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**Opportunity in a-Raqqa:
A Case Study on Shaping the Future of Syria**

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While the ceasefire in Syria seems to have held for over a month, violations on the ground are increasing, especially on the part of the forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. Consequently, representatives of the rebel coalition participating in the Geneva talks, intended to draft a plan to end the fighting, now say that that ceasefire is on the verge of collapse. They contend that fighting in the Aleppo sector has resumed full force and Syrian airstrikes are again of the scope they were before the ceasefire went into effect. Assad's forces have reacted to this assertion with a familiar and, in their view, obvious answer: rebel forces have allied themselves with Jabhat al-Nusra, which is not a party to the ceasefire, and therefore attacking them does not represent a violation of the ceasefire understandings.

Indeed, the significant turn of events in the fighting comes from the front where fighting never ceased, i.e., between Assad's forces on the one hand, and those of the Islamic State and Jabhat a-Nusra on the other. In late March, the Syrian army and pro-Assad coalition, helped by massive Russian air support, retook the city of Palmyra, where they massacred Islamic State fighters. The conquest of Palmyra, followed by the capture of the nearby town of al-Qaryatayn, served Assad and his allies in several ways. First, it sent a symbolic message by liberating Palmyra, a city of historic significance, and saving the antiquities not destroyed by the Islamic State. Second, control of the territory east of Homs has made it possible to open a Damascus-Homs axis and create Assad-controlled territorial contiguity in central Syria. Third, and above all, pictures of the battlefield strengthen the notion that Assad's forces are fighting the Islamic State rather than other rebels, and emphasize that Assad is the only option when it comes to defeating the Islamic State in Syria.

At present, given the agreement between Russia and the United States whereby Assad may continue to hold the reins of government at least during the transition period until an arrangement is formulated, Assad can feel more secure in his rule. Not only has the

image of Assad as the only alternative to the Islamic State been strengthened, but under the guise of fighting the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra he can continue to attack the other rebel organizations as well, so that in the mind of the Syrian public they will not present an alternative to his rule from within Syria. The Syrian army is exploiting the presence of Jabhat al-Nusra in areas held by other rebel organizations to continue its attacks there.

The idea that the Assad regime is the only alternative to the Islamic State and is the solution rather than the cause of the Syrian crisis could be further entrenched if the seizure of Palmyra and a-Qaryatayn is used as a springboard to develop a Syrian military ground offensive toward a-Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State in Syria. But for a military takeover of a-Raqqa, Assad needs not only massive air support from Russia but also cooperation on the ground from the northern Syrian Kurds, who so far have shown great resolve in fighting Islamic State forces. Recently, however, relations between Assad and the heads of the Kurdish community were upset by the Kurds' declaration that they want a Kurdish federation. The declaration was made without prior coordination with Assad, though in the past Assad was willing to recognize Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria on condition they demonstrate loyalty to his regime. Furthermore, Assad is unhappy about the coordination between Russia and the Kurdish rebels. The gaps, worries, and disagreements between Assad and the Kurdish leadership in Syria could therefore disrupt and/or delay coordination for taking over a-Raqqa.

By imposing a ceasefire between Assad and rebels, Russia and the United States in practice provided Assad's forces with the opportunity to focus on fighting the Islamic State and Jabhat a-Nusra and seize control of territories from which they have withdrawn, thereby tilting the balance of power that will determine Syria's future in his favor at the rebels' expense. However, it seems that policymakers in Washington are minimizing the likely possibility that as long as Assad continues to rule and gain strength, so the flow of volunteers to the Islamic State and jihadist groups – appearing to be the relevant opposition to the Assad regime – will continue unabated. In addition, the more that other opposition groups feel that the West, especially the United States, has abandoned them – given the consensus that the United States has conceded to Russia and retracted its demand to depose Assad at once – so their tendency to join Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State will grow.

A Possible Reversal: The Seizure of a-Raqqa

Violations of the ceasefire by Assad's forces, their significant success in taking over Palmyra, and the possible plans for the reconquest of a-Raqqa place the rebels in an inferior position, but they can turn the situation around and take advantage of an opportunity for them and the Arab and Western states supporting them. The United States

now has the opportunity to form an opposition force, prepare it, and help it seize a-Raqqa before it is attacked by the pro-Assad coalition comprising the Syrian army, Russian air support, and Hezbollah and Iranian troops. Instead of allowing Assad to liberate lands controlled by the Islamic State, the United States could support the less radical forces, and help them liberate and control these areas and thereby acquire a tangible symbol of victory. To this end, it is also possible to enlist widespread support from those parts of the Syrian population that are repelled by both Assad and Salafi jihadists and hope for a less radical alternative to lead Syria to a more stable future.

If the United States desires to increase its influence in shaping the future of Syria it must formulate an effective coalition of rebel forces with the Free Syrian Army, together with the Syrian Democratic Forces (80 percent of whom are Kurds and the other 20 percent Sunnis) headquartered in al-Hasakah, and the New Syrian Army (established with US and Jordanian help, consisting of volunteers from Sunni tribes) headquartered in Deir a-Zor. The first test for the rebel coalition would be the taking over a-Raqqa.

To improve the chances of this move's success, the United States must take some complementary steps. One, it must coordinate the move with Russia, which (in opposition to Turkey) supports the Kurdish forces and does not oppose US dominance in eastern Syria and attacks on the Islamic State. In exchange, the United States would be able to acknowledge Russia's interests and dominance in Syria's coastal sector. Two, in order to enlist the Sunni states (especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey) in the move and encourage the rebel organizations to focus on fighting the Islamic State, the United States would have to make a public commitment not to let Assad stay in charge. Three, the United States must form a shadow government of the Syrian opposition organizations capable of serving as the foundation for a transition government and practical alternative to the Assad regime, while formulating goals for an agreement acceptable to most of the internal Syrian actors not belonging to Salafi jihadism. Four, the United States must prevent Assad from making any further territorial gains at the rebels' expense by strengthening them with military aid from the United States and the Sunni nations. Five, the United States must shift the center of gravity of the civil war to areas under Islamic State control. Anyone who succeeds in liberating land from the Islamic State will achieve a significant edge in the battle over expanding control of Syria. And six, the United States must provide economic, humanitarian, and civilian aid to the rebel forces so that they can build and display governance in every area they liberate from the Islamic State and prevent the formation of a vacuum that would quickly be filled by Assad or Jabhat a-Nusra forces. Support for the local population is vital in constructing governance legitimacy for the liberating forces. Civil rallies that were held in early April in Idlib,

Aleppo, and near Damascus are positive evidence for the formation of support for a rebel coalition.

A major constraint regarding this proposed strategic plan is Turkey's position, and the question of how to allay Turkey's concerns about the growing strength of the Kurdish rebels. As Kurdish fighters represent the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces, they constitute a critical part of the rebel coalition's success in taking a-Raqqa. But for Turkey, the Syrian Democratic Forces comprise a proxy of the Kurdish underground. To keep Turkey from undermining the move, the United States must have an appropriate incentive for the Turks. The problem is that the levers in the hands of the US toward Turkey are inferior to the Turkey's ability to do damage. An issue recently discussed was which rebel forces would seize control of the Syrian side of the border crossings with Turkey. Turkey opposed Kurdish rebel control of the crossings. On this issue, the United States could promise not to interfere with Turkish activity at the crossings and along the border. Nonetheless, a direct appeal from President Obama to Turkish President Erdogan is necessary to persuade the Turks not to interfere with the effort to take over a-Raqqa. As part of such an appeal, the two presidents would also be able to discuss further incentives.

The taking over of the Islamic State capital by the coalition of rebel organizations could represent a reversal that would challenge the false dichotomy Assad presents, namely that he is the only alternative to the Islamic State and the Salafi jihadist organizations. It is necessary to demonstrate to the Syrian people that an opposition comprising more pragmatic Syrian forces could be a promising alternative, even if it threatens the already shaky ceasefire, especially if Assad tries to foil the rebels' success. US political and military support for such a coalition is critical. It will improve trust in the United States among its allies in the Middle East and help establish a united political front with the Sunni Arab nations in any future negotiations on a transition period and on shaping the future of Syria.

