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Syria After Islamic State:

"Everything Needs to Change, So Everything Can Stay the Same"?

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Syria after Islamic State: "Everything Needs to Change, So Everything Can Stay the Same"?[1]

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Executive summary

The fight against Islamic State (IS) has been the focus of Western countries' policy towards Syria since late 2014, while the objective of finding a lasting political solution to the conflict has been relegated to the background. This policy focus has manifested as a military counterterrorism campaign, primarily in the north east and with no real link to political and security developments elsewhere in the country. There has been very little effort devoted to addressing any of the root causes of IS's rise. As the military campaign against IS comes to an end, many questions need to be raised to help design new policies that could translate IS's military defeat into political gains for stability and peace in Syria.

IS had lost most of its territory by the end of 2017, following large-scale and destructive military operations initiated to combat it. However, the fundamental question of what political order may be built on the ruins of the self-proclaimed 'caliphate' remains unanswered. This issue cannot be dissociated from the broader framework of the Syrian conflict. At the same time, the fight against IS has noticeably changed the balance of power between local actors, by marginalising Syrian opposition forces and empowering the two main actors that made territorial gains through these military operations: the Syrian regime and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). It has also raised new challenges relating to the governance of these liberated territories. To prevent the emergence of a new form of radical jihadism, and indeed for any peace effort to be sustainable in eastern Syria, these challenges need to be identified and addressed.

The stabilisation of post-IS territories is undermined by the persistent, multifaceted rivalries between the international, regional and local actors that took part in the fight against IS. Three distinct and competitive military campaigns were conducted to eliminate the terrorist organisation. The fight against IS has thereby amplified the proxy war between the main foreign powers intervening in Syria (the US on the one hand, Russia, Iran and Turkey on the other) rather than unifying them behind a common objective. For the Syrian regime and the PYD, this war has also become a struggle to gain international legitimacy. These two local 'winners' are likely to fight over the liberated territories as long as international and regional powers do not find a final settlement for the conflict.

The governance of these liberated areas is likely to remain a serious problem. The local communities, primarily Sunni Arabs in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor governorates, are being governed by powers that have no real legitimacy and leave little room for the concerns and

needs of local populations. The application of the Kurdish self-administration model to govern Arab-majority cities like Raqqa has illustrated the risks inherent in the imposition of governance mechanisms that are neither inclusive enough nor sufficiently democratic. The Kurdish leadership has certainly made efforts to establish a power-sharing model that allows local Arab notables to participate in the newly-established civilian administrative structures, through coopting tribal leaders. However, the civilian councils established hold no real political power, as this remains concentrated in the political and military apparatus of the PYD. In addition, internally displaced persons and refugees remain excluded from the decision-making processes that relate to the governance of their native cities.

Finally, the root causes of IS's rise are linked primarily to the rejection of Bashar al-Assad's regime among Sunni Arabs of eastern Syria, who have historically been marginalised. The violence of the regime's crackdown on protest movements since 2011, and the subsequent four years of brutality and deprivation imposed by IS, have deeply alienated local Sunni communities and exacerbated their feelings of defeat and despair. The military defeat of IS brings the key question of Sunni Arabs' future to the fore, particularly as regards their political representation at the local level and their role in rebuilding a viable political order.

However, the extreme fragmentation among Sunni communities, divided even within a single locality, remains a major obstacle. It is thus difficult to identify which actors, if any, may truly represent Sunni Arabs and may be capable of putting forward a political project that the majority of the community would deem acceptable. In areas of north eastern Syria that have historically been dominated by tribal structures, community divisions could even lead to inter-tribal violence. In the longer-term, the lack of a political project that meets the needs of Sunni Arabs could breed jihadist militant ideologies and new forms of extremism.

Introduction

After more than three years and a costly war, the military defeat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Syria has lately been declared by many international leaders. By the end of 2017, IS had lost more than 96% of the large territory it had conquered in Iraq and Syria since 2013. It had, moreover, in the course of 2017, transformed from an organisation that controlled more than half of Syria's surface area (though in the regions with lower population density, mainly in the North East[3]), into a force that controls only about 3%. The complete military recapture of the city of Raqqa, the self-proclaimed capital of the caliphate, in October 2017 marked a symbolic step in what could be described as the IS 'eradication' process. However, the lack of a clear and comprehensive political plan to address the root causes of IS's rise could further destabilise Syria, and with more far-reaching consequences for the whole Middle East region as well as for Europe.

Western governments' focus on the fight against the terrorist organisation as their chief priority has had a negative impact on the prospect of a secure political transition. The US-led international coalition, Russia and the Syrian regime, all adopted a predominantly military approach to fighting IS without looking at a viable political vision for a post-IS Syria. For some European states involved in the international coalition, IS has been perceived as more of a security threat to Europe than to the Middle East. Western strategists and policy-makers

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[3] This paper uses the term "north east" to refer to the provinces located both in the north east (northern Aleppo governorate and Raqqa governorate) and the east (Deir al Zor governorate) of Syria, that were under IS's control.

have largely overlooked key issues and questions relevant to the future of Syria: will IS's waning power lead to stability in the north eastern provinces or will it create more chaos? Will IS's military defeat be sufficient to pacify parts of Syria, and consequently to create new dynamics likely to end the Syrian conflict, or will it trigger new waves of violence between the different factions that have contributed to its defeat and within local communities? Will the post-IS political order prevent the re-emergence of old forms of extreme jihadist violence or could it even provoke the emergence of new ones?

The aim of this research paper is to identify the main challenges that those seeking to govern IS-liberated territories will face, particularly the dynamics that could lead to new waves of violence and undermine efforts to stabilise and rebuild these devastated areas. It starts by analysing how competition between rival international actors and their local proxies in the fight against IS has further accelerated territorial fragmentation in Syria. The former territory of the 'caliphate' is now shared mainly between the US-backed Democratic Union Party (PYD)[4] and its local Arab allies on the one hand, and the Syrian regime's armed forces with their Russian and Iranian allies on the other. Additionally, another small territory in north of Aleppo governorate is under the control of the Turkish military. IS's military defeat has not put an end to the proxy wars between the main foreign powers involved, whose ever-increasing military involvement threatens stabilisation efforts at the local level.

The paper then looks at modes of local governance employed by the PYD leaders in predominantly Sunni Arab areas, such as in the governorate of Raqqa[5]. The military success of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) against IS – which has enabled it to control more than 25% of Syrian territory by the end of 2017 – has been the main factor that secured PYD's legitimacy, both internationally and in Kurdish-majority areas in Syria. However, this legitimacy remains contested by most of the Syrian opposition forces originally from Raqqa, now for the most part internally displaced or living in exile. The PYD could also be challenged by the regime's aim to retake control over the entire territory. Although the party has made some efforts to adapt its own governance project of Rojava[6] to the demographic reality of Raqqa governorate, it still faces many challenges which could prevent it consolidating its power among the local Arab communities in this area.

Finally, this paper seeks to assess the risks of IS's survival beyond its loss of territory, and the survival of other jihadist groups in Syria. It questions the fate of IS combatants, but also the root causes that led to the organisation's rise in north eastern Syria. The lack of a political project that could address the deepening grievances of a large part of the Sunni community, as well as the divisions within local communities, raise concerns about the survival or re-emergence of violent jihadism in Syria.

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[4] The main Kurdish political party in Syria. It is often considered as the sister organisation of the militant Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (although it denies this). It has one male armed wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), and one female armed wing, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

[5] This paper focuses more specifically on the military and civilian bodies established in the context of the battle to drive IS from the city of Raqqa. It should be considered as introductory research, and will be followed by a more specific, field-based study to be published by the Middle East Directions programme, see Z. Awad, *Deir al-Zor after the Islamic State, Between the Kurdish Self-Administration and the Syrian Regime*, Research Report, EUI, forthcoming.

[6] The PYD started establishing its own institutions (referred to in this paper as the Kurdish Self-Administration) to govern the regions under its territorial control in northern Syria after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime in 2012. It calls these areas, where Kurds have a significant presence, Rojava (or Western Kurdistan).

This research report is based mainly on interviews the author conducted in November and December 2017, face-to-face and over Skype, with Syrian activists and journalists from Raqqa and Deir al-Zor governorates now living in Turkey and Europe. Other key sources include: Skype interviews led by a Syrian researcher (who requested anonymity for its own security) with Kurdish personalities and activists based in Syria; open sources (until 22 January 2018, the time of writing), including media close to the Kurdish Self-Administration and Facebook pages of the newly-established local councils in Raqqa governorate in 2017; the author's close monitoring of the situation in north eastern Syria since 2014; and, the author's regular meetings with Western and Turkish policy-makers based in Turkey[7].

The Fight Against IS: Competition and Internal Fragmentation

Unlike in Iraq, the forces which fought against IS in Syria were fragmented and in competition with one another, mirroring the multiple proxy wars between international and regional forces taking place on Syrian soil. The battle against IS has moreover become an important part of local actors' strategies to (re)gain international legitimacy, particularly the two main local actors who fought IS on the ground: the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)[8] and the Syrian regime. The military interventions of external actors, motivated by their own strategic interests, remain key to explaining the balance of power between their respective local allies. The politico-military map that has been redrawn following the war against IS is likely to continue evolving.

Many enemies and competing interests

The fight against IS in Syria was led by three main coalitions: the US-led International Coalition, in coordination with and in support of Kurdish fighters (and later their Arab allies within the SDF), that launched its first offensive in September 2014; the Russian Air Force, in support of the Syrian army and militias affiliated to Iran and the Assad regime, which entered the battle at the end of September 2015; and the Turkish army, in support of various brigades of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which fought between August 2016 and March 2017.

Since the first battle against IS in Kobani (Ain al Arab) in Autumn 2014, the US administration and Turkey have been in disagreement over how to fight IS. The US chose to rely on the YPG as their most effective partner, a group which Turkey considers a national security threat. This decision deeply angered Ankara and jeopardised the relationship between the two countries. The divergence of interests was further accentuated as the Kurdish fighters in an alliance of convenience with Arab groups gained increasing territory along the Syrian-Turkish border in 2015[9]. In August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield to combat both IS and the PYD in the northern province of Aleppo, but in reality aiming to prevent the PYD from building a contiguous territory made up of the three Kurdish cantons

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[7] The paper follows the roundtable organised by the Middle East Directions programme in Brussels, "The Day after the Military Defeat of the Islamic State" on 6 December 2017. The author would like to thank Daryous Aldarwishe in particular for his presentation during this event.

[8] The Syrian Democratic Forces were established in October 2015. It is a heterogeneous alliance of multi-ethnic militias (including Arab, Assyrian and Turkmen armed groups) that remains squarely under the command of the YPG and is reliant upon PKK-trained Kurdish fighters who form its backbone. International Crisis Group, *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, Briefing 53, Middle East and North Africa, 28 April 2017; A. Lund, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/22/origins-of-the-syrian-democratic-forces-a-primer

[9] Kobani and Tell Abyad are two localities on the Syrian-Turkish border that were liberated by International Coalition-backed PYD in January and June 2015 respectively. The city of Manbij was reconquered on 12 August 2016.

(from Afrin in the west, to Kobani in the middle, and Qamishli farther east). During this operation, Turkey relied on Syrian opposition forces, coordinated with Russia, but received minimal assistance from the US-led Coalition. Three months later, the SDF launched its own operation, dubbed Anger of the Euphrates, with the aim of regaining control of the city of Raqqa. Syrian forces affiliated with Turkey did not participate in this operation.

Beyond this disagreement between the two NATO allies, Washington and Moscow agreed on May 2017 that the Euphrates River would constitute the dividing line between the areas to be controlled by the SDF (east of the river), and the areas to be controlled by the Syrian regime under Russian protection (on the west bank)[10]. This non-aggression pact has prevented an aerial battle between the US and Russia and has been respected, despite some breaches and clashes between the SDF and regime forces during the last months of 2017. However, this tacit understanding remains fragile in the absence of an overall political agreement on how to end the war in Syria. In Raqqa governorate, SDF control may be challenged by both the Syrian regime and Turkey. In Deir al-Zor, control over oil resources and the Syrian-Iraqi border are two major points of contention, and therefore potential sources of conflict.

In both governorates, Kurdish military control can only be sustained with strong support from the US. While the US for a long time remained uncertain about the duration of its involvement in Syria, the administration in December 2017 seemed to decide to use its support for the Kurds to strengthen its position in negotiations with Moscow and weaken the influence of Iran[11]. The regime's dependence on its Russian and Iranian allies in north eastern Syria is also considerable.
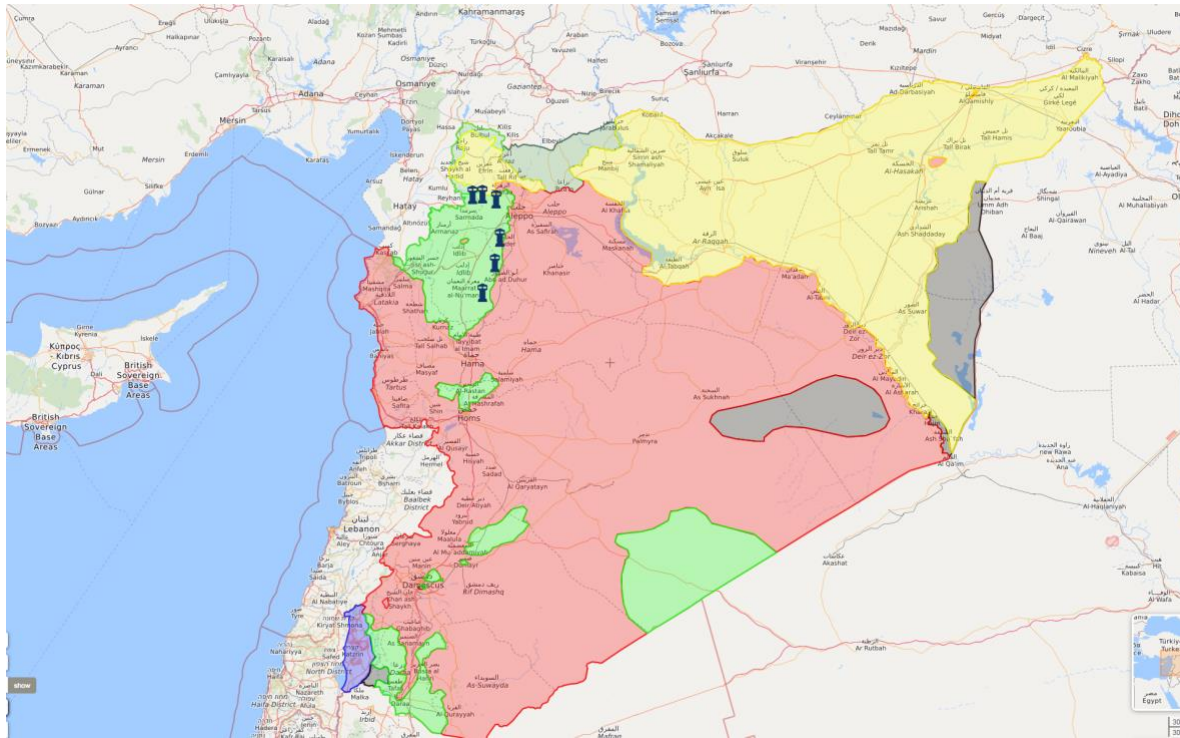
The future of Syria's north eastern region, which is strategically located at the intersection of three countries, remains a stumbling block in the negotiations between international and regional actors to find a comprehensive political solution to the conflict. Moreover, the Kurds of the PYD were excluded from all Syria peace-talks (Geneva, Astana and Sotchi) until January 2018. Washington's recent decision, announced on 14 January 2018, to form a 30,000-strong border force - essentially a restructured version of the SDF - to control Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq and also be deployed along the Euphrates, was strongly condemned by Moscow, Ankara, Teheran, and Damascus[12]. Turkey retaliated by launching a new military intervention in the Kurdish canton of Afrin on 20 January 2018 and might also seek to take over the city of Manbij (probably with a green light from Russia). This new stage in Syria's proxy wars is likely to redraw the internal boundaries between post-IS territories.

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[10] This tacit understanding between the US and Russia dealt mainly with the governorate of Deir al-Zor, in which the regime forces with the support of the Russian Air Force on one hand, and the US-backed SDF on the other, initiated two separate military campaigns against IS (in July and September 2017 respectively). This led to the governorate being divided in two. There was also an understanding about the south bank of the Euphrates, east of the city of Raqqa.

[11] I. Hamidi, *Ten American steps for the "diplomatic recognition" of the region east of the Euphrates* (in Arabic), Al Sharq al Awsaat, 7 January 2018.

[12] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/16/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-force.html?&moduleDetail=section-news

Source: https://syria.liveuamap.com/

Governing the 'Syrian Territories'

To a large extent, the current situation in north eastern Syria is the legacy of disagreemets and arrangements between external players. The post-IS landscape hence remains divided up for the time being, amplifying the process of fragmentation of the Syrian territory at work since the beginning of the conflict[13]. By the end of December 2017, this process was characterised by four emerging governance models.

In the area known as Euphrates Shield, in the northern areas of Aleppo governorate, the Turkish authorities have introduced a form of direct rule by the municipality of Gaziantep and its governor. The Turkish government established new local councils in this area, inspired by the model born in the Syrian opposition-held areas, and pays salaries to their members, as well as to the police units it has trained, teachers and medical staff. It has also invested in reconstructing certain types of infrastructure in the different districts of north Aleppo governorate, where it has traditionally been very poor, and sometimes severely damaged (such as in the city of al-Bab). However, the Turkish authorities have favoured short-term solutions rather than a long-term stabilisation strategy[14]. Turkey's low appetite to invest in large-scale projects in Syria may be due to continuing security threats posed by Kurdish forces to the west and east of the Euphrates Shield, and by regime-affiliated forces in the south, notwithstanding implicit 'non-aggression' guarantees that Ankara may have obtained from Russia and the US.

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[13] J. Yaziji, "Syria's Implosion: Political and Economic Impacts", in L. Narbone et al. (eds), *Inside Wars. Local Dynamics of Conflict in Syria and Libya*, EUI, 2016, http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/41644.

[14] H. Haid, *Post-ISIS governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy*, Research Paper, Chatham House, September 2017.

The former IS territories captured by the Syrian army, with the help of a multiplicity of local and foreign militias and Russian air support, are characterised by a low population density: the Syrian steppe (*badiya*) in Homs governorate and the south-east of Raqqa governorate, traditionally sparsely populated, and the right bank of the Euphrates in Deir al-Zor governorate, where a large proportion of the local population fled the progression of the regime's army. The regime does not face significant challenges to governing these sparsely populated regions at this stage. Although the regime's central objective is to regain control of the entire national territory, it nevertheless encourages internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to the areas it has retaken. It needs to restore its image, to show that it enjoys legitimacy and has sufficient manpower to ensure local security. It has thus begun to promote "local reconciliations" in some areas of Deir al-Zor, following the model implemented in the governorates of Rif Damascus and Homs[15]. Beyond this, the regime seems to have no other strategy than trying to impose a return to the mode of governance that prevailed before 2011.

Finally, the regions liberated by the SDF are currently governed according to two different administrative statuses. In Arab-majority areas, the newly-established local councils are affiliated to the SDF's political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), while the governance structures established since the summer of 2012 by the PYD in most of the regions where Kurds have a significant presence are integrated in the Kurdish Self-Administration. The Kurdish model of governance has in fact evolved with the SDF's military progress outside Kurdish-majority–areas since 2015[16]. The SDC was established in December 2015, then the Democratic Federation of North Syria (DFNS) in March 2016[17], and civil councils were created in each of the liberated cities. In July 2017, the internal boundaries of the DFNS were slightly redrawn into three provinces. Some areas traditionally inhabited by an Arab majority with Turkmen, Kurdish and Armenian minorities, such as Tell Abyad district, were included into this de facto autonomous Federation. In December 2017, local elections were held in all the localities of this Federation - a further step towards presenting both the local and international communities with the fait accompli of a "Kurdish federal region". However, the areas recently liberated by the SDF have not yet been integrated in the DFNS. These areas, including Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and all of Deir al-Zor's districts, are predominantly Sunni Arab, and are not adjacent to the Turkish border. It is in these grey zones - which were the strongholds of IS for nearly three years - that the challenges of governance and reconciliation are most acute.

Governance challenges and a struggle for legitimacy: the case of Raqqa

Before becoming the capital of IS's self-proclaimed 'caliphate', Raqqa was the first provincial capital to fall to the opposition in March 2013. At this time, the city was under the military control of FSA-affiliated brigades, the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham movement, and Jabhat al-

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[15] F. Adleh, A. Favier, *Local "reconciliation" agreements in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding*, Research Paper, June 2017, EUI, http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/46864.

[16] Based on the ideology of the PKK and its leader Öcalan, the Kurdish project advocates the establishment of a "model of governance based on decentralisation, democracy, secularism, and multiculturalism which is proposed for entire Syria", Hediye Yûsîf, Co-Chair of the council of the Democratic Federation of North Syria, https://www.opendemocracy.net/ercan-ayboga/solution-for-syria-en-route-democratic-federation-of-north-syria, March 2017.

[17] D. Aldarwishe, "Local Governance under the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava" in L. Narbone et al. (eds), *Inside Wars*. See also the presentation of the DFNS on https://rojavanorthernsyria.noblogs.org/english/document-of-the-democratic-federal-system-of-rojava-northern-syria/ and the Social Contract of the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria, available on: http://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/17620

Nusra. When the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the precursor to IS, announced its expansion into Syria in April 2013 with the intention to subsume Jabhat al-Nusra back under its command, most of the latter's militants in Raqqa answered ISI leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's call. Revolutionary control of the city did not last long. By July 2013, many activists and influential people in the city had been kidnapped or killed by the then re-named Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (about 1,200 kidnappings by January 2014). In less than six months, ISIS had succeeded in pushing all other armed brigades out of the city, starting with those affiliated to the FSA, and declared its total control over Raqqa in January 2014[18]. The international military campaign to drive IS (as ISIS was re-named) out of its Syrian stronghold took place over five phases from November 2016 to October 2017. The campaign resulted in the destruction of 80% of the city and the death of around 1,800 residents.

The struggle between Kurds and Arab revolutionary forces

Two conflicting narratives regarding the International Coalition-backed SDF's victory in Raqqa prevailed in October 2017. On one hand, Arab activists from the region who had actively participated in the revolution – most of them now live in exile – described the SDF's military conquest as a "new occupation" by foreign fighters whose first act had been to install a huge portrait of the PKK's jailed leader at the city's central and symbolic square[19]. On the other hand, the Kurdish leadership insisted their intent was to "bring together all the different components of region's society". These two narratives have been fueled by bloody episodes of conflict between Arab and Kurdish brigades (in Ras al-Ain from December 2012 and inter-fighting in Aleppo in 2015). Beyond this, the ordinary inhabitants of Raqqa may have more prosaic concerns such as returning home and recommencing a secure and normal economic life.

The International Coalition took a major risk in the battle for Raqqa in relying on Kurdish-led forces to liberate territories inhabited mostly by Sunni Arabs. The US has promoted the integration of Arab-dominated units into the ranks of the SDF since its establishment in October 2015. According to the US Department of Defense, the number of Arab fighters joining the SDF has gradually increased to account for about 60% of the total troops in March 2017[20]. Most of these came from tribal confederations in northern Syria. However, they remained squarely under YPG command. During the last phase of the military operation to liberate the city of Raqqa (June-October 2017), Arab tribal forces from the northern countryside of Raqqa's governorate and to a lesser extent from the western countryside joined the battle. However, most FSA units were excluded[21]. Beyond Raqqa, many young Arabs have joined the SDF out of a fear that they may otherwise be suspected of having links with

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[18] The first nucleus of IS was established in Raqqa in May 2013 with the support of Abou Luqman al-Raqqawi, who had been released from Saadnaya prison during President Assad's amnesties in the summer of 2011. He may have been previously trained by the Syrian intelligence services. See: M. Alhassoun, *Raqqa and the Revolution* (in Arabic), Draft version, 2017. On the links between ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra, see: C. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, Hurst, London, 2015.

[19] Author's interviews with Syrian activists in Istanbul, November 2017. See also Y. al-Haj Saleh, *A Wary Return to Raqqa*, 13 November 2017, http://www.yassinhs.com/2017/11/13/a-wary-return-to-raqqa/.

[20] https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1099469/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-gen-townsend-via-teleconference-from-ba/. According to the same sources, there were 5,000 Arabs among the 30,000 combatants when the coalition was created in October 2015, and 13,000 Arabs out of 45,000 in December 2016.

[21] Unlike Manbij and Deir al-Zor, no "Raqqa military council" has been set up. The best-known brigade of the FSA in Raqqa (Raqqa Revolutionary Front) was sidelined during the battle to liberate the city, while other armed groups such as the Tell Abyad Revolutionaries Brigade, Liwa Aswad al-Furat, Liwa al-Tahrir, Liwa Ahrar Raqqa and Raqqa Hawks Brigade (a faction close to the regime) were enlisted alongside the YPG and YPJ.

IS and be persecuted by the PYD[22]. In addition, the high turnover of non-Kurdish units in the different phases of the military operation illustrates the internal tensions and conflicts of interest within the SDF[23]. The cohesion of this coalition has stemmed mainly from US policy, and it may therefore start to fracture as the military campaign comes to an end.

In April 2017, the SDF's political wing, the SDC, set up the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) to administer the localities of the governorate when they came under the SDF's military control. Backed by the US, this civilian structure headed by two presidents (an Arab and a Kurd) was immediately rejected by the Raqqa Provincial Council (RPC) based in the Turkish city of Urfa, the local governance structure recognised by the main opposition body the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)[24]. This duplication of governance structures for the newly-liberated Raqqa province appears to have been a direct consequence of strategic disagreements between the US and Turkey. While the US administration and its Kurdish partner had initially been reluctant to involve civilian actors based outside Syria in the RCC, Turkey stymied US efforts to reconcile the two councils in late September 2017[25].

This struggle for legitimacy raises the broader issue of the return of IDPs and refugees who constitute the bulk of Raqqa's population, and who have not been involved in discussions regarding the province's future[26]. Chief among them are Raqqa's activists and influential citizens who had initiated the revolutionary movement and have since IS's takeover of the city in 2013 reorganised themselves militarily and politically in the areas to which they fled. Debates have been taking place among this group, now scattered mostly between Turkey and Europe, on the viability of returning to Syria. The majority however refuses to submit to the laws of the new local rulers, whom they accuse of having never given legitimacy or recognition to the opposition's projects and of collaborating on several occasions with the regime's forces. In addition, some of these activists acknowledge that they have lost all their local networks on the ground. The SDF's military victory against IS, followed by the imposition of a new civilian administration in Raqqa, is also a defeat of the opposition forces and opens the door to a face-off between the Kurds and the regime.

Towards a confrontation between the Kurds and the regime?

At the end of October 2017, Ilham Ahmad, the Kurdish co-president of SDC, was still asserting her camp's willingness to "negotiate with the regime" for a federal solution in Syria, suggesting the possibility of a temporary agreement between the two parties. However, immediately after Raqqa's fall, several regime officials increased the intensity of their verbal threats against the Kurdish project, going so far as to compare the PYD with IS, and announcing that they would "expel the SFD and the Americans from Raqqa". In response, the head of the SDC's political committee declared that there was "no room for the regime in

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[22] Author's interviews with an Arab activist from Tell Abyad. See other testimonies in, Ayn al Medina, *Tell Abyad… Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians and Armenians and Self Administration* (in Arabic), 18 May 2017. http://www.ayn-almadina.com/details/.

[23] *The Alliance between tribes and the SDF* (in Arabic), http://www.rok-online.com/?p=8383, 27 October 2017.

[24] The RPC claims to be the successor of the civilian council that began administering Raqqa in 2013 after the FSA and Islamist armed groups took the city from the Syrian regime. However, this body has been undermined by internal conflicts within the Syrian opposition.

[25] On US initiative, RPC members and Syrian civil society activists were invited to Rome to meet government representatives from EU member states, but they refused to attend the meeting because of pressure from Turkey. Author's interview with a Syrian activist from Raqqa who previously worked for an American organisation.

[26] In mid-October 2017, less than one percent of Raqqa's 300,000 pre-war population remained in the city, according to estimates.

Raqqa" and that this was a "red line"[27]. The two parties have not yet reached a dead end, especially because the ongoing battle in the Afrin region could reshuffle the cards. The future of their relationship will be strongly dependent upon the positions of their respective international backers. In the meantime, the ability of both sides to impose political and social control over local communities is key, especially for the Kurdish leaders who have gained military control over most of Raqqa governorate. The regime, which is only present in the governorate's almost-deserted south eastern zone, could bet on the failure of the SDF-sponsored model of governance for Raqqa. It could then re-impose its authority there through coopting tribal leaders or other local intermediaries.

Several analysts consider the participation of Sunni Arab populations in the management of post-IS territories as a prerequisite for long-term stability[28]. Indeed, the first decisions of the civil and military governance structures of the new rulers of Raqqa, which have been the subject of intense media coverage, indicate a willingness to mitigate the risks of ethnic tensions and of Sunni Arab residents' marginalisation. The PYD is seeking to further consolidate its power and to legitimise itself through an emphasis on two key pillars: the provision of security and public services, as well as the claim that local actors are truely represented within the newly established civil structures. The PYD has done this elsewhere[29], however in Raqqa an effort has been made to be in line with local demographics. The RCC appears, in the media close to SDC, at the center of this strategy. It consists of two presidents, three deputies (a Turkman, an Arab and a Kurd) and 14 technical committees covering all areas of governance.

A few days before the official announcement of the liberation of Raqqa, the chairman of the RCC's General Relations Committee Omar Alloush – who is also the main architect of the project for shared governance between Arabs and Kurds – announced the main priorities of the rapid response plan to stabilise Raqqa. He stated that the security and safety of Raqqa's residents should be entrusted to a newly formed local police force, that adopted the name Internal Security Forces (ISF), under the supervision of the RCC. The US started training this police force in May 2017 (with the initial objective of training 3,000 young people) to ensure security and stability in the liberated areas of Raqqa governorate. These have been deployed primarily in the main cities of the governorate. In Raqqa city, as of January 2018 its presence remains limited while the priority remains mine clearance. The relationship between the ISF and the Asayish, the security force previously established by the PYD to secure the Kurdish areas, remains unclear. In addition to security, the RCC is highlighting the efforts of its various committees, particularly the Raqqa Reconstruction Committee and the Services Committee, in providing basic services to the population: cleaning the streets, undertaking the maintenance of water and electricity infrastructure, distributing of fuel oil and gas, opening schools and health centres, and repairing bakeries[30]. From the end of December 2017, however, these services were concentrated in only one neighborhood in the north of the city,

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[27] https://www.kobanikurd.com/archives/72630

[28] For example, H. Haid, *Local Participation is Important to Post-ISIS Governance in Raqqa*, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/05/16/local-participation-is-important-to-post-isis-governance-in-raqqa; M. Yacoubian, *Governance Challenges in Raqqa after the Islamic State*, Special Report, United Stated Institute of Peace, October 2017, https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/governance-challenges-raqqa-after-islamic-state.

[29] R. Khalaf, *Governing Rojava. Layers of Legitimacy in Syria*, Chatham House, December 2016, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-12-08-governing-rojava-khalaf.pdf.

[30] See RCC's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Majlisraqqaalmadani/., https://www.kobanikurd.com/archives/72454

the first to be liberated and an area to which a number of IDPs had already returned[31]. Overall, reconstruction will require a large amount of effort and resources, given the level of destruction.

Kurdish officials underline the representation of Arabs, who constitute the majority of the RCC. They also highlight the "democratic process" at work: the elections that have taken place, from the most local administrative level (the "people's communes") to the RCC. The mandates of the latter's committees were, moreover, renewed during its second meeting on 10 January 2018[32]. The Kurdish leadership, probably encouraged by the US, bet on tribal leaders very early on, coopting them to secure territories. The various Arab tribes are well represented in the civil bodies set up by the SDC, alongside several 'technocrats'. Tribal leaders have been mobilised in reconciliation initiatives aiming to reintegrate former IS sympathisers in local society or to settle disputes relating to property rights and social customs. It is unlikely, however, that tribal leaders truly represent local Arab communities and, more importantly, they are unlikely to remain reliable partners. In recent years, *sheikhs* within the same tribe or clan have sworn contradictory and very volatile allegiances, submitting themselves to the 'law of the strongest' (the regime, then the opposition, then IS) to defend their immediate personal interests[33]. At the same time, the Kurdish leadership does not rely to a significant extent on members of the liberal professions and civil servants (who made up 40% of Raqqa's population before 2011), the majority of whom had sided either with the regime and are still displaced in Hama and Damascus governorates, or with the opposition and have become refugees, mostly in Turkey.

Beyond discourses and formal institutions, the democratic nature of the representation process deserves to be relativised as it is taking place in a context largely dominated by weapons and military logic, and in absence of neutral observers. The question of whether or not to integrate Raqqa in the Federation of North Syria has not yet been decided. The SDC authorities emphasise that "it will be the decision of local inhabitants", but it is doubtful that the Kurdish leadership will leave such a strategic and political decision to Raqqa's local communities. Moreover, the main question may not be the degree of integration and participation of local Arabs in civil institutions, but whether the PYD retains power for itself or grants some autonomy to local actors. In fact, the RCC has little power over the military and political cadres of the PYD and its head operates under the supervision of PKK executives and advisers. Its sources of funding largely depend on PYD and PKK networks (diaspora and natural resources controlled by the YPG). The main decision-making processes seem thus to be concentrated in the hands of PYD and PKK officials, who also have the necessary contacts with the Kurdish military and security services.

Moreover, the RCC has not been the principal recipient of US aid that initially favoured relatively autonomous programmes or small civil local organisations (as US agencies had done in opposition-held areas with the police and civil defense programmes)[34]. The RCC's officials have consistently criticised the low financial commitment of their foreign supporter

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[31] There are no accurate statistics for the number of the returnees to Raqqa city. In mid-January 2018, the RCC said as many as 125,000 had returned to the city since October 2017. UNOCHA and INGOs recorded only half that number.

[32] http://cc-raqqa.com/archives/625.

[33] At least three 'tribal armies' have been established in Raqqa governorate: one affiliated with the FSA in 2015, the Tribes' Forces within the SDF, and the Tribal Army working with the Assad army and headed by Turki Al-Buhmed.

[34] The Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) is the US State Department's stabilisation programme for Raqqa, based in Ankara. It has provided assistance to restore services mainly through the Early Recovery Team.

and would be unable to manage Raqqa governorate without the resources from the SDF's control over natural resources in Deir al-Zor governorate. The lack of direct international funding for civilian structures could prevent them from becoming autonomous from PKK funding networks. Lack of human resources and competences is another obstacle that may hinder the PYD-led SDF from governing post-IS territories.

Finally, the Kurdish project does not seem to be actively supported by Arab populations, even those who have participated in civilian bodies. Previous experiences in the cities of Tell Abyad and Hassakeh have indeed raised concerns about the future of the city of Raqqa. Indeed, Kurdish "democratic" management has shown some similarities with the practices of the Syrian regime, especially in cities where the Kurds had previously suffered abuses from Arab groups such as in Tell Abyad[35]: human rights violations by YPG forces, restrictions on freedom of expression of both Kurdish opponents and Arab activists, forced displacement and compulsory conscription[36]. However, it is above all the social and cultural model proposed by the Kurds that could have a negative impact on local Sunni Arab communities, particularly questions of education (curriculum and language) and of personal status: the rules of inheritance, gender equality, and the prohibition of polygamy (central to the customs of rural Arab societies) are all sensitive issues.

In addition to these internal challenges, Kurdish officials have focused their attention on external security challenges. They warn against the risks of destabilisation through the Turkish or Syrian intelligence services' instrumentalisation of certain tribal leaders, of assassinations targeting Arab public figures who have joined the SDF, or even of terrorist attacks[37]. These challenges are certainly real, and several SDF-held localities have recently witnessed criminal and terrorist acts by unknown perpetrators[38]. However, this focus on external challenges also appears as a justification for maintaining ever-closer security control over populations.

Beyond their desire to gain legitimacy in Raqqa, the Kurdish authorities' main goal seems to be to score points to gain sufficient political weight to influence the future of the country, that is to obtain at least the implementation of their federal project. For the regime, the fight against IS is only a single episode in a longer fight to eradicate any form of insurgency and to retake the control of the entire territory. These conflicting strategies will likely reproduce in Raqqa the model of the 'ignored-city', in which local communities suffer a long history of economic, political and social marginalisation. In addition, the Assad regime and the PYD's visions are even less likely to accommodate Sunni Arab identity, particularly as it has transformed and radicalised during the years of conflict.

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[35] On the conflict in Tell Abyad, see *Tell Abyad… Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians and Armenians and Self Administration*, Ayn al Medina, op. cit. And Amnesty International, *Syria: Forced Displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria*, 13 October 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/.

[36] A. Al-Jabassini (2017) *Civil Resistance to Military Conscription in Kurdish Areas of Northern Syria: The Untold Story*, Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 12:3, 104-110, DOI: 10.1080/15423166.2017.1371064

[37] http://www.geo-strategic.com/2018/01/blog-post_30.html.

[38] For example, the head of the Raqqa Reconstruction Committee, Ibrahim al-Hasan, was subject to an assassination attempt in January 2018: http://artafm.com/news/8822

What is the future of IS and other jihadist groups in Syria?

IS has lost almost all of its territory, and its structure has been damaged by the death of many of its leaders. But it has not yet been defeated, either at the military level or, and perhaps more importantly, at the level of the political roots which made its rise possible. IS never obtained significant popular support among Sunni Arab Syrians, but at the same time, they have never considered it their main enemy.

The game is not over yet

Militarily, IS is unlikely to soon recover the strength it acquired between 2014 and 2016. The loss of the quasi-totality of its territory is a huge blow to its strategy. Most of its senior leaders (almost all of whom were foreign fighters) were killed in air raids and others have been arrested by the SDF and the regime. Thousands of local fighters were also killed during the long military campaign and hundreds of others surrendered to the SDF especially in the second half of 2017. Both the Syrian regime and the SDF have negotiated the surrender of the last group of fighters who held the main urban strongholds of Raqqa and other cities in Deir al-Zor governorate, allowing them to flee with their families from Raqqa city toward eastern desert areas in Deir al-Zor governorate and from Deir al-Zor to Iraq[39]. Hundreds more have merged into the mass of the displaced people who fled to SDF-controlled areas or opposition-held areas or in Turkey, although some of them have since been arrested.

Despite its weakening, IS continues to pose military and security threats. The organisation is still fighting to keep hold of its remaining pockets of territory in Deir al-Zor. It still controls small pockets in the south of the capital Damascus and in the desert around Al-Sukhnah in the eastern countryside of Homs. It has also re-emerged in the northeastern countryside of Hama and southern countryside of Idlib since October 2017, after it brought hundreds of reinforcements from the regime-held areas in the Syrian Desert. In time, IS survivors may well form sleeper cells in hard-to-reach areas and eventually return to the al-Qaida model: create a network of clandestine cells across Syria and its neighboring countries able to maintain instability through terror attacks. IS's future in Syria is inseparable from its trajectory in Iraq, its place of origin[40]. In Iraq, it is not the first defeat of IS: between 2007 and 2013, its structure survived repression, prison, and exile, and continued to exist underground.

Moreover, there has been no implementation of transparent transitional justice mechanisms that would have made it possible to fairly judge local people who were linked to IS. This issue is undoubtedly complicated: should one judge those who have pledged allegiance to IS (of whom no known list has been established), or only those who participated in the fighting (estimated at most between 4,000 and 5,000)? The question does not even seem to have been raised in the areas reconquered by the regime, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. In SDF-controlled areas, hundreds of Syrian detainees accused of collaborating with IS, or having sworn allegiance to it, have been released through the mediation of tribal leaders. They may have been reintegrated into the local life and some may even have been coopted into the Kurdish security and intelligence services. It is nevertheless unclear whether these 'reconciliation procedures' were motivated by the need of Kurdish forces to prevent tensions with and between tribes, or if they responded to a strict logic of

[39] Q. Sommerville and R. Dalati, *Raqqa's Dirty Secret*, November 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret.

40 L. Al Rachid, « L'Irak après l'État islamique: une victoire qui change tout?», Notes de l'Ifri, Ifri, juillet 2017. T. Gade, *The Mosul Campaign: Winning the War, Losing the Peace?*, Policy Brief, EUI, July 2017, http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/47088/PolicyBrief_2017_14_MED.pdf.

justice. In the future, the lack of transitional justice procedures could lead to inter and intra-tribal conflicts, especially since traditional tribal reconciliation procedures have broken down[41].

The need to redress grievances

Finally, IS or other jihadist groups are likely to survive as long as Sunni Arab grievances persist in Syria. The susceptibility of a part of the Syrian population to the message of the jihadist groups, and a fortiori to IS's message, has been less based on ideological and religious foundations, and more on political and social roots. Certainly, the motivation and the degree of compliance are difficult to assess, but the majority of those who have pledged allegiance to IS were motivated initially by opportunism and self-serving interest (submission to the law of the strongest, self-preservation, the only way to claim the continuation of the fight against the regime). Salafist beliefs, were not widespread in Syria before the revolution, jihadist trends even less so, though they may have gained popularity after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. For example, in a city like Raqqa, the practices of a popular Islam, marked by the Sufi trend, were historically dominant. Salafist ideas (*al-salafiyya al-'ilmiyya*, or Scripturalist Salafism, in contrast with Jihadi Salafism) appeared in the city in the 1990s, at the same time as religious observance increased and Qur'an memorisation institutes were opened under the control of the regime. Salafist ideas nevertheless reached a limited audience (less than a hundred young people from the city of Raqqa, a few dozen of whom went to fight in Iraq in 2003 then came back and were imprisoned by the Syrian regime)[42]. This does not mean that local communities were impervious to IS propaganda and brainwashing, which may have had an effect, especially among children and young people, and resulted in some individuals joining the organisation because of jihadist convictions. However, the barbaric violence and the oppressive practices of IS against local populations are today considered abhorrent in eastern Syria.

The problem remains of finding a credible alternative to respond to feelings of defeat and alienation evermore present among Syria's Sunni Arab communities, which, if unaddressed, could breed jihadist militant ideologies and new forms of extremism in the future. As a resident of Deir al-Zor said, "our choice today is limited to either becoming opportunistic mercenaries for one of the dominant military forces, hating the Kurdish project, or even more, hating the regime's oppressive practices." However, neither the religious institutions nor the political forces of the decimated opposition are today able to offer a vision and project for these Sunni Arab communities whose identities have also tended to be very regionalised. As for tribal leaders, they are unlikely to be able to play a positive role in rebuilding a political order at the local level. Tribal leaders' loyalties have been divided between successive dominant military forces (the regime, the opposition, IS, and the SDF). Moreover, local communities have not always followed tribal sheikhs' stances.

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41 K. Kaddour and K. Mazur, *Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal regions*, Carnegie, February 28, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/eastern-expectations-changing-dynamics-in-syria-s-tribal-regions-pub-68008.

42 Three *sheikhs* from Raqqa played a role in the expansion of Salafism. Sheikh Salem al-Helu was persecuted by IS's security officers. Sheikh al-Assaf was arrested and may have died under torture in an IS prison. Their fate may be a clear sign that their Salafist teaching and IS's ideology are not compatible. Ain al Medina, 3 May 2017, *Al-Raqqa and its transformations: Society, policy and future governance* (in Arabic), http://www.ayn-almadina.com/details

Nothing can prevent jihadist messages continued flourishing inside Syria, unless the root causes of the grievances of a large part of the Sunni community are addressed. These grievances, that were at the heart of the demonstrations in 2011, originated from the regime's policy of marginalisation, deprivation, and oppression, particularly in the north eastern regions of Syria. They have deepened after the seven years of conflict, during which these same populations have become even more dehumanised and marginalised. The restoration of central state authority, primarily through military means, might ultimately pave the way for a revival of a much more violent extremism in the next generation.

Conclusion

The battle against the IS has temporarily reshaped the political map of north eastern Syria. While IS's military defeat ought to have provided the opportunity to discuss the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country, it has instead ignited new proxy conflicts between key regional and international actors. The governance of post-IS areas remains dominated by security concerns, which reinforces the predominant role of military and security actors and leave little space for local civil societies.

Furthermore, the PYD and the Syrian regime primarily perceived their respective fights against IS as a means to regain legitimacy on the international scene rather than directing efforts to meet the needs of local populations. Their legitimacy remains weak among local Sunni Arab communities in north eastern Syria. As this paper has demonstrated in the case of Raqqa, the Kurdish leadership has established a power-sharing model that allows the participation of some Arab tribal leaders in the newly-established civilian administrative structures. But this governance model still excludes many groups within the local population, including internally displaced persons and refugees. Its decision-making also remains concentrated in the political and military bodies of the PYD, which has imposed itself as the dominant Kurdish political party in Syria by eliminating its political opposition. It has emerged as a major force in some predominantly Arab areas because of US military support, though it remains dependent on this support and on the interests and networks of the PKK.

Moreover, the new rulers in post-IS territories have not paid attention to the main grievances of Sunni Arab communities that have originated from a long history of economic, political and social marginalisation. These grievances may well have been exacerbated by the violent oppression the communities faced at the hand of both the Syrian regime and IS. Nor are the new rulers in post-IS territories addressing the central issue of reconciliation in local communities now deeply divided because of conflicting political allegiances since 2011 and successive waves of displacement throughout the conflict. The issue of reconciliation, when it is raised, has generally been determined by the conditions and mechanisms imposed by the dominant military force in the area in question.

Based on this, a political strategy to stabilise Syria's post-IS territories and to prevent the re-emergence of radical forms of jihadism in the long term should seek to reconcile Syria's peripheral areas (formerly controlled by IS) with the regime, the actor that has fueled grievances and resentment among a large part of the population.

For the time being, the US administration has set up a stabilisation programme only for the province of Raqqa, to the exclusion of other areas, focusing on the restoration of services. This programme needs to be expanded to ensure inclusive local governance that meets the needs of local communities and addresses their grievances. In the specific case of Raqqa,

international engagement needs to ensure that the PYD delegates power to local communities. Such a policy should include IDPs and refugees in discussions and planning on the future of their native region and increase the participation of the middle classes and the liberal professions in local management. A political dialogue between Arabs and Kurds originally from the area should also be encouraged to defuse tensions and promote genuine reconciliation. Finally, promoting the rebuilding of local leadership within Arab Sunni communities – which are not only fragmented but have also been decimated by regime and IS's repression– seems the best solution to prepare the ground for a stable, long-term peace.

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