Did Groupthink or Polythink Derail the 2016 Raqqa Offensive?
The impact of group dynamics on strategic and tactical level decision making

Kasey Barr
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

and

Alex Mintz
Behavioral Political Science (BPS) Lab
IDC- Herzliya

Abstract

In this paper we examine the effect of group dynamics on the 2016 US decision to attack Raqqa, the capital city of ISIS in Syria. We show that whereas the Groupthink syndrome characterized the US and its international coalition partners' decision to attack Raqqa, implementing this decision was characterized by a Polythink Syndrome. We apply these concepts to both the US administration dynamics and to the US-led international coalition. We provide support for the Mintz and Wayne (2016) hypothesis that Groupthink is more likely in strategic level decisions, whereas Polythink is more likely in tactical level decisions.

Introduction

At the September 2014 conference of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), U.S. President Obama led ten nations in an agreement to join forces to build a broad international coalition with a mission to "degrade and, ultimately, destroy the threat posed by ISIL" [henceforward ISIS]. Following the NATO meeting, the president Obama laid out a four point strategy consisting of airstrikes, material and technical support for those fighting on the ground, counter-terrorism activities and humanitarian assistance to achieve this objective. He explained that "in each of these four parts of our strategy, America will be joined by a broad coalition of partners" (White House Press Office 2014).

With a flood of refugees fleeing Iraq and Syria and the beheadings, crucifixions, and near genocidal rampage of ISIS against Christians, Yazidis, and their idea of apostate Muslims, almost any action against the group responsible for such medieval brutality was certain to garner support at home and internationally. Nations quickly lined up in support of Obama's broad strategy and by October of2014, several countries were launching airstrikes against ISIS fighters. The U.S. Department of Defense, under the direction of Central Command, officially named the operation *Inherent Resolve*.[1]

Nearly three years into the battle, the U.S.-led Coalition under the Obama administration was hoping to come to the "ultimately destroy" phase of the strategy. One of the first battlefield successes in Syria came in early 2015 when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were able to retake Kobane. With the support of coalition airstrikes, the SDF deprived ISIS fighters of significant territory in the northeast region, a major battlefield victory being the city of Manbij in August 2016. Coalition forces

---

[1]For a complete and official review of the mission and organizational structure visit the official website at http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/1/Documents/Mission/History.pdf?ver=2016-03-23-065243-743

then aimed their sights at Raqqa, the well-entrenched hub of ISIS command and control in Syria and the highly symbolic capital of the terror group's self-declared caliphate.

Background

Raqqa is located approximately 100 miles east of Aleppo on the Euphrates River with a population of close to 200,000, the majority of whom are Sunni Arabs. The Islamic State took control of the area in January 2014 and instated Raqqa their capital on June 29, 2014 giving it tactical as well as symbolic significance. Today the number of combatants is estimated at around 5,000. This number is expected to rise to around 10,000 as ISIS fighters flee the battle in Mosul to take refuge in and reinforce the already entrenched stronghold of Raqqa (Ryan and DeYoung 2016).

The battle plan to take Raqqa, dubbed *Wrath of the Eurphrates,* was to overlap with the battle for Mosul (Schmitt 2016b). In the summer of 2016 U.S. military leaders indicated that there were plans in place to attack the two major strongholds of ISIS simultaneously.

Ten days after the battle for Mosul commenced, at a NATO meeting on October 26, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter expressed the commitment to and cohesiveness of the U.S.-led coalition to defeating ISIS in Raqqa, expressing that "we [coalition states] all want to keep ISIL under sustained pressure – that's the key – and defeat it in both Iraq and Syria, and everybody shares that objective" (Department of Defense 2016b). Carter confirmed that the battle for Raqqa would eventually overlap with Mosul and that simultaneous operations have" been part of [the]

planning for quite a while" and that the battle toward Raqqa would be executed "within weeks…and not many weeks" (ibid).

As Obama completes his second term as president and steps down on January 20ʹ 2017, the battle plan for Raqqa, with its tactical and symbolic significance in the war against the Islamic State, remains just a plan. Despite such unity of purpose at the strategic level among the major decision-makers in the U.S.-led international coalition, the mission failed to be implemented within the proposed timeframe.

Intra-Group Dynamics

What might intra-group decision-making dynamics reveal about why the coalition was unable to carry out such a broadly supported mission? Was it, as psychologist Irving Janis (1982) suggests in his *Groupthink* theory, the result of a group dynamic where there was too much consensus seeking that failed to realistically evaluate the situation in all of its complexity? At the strategic level, this appears plausible. Yet even a casual acquaintance with the region and the dynamics of coalition partners reveals that this explanation fails to account for the tangled web of actors and interests within the U.S. Administration and the U.S.-led international coalition and the dilemmas which presented themselves at the tactical level of decision making.

Mintz and Wayne (2016) presented the theory of *Polythink*, a paradigm shift from Janis' Groupthink, theorizing that many failures and pathologies in policy implementation are due, in fact, to the exact opposite group dynamic, i.e. of plurality of opinions, disagreements, intra-group conflict and lack of consensus resulting in a

confusing, disjointed decision-making process leading to sub-optimal decisions and outcomes.

Defense Secretary Carter revealed in the Fall of 2016, at the time the nations were expressing their unified intent to defeat ISIS in Raqqa, that the coalition had not come to agree on the implementation of their shared strategic mission saying, "we [coalition states] agree on the basic principles…and we're working on the practicalities…practicalities that reflect the principles that – we share" (Defense Department 2016b). But, as we claim, it was the *practicalities* where the group dynamics provide more insight into how the policy outcome was reached.

Coalition members put forth a range of proposals regarding the battle for Raqqa with the dissention centering on two major tactical questions: (1) which fighters should be commissioned to fight in Raqqa? The answer needed to account for the delicate alliance of actors with competing local, regional, religious, and ethnic interests. And (2) when would be the most opportune moment to launch the strike on the city? The answers required balancing urgent security need to disrupt external terrorist plotting and planning against the West from Raqqa with the needs of commanders on the ground to have the time required to recruit, train, and equip an effective fighting force capable of defeating ISIS in Syria while managing the resources of the Coalition forces waging a difficult and ongoing battle for Mosul in Iraq. The final result was a lack of action by the U.S.-led coalition before Obama stepped down from office, irrevocably changing the composition of the decision-making unit and leaving the entire operation in the hands of a new administration.

Why did such a clearly defined and widely accepted mission to attack Raqqa fail? More specifically, how is it that the president, coalition members, and their policy making teams, made policy decisions that ended with inaction? Was it the result of Groupthink? Rather than too much consensus seeking, this paper argues that it was the opposite, yet just as destructive, divisiveness and fragmentation of Polythink at the tactical level that hindered the group decision-making process leading to paralysis with the threat of mission failure.

There are "distinct, and significant, potential explanatory powers" in the analysis of small group factors in the construction and outcomes of a foreign policy ('t Hart 1997, p. 7). Mintz and Wayne assert that factors such as the composition of a decision unit and group dynamics within the unit and between other decision units impact the choices a decision unit will make and that "[u]nderstanding these dynamics is crucial to explaining, predicting, and improving national security and foreign policy decisions" (2016, p. 164). A substantial portion of the literature devoted to the analysis of the small group of elite power players surrounding the president have focused on Irving Janis' well-known theory of **Groupthink** which asserts that individuals within a cohesive group strive for unanimity and diminish their ability to realistically evaluate decision alternatives which conflict with the group, or leadership, evaluation of the situation (Janis, 1982). Yet there are other small group dynamics that can both hinder and facilitate good decision outcomes. A growing number of scholars have demonstrated, as the title of one book indicates, the need to move *Beyond Groupthink* ('t Hart, et al. 1997) to explain sub-optimal decision outcomes by presidents and their advisers. Scholars Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow (2010) demonstrated empirically "that group structures and decision

processes have important effects on foreign-policy making: the quality of decision making has a direct probabilistic, and measureable effect on the quality of the outcome" (p. 188). They specifically explain how "flawed group structures can in certain cases lead to flawed decision processing" (ibid, p. 123).

Mintz and Wayne (2014, 2016, 2016b) present the **Polythink** syndrome as an explanation for flawed decisions and as an alternative explanation to the well-known and broadly utilized theory of Janis. Polythink is identified as "a group dynamic whereby different members in a decision-making unit espouse a plurality of opinions and offer divergent policy prescriptions, and even dissent" (ibid). Polythink is characterized by an intra-group conflict and a fragmented, disjointed decision-making processes (ibid, p. 3). Polythink is a contrasting dynamic to Groupthink.

Mintz and Wayne (2016) present a *continuum* of group dynamic where they chart one end of the spectrum as the "completely cohesive" (Groupthink) to the other end of "completely fragmented" (Polythink). They explain that on "the Groupthink-Polythink continuum, there is also a range in the middle in which neither Groupthink nor Polythink dominates" (ibid, p. 9). They term this area **Con-Div** and explain that it is "the range in which the convergence and divergence of group members' viewpoints are more or less balanced and in equilibrium" (ibid). This is the range in which there is greater possibility for optimal decision-making to be crafted because of successful dynamics in the decision making unit.

Each dynamic exhibits particular symptoms that provide scholars and policy analysts with the ability to identify and diagnose which group dynamic is at work within a given decision-making unit. They symptoms of Groupthink include close-mindedness,

overestimation of the group's power and morality, rationalization to discount warnings, stereotyped views, pressure toward uniformity such as self-censorship, the illusion of unanimity, and pressure on dissenters through self-appointed mind guards (Janis 1982). On the other end of the spectrum, the symptoms of Polythink include a greater likelihood of intra-group conflict, leaks, confusion and lack of communication, framing effects, adopting the lowest common denominator positions, decision paralysis, limited review of policy options, and no room for reappraisal of previously rejected policy options (Mintz and Wayne 2016). To identify if a decision-making unit is able to achieve a dynamic within the center of the continuum with the optimal group dynamics of Con-Div, the following symptoms should be present: a clearer policy direction than in Polythink with little or no confusion over the policy direction, fewer group information processing biases than in Groupthink, less likelihood of ignoring critical information than in groupthink, operating in one voice, too much harmony that may hinder real debate, less likelihood of decision paralysis, and finally a greater likelihood of "good" decision compared with Groupthink or Polythink (ibid).

Mintz and Wayne (2016) analyzed the decision-making process of previous decisions of the Obama administration in Syria. They explained that the Obama administration was united in the strategic decision to degrade and destroy ISIS, displaying the cohesive group dynamic of Groupthink, yet at the tactical level of "boots on the ground" policy implementation, the decision-making was fraught with confusion and dissent among players within the group – reflective of the Polythink dynamic (ibid).

8

Strategic versus Tactical Decision Making

When discussing the use of force in a decision making process, Mintz and Wayne (2016) point out that there needs to be a distinction between the strategic and tactical decisions. Based on several case studies, they infer that there is a pattern whereby strategic decisions typically fit the groupthink model, whereas tactical decisions fit the Polythink model with "broad agreement concerning overarching foreign policy goals, but then little agreement about how to reach and implement those goals" (p. 164). They claim that when it comes to policy implementation, Polythink is more common than Groupthink, whereas in strategic level decisions, Groupthink is more common than Polythink. This means that while a group may be solidly unified about a general strategy, the decisions related to the ways and means of how to get the agreed upon ends have the potential to delay and obstruct implementation due to Polythink.

For example, this is evident in Obama's 2014 Syria policy regarding "no boots on the ground" and in the 2016 Raqqa decision. While at the strategic level the objective was agreed upon with near unanimity, the tactical plans were fraught with the sub-optimal group-decision making dynamics of dissention, fragmentation, and confusion symptomatic of Polythink. Our case study of the Raqqa Decision provides greater evidence for the hypothesis that, while a Groupthink dynamics typically dominates strategic decision-making, it is the Polythink Syndrome that often plagues group dynamics at the tactical level (ibid).

The Decision-making Unit

Where past research analyzed the decision of President Obama and his administration, the unit of analysis that is of interest in this article is the international anti-ISIS coalition and its member states under Obama's leadership. Each member state has been part of a collective decision-making unit. Many nations joined the coalition, but only a few states became significant players in the direction of policy. Those involved militarily in airstrikes included Australia, Bahrain, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and the UK (McInnis 2016). Of these key actors, even fewer took vocal positions on the policy dilemmas outlined above, these included: France, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Additionally, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were obviously key players and were representative of the Syrian contingent that the United States views as partners in the battle against ISIS since the official U.S. position was that the Assad regime was no longer a legitimate government. However, before moving to an in-depth analysis of the Coalition Forces dynamics, the next section documents that there was a Polythink dynamic manifested within the Obama administration in it decision-making process on Raqqa. This is reflective of the greater dynamics working within the coalition and subsequently addressed in this paper.

Symptoms of Polythink in the Obama Administration's Decision on Raqqa

Inside the Obama administration there were two sub-groups in conflict over the best policy to get the battle for Raqqa underway. Furthermore, the question of which composition of troops to send into Raqqa proper turned into a prolonged and contentious debate.

Those in favor of arming the Syrian Kurds directly included Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter as well as General Joseph F. Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Offering a competing perspective, National Security Advisor Susan Rice and Ambassador to the UN and Turkey, Samantha Powers sharply opposed this move because of the impact it would have on US-Turkish relations. They proposed utilizing Arab forces backed up by the soldiers that Turkey was offering to send. These sub-groups broke down along two distinct institutional lines, the Pentagon and the State department. The needs, as perceived by both, were in direct competition. This led to "dozens of meetings of President Obama's top national security team, scores of draft battle plans and hundreds of hours of anguished, late-night debates" (Entous, et al 2017). As a result, and as predicted by Polythink, there was a very substantial delay and in action resulting in handing the issue to the next administration on January 17, just three days before Obama would leave office, with a recommendation to arm the Kurds directly and a memo on how to explain this move to Turkey.

Mintz and Wayne (2016), demonstrate multiple cases of Polythink among elite group decision making in US foreign policy and particularly in the 2012 debate over the potential arming of Syrian Rebels. Five years later, and more than seven months after the mission to liberate Raqqa was publically announced, Obama's decision-making unit was still fragmented and disjointed. In contrast to the initial decision on Raqqa, the decision-makers around the president came to agree that the decision should be left to the next president (ibid). Clearly Polythink, as represented in the plurality of opinions and divergent policy recommendations in a decision unit—in this case, President Obama's inner circle of foreign policy makers, significantly

influenced the mission and in the context of Obama's term in office, led to a delay and even to decision paralysis over Raqqa.

Symptoms of Groupthink in the U.S.-led Coalition at the Strategic Level

President Obama, as leader of an international coalition against ISIS, set forth a straightforward strategy to dislodge ISIS from Raqqa and was able to gather the unanimous support of coalition members in the decision-making unit. After the mission was outlined by U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter at a NATO press conference in Belgium on October 26, coalition members released statements of support. Specifically, United Kingdom Defense Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon affirmed that "Daesh [IS] are on the back foot. The RAF is already playing a leading role in the air, hitting them hard in Iraq and Syria" (Sengupta 2016). In a joint press Conference with Secretary Carter French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that "Like Mosul, Raqqah is a strategic objective and remains really the focus of our attention (Department of Defense 2016). Earlier in September of 2016 Mr. Erdogan met with President Obama at the G20 summit in China and told reporters that "Obama wants to do some things jointly concerning Raqqa…We said this would not be a problem from our perspective. Our soldiers should come together and discuss, then we will do what is necessary" (Barnard and Yeginsu 2016).

It is evident that members of the coalition envisioned this happening in tandem, or closely following the Mosul offensive. Leaders within the decision-making unit, like a chorus, expressed pitch perfect harmony in declaring the urgent need to defeat ISIS in Raqqa. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force in Syria and Iraq, expressed a "sense of urgency" and affirmed that Raqqa

is key to victory over ISIS and security for the US, due to the "plot-and-planning" of IS combatants within Raqqa against Western targets (Department of Defense 2016c).He went on to explain that, "We want to pressure Raqqa" so that militants escaping Mosul do not "have a convenient place to go" (ibid). United Kingdom Defense Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, said at the start of the offensive in Mosul that "We hope a similar operation will begin towards Raqqa in the next few weeks (Ensor 2016). France's Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian warned, "We have to go to Raqqa...to dismantle Daesh" (Said 2016). He told Europe 1 radio, that "Mosul-Raqqa can't be disassociated" (ibid) warning that terrorists fleeing from Mosul would reinforce the plotting in Raqqa if the coalition did not move quickly. He stated, that "In these columns of people leaving Mosul will be hiding terrorists who will try to go further, to Raqqa in particular" (ibid).

Leaving out the details of just how to implement the strategy allowed for rapid consensus building despite intensely complex regional backdrop of the Syrian Civil War and the regional conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish populations within Turkey and Syria. The Obama-led coalition isolated the conflict from the local, regional, and international conflicts and tensions and brought even warring allies to the table by having both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Turkish government as part of the coalition. With regard to the strategic decision on Raqqa, it is clear that the U.S.-led coalition exhibited a Groupthink dynamic. Yet when it came to implementing the decision, and despite the clear policy direction and unanimous consensus, a canvassing of news outlets, press briefings, and official statements reveals that there was an on-going, and at times tense, debate between coalition partners as to the tactical implementation of the strategic objectives. This paper will

demonstrate how quickly Groupthink, in line with previous findings deteriorated at the tactical level into the dysfunctional dynamics at the opposite end of the decision-making continuum with the disjointed, fragmented, and confusion of Polythink and resulting in decision paralysis and mission failure in Raqqa under the Obama administration's leading of the U.S. coalition against the Islamic State.

Symptoms of Polythink in the U.S.-led Coalition at the Tactical Level

In this section we demonstrate that Polythink was the dominant dynamic within the international coalition. Its members were unable to formulate a cohesive and effective battle plan within the window of time needed to launch the battle for Raqqa. Regional complexities became pronounced at implementation. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force in Syria and Iraq, stressed this to reporters on October 25, 2016 after the offensive against Mosul began and as the coalition was gearing up for a move on Raqqa, "This is a complicated battle space, amid regional security concerns and adjacent to a civil war, and that makes for a complicated planning effort" (Department of Defense 2016c). Stakeholders with competing interests on critically important issues in Syria operate within the international coalition.

Below we analyze the symptoms of the Polythink dynamic as outlined in Mintz and Wayne (2016) with regard to the aforementioned tactical policy dilemmas outlined in this paper: (1) which fighters should be commissioned to fight in Raqqa? And (2) when is the most opportune moment to launch the strike on the city? As the U.S. is the leader of this coalition, this paper will analyze the decision-making dynamics

from the U.S. perspective related specifically to the plans and preparation for the battle to liberate Raqqa city from ISIS under the Obama administration in 2016.

Polythink Symptom 1: Intra-group conflict – infighting and turf battles

"Regional politics are as much of a hurdle as IEDs" (Van Wilgenburg and Youssef, 2016). Intra-group Conflict is a key symptom of Polythink and is unquestionably present in the U.S.-led Coalition. It is keenly manifested in the Turkish/Kurdish relationship. The infighting and turf battles between these two members of the coalition are practically a zero-sum contest in which any gain for the Kurds is seen as a loss for the Turks and vice-versa. The Obama administration, in bringing these warring parties under the same coalition, clearly hoped that the clarity of purpose and shared aims to oust ISIS from Raqqa would override this dynamic. However, apart from their strategic interest to keep the other from gaining any tactical advantage over the other, this dynamic of intra-group conflict deeply impacted a major tactical question of which troops should take part in the offensive in Raqqa which was of paramount importance to both sides.

Turkey regularly voice their security and territorial concerns regarding the Kurdish-dominated fighting force that makes up the majority of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[2] When the rebel forces took up arms against the Assad regime, the Kurdish minority in Syria seized on the opportunity to advance their political and territorial goals to connect the Kurdish areas in Kobane and Efrin. They are the dominating component of SDF, founded in October 2015 as a multi-ethnic and religious alliance of Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, and Circassian militias united against

---

[2] Turkey has sent its own forces across the border to back Syrian opposition fighters, and has suggested they lead the offensive to retake Raqqa. The Turkey-backed forces, now pushing toward the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab, have clashed with ISIS as well as the SDF. by Turkish special forces should drive ISIS out of Raqqa, and suggested that residents of the mainly Sunni Arab city might not welcome Kurdish forces.

the Assad regime and now the Islamic State. The Kurdish component of the force is known as the Popular Defense Unites (YPG). Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the insurgent group operating in Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), which both Turkey and the US have designated as a terrorist organization.[3] As the YPG in Syria continued to fight ISIS and free territory they claim as Kurdish, tensions within neighboring Turkey rose. The Turkish government, concerned that growing Kurdish autonomy in Syria would exacerbate their own three-decade Kurdish insurgency[4] made no distinction between the PKK and the YPG. They do not view the Kurdish forces of the SDF as a legitimate partner but as a terrorist organization. Underscoring this point of view, President Erdoğan said "I told him [President Obama] about the steps we will take in Syria against terrorist organizations. Let me note that we don't need terrorist organizations like the PYD, the YPG in Raqqa, either. The PYD, the YPG or the PKK, they are all the same…They are a simple terrorist organization" (Office of the Turkish President 2016c). Turkey experienced several deadly terror attacks by the Kurdish PKK in Turkey over the past year and the Turkish backed Syrian fighters who oppose the Kurds with tanks, aircraft, and bombing raids (Associated Press Staff, 2016).

---

[3] The PKK seeks political autonomy and previously fought for full independence. In the 1980s they started an insurgency in Turkey which was very violent through the 1980s and 90s, but dissipated in the last couple of decades allowing for a negotiated cease-fire in 2012 and 2013

[4] There is evidence to support this fear as there have been several renewed attacks which have been very violent and deadly. Kurdish groups in other parts of Turkey have launched terror attacks including bombings against both military and civilian targets. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons claimed responsibility for killing 39 and injuring 154 people outside soccer stadium. Also in June they took responsibility for an attack that killed 11 people in a car bombing in a tourist area in Istanbul (Timur, Safak 2016). The violent terror attacks by Turky's Kurdish population have ignited a backlash from the Turkish government in an effort to prevent the growing Kurdish autonomy in Syria to provoke their own Kurdish population to violence. Turkish troops in southeastern Turkey are now occupying many Kurdish majority towns.

The U.S. and coalition partners attempted to keep Turkey reined-in. However, President Erdoğan repeatedly voiced his concerns about tactical questions, emphasizing that the regional issues are of direct concern for his country saying "Why are the barriers that are raised for Turkey not raised for other countries that take part in the anti-DAESH operation?...They come from tens of thousands of kilometers away and have a say over Iraq and Syria; but Turkey can't have any say over this struggle just across its borders! How come that might be possible?" (Office of the Turkish President 2016b).

He further vowed that "We will henceforth protect the right of this nation with a tit-for-tat fight in the field and with a seat at the table, if need be" (ibid). And indeed the Turkish have engaged in Syria with direct attacks on Kurdish forces. Such hostile actions by one coalition member against the other, over such critical issues as survival and sovereignty, resulted in an almost nonchalant response from Washington. U.S. Lt. Gen. Townsend told reporters:

> [W]hen members of the coalition aren't engaging Daesh, they're doing other activities, that's not helpful for the coalition. It's not part of the coalition. And we ask members of the coalition to refrain from undertaking activities that are not focused on the defeat of Daesh [IS] (Defense Department 2016c).

Conversely, the Kurdish majority SDF is opposed to Turkey's participation in the Raqqa operation. Emed said in a press conference that the SDF does not want the Turkish to interfere in "the internal affairs of Syria," and that "Raqqa will be free by its own sons" (Associated Press Staff, 2016).Former spokesman of the Kurdish Democratic Union (PYD), the political wing of the SDF, Nawaf Khalid said "Let's be clear: Turkey is an enemy of the Kurds." (ibid).This conflict within the conflict

between warring allies puts the U.S. in a difficult position where it had to balance the interests of both parties without derailing the coalition strategy and diverting crucial allies from the battle for Raqqa.

Lieutenant General Townsend has distinguished the Kurdish majority SDF, a force of over 30,000 proven soldiers compared with 10,000 new Arab Forces and an undefined commitment of Turkish fighters, as "the most effective fighting force in the battle against IS" (Defense Department 2016c). Yet French Defense Minister Le Drain, and many other coalition leaders, reinforced in a press conference that "Turkey is a key partner in this fight" (Defense Department 2016).The Obama-led coalition valued both the Kurdish fighters and Turkey's agreement and was therefore unable or unwilling to utilize the full strength of either partner for fear of alienating the other. They attempted to separate battles into phases and utilized different troop formations with different time lines in an effort to keep these warring allies in the coalition and focused on the defeat of IS. Yet the dispute between these two members of the decision-making unit complicated the planning of the operation for the Raqqa battle and, despite intense efforts, the Obama administration was unable to isolate the decision on Raqqa from this regional quagmire.

Polythink Symptom 2: Confusion and communication without clarity

As the planning for the Raqqa battle was progressing in the fall of 2016, regional dynamics were becoming increasingly tense and violent. Despite the efforts to communicate, the unwillingness of the U.S. administration to take the lead in clearly defining a tactical plan, the communication served only to add multiple perspectives and demands that obfuscated tactical plans and served to highlight the division between Turkish and Kurdish coalition members.

U.S. and European coalition members demonstrated an incredible level of communication with partners to address dilemmas. French Defense minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said, "Ashton Carter and myself agreed a while back that the defense ministers of the most committed countries should meet regularly to review whether our military effort was meeting the strategic objectives that we set ourselves, and as part of the broader framework that we wish to bring about" (Department of Defense 2016). The coalition met for the first time on January 20th, 2015 and has had six meetings before the end of 2016. In a span of five months, Le Drian and Carter met four times to discuss counter-IS operations and mutual security concerns. Le Drian emphasized, "our discussions have allowed us to stress the paramount need to maintain the cohesion of the coalition that has demonstrated its effectiveness. We also agreed on the importance of neutralizing ISIL fully to limit its dispersion and its effects on other areas where it might seek to develop, as today in Libya, or in other parts of Africa" (ibid).

The most critical communication was that which dealt with the Turkish/Kurdish intra-group conflict. Townsend addressed this and exhibited commitment to communication in a statement to the press core saying, "Turkey doesn't want to see us operating with the SDF anywhere, particularly in Raqqah… So, we're negotiating, we're planning, we're having talks with Turkey and we're gonna take this in steps" (Department of Defense, 2016c). This is just what happened. In addition to NATO meetings US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford met with his counterpart in Ankara, Hulusi Akar to solicit approval for utilizing the SDF for the offensive to isolate Raqqa (Schmitt 2016b). As the campaign to Isolate Raqqa began,

Lt. Gen Townsend released an official statement reiterating the objective to keep lines of communication open between coalition partners saying:

"The Syrian Democratic Forces have begun their operation to isolate the city of Raqqah and other ISIL-held territory in Syria… Throughout each phase of the campaign to liberate Raqqah, the Coalition will continually consult with allies and partners as we plan for the city's ultimate seizure and governance once ISIL is defeated" (Department of Defense, 2016c).

Townsend was able to lay out a clear tactical plan for the process leading up to the battle for Raqqa saying, "we think it's very important to get isolation in place around Raqqah to start controlling that environment on a pretty short timeline…the Syrian Democratic Forces, to include the Kurdish YPG and the Arab -- Syrian Arab Corps, will all be part of that force to go and place isolation at Raqqah…[but]what happens after that is still to be determined between our government, our local partners and Turkish government" (ibid).

In all these meetings, the efforts to communicate, solicit approval, and build consensus, the intra-group conflict dynamic proved too great to overcome. The U.S. formulated a creative tactical plan for the preparation for the battle for Raqqa but did not take a lead in formulating and building support for a clearly defined and well communicated tactical plan regarding the actual battle to liberate the city. It was left "to be determined" and thus the cross-purposes and competing regional needs over critical issues could not be laid aside. There was clearly communication, but, as is indicative of Polythink, it did not facilitate a clear tactical vision and served only to cloud the interpretation of facts on the ground, complicating the process of building common tactical goals.

Polythink Symptom 3: Leaks, fear of leaks (and off-message comments in media)

The communication from coalition leaders notwithstanding, there were several remarks to the media from coalition members that demonstrated that there was either confusion or lack of cohesion within the decision-making unit regarding tactical operations. The presence of leaks and off-message comments by different members of the decision unit are a symptom of Polythink. When group members do not have a consensus on the direction of the decision, there is more likelihood of leaks in order to undermine positions they oppose (Mintz and Wayne 2016).

While the US and coalition partners made a public display of good efforts to communicate with Turkey, the most vocal opponent of the coalition tactical plans, the SDF, the most active and invested fighters in the coalition, were apparently left out of this key tactical decision regarding troop participation in Syria. In order to have their perspective heard, they resorted to airing a conflicting statement to the press. SDF spokeswoman Ahmed claimed that U.S. officials had not discussed the possibility of a Turkish force taking part in the Raqqa battle. Underlining SDF's staunch determination to keep Turkey out of the battle, Ahmed said to reporters, "I think (Ankara) is trying to pressure the Americans to bring in allied groups into Raqqa (Fraser and El Deeb 2016). Another news article reports that Kurdish militias, who despite help on the ground from American Special Operations advisers have criticized the United States for allying with Turkey" (Schmitt 2016).

Polythink Symptom 4: Framing effects and selective use of information

Off-message remarks, with regard to the policy dilemma on the timing of the battle, formed into two competing frames: security versus stability. This is a symptom of the fragmentation common to the Polythink dynamic.

The security frame. On October 16th, the U.S. led Coalition began the fight to retake Mosul, Iraq, from the Islamic State (ISIS) but the battle for Raqqa, Syria, did not begin in tandem despite earlier indications from top U.S. military leaders that attacks against these two ISIS strongholds would be simultaneous or overlapping due to the "plot-and-planning" of ISIS combatants within Raqqa against Western targets and the need to stop militants escaping Mosul from "have a convenient place to go" (Department of Defense 2016b, 2016c).

France has suffered multiple and devastating terror attacks executed by the Islamic State. Highlighting France's security concerns, as one of the most vocal members pushing the security frame, President Francois Hollande expressed concern about the outflow of IS fighters from Mosul, and particularly foreign fighters returning to their native countries stated, "We must…be very vigilant towards the return of foreign fighters" (Said 2016).The urgency to dislodge IS from Raqqa was echoed by French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in the Nov 6 press conference when he said "We have to go to Raqqa...to dismantle Daesh,"

The stability frame. While the message of most Western leaders is to fight against ISIS in Raqqa as quickly as possible with the objective for the battle for Mosul and Raqqa to overlap, deputy prime minister of Turkey, Numan Kurtulmus, highlighted the need for regional stability saying, President Erdoğan is the most vocal opponent of the idea and takes the position that the coalition should delay. Turkey's position is

to wait to move on Syria until the operation to oust ISIS from Mosul is completed (Bertrand 2016). Turkey has had its own onslaught of terror attacks. However, unlike France, many of these terror attacks have been perpetrated by the Kurdish militant group the PKK, raising more concerns within the Turkish government of utilizing Kurdish troops, even if Syrian, to fight in Raqqa. A delay would provide more time for a different force composition, composed of Arabs and not Kurds, to be recruited and trained.

Turkey was not alone in this concern, anonymous U.S. administration officials told reporters that they are concern that military planning is "outpacing the planning needed to make sure the city does not descent into new chaos or follow-on conflict once liberated" (Rogin 2016). These officials advocate for a more paced and comprehensive approach which would contend with local, regional, and international complexities as well as potential humanitarian issues which may occur with the liberation of Raqqa. These divergent views on Raqqa represents a cleavage between those who prioritized the defeat of IS and those who viewed the battle against IS as just one component in a broader strategy to stabilizing Syria.

The framing and counter framing present in the coalition with regard to the timeframe of the battle is a clear symptom of Polythink. Despite such overwhelming statements by most coalition members as to the security threat and the need for urgency, Turkey's expressed need for regional stability in keeping the Kurds out of Raqqa due to the intra-group conflict between these two members of the decision-unit, appears to have been enough to slow tactical advances to the detriment of the shared strategic objective.

Avoiding Polythink Symptom 5 by serious review of policy alternatives, objectives, risks and contingencies

Avoiding a key Polythink symptom, and more in-line with the Con-Div dynamic reported in Mintz and Wayne (2016), there was a clear attempt by the Obama administration to solicit and review policy alternatives. The U.S.-led coalition demonstrated prodigious attentiveness to very critical and thorny information.

Nested under the Arab-led battle plan for Raqqa are at least two publically addressed policy options that were under review. Under Polythink and Groupthink there is a rush to exclude options, but that it not apparent in this situation. There was a clearly favored policy of utilizing the Arab force, but the costs and benefits of other options appear to have been weighed by coalition partners. As previously discussed the Turkish were determined to prevent Kurdish troops in Raqqa and vice versa. Utilizing a troop composition that could ignite a battle between allies and destabilize the region would threaten the mission and could create an even greater crisis. Yet this did not exclude a serious review of both options. New York Times journalist Eric Schmitt, reported that the president and the National Security Council discussed several options and that Obama "directed aids to examine all proposals that could accelerate the fight against the Islamic State" (Schmitt 2016).

Arming the Kurds. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were key to the defeat of IS in Kobane and in most of the battles against IS in Northern Syria and dubbed by U.S. military leaders as "the most effective fighting force in the battle against IS" (Department of Defense 2016c). However, because Turkey links the Kurdish YPG unit of the SDF with the Kurdish insurgent group, the PKK, the U.S. has directed all military assistance to what they term the "Syrian Arab Coalition", which is composed

of the various Arab groups working under the SDF umbrella. This allowed the US to fund the SDF movement without excessive resistance from Turkey.

However as Turkey began to engage the Syrian Kurds in open battle, The New York Times reported that the incidents resulted in the policy review as "American commanders fear that their timetable to take Raqqa was set back when Turkey launched its first military intervention into Syria with ground forces." (Schmitt 2016). Their offensive helped to degrade IS of a crucial supply route but also eroded territorial gains of Kurdish militias who held the US responsible for allying with Turkey (ibid).The action by Turkey led Gen. Joseph L. Votel, the head of Central Command, to vocalize that there may be a need to arm the Kurds as an incentive to keep them in the coalition (ibid). Raqqa is majority Sunni Arab, and while it does benefits the Kurdish-led SDF to defeat IS in their strategic and symbolic capital, it also deprives them of other battle plans which are more strategic to their political aspirations. Leaders of the political wing of the YPG, known as The Democratic Union Party (PYD), have expressed the opinion that the efforts of the YPG should be spent on Kurdish nationalist objectives over battles for Arab-majority cities (Van Wilgenburg 2016).While Aldar Xelil Senior Kurdish official with Tev-Dem, a coalition of six parties that the PYD formed to govern liberated areas of northern Syria, stated that a priority before liberating Raqqa would be to open the IS controlled road between Kurdish controlled Kobani and Efrin (ibid).According to Votel, direct funding from the US may be needed to maintain a commitment from the SDF to prioritize Raqqa over their territorial aims.

In spite of the risk of angering and alienating Turkey, NYT reports that the plan to arm the Kurds "filtered up through the Pentagon's Central Command…[and] calls for providing the Syrian Kurds with small arms and ammunition, and some other supplies, for specific missions, but no heavy weapons such as antitank or antiaircraft weapons" (Schmitt 2016). Utilizing the Syrian Kurdish fighters would have allow for a more rapid advance on Raqqa, however it would have been a major policy reversal with the potential to alienate Turkey and possibly lead to increased conflict between the Turks and Kurds, yet this did not disqualify a review to directly arm the YPG in preparation for the battle in Raqqa (ibid).

Replacing the Kurds with Turkish fighters. Turkey has been fighting alongside Arab fighters in Syria with the objective to occupy a safe zone 15 miles along their border. This is to be IS free and Kurd free (Ryan and DeYoung 2016).Turkey's defense minister suggested that instead of the Kurds, Turkish-backed forces can present an "alternative" (Karam and Issa 2016).To keep the Kurdish forces focused on Coalition goals, the U.S. has a strategic interest in keeping Turkey reined-in.

Spokeswoman for the SDF, Jehan Sheikh Amad claimed that U.S. officials had not discussed the possibility of a Turkish force taking part in the Raqqa battle. Ahmed said to reporters, "We are self-sufficient. There is no need" (Fraser and El Deeb 2016).Political official Rezan Hiddo said the SDF notified the coalition that it would not continue the advance toward Raqqa if Turkish-backed forces continued advances into Kurdish-held territory. Hiddo warned, "We cannot extinguish the fire in our neighbor's house if our home is burning. We were very clear with our allies. If there is a plan to attack Daesh, there must be limits for Turkey" (Associated Press Staff, 2016). Despite such stern warnings from the SDF, the US demonstrated that the

proposal was not immediately discounted. When asked in a press briefing if it would be a good thing for the coalition if Turkey participated militarily in the offensive in Raqqa, Sec. Carter answered:

> We already are at the point where we're working extensively with the Turkish military in Syria…[and] we're looking for other opportunities to -- including further within Syria to include Raqqah. So that's -- that's been part of our discussions (Defense Department 2016b).

Later after meeting with his counterpart in Turkey, Carter spoke more reservedly saying, "Turkey's a very strong ally, of course…We didn't conclude any new arrangements, but we continued these -- these very important discussions with a very good partner" (Defense Department 2016b). Townsend referenced tactical operations with Turkey with greater caution telling reporters when questioned about the involvement of Turkey in Raqqa, "We'll welcome any contributing nation that wants to make themselves part of the coalition." But, he said, "that can't just come with a whole bunch of strings. They've got to be willing to do what the coalition needs" (Ryan and DeYoung, 2016).

The US reviewed alternative policy proposals and clearly engaged in some level of cost and benefit analysis. However, despite these attempts to seriously evaluate alternatives, in the end the intra-group conflict was judged as too costly to utilize either force to speed the Raqqa battle. The option of utilizing an Arab majority force was able to gain consensus and was thus chosen as the most optimal means.

Avoiding Polythink Symptom 6: Reappraisal of previously rejected alternatives

The coalition engaged in both a review of policy alternatives as well as issuing public commitments to reappraise alternatives, even those previously rejected. Washington judged that it needed both Turkey and the Kurds as allies for different reasons, thus the U.S. made the decision to utilize the Arab majority force. Still, the U.S. stopped short of issuing a commitment to exclude Kurdish forces, demonstrating that it was working to avoid yet another Polythink symptom of failing to reappraise previously rejected alternatives. Repeatedly, U.S. coalition leaders demonstrate flexibility with regard to the policy of the Raqqa battle including both troop composition and the timing. The U.S. did not appear to be locking into a position. Townsend demonstrated the commitment to flexibility and consultation about tactical questions each step of the way saying:

> We think it's very important to get isolation in place around Raqqah... And I think that the Syrian Democratic Forces, to include the Kurdish YPG and the Arab -- Syrian Arab Corps, will all be part of that force to go and place isolation at Raqqah. .....What happens after that is still to be determined between our government, our local partners and Turkish government (Defense Department 2016c).

Similarly, the SDF announced their intensions to keep options open and not lock into a position regarding troop composition into Raqqa. "The campaign will continue to be in that form [utilization of the Kurds for isolation of Raqqa] until it enters the city," Ahmed told The Associated Press. She said the Kurdish-led SDF, as the main force on the ground, is best placed to decide what forces are needed to liberate the city" (Karam and Issa 2016).

Symptomatic of a Polythink dynamic, even the reappraisal of previously rejected alternatives, due to the intra-group conflict, has little effect but to push the unit toward the next two Polythink symptoms to be discussed, lowest common denominator decision-making and decision paralysis.[5]

Polythink Symptom 7: Lowest common denominator decision making

Multiple U.S. administration officials made it clear that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was their most effective ally in the fight against ISIS. However, the inability of the coalition to obtain consensus on utilizing the SDF led to lowest common denominator decision-making, another symptom of a Polythink dynamic at play within the decision-making unit. Consequently, the only option able to garner the support needed was to train and equip an Arab-majority force.

Both regional and international members of the coalition coalesced around the training and utilization of an essentially Arab force. Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said "local territorial forces" should retake Raqqa with air support from the coalition but no foreign ground troops (Karam and Issa 2016).United Kingdom Defense Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, told France 24, that the liberation of the city needs to be accomplished by an "essentially Arab" force. He added that "the liberation is not going to be welcomed by the people of Raqqa" if Kurdish troops are involved (Ensor 2016). He later announced that the British, in support of the effort to train and equip local Arab fighters agreed to send a small military force of twenty advisors (Wintour 2016).Around the same time, the U.S., in addition to the 300

---

[5]The U.S. commitment to understanding the perspectives of all members within the decision-making unit is a symptom of the more optimal Con-Div dynamic. Yet it may have backfired in such that constant involvement of members of the unit, members engaged in hostile conflict with one another, overrides the intentions and led to instability and confusion.

advisors they initially sent, committed to an additional 200 advisors. Yet even the additional support did not appear enough to maintain forward momentum. U.S. Colonel Dorrian, expressed this saying, "Right now, I don't think that all the forces that'll be involved in that liberation campaign for Raqqa are yet trained" (Defense Department 2016d).

In addition to the failure to advance, the effectiveness of the Arab force in training has created concern. The coalition attempted to distinguishes between 2015 debacles in which the Arab forces were trained and failed and the current troop situation by noting that they are not building an entirely new force as was previously required, but rather adding to a pre-existing armed faction in Syria (Wintour 2016). Yet the effectiveness and durability of the largely untested force remained unknown and the timeframe by which they would be ready also unknown. Military spokesman Col. John Dorrain said that the "American warplanes are flying bombing missions against the Islamic State's command and control in and outside Raqqa city in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces, but acknowledged that it may take some time before the forces reach Raqqa city (Schmitt 2016b). He went on to explain that during this time the coalition would continue to recruit and train Arab troops for the offensive into the city (ibid).

While this option was the only one to bring consensus, it also involved risks that prompted serious review in the United Kingdom after their commitment to send advisors to train an Arab force. When United Kingdom Defense Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon affirmed that "Now we are stepping up our support to moderate opposition forces in Syria, through training them in the skills they need to defeat Daesh" (Sengupta 2016), the Guardian reported that "any British decision to help the

rebels, however limited, will prove controversial... [because of past failures which] ended in disappointment and some embarrassment" (ibid). The paper references instances in 2015 when Arab forces trained by the US and UK were slaughtered by both Assad and ISIS fighters with the added disadvantage of US-supplied equipment falling into the hands of enemy fighters. This policy was vetted far more cautiously by the British government and led to the requiring, along with the sending of advisors, that "All volunteers from the moderate opposition will be subject to strict vetting procedures and will receive training in international humanitarian law. Trainees will be security and medically screened prior to the start of training and will be assessed during and monitored after training" (Wintour 2016).

Despite repeated acknowledgement by U.S. military officials as to the superiority of the SDF as the strongest, most capable fighting force against IS, they were sidelined because of failure to gain consensus. The U.S. did received approval from Turkey to utilize them to isolate Raqqa, but not for the battle within. While it brought the coalition forces closer to Raqqa, the battle to liberate the city did not happen within weeks, or within a few months and as of the writing of this paper. With the appointment of President Trump, there is likely to be a review of US and coalition forces policy options with regard to Raqqa. Working with an Arab-only force assuaged Turkish and Kurdish concerns vis-à-vis the other, but it had consequential tradeoffs with regard to the timeframe of the battle, and place mission success in jeopardy of decision paralysis and failure. The inability to gather approval for the utilization of the entire SDF, including the skilled Kurdish fighters, was a lowest common denominator, satisficing decision. The result was a delay that did in fact led to a decision paralysis under the previous administration.

Polythink Symptom 8: Decision paralysis

A destructive outcome of Polythink is the inability to decide upon or act on a policy. Clearly, the unanimously shared strategic objective to defeat ISIS in Raqqa, as well as the shared commitment to address this security threat within "weeks" was the objective of the Administration and many coalition partners. It never materialized, however. Thus, the decision *not* to act was not the result of an optimal policy choice, but by the culmination of multiple dysfunctional group dynamics reflective of the Polythink dynamic operating in the coalition.

In the Raqqa decision, the coalition worked to define the tactical battle-field in such a way as to respect both Turkey and the Kurds and the solution that was acted upon was the phased approach. This would allow for the advantage of utilizing the Kurdish force to prepare and soften the battlefield for the fledging Arab Force. It would also acknowledge the security needs raised by Western nations, as isolating Raqqa was supposed to significantly degrade the planning of ISIS. And in some ways it did. On Nov 16, a US airstrikes killed the senior leader of IS, Abdul Basit al-Iraqi. Al Iraqi was responsible for ISIL's external networks that targeted America, Europe, and Turkey. This prompted spokesman Col. John Dorrain to tell reporters that al-Iraqi's death "degrades and delays ISIL's current plots against regional targets and deprives them of a capable senior manager who provided oversight over many external attacks" (Department of Defense 2016d). The success in lessoning the threat of movement of ISIS in and out of the city, and degrading their capabilities, was to allow for the training of Arab troops which would engage the city when they were operationally

ready. But they did not attain an acceptable level of readiness, at least within a feasible timeframe.

The battle plan's division into phases was to provide leeway for the use of Kurdish forces to encircle the city and then allow an Arab-led force to battle within the city. The phased approach hoped to divide the complex battle field and rivaling allies into sub-divided tactical missions where agreement would be attained and a unified vision and voice maintained. Yet no battle commenced. The Kurds were sidelined, the Turks were not utilized, and the Arab forces never really materialized. There were some key tactical advances in preparation for the strategic objective to defeat IS in Raqqa. But the regional complexities, expressed in conflicting tactical opinions became more of a focus than the strategic objective. The coalition avoided a major outbreak of hostilities between the Kurds and the Turks, keeping the decision-unit unified, but to what end?   The benefits of holding the coalition together were weighed as greater than the cost of a delay to train and equip local fighters. But the delay ended up in paralysis. Despite create alternatives, the irreconcilable views of the Turkish and Kurdish decision-makers led to the inability to advance in the coalition's strategic objectives and the tactical policy dilemmas proved unalterably susceptible to the Turkish-Kurdish intra-group conflict. Their strategic interests in keeping the other from participating in the battle for Raqqa ended up in decision paralysis and mission failure for the coalition.

Conclusion

The foreign policy decision-making on Syria in the Obama administration has been one of the most contested and criticized of his eight year administration. As Allepo

fell, Leon Wieseltier, senior fellow at the Brookings Institute offered a blistering critique of Obama's policy in Syria in a *Washington Post* Op-ed, stating "Between action and inaction, [the Obama Administration] chose inconsequential action" (Wieseltier, 2016). Many foreign policy elites, including top democrats such as then Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, broke with Obama when it came to his policy and lack of action in Syria despite the humanitarian crisis (Jaffe 2016). Others (e.g. most members of Obama's inner circle) approved the decision

As of the writing of this article, in early 2017, the battle for Raqqa has not yet commenced. Though the situation in Syria was blighted with regional conflicts, civil war, and a tacit proxy war between the US and Russia, the Obama administration attempted to isolate the battle against ISIS from other theaters and events in order to carve out a very clear policy direction which would receive broadest consensus. However, at the tactical level regional dynamics, and particularly the Turkish/Kurdish conflict proved too much to surmount and the coalition failed to formulate and engage in an effective battle plan within the window of time originally planned to launch the battle for Raqqa.

The presence of intersecting interests and cross purposes of multiple actors within the coalition, particularly the Turks and Kurds, proved too strong of a destructive intra-group Polythink dynamic to overcome, even though there was some consensus as to the utilization of an Arab-majority force, there was a review of policy options and reappraisal of previously rejected options, and there was a major effort to communicate and balance the needs and interests of members in the decision-making unit. Despite the attempts to avoid symptoms of Polythink, the multiple

attempts to bridge intra-group conflict failed. The isolation phase made some headway, yet a strong Arab force never emerged. As the troops surrounded the city of Raqqa, the tactical dilemmas became more pronounced and the strategic objective more obscured, rather than advancing on Raqqa, it seemed the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition were centered on keeping warring members from attacking one another and negotiating between them in order to hold the coalition together at the expense of the strategic purpose. Within the constraints and policy path laid out by the President, the decision on Raqqa illustrates the importance of group dynamics (Groupthink and Polythink) at both the tactical and strategic levels.

This paper also provides support for the strategic versus tactical hypothesis, confirming in this case how even in a clear-cut decision, following a groupthink dynamic, implementation becomes difficult due to a group dynamics at the other end of the decision-making continuum, Polythink, where destructive fragmentation and confusion has dominated the decision-making process and led to lowest common denominator policies and decision paralysis. Despite the clear strategic objectives and group agreement of purpose and overall goal with regard to the decision to attack Raqqa, this case studies shows that tactical implementation can fail as a result of deep rooted conflict among group members. Thus, it is paramount that the dynamic of intra-group conflict be avoided in building a decision-making unit. Future research should pay more attention to the architecture of building decision units capable of making critical decisions, i.e. how leaders can move from Destructive Polythink to Constructive Polythink.

References

Associated Press Staff. (2016). Syrian Kurds begin campaign to oust Islamic State from Raqqa."
    Associated Press. November 7. Retrieved from
    http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3910112/Syria-Kurds-announce-start-
    campaign-retake-Raqqa.html

Barnard, Anne and Ceylan Yeginsu. (2016). "Erdogan Says Turkey Would Join U.S. to Fight ISIS
    in Raqqa, an ISIS Bastion in Syria". *The New York Times.* September 7. Retrieved from
    https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/world/middleeast/erdogan-raqqa-syria-
    isis.html?_r=0

Bertrand, Natasha. (2016). "Turkey is trying to put the brakes on the US's next big move
    against ISIS – but Obama isn't having it." *Business Insider.* November 1. Retrieved from
    http://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-us-raqqa-isis-offensive-2016-10

Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command. (2016). "Lt. Gen. Townsend statement on
    SDF advance to isolate Raqqah", Operation Inherent Resolve. November 7. Retrieved
    from http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/News-Releases/News-Article-
    View/Article/997510/lt-gen-townsend-statement-on-sdf-advance-to-isolate-raqqah/

Department of Defense, Office of Press Operations. (2016) "Joint Press Conference by
    Secretary Carter and Minister Le Drian in Paris, France." October 25. Retrieved from
    https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/986525/joint-
    press-conference-by-secretary-carter-and-minister-le-drian-in-paris-france

Department of Defense, Office of Press Operations. (2016b). "Media Availability with
    Secretary Carter at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium". October 26. Retrieved
    from https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-
    View/Article/987629/media-availability-with-secretary-carter-at-nato-headquarters-
    brussels-belgium

Department of Defense, Office of Press Operations. (2016c). "Department of Defense Press
    Briefing by Lt. Gen. Townsend Via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq." October 26.
    Retrieved from https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-
    View/Article/987897/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-lt-gen-townsend-via-
    teleconference-from

Department of Defense, Office of Press Operations. (2016d). "Department of Defense Press
    Briefing by Col. Dorrian via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq". November 16.
    Retrieved from https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-
    View/Article/1006576/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-coldorrian-via-
    teleconference-from-bagh

Ensor, Josie. (2016). "Battle for Isil capital Raqqa 'within weeks' says Fallon". *The Telegraph*.
    October 26. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/26/battle-for-
    isil-capital-raqqa-within-weeks-says-fallon/

Entous, Adam, Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan. (2017). "Obama's White House worked for months
    on a plan to seize Raqqa. Trump's team took a brief look and decided not to pull the
    trigger."*Washington Post.* February 2. Retrieved from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-white-house-worked-for-months-on-a-plan-to-seize-raqqa-trumps-team-deemed-it-hopelessly-inadequate/2017/02/02/116310fa-e71a-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html?utm_term=.0ea30547b86c

Fraser, Suzan and Sarah El Deeb. (2016). Turkey, Syrian Kurds at loggerheads over Raqqa offensive". *Associated Press.* November 8. Retrieved from http://bigstory.ap.org/article/1ce12cd3e7ae462f912a57877db6be78/turkey-concerned-syrian-kurds-press-toward-held-raqqa

Jaffe, Greg. (2016). "Washington's foreign policy elite breaks with Obama over Syrian bloodshed." *Washington Post.* October 16. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/washington-foreign-policy-elites-not-sorry-to-see-obama-go/2016/10/20/bd2334a2-9228-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4_story.html?utm_term=.80859448d12a

Janis, Irving L. (1982a). *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. First published in 1972.

Janis, Irving L. (1982b). "Decisionmaking under Stress." In *Handbook of Stress: Theoretical and Clinical Aspects*, edited by Leo Goldberger and Shlomo Breznitz, 69–80. New York: Free Press.

Karam, Aeina and Philip Issa. (2016). "Syrian Kurds begin campaign to oust Islamic State from Raqqa." *Associated Press.* November 6. Retrieved from http://bigstory.ap.org/article/5d2818fec6864288933e4b29e2b1abb4/syria-kurds-announce-start-campaign-retake-raqqa

McInnis, Kathleen J. (2016). "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State." Congressional Research Services. August 24.

Mintz, Alex and Carly Wayne.(2014). "Group Decision Making in Conflict: From Groupthink to Polythink in Iraq," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, eds. Peter Coleman and Morton Deutsch, 331–352. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Mintz, Alex, and Carly Wayne. (2016). *The Polythink Syndrome: US Foreign Policy Decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS*. Stanford University Press.

Mintz, Alex, and Carly Wayne. (2016b). "The Polythink Syndrome and Elite Group Decision-Making." *Political Psychology* 37.S1.

Office of the Turkish President. (2016). "July 15 Coup Attempt Was Aimed at Sparking a Civil War in Turkey". Official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. October 27. Retrieved from https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/55797/15-temmuzda-bu-millet-yeniden-canakkale-destani-yazdi.html

Office of the Turkish President. (2016b). "Turkey Will Definitely Take Part in Any Development in Iraq and Syria". Official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. October 26. Retrieved from https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/55785/turkiye-irak-ve-suriyede-yasanan-her-gelismenin-icinde-mutlaka-yer-alacaktir.html

Office of the Turkish President. (2016c). "July 15 Coup Attempt Was Aimed at Sparking a Civil War in Turkey." Official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. October 27. Retrieved from https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/55797/15-temmuzda-bu-millet-yeniden-canakkale-destani-yazdi.html

Rogin, Josh. (2016). "Obama administration debates the wisdom of rushing to retake Raqqa." *Washington Post.* October 16. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/anti-islamic-state-forces-are-rushing-to-retake-raqqa-that-could-be-a-mistake/2016/10/16/b7158068-922f-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.2b3b28c5a393

Ryan, Missy and Karen DeYoung. (2016). "'We're not in perfect control': U.S. plans operation against Islamic State in Syria despite obstacles." *Washington Post*, October 31. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/were-not-in-perfect-control-us-plans-operation-against-islamic-state-in-syria-despite-obstacles/2016/10/31/b649605e-9d1b-11e6-9980-50913d68eacb_story.html

Said, Rodi. (2016). "U.S.-backed Syrian alliance declares attack on Islamic State in Raqqa". *Reuters*. November 6. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKBN1310GX

Schafer, Mark, and Scott Crichlow.(2010). *Groupthink Versus High-Quality Decision Making in International Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Schmitt, Eric. (2016). "Obama Administration Considers Arming Syrian Kurds Against ISIS." September 21. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/world/middleeast/obama-syria-kurds-isis-turkey-military-commandos.html

Schmitt, Eric. (2016b). "U.S.-Backed Militia Opens Drive on ISIS Capital in Syria." *New York Times*, November 6. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/07/world/middleeast/us-backed-militia-opens-drive-on-isis-capital-in-syria.html?_r=0

Sengupta, Kim. (2016). "British troops to train Syrian fighters as pressure on ISIS grows." *Independent*. October 24. Retrieved from http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-british-troops-train-opposition-michael-fallon-a7378756.html

Steward, Phil and Marine Pennetier. (2016). "U.S. says to launch campaign on Raqqa before Mosul complete." *Reuters.* October 25. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN12P26F

't Hart, Paul, Eric K. Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, eds. (1997). *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Timur, Safak. (2016). "Kurdish Militant Group Claims Responsibility for Deadly Istanbul Bombing." *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/world/europe/kurdish-tak-istanbul-double-bombing.html?_r=0

Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir. (2016). "The War Within the War for Raqqa." *Foreign Policy.* June 6. Retrieved from http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/06/the-war-within-the-war-for-raqqa/

Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, and Nancy A. Youssef. (2016). "The Long Battle to Retake the ISIS Capital Raqqa, Has Now Begun." *The Daily Beast.* November 11. Retrieved from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/06/the-long-battle-to-retake-the-isis-capital-raqqa-has-now-begun.html

White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2014). Statement by the President on ISIL [Press release]. September 10. Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1

Wieseltier, Leon. (2016). "Aleppo's fall is Obama's failure." *Washington Post.* December 15. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/aleppos-fall-is-obamas-failure/2016/12/15/5af72640-c30f-11e6-9a51-cd56ea1c2bb7_story.html?utm_term=.deeb2cafcb90

Wintour, Patrick. (2016). "MoD to resume training Syrian opposition fighters for assault on Isis." *The Guardian.* October 25. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/25/mod-to-resume-training-syrian-opposition-fighters-for-assault-on-isis