

THE
CARTER CENTER



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 governorate 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.

Analysis of the Conflict in Ras al-Ain

February 18, 2013



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.

For the remainder of the summer, the territory remained relatively quiet. The Syrian regime kept a substantial troop presence in the largest Kurdish city, Qamishli, and the YPG quickly consolidated their control where regime security was not present. Life proceeded with relative calm until on November 8, 2012, when opposition forces from nearby areas advanced upon the few remaining regime forces in Ras al-Ain. Over the course of four days, opposition forces won decisive victories over the remaining regime elements and moved into the town.

Upon entering the town, tensions between opposition forces and the YPG rose. Some opposition fighters saw the YPG as being complacent towards the Syrian regime, others believe them to be

guilty of outright collaboration, and many others saw the YPG as a threat to Syrian nationalism. Regardless of the cause of their grievances, almost all opposed the flying of Kurdish colors in the city. These rising tensions, however, were interrupted by the Syrian regime's response to the opposition activity. The two days of air raids on opposition positions led to the exodus of much of the city's population.

Tensions again rose in the days following the air raids and on November 19th clashes broke out between the YPG and opposition forces in the city. The fighting divided the town from north to south and resulted in the death of at least one member of both the opposition and YPG forces. Following these clashes, some looked to mediate a ceasefire. Many of those interviewed reported Jabhat al-Nusra as taking a leading role in ceasefire negotiations, which called for the creation of a civilian council and a joint checkpoint in the center of the city. Neither one of these materialized and in intermittent clashes continued along the de facto battle line through the center of town.

The most recent round of serious fighting occurred between January 16th and 19th. This fighting again led to a large displacement of civilians and highlighted the Turkish role in the conflict. During the clashes, witnesses report that the Turkish government created a field hospital on the border in order to treat opposition forces while simultaneously preventing Kurdish civilians from crossing into Turkey. Others report opposition troops having entered the city from the Turkish sister city of Ceylanpinar.

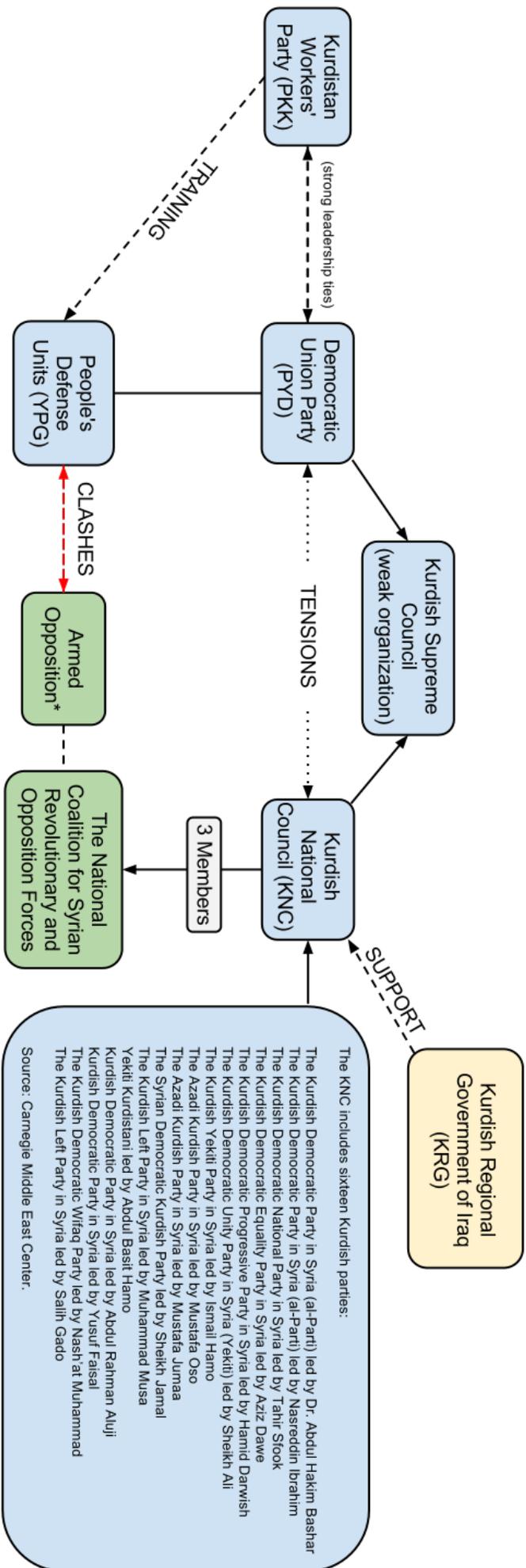
During these clashes, opposition forces made gains, but despite commanding a substantially larger force (by some accounts twice as large as the YPG militia in the city) the line of control remained more or less unchanged with heavier losses being reported on the opposition side. These latest clashes also demonstrated a significant rise in the severity of the fighting. Opposition video showed a number of rebel-held tanks firing upon YPG forces from the western outskirts of the city, and some report as many as seven tanks being used in the assault.

Structure of Political Organizations

Kurdish political power in Syria is divided between two major players, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). Each of these organizations has strong ties to external political actors, as well as more limited ties with each other through the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC).

The Democratic Union Party is closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In addition to ties at the leadership level, the PKK has also been instrumental in training fighters in the PYD's militia (the People's Defense Units), which is the only major Kurdish militia operating in Syria. These strong ties and monopoly on military power have granted the PYD disproportionate political power as well as the enmity of a number of actors (particularly Turkey). Also, the connections with the PKK, have resulted in efforts by the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) to counter their influence by supporting other Syrian Kurdish organizations.

One such organization is the Kurdish National Council. The KRG sponsored the creation of the KNC, which grouped together the nearly all remaining Syrian Kurdish political parties. Also, in a move which was tacitly supported by Turkey, the KRG sponsored the creation of the KSC, which looked to bring both the PYD and KNC together under one political roof. This effort has, in large part, been a failure. Though the two parties have equal representation in the KSC, the PYD's sole control over the YPG as well as the fact that it is a unitary actor as opposed to a conglomerate of clashing personalities, has meant that the two parties have never truly been on an equal playing field.



* 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.



Figure 1: Jamshid Khabat Ibrahim

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 groups adhere to different ideologies and express distinct visions for a post-Assad Syria, they also change allegiances often.

In one more dramatic example of this, little more than a week after Liwa al-Ummah was formed in Ras al-Ain, it was announced that six of its battalions had switched allegiance to the new “Ahfath ar-Rasul Brigade” under the command of the Revolutionary Military Council of Hassakah.² In addition to command structures shifting, there are some battalions that are claimed by multiple umbrella organizations or commanders. For example, the Revolutionary Military Council of ar-Raqqa, which has at least two brigades operating in Ras al-Ain, is affiliated with both nation-wide leadership networks of the Free Syrian Army as well as with the Jabhat at-Tahrir al-Jazeera wa al-Furat, which is a Turkish government-supported network of fighters with a heavy presence in the Dier ez-Zour governorate with branches in the north.

Not all units have such a wealth of affiliations. In fact, several armed groups have leadership networks actively working to distance themselves from the situation. A small (but powerful) number of independent Islamist forces operating in Ras al-Ain (particularly Liwa Guraba ash-Sham and Jabhat an-Nusra) received condemnation from the central figurehead of the Free Syrian Army, Riad al-Asaad for participating in the escalating violence in Ras al-Ain.

Despite the apparent diversity of groups operating in Ras al-Ain, there does appear to be one major unifying force – Turkey. Given Turkey’s long history of conflict with the PKK, their interest in countering the influence of the PKK-affiliated PYD and YPG in Syria comes as little surprise. On the other hand, Turkey and opposition elements have flaunted their relationship. Several opposition troops have been seen raising Turkish flags in Ras al-Ain, and many reference the aid they have received from Turkey. The previously mentioned Jabhat at-Tahrir al-Jazeera wa al-Furat, which openly discusses the support it receives from Turkey, announced its formation at a press conference in the southern Turkish city of Urfa alongside Turkish interpreters.

¹ A complete structural diagram is included in the appendix.

² Diagrams detailing this shift of allegiance can be found in the appendix.

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 February 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:

1. Redeployment of military forces and removal of all military presence inside the city.
2. The creation of a follow-up committee made up of both sides with the mandate of observing the implementation of this agreement
3. The creation of a civilian council that is representative of the city, which will be tasked with running the city.
4. The civilian council will control the border crossing.
5. The civilian council will run the city and will prevent military forces from interfering in its work.
6. Joint YPG-FSA checkpoints are to be established outside the city and will be turned over to the civilian council once it is capable of manning them.
7. The passage of goods and people of any one side will be eased when passing through a checkpoint controlled by the other side.
8. The YPG and FSA will coordinate to liberate the other cities which are still under regime control.
9. The cities in which the regime is not present are as follows: Derbasiye, Amuda, Tel Temr, Maabada, and Derik.
10. All hostile media campaigns against the other will be stopped.
11. The introduction is considered a crucial provision to this agreement.

This agreement, which is the first official ceasefire agreement to be signed between forces in Ras al-Ain, closely resembles a recently-failed negotiation attempt introduced by Michel Kilo of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the National Coalition). Michel Kilo's plan called for many of the same things, but gave FSA forces a larger role in controlling the border and acting as police forces in the city. While negotiations took place regarding Kilo's agreement, nothing was officially signed.

The signing of the current ceasefire agreement represents a significant step forward, but will require a sustained effort on all sides to implement it. While there were several representatives of the FSA-affiliated opposition groups present at the signing of the agreement, the degree of control these leaders have over the diverse and fragmented collection of troops in the area remains to be seen. Furthermore, details regarding the structure and composition of the critically important civilian council have been left out of the agreement, which could prove to be contentious in the near

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.

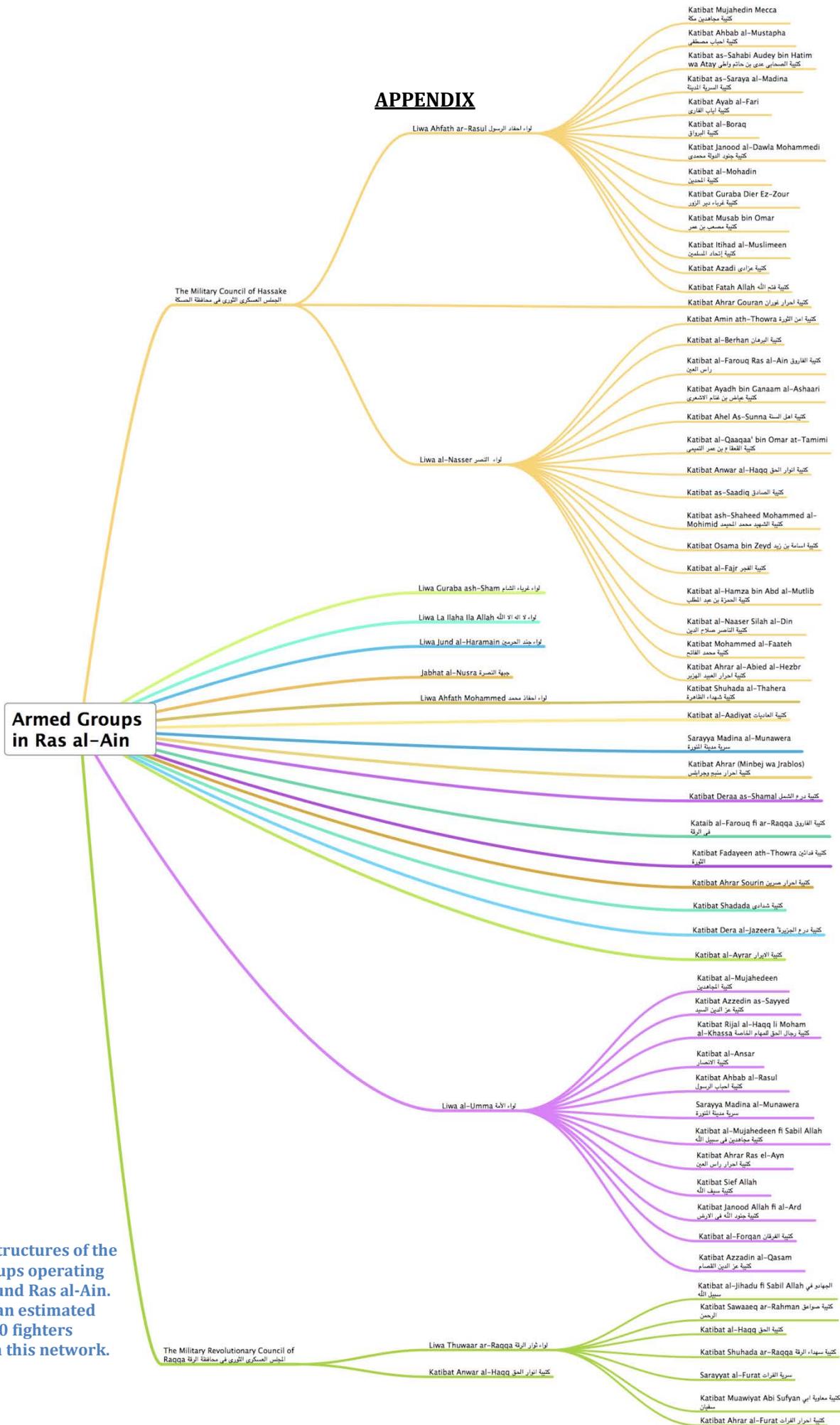


Figure 2: Structures of the armed groups operating in and around Ras al-Ain. There are an estimated 1,500-2,000 fighters included in this network.

November 25, 2012

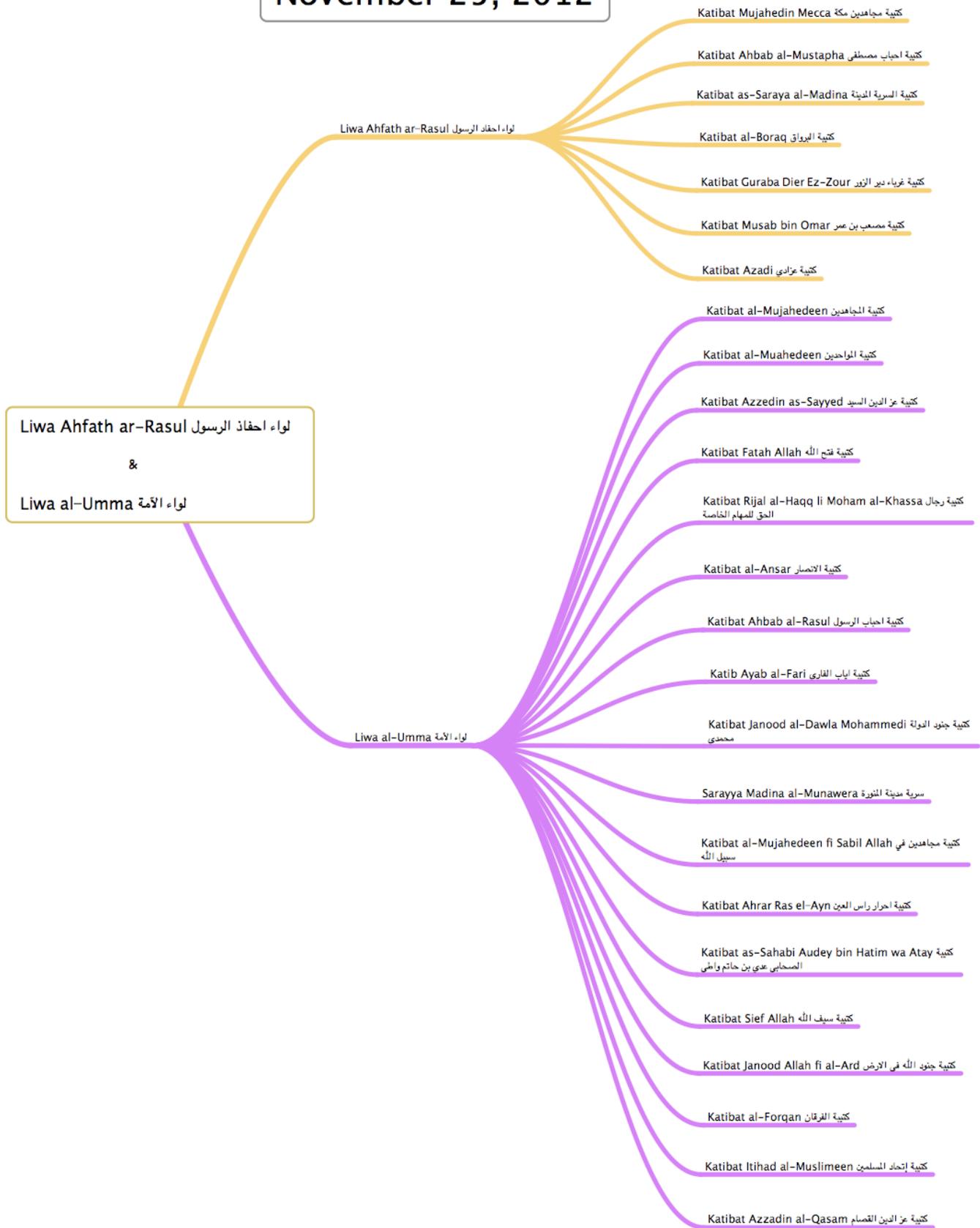


Figure 3 and Figure 4: This structural diagram as well as the associated diagram on the following page show the rapid re-alignment of battalions in Ras al-Ain and demonstrate the lack of rigid command structures among FSA-affiliated forces.

December 2, 2012

لواء احفاد الرسول
Liwa Ahfath ar-Rasul
&
لواء الأمة
Liwa al-Umma

لواء احفاد الرسول
Liwa Ahfath ar-Rasul

كتيبة مجاهدين مكة
Katibat Mujahedin Mecca

كتيبة احباب مصطفى
Katibat Ahabab al-Mustapha

كتيبة الصحابي اودي بن حاتم واطى
Katibat as-Sahabi Audey bin Hatim wa Atay

كتيبة السرية المدينة
Katibat as-Saraya al-Madina

كتيبة اباب الفاري
Katibat Ayab al-Fari

كتيبة البرواق
Katibat al-Boraq

كتيبة جنود الدولة محمدية
Katibat Janood al-Dawla Mohammedi

كتيبة المحادين
Katibat al-Mohadin

كتيبة غزباء دير الزور
Katibat Guraba Dier Ez-Zour

كتيبة مصعب بن عمر
Katibat Musab bin Omar

كتيبة اتحاد المسلمين
Katibat Itihad al-Muslimeen

كتيبة عزادي
Katibat Azadi

كتيبة فتح الله
Katibat Fatah Allah

لواء الأمة
Liwa al-Umma

كتيبة المجاهدين
Katibat al-Mujahedeen

كتيبة عز الدين السيد
Katibat Azzedin as-Sayyed

كتيبة رجال الحق للمهام الخاصة
Katibat Rijal al-Haqq li Moham al-Khassa

كتيبة الانصار
Katibat al-Ansar

كتيبة احباب الرسول
Katibat Ahabab al-Rasul

سرية مدينة المنورة
Sarayya Madina al-Munawera

كتيبة مجاهدين في سبيل الله
Katibat al-Mujahedeen fi Sabil Allah

كتيبة احرار راس العين
Katibat Ahrar Ras el-Ayn

كتيبة سيف الله
Katibat Sief Allah

كتيبة جنود الله في الارض
Katibat Janood Allah fi al-Ard

كتيبة الفرقان
Katibat al-Forqan

كتيبة عز الدين القسام
Katibat Azzadin al-Qasam