



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report identifies critical governance challenges the Syrian city of Raqqa will face after it has been liberated from the Islamic State. Based on interviews and a survey in the field as well as a review of the literature, the report is supported by the Middle East and Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and is integral to ongoing USIP efforts to develop and implement effective peacebuilding programs.

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Mona Yacoubian

Governance Challenges in Raqqa after the Islamic State

Summary

- Raqqa, the capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS)'s caliphate, has occupied a central place in the group's narrative, and its fall marks a critical strategic and symbolic defeat for IS.
- This military victory will not ensure the end of IS, however. Developing post-IS governance that is inclusive, accountable, and responsive to the local population will be essential to precluding the emergence of IS 2.0.
- The emergence of effective governance in Raqqa faces four categories of significant challenges: strategic, ethnic, tribal, and technical.
- Strategic issues arise from the multiple competing forces on the ground in eastern Syria and reflect the inherent complexity of governing Raqqa in the absence of an overall political settlement to the greater Syrian conflict.
- Ethnic tensions between Kurdish and Arab populations are a critical fault line that could complicate Raqqa's governance.
- Raqqa's strong tribal character adds another layer of complexity, raising the possibility of revenge killings and land or property disputes, among other issues.
- Technical considerations—such as water supply in an area that depends on irrigated agriculture—underscore the difficulty of restoring essential services.
- Education is also a key challenge after three years of schools being either closed or taken over by IS and modeled on its extremist ideology.
- Key recommendations include ensuring continued US engagement, leveraging influence with Kurdish-led forces, promoting Arab-Kurdish dialogue, developing new tribal reconciliation models, restoring social cohesion, building capacity, and ensuring essential services delivery.

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Background

The fall of Raqqa—the capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) caliphate—marks a critical defeat for IS, a powerful symbolic and strategic loss. Yet the success of the counter-IS campaign will ultimately be determined not by battlefield wins, but instead by what follows.

Securing and sustaining the peace in Raqqa will be a critical challenge to the overall success of the campaign. Failing to follow military victory with a well-conceived stabilization and governance strategy could lead to the emergence of power vacuums and instability. Developing post-IS governance arrangements that are inclusive, accountable, and responsive to the local population is essential to precluding the emergence of either IS 2.0 or new extremist groups. As noted in a June 2017 study by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, “Simply pushing the Islamic State out of a formal governing position...will not ensure the achievement of these post-liberation tasks and reduce the likelihood that the Islamic State or some other terrorist organization emerges to take advantage of a tenuous peace.”¹

Earlier experiences in Iraq underscore the importance of good governance as a critical hedge against the return of violence and extremism. Iraq’s Anbar province is a powerful reminder of the fleeting nature of military victories not accompanied by efforts to anchor good governance. Anbar was the crucible from which IS emerged. Rooted in the former al-Qaeda in Iraq, IS thrived on deep Sunni disaffection. Baghdad’s harsh repression of the local Sunni population and its refusal to allow for more empowered local governance structures in Anbar created the perfect environment for IS to flourish.

A December 2015 Mercy Corps report concludes that “there is no silver bullet to building stability in Iraq, but good governance is essential to addressing the root causes of instability.” Acknowledging unique aspects to each case, the report emphasizes a key commonality among Iraq, Syria, and other countries in the midst of conflict: “Where governments fail to be responsible, accountable, and just toward citizens, insurgent groups can gain traction.”²

Raqqa’s governance challenges are distinct from those of Iraq as well as from those of other IS-liberated areas of Syria. They fall into four key categories: strategic, ethnic, tribal, and technical.

The strategic set entails challenges inherent in governing Raqqa in the absence of a broader political settlement to the Syria conflict. These challenges are rooted in the complexities of multiple and competing forces on the ground in eastern Syria: US, Kurdish, Syrian Arab opposition, Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian, to name the key stakeholders. Key questions include: Who will be the central political authority to which Raqqa answers? What role will the US-backed Kurdish forces play? Will the United States maintain a presence in and around Raqqa? Will the Syrian regime, aided by its allies Russia and Iran, seek to reassert its control over Raqqa?

The second set of challenges, ethnic tension, focuses on the inherent strains between the Arabs and Kurds. It reflects Raqqa’s reality as an Arab-majority city lacking any significant Kurdish element in its identity yet being liberated by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Indeed, Raqqa is the farthest afield that the SDF have ventured in the counter-IS campaign. It is a world apart from the Kurdish-dominated, semi-autonomous region in northern and eastern Syria that the Kurds have named Rojava (Western Kurdistan). Several related questions revolve around how to mitigate potential Kurdish-Arab tensions, based in part on governance challenges in other SDF-liberated areas with mixed Kurdish-Arab populations.

Raqqa’s strong tribal character raises yet another set of issues. Divisions within Raqqa’s clans and tribes, coupled with the breakdown of traditional tribal reconciliation mechanisms over three years of IS rule, could portend significant violence. Post-IS revenge killings and land and property disputes could erupt after IS is ejected.

Last, the technical difficulties of everyday governance also pose significant challenges. In particular, issues related to delivery of essential services—particularly water-related challenges in an area heavily dependent on irrigated agriculture—will be significant. Reinvigorating education following three years of schools being either closed or taken over by IS and its radicalized curriculum will be critical.

Given Raqqa's centrality to the IS narrative, successfully securing the peace post-IS assumes even greater importance.

Raqqa's Importance

Raqqa's significance cannot be overstated. A sleepy, provincial city before the 2011 outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Raqqa's prominence grew when it became the first city to fall to Syrian rebels in 2013 (see map 1). Its notoriety skyrocketed when IS took control and consolidated its grip in January 2014, declaring Raqqa the capital of its "caliphate." Thousands of foreign fighters flocked there, heeding the siren call of jihad. Raqqa has played a central role in the IS narrative of reconstituting an Islamic state (*dawla Islamiyya*) across large swathes of Iraq and Syria. It has also been a key location for IS's external operations in planning for attacks against the West.³

Given Raqqa's centrality to the IS narrative, successfully securing the peace post-IS assumes even greater importance. Although many IS operatives reportedly moved from Raqqa farther south down the Euphrates Valley in anticipation of military operations, the group will surely seek to exploit any power vacuums or sources of popular disaffection that arise after liberation. This strategy likely would focus on the long game, maintaining a latent presence that could reemerge under the right conditions. Such smoldering embers of extremism could reignite fueled either by preconflict conditions that have only worsened or the challenges in the aftermath of IS rule.

Before the conflict, Raqqa was among the least developed governorates in the country. In 2010, the city was contending with many of the socioeconomic problems that fueled the Arab uprisings: a burgeoning youth population, high unemployment, and unresponsive and corrupt governance. From 2001 to 2010, its population grew by 38 percent, from 698,000 in 2001 to 966,000 in 2010. This growth reflected a high fertility rate, 5.5 children per woman in 2004, the third highest in Syria after Deir Zor and Dera'a. Some estimates place the number even higher, at six or seven, the highest in Syria. Moreover, Raqqa's socially conservative population skewed young, an estimated 48 percent of whom are under age fifteen.⁴

Across eastern Syria, the agriculture sector—close to 50 percent of the local labor force—was faltering under the strain of a failing state-run irrigation infrastructure compounded by an historic drought. Inefficient irrigation systems and poor governance significantly reduced the amount of irrigated land. Meanwhile, the drought of 2006 through 2009 exacerbated the agriculture sector's challenges, leading to numerous failed farms and significant rural-urban migration.

Initially, IS exploited these issues to consolidate its hold on Raqqa. Its hard-line Islamist ideology found acceptance in more socially conservative, lower-income quarters of the city. Its ability to enforce order and at least initially clean up corruption also engendered some popular goodwill. Some point to Raqqa's "profound sense of social, political, economic and educational marginalization" as a key dynamic underpinning the rise of IS.⁵

Today, the counter-IS campaign has exacted an enormous toll on Raqqa. A BBC reporter who visited in early October described the destruction as unparalleled: "Hardly a building... was untouched by the violence."⁶ A June 2017 report by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria noted with concern the "staggering loss of civilian life" to intensified airstrikes as the Raqqa battle intensified.⁷ Most of the inhabitants of Raqqa

Map 1. Raqqa in Syria



Source: Pavalena/Shutterstock.

city—population some three hundred thousand before the conflict began—have fled.⁸ It is estimated that fewer than twenty thousand civilians remain in the city. Shelter, health, water, and other critical infrastructure have sustained significant damage in the fighting.

Beyond the physical toll, the Syrian conflict has decimated the country's social fabric and Raqqa is among the most negatively affected. A Syrian Center for Policy Research study developed a social capital index of three components: social networks and participation, social trust, and shared values and attitudes. Raqqa registered the highest decline overall in social capital—80 percent—of any governorate in Syria. The report attributes this decline in part to IS control, which disrupted social networks and undermined social cohesion.⁹

Post-IS Governance

Once a semblance of security is restored in Raqqa, an interim civilian council, the Raqqa Civilian Council (RCC), currently based in Ayn Aissa (about thirty miles north) will lead local governance efforts. Announced in April 2017, the council is made up of approximately 120 members; within it, several committees have been formed to address specific administrative issues. Headed by an Arab and a Kurdish representative as copresidents, the council is majority Arab but includes a mix of representatives from the area, including Turkmen and Kurds.

Plans envision expanding membership to include important tribal elements currently under IS rule as well as exiled members of the former Raqqa Local Council, which led governance efforts in 2013 under Syrian rebels. Elections for a new civilian council are planned for May 2018.¹⁰ Current plans for restoration of order envision a three-thousand- to four-thousand-strong policing force called the Internal Security Force, to be made up of local Raqqa residents. Demining will also be a critical security challenge.

Despite the interim RCC's reflection of the local demography, some activists and researchers have raised concerns over the RCC's power distribution. Real power, they say, is in the hands of a few Kurdish elements behind the scenes. "It may look more representative in terms of the Arab-Kurdish breakdown," a Syrian activist explained in an interview, "but the real need is to focus on who has actual decision-making power." Others point to the RCC formation process, noting its lack of transparency and questioning its power distribution: "The RCC has a beautiful structure, but in reality, only three people wield actual power."

Nonetheless, even with these criticisms, many continue to hold out hope that the RCC can play an important role as the key civilian governance structure in Raqqa. Some point to growing Arab confidence in the RCC as the battle for Raqqa proceeds and Kurdish-Arab cooperation grows among the SDF. Others note the planned May 2018 election as an important opportunity to ensure that the RCC accurately reflects and is empowered to serve Raqqa's civilian population (see box 1).

Even under the best of circumstances, the RCC will face a multitude of challenges.

Box 1. The View from Raqqa

Given the danger inherent in a conflict environment, gaining insights directly from Raqqa residents is extraordinarily challenging. Yet popular perceptions, even anecdotal, further illuminate the governance challenges that post-IS Raqqa will confront.

Conducted in early September 2017 by an independent research firm based in Istanbul (SREO Consulting), a survey of eighty Raqqawis living in newly liberated areas in the city's immediate vicinity reveals important insights into popular sentiments. Although the sample is small and not necessarily representative, the results do highlight key issues relating to post-IS governance in Raqqa:

- **An Arab-Kurdish divide.** A majority of those surveyed (70 percent) viewed Raqqa's impending capture by the Kurdish-led SDF favorably. Almost the same proportion (67 percent), however, believed that the SDF is a force for Kurdish populations and aspirations only.
- **Preference for the Syrian government.** Nearly 65 percent preferred Syrian government influence over Raqqa to the SDF's. An equally high percentage believed that the Syrian government would be better able to meet local governance expectations.
- **Security, essential service restoration, and justice critical to tribal support.** When asked about the top priority for gaining tribal support for any group governing Raqqa, 40 percent noted security, 28 percent essential service restoration, and 26 percent justice (see figure 1).
- **Tribal reconciliation possible, but blood revenge could be a key issue.** Some 65 percent of respondents responded positively regarding the possibility of tribal reconciliation post-IS. In terms of obstacles to tribal reconciliation, a large majority, 63 percent, identified blood revenge as the key impediment.

***Questions loom over
which entity will exercise
political authority.***

Strategic Challenges

Raqqa's liberation will elevate several strategic challenges that have largely been subsumed by focus on the military campaign. Taken together, they will without question complicate post-IS governance efforts in the city.

First, without a political settlement to the wider Syria conflict, questions loom over which entity will exercise political authority over Raqqa. In Syria, unlike Iraq, where the counter-IS coalition works closely with the Iraqi government, coalition efforts have proceeded without the Syrian government's cooperation and largely in competition with its allies, Iran and Russia. The US-led anti-IS coalition does not maintain direct ties with Damascus, operating instead through the Kurdish-led SDF on the ground. Assuming that Raqqa stays under coalition control, stabilization efforts will remain highly decentralized, with security and governance provided by local forces but not linked to a more centralized authority. This arrangement could lead to localized fighting as various factions vie for control over the city and its governance.

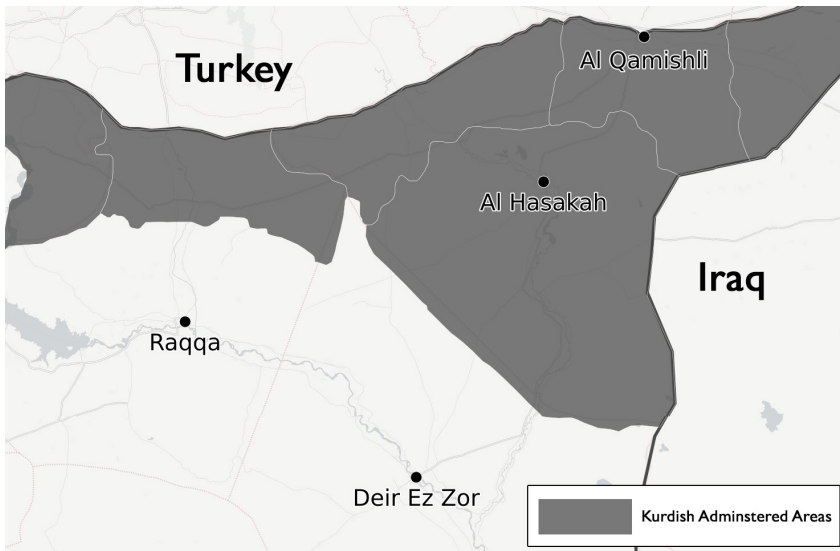
The Syrian regime could also make a play for Raqqa. Although Damascus lost control over Raqqa in 2013, President Bashar al-Assad has underscored his desire to regain control over all Syrian territory. Damascus retained ties with Raqqa even after IS took control, continuing to pay salaries and administer some services. Indeed, some observers maintain the enduring importance of such ties, citing Damascus's long-standing role in administering the city. Damascus could try to revive these intermediary networks on which it relied to govern remotely. Some key tribes from Raqqa have retained ties with Damascus as a hedge should the regime regain control over the city, an interviewee reported. Although Assad has emphasized his desire to retake all Syrian territory, others in the regime have hinted at the possibility of negotiating a deal with the Kurds, exchanging regime support for some level of Kurdish autonomy for a handover of Raqqa to Syrian government control (see map 2).¹¹ Even if the regime does not seek to retake Raqqa, it could undermine the stabilization efforts of others.

More broadly, as the Syrian regime seeks to reestablish its authority, it could put greater pressure on the Kurds, further complicating efforts at stabilizing and governing Raqqa. Damascus has expressed growing frustration with the Kurds and their cooperation with the United States.¹² Although the Kurds have operated at times in tacit cooperation with the Syrian regime, Damascus could seek to regain control over the Kurdish regions in the north of Syria, provoking a new conflict.¹³ Should Damascus opt to challenge the Kurds in northern Syria, the Kurds' efforts at assisting with Raqqa stabilization would be compromised.

Second, a potentially destabilizing Turkish-Kurdish conflict is roiling beneath the counter-IS campaign in Raqqa. The Kurds have played a critical role in the Raqqa campaign, but their primary objective is still to consolidate control over their cantons in the north and east. Meanwhile, Turkey harbors deep concerns about these ambitions. Ankara has maintained staunch opposition to the coalition's reliance on the Kurdish-led SDF and has intervened militarily in Syria to prevent the joining of Kurdish cantons into a single, contiguous entity. Moreover, Turkey views the Kurdish elements of the SDF as an extension of the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist group fighting a decades-long insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Following Raqqa's liberation, the latent PKK conflict could erupt into a significant battle.

Third, continued US support for both the SDF and broader stabilization efforts in eastern Syria will be key. Washington has been clear that it will not become involved in Syria's longer-term reconstruction or in nation-building.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the United States has a critical role to play in ensuring that IS-liberated areas are stabilized and that local governance structures are built on solid foundations. Although the US footprint is small—estimated at around a thousand special operators and a small contingent of civilian advisers—these forces both advise and guide the SDF and provide critical stabilization assistance. The US presence is an

Map 2. Kurdish Territory in Northeastern Syria



Map courtesy of Derek Caelin and Matthew Ciesielski.

important stabilizing element. A precipitous American exit could leave a dangerous power vacuum or spark any of the simmering conflicts noted earlier.

Fourth, Kurdish intentions are another X factor. Kurdish actions will depend in part on whether the United States remains engaged in Raqqa. Some Kurdish officials have underscored the centrality of a US presence in Syria for stability.¹⁵ Given the significant role Kurdish forces have played in the counter-IS campaign, the Kurds will look to the United States to protect their interests by supporting their claim over the Kurdish-majority regions in northern and eastern Syria. Many Kurds are bracing for conflict with Turkey should the United States pull out of Syria. If the Kurds feel abandoned, they will prioritize maintaining control over their territories, possibly ceding Raqqa to the regime. Should the Kurds retain a presence in Raqqa, questions arise over whether they will seek to include Raqqa in its Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, a move that would provoke Raqqa's Arab-tribal majority. In March 2017, Saleh Muslim, the cochair of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) noted his expectation that Raqqa would join the Kurdish federal system in Syria.¹⁶

Ethnic Tensions

Kurdish-Arab tensions are another key set of challenges threatening post-IS governance in Raqqa. A recent quarterly Inspector General report to Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve noted that "Kurdish influence in Raqqah may exacerbate ethnic tensions" and that "Kurdish overt and behind-the-scenes control of Raqqah remains 'one of many complications' in establishing security and viable government in Raqqah."¹⁷

Although post-IS governance in Raqqa envisions a leading role for local Arabs, the reality is likely to be far more complicated. The SDF's Kurdish elements are unlikely to leave the city entirely. Some observers express concern that Kurdish elements loyal to the PYD will retain the real power. The council, a Syrian activist explained in an interview, "may seem representative, but will be concretely connected to the PYD and will struggle with local legitimacy. ...The PYD history on inclusive governance is not good. They don't tolerate any type of dissent—Arab or Kurdish." A researcher from eastern Syria underscored the role of Kurdish secret police, the Istikhbarat, in controlling and repressing citizens in Kurdish-held areas.

Experience in other SDF-held areas, especially in mixed Kurdish-Arab districts, not to mention Arab-dominant areas, has been somewhat negative. In 2015, Amnesty International accused Kurdish forces of war crimes on grounds of forced displacement and home demolitions.¹⁸ More recently, referencing the primarily Kurdish militia YPG in Syria, an April 2017 International Crisis Group report underscored that “outside majority-Kurdish areas, however, this governance appears fragile. . . . Efforts by the YPG (and its Self-Administration) to achieve Arab buy-in to its project have been partial and haphazard and do not amount to a meaningful share in governance.”¹⁹ Other sources report that “real power in YPG-held areas is concentrated in the hands of Kurdish cadres with PKK backgrounds. . . . Arabs who join the self-administration are given impressive titles, but little authority.”²⁰

Kurdish-Arab tensions could substantially undermine post-IS governance in Raqqa. Governance that is not inclusive or that alienates large segments of the population could facilitate a return of conflict and instability. Kurdish attempts to limit the authority of Arab members of the RCC and other governance structures likely would trigger local disaffection and undermine the legitimacy of these entities. Outright Kurdish repression of local Arabs or attempts to impose either Kurdish culture or the PKK’s Marxist ideology on Raqqa would further stoke tensions and deepen popular resentment. IS or other Sunni extremist groups could exploit these tensions, complicating governance efforts and potentially facilitating an extremist resurgence in Raqqa. IS has already laid a marker regarding its continued presence. The group has warned Arabs against cooperating with the Kurds, threatening “bitter revenge” against Arabs who join Kurdish efforts.²¹

Tribal Issues

Raqqa’s strong tribal character adds yet another complication. Tribes, clans, and subclans have long defined Raqqa’s social landscape. Tribal actors are known for their pragmatism, often shifting their loyalties depending on their immediate interests. “In November 2013,” one article reports, “exactly two years after Assad’s historic visit, representatives of 14 Raqqa tribes appeared in a video pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi—including the same tribes that made the same oath to Assad a year earlier.”²²

Tribes and clans are not unitary actors. Subclans and even families have been divided in their loyalties: some side with IS, others with rebel fighters, and still others with the regime. At times, IS effectively exploited tribal differences to solidify its hold in Raqqa. It capitalized, for example, on the generational divide with tribes and clans, pulling disgruntled youth under its sway and away from the authority of tribal elders.

IS also learned from its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq’s experience with the Sunni Awakening in Iraq. IS has sought to build linkages with local tribes in Raqqa to cement their ties and forestall a tribal uprising against IS. As Syria scholar Fabrice Balanche explained in an interview, IS members married local women and recruited fighters from tribal youth. IS also created a public relations bureau charged with tribal outreach and managing tribal disputes.²³

Managing tribal disputes and ensuring against revenge killings will be a critical challenge. Inter- and intratribal conflicts could give rise to significant instability. In particular, revenge killings, disputes involving property or housing or land, and internally displaced person returns could undermine governance efforts. Traditional tribal reconciliation mechanisms have broken down, in some instances supplanted by IS efforts to manage tribal disputes. In other cases, the overall chaos associated with Syria’s civil war has disrupted traditional dispute reconciliation mechanisms. The “breakdown of state authority. . . and formation of armed groups” has been associated with an erosion of traditional tribal mechanisms.²⁴

Tribal actors are known for their pragmatism, often shifting their loyalties depending on their immediate interests.

Figure 1. Securing Tribal Support

What are the top two things that any group wishing to govern Raqqa should do to secure broad tribal support?

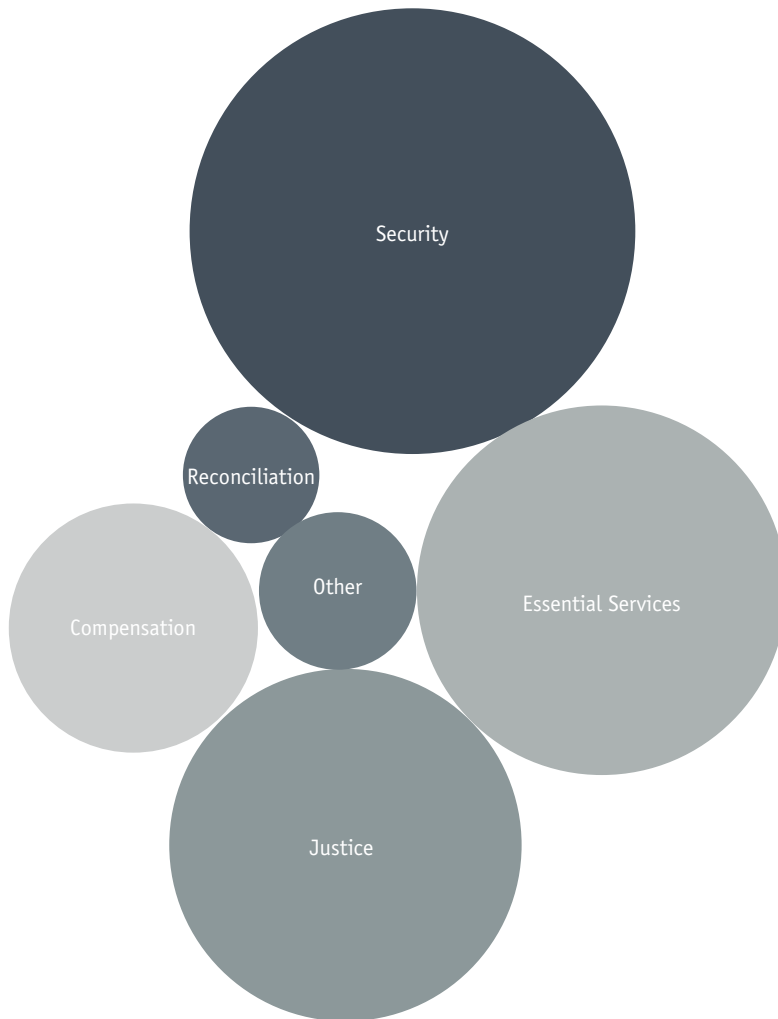


Illustration courtesy of Derek Caelin.

After IS, prospects for tribal violence in Raqqa are high. Revenge killings can be expected against those who allied with IS. Entire clans or subclans likely will not be implicated, but individuals who committed atrocities on behalf of IS could well be targeted. In addition, the IS practice of seizing land and property of clans who fled the city and redistributing it as patronage to loyal clans could lay the ground for land and property disputes after IS is ousted. Internecine tribal fighting could also erupt should a strong, disciplined local police force fail to take root. Clans and subclans could battle each other for control over parts of the city.

The fluidity of tribal loyalties could also be leveraged in favor of new governance structures such as the RCC. As one Syrian observer noted in an interview, “They will abandon Daesh in two days. Loyalties will be determined by who pays better, who provides security, and who provides some role in governance.” It will therefore be important to ensure that key tribal elements are included and empowered in the RCC’s membership. For example, some clans from the influential Afadhlah tribe pledged loyalty to IS, and others fled to Damascus. To date, according to a researcher from eastern Syria, the tribe has withheld from building an alliance with the SDF.

Technical Challenges

Along with meeting the complexities of strategic, ethnic, and tribal challenges, responding effectively to the local population's essential needs will be critical. Responsive service delivery can significantly bolster the credibility of local governance structures among the local population. Likewise, governing councils that fall short of popular expectations in providing electricity, water, health care, and other essential services will see a credibility deficit.

Specifically, three areas are pivotal. First, governance capacity issues could undermine overall efforts to provide essential services. Second, water and irrigation infrastructure challenges will reverberate across numerous sectors, affecting well-being and livelihoods. Third, education is essential for Raqqa's next generation, especially in the aftermath of three years of IS rule and the associated trauma that children and adolescents experienced.

In the brief interregnum between regime control and the IS takeover of Raqqa, the civilian Raqqa Local Council was among the most effective opposition local councils in Syria and a testament to the city's local talent. Many experienced technocrats fled Raqqa during IS's rule. This outflow of talent—many of whom live in exile in Turkey or Europe—has minimized the capacity of local governance structures to deliver services effectively.

Attracting talent back to Raqqa will be challenging, particularly if uncertainty surrounds the ultimate governing authority in the city. Mobilizing the professional class and former civil servants will be essential. Yet, because the regime still pays the salaries of some technocrats, and therefore retains some influence, some exiles may not return, fearing that the regime could regain control of the city. It will also be difficult to attract talented technocrats to the RCC if a sense prevails that real power is wielded by Kurdish elements behind the scenes.

Adequate financial resources are another critical component of the overall capacity to deliver essential services. Significant funding will be needed to restore power and water and rebuild roads and infrastructure. Questions also remain about who will pay salaries; the United States has said that this should and will be a Syrian responsibility.

Between IS mismanagement and the inevitabilities of conflict, Raqqa's water and irrigation infrastructure—the governorate's lifeblood—has deteriorated significantly. Currently the SDF controls the three largest dams, which account for 70 percent of water and electricity needs for the entire country.²⁵ Agriculture, a key source of livelihoods in the area, has long depended on the state-run irrigation infrastructure.

Control and governance of the state-run irrigation system will be a decisive issue and a source of significant power. Unlike other parts of Syria, where access to water is via wells and therefore highly decentralized, Fabrice Balanche explained, Raqqa's centralized irrigation system directs enormous power and influence to the control over infrastructure. The governance body that wields decision-making power over access to and distribution of water will determine the fate of Raqqa's vast agricultural lands and the people who earn their livelihoods from those lands. It will also inherit the "legacy of failed regime irrigation policies" amid continuing water scarcity, a potent source of future conflict.²⁶ Failure to implement water and irrigation policies that effectively mediate control and distribution of this precious resource could fuel widespread disaffection among local tribes that leads to instability.

Education in post-IS Raqqa has implications that reverberate well into the future. The trauma that Raqqa's children experienced while under IS rule and the decimation of the education system have exacted an immeasurable toll. Doctors examining children who have fled Raqqa report severe—even unprecedented—signs of trauma.²⁷ Save the Children, an international NGO, interviewed children and families escaping Raqqa and "warns [that] the psychological scars they carry could take years, even decades, to heal."²⁸

After seizing Raqqa in 2014, IS gradually took control of the education system, closing a number of schools while replacing the Syrian curriculum with its own ideologically laden course of study in others. All universities in the governorate have been closed, depriving students of higher education opportunities. Most concerning, IS has attempted to propagate its radical ideology among Raqqa's youth. Many teachers fled. Those who stayed were required to take a mandatory course on sharia.²⁹ Broad concerns have been raised about children being indoctrinated through IS organizations such as the Cubs of the Caliphate, which recruits young boys to be militants in the organization.

Together, these issues pose a generational challenge. Addressing the trauma suffered by Raqqa's children while under IS rule will be essential to moving forward and securing their future, as well as that of the governorate, and to ensuring against the return of extremism.

Doctors examining children who have fled Raqqa report severe—even unprecedented—signs of trauma.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Special Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk characterized anticipated efforts to bring stability to Raqqa as “the most difficult, complex thing imaginable.”³⁰ Effectively addressing these challenges will also serve as an important hedge against the return of conflict and extremism. Similarly, failing to respond adequately will increase the likelihood of instability and the reemergence of radical groups that exploit popular disaffection. Governance issues will be multifaceted and demand well-conceived responses that reflect the complexities on the ground.

The following recommendations are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Strategic and Political

Maintain US engagement and presence in Syria. The United States should resist the temptation for a precipitous withdrawal after IS has been defeated militarily. Washington has underscored the limitations of US involvement in Syria, noting that the United States will not engage in nation-building or reconstruction. However, continued US engagement under the current light footprint characterized by a “by, with, and through” strategy that relies primarily on local Syrian forces for stabilization and governance is essential. As a US commander operating on the ground in Syria emphasized, “The best way for us to force them back into the extremist camp is to leave them.”³¹ The United States can contribute to stability by providing critical guidance on stabilization and governance and serving as a buffer between forces on the ground. As military operations taper off, civilian assistance and advisers will play an increasingly important role. Currently a small team of US humanitarian and development experts are on the ground assisting stabilization efforts. Their continued—and possibly expanded—presence will be essential going forward.

Enhance international coordination for postconflict assistance. The absence of a wider political settlement in Syria will complicate international assistance efforts in Raqqa. The Syria Recovery Trust Fund is the only multi-donor assistance body operating in areas outside Syrian government control. Unlike in Iraq, where the United Nations has played a critical role in coordinating international donors, multilateral bodies (such as the United Nations or the World Bank) are reluctant to play a direct role in Raqqa assistance efforts unless the Syrian government is the authority. The Syria Recovery Trust Fund, meanwhile, currently does not have the capacity to fulfill Raqqa's vast stabilization and recovery requirements. The United States, together with other key donors, should explore possibilities for enhancing this capacity and consider additional, creative options.

Intensify diplomatic engagement with Turkey and work to deescalate Turkish-Kurdish tensions. Turkey's displeasure with the US decision to rely on the Kurdish-led SDF to take

Raqqa has led to a rise in cross-border tensions. Ankara has prevented the flow of stabilization assistance to Kurdish-held areas in Syria, further complicating these efforts. As it has done in the past, Turkey could also use its control over the Euphrates River flow into Syria to sabotage recovery efforts downstream. Deepening tensions between Turkey and the Kurds could erupt into open conflict, derailing Raqqa stabilization and governance efforts. The United States should try to assuage Turkish anger over the SDF's role in Raqqa and to deescalate Turkish-Kurdish tensions. This could entail formalizing ground rules to avert conflict in Syria and rejuvenating efforts to deescalate the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey and broker new talks.

Ethnic

Insist on inclusive and representative governance in Raqqa. Strong US backing of the Syrian Democratic Forces can translate into important leverage. Washington should condition future funding to the SDF on its willingness to promote genuinely inclusive, responsive governance. At the same time, it needs to signal the Kurds that they cannot rule Raqqa, but instead should devolve significant authority to local Arabs. Efforts to expand the Raqqa Civilian Council to include tribes and exiles currently not represented should begin soon after liberation. Security permitting, elections should be encouraged to take place in May 2018 as planned. These efforts should be coordinated with other international donors to ensure that conditionality has even greater resonance.

Support Arab-Kurdish reconciliation and dialogue efforts. Initial Arab goodwill toward the Kurds for their role in liberating Raqqa could be a starting point for intensive Kurdish-Arab dialogue and reconciliation. Efforts should focus on community-based and youth programming that emphasizes strengthening ties between local Kurdish and Arab populations.

Tribal

Strengthen and reform tribal reconciliation mechanisms. Rejuvenating and improving on tribal reconciliation and mediation mechanisms will be critical. Revenge killings and other tribal conflicts are likely to emerge and reconciliation efforts will be important in mitigating conflict. New reconciliation mechanisms should be established that engage but don't rely solely on tribal mechanisms. Identifying and engaging key clan and tribal sheikhs will be important because such leaders could help prevent revenge killings from spiraling out of control. An objective and transparent vetting process is also needed to ensure that no collective punishment is imposed.

Emphasize rebuilding social cohesion and restoring social capital. Convening local governance institutions and civil society organizations to discuss issues facing the community will help restore social capital and begin to rebuild social networks. Efforts should prioritize elements that emphasize social cohesion, particularly regarding reintegration of internally displaced persons and refugees, and ensure that new governance strategies do not exacerbate existing inequalities. A political economy mapping of stabilization and governance efforts should be undertaken that identifies "winners and losers" and works to mitigate the emergence of new conflicts.

Technical

Enhance efforts to recruit and empower technocrats and civil servants and emphasize capacity building. Members of the former Raqqa Local Council who are currently in exile should be encouraged to return. The power to address technical challenges must be in the hands of skilled technocrats rather than of local political leadership. Empowering technocrats

to resolve problems will enhance recruitment efforts. Resources should also be devoted to training and developing this technocratic cadre.

Improve water and irrigation policies. Initial efforts should focus on a strategic mapping of irrigation infrastructure and associated policies, which will help identify inefficiencies in the current system as well as “winners and losers.” More efficient irrigation methods should be used wherever possible. Equally important, an inclusive and responsive water governance model should be developed that ensures more equitable irrigation practices.

Prioritize investment in the education sector. That resources are limited should not prevent education-related investments. Both school refurbishment and construction and curriculum reform merit particular focus. Efforts to deprogram youth who have been indoctrinated in IS ideology should be integral to the curriculum.

Integrate psychosocial support in youth-related programming across sectors. Given the wide scope of trauma associated with IS rule, psychosocial interventions will be essential, especially for children. This support must begin now, even before children who have fled Raqqa return. Psychosocial support needs to be integrated across sectors, including health and education, to ensure that children receive the appropriate treatment.

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