Also, some observers on the ground claim that even within the nominally "Kurdish" battalions operating under the banner of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA), the majority of the fighters are Arab.

In addition to being the only major Kurdish force in the area, the YPG also boasts a strong central command. In Ras al-Ain there are no battalions or brigades – all fighters in the city fall under one, unified command, led by Jamshid Khabat Ibrahim (nom de guerre). YPG militia members also appear to be highly skilled, and are believed by many to be trained in the Qandil mountains – the longtime stronghold of the PKK.

Opposition forces operating in the area, on the other hand, are extremely fragmented.[1] Not only do the separate C /P 0.018 Tw 0.5198 0Td261a0 Tc 0 Tw 2.533 0 .1782.

The openness of this relationship, while unsurprising, furthers the intractability of the conflict between opposition forces and Kurds throughout Syria. While opposition forces suspect the Kurds of collaborating with the regime, Kurdish forces see the opposition as little more than a Turkish proxy designed to stifle any aspirations of autonomy for the Kurdish people of Syria.

Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement

Several attempts to negotiate a ceasefire have been made over the course of the conflict. The most recent of these took place on Feburary 17, 2013 and resulted in the signing of a ceasefire agreement between representatives of the FSA and YPG based on the principles quoted below:

> Believing in the unity of the Syrian land and people, abiding by the principles of peaceful cohabitation among all segments of the Syrian population, rejecting all sectarian, ethnic, and economic tendencies, to unite all Syrians in their fight for dignity against the dictatorial regime, to build a free Syria in which all Syrians enjoy his/her rights, under the slogan, "Syria for all Syrians," the various segments of the society in Ras al-Ain agreed to avoid all conflict based on the following provisions:
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> 1. Redeployment of military forces and removal of all military presence inside the city.
> 2. The creation of a follow-

future. Lastly, and of great importance, is the willingness of Turkey to accept a ceasefire. Having played a major role in aiding and supplying the opposition forces in their fight against the YPG, it is likely that Turkey will try to spoil the agreement in order to continue their proxy struggle against the PYD and YPG.

Should this agreement fail to bring about a lasting truce, there could be other avenues to a negotiated agreement. Though the numerous political parties operating in the area are generally at odds with one another, there are a few connective elements that could be leveraged for the purposes of negotiation. First and foremost among these are the Kurdish representatives who have joined the National Coalition. Among these are three members of the Kurdish National Council and a representative of the Local Council of Hassakah. Mohammed Mustapha Mohammed, the representative of the Local Council of Hassakah appears to be particularly well poised due to his connection to the formal opposition, local council, and his affiliation with the Kurdish Youth Movement. As an active member of the Kurdish Youth Movement, a pan-regional organization with a high degree of grassroots support and organization, Mohammed has already met repeatedly with the PYD in attempts to preserve Kurdish unity. As a long established organization, the Kurdish Youth Movement has a higher degree of popular support than the newly created Kurdish Supreme Council. Furthermore, placing this organization in a leading role could bolster their efforts at grassroots level unification.

Regardless of who or what organization is chosen to mediate should the conflict turn violent again, it is clear that all parties will have to be represented in the negotiations. Disproportionate representation on the part of the YPG, as was the case in this latest ceasefire agreement, could further harm the fragile relationship between the KNC and PYD. Also, any ceasefire agreement would also have to take into account the growing power of independent Islamist armed groups. Should these groups be included in the political process from the beginning during local ceasefire agreements, there will be better prospects for their productive participation in larger, and perhaps even nation-wide, political processes.

Figure 3 and Figure 4: This structural diagram as well as the associated diagram on the following page show the rapid re   -alignment of battalions in Ras al -Ain and demonstrate the lack of rigid command structures among FSA   -affiliated forces.