

Policy memo by Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, Jonas Parello-Plesner

Stabilizing Raqqa

On December 11, 2017 Hudson Institute convened a closed-door workshop with a distinguished group of stabilization and Syria experts including current and former administration officials, diplomats from key IS-Coalition partner countries, and Syrian opposition representatives.

The aim of the workshop was two-fold: to critically examine short-term stabilization as well as longer term governance challenges in liberated Raqqa, and to cast a prospective look at the possible proxy conflicts around Raqqa between the US, Syrian regime, Iran, Russia, Turkey and the Kurds. The end of the counter IS military campaign in Raqqa is exacerbating fault lines among these key players, some of which have the potential to cause new conflicts in Syria. Turkey, a NATO-ally and Counter-IS Coalition member, is disgruntled about the Kurdish influence in Raqqa. Iran and the Assad regime want American forces to leave. Increasingly, also Russia speaks of the US presence as illegitimate. Yet the continued American military presence also secures protection for Counter-IS Coalition stabilization activities in and around Raqqa and for on the ground influence on Syria's future. Russia has its own outreach to the Syrian Kurds with the possibility of inserting itself as mediator. In short, winning the peace in Raqqa might become harder than the military campaign to defeat IS.

Below are some of the key take-aways and recommendations for the US and Counter-IS Coalition members selected and compiled by Hudson Institute, Senior Fellow, Jonas Parello-Plesner¹.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- **IS in its prior form is military almost defeated** but will not disappear and continue to be a threat **in insurgency-mode**. Therefore, the total defeat of IS will require continued Counter-IS Coalition counterterrorism (CT) operations. Stabilizing Raqqa and improving governance in order to address local grievances, could improve the chances of defeating IS, which exploits chaos.
- **Stabilization and governance in Raqqa** and surrounding areas are now, rightly, an important focus for the Counter-IS Coalition. The city was symbolically important for IS as a capital. Therefore, it is equally symbolically **important that Raqqa is rendered stable enough for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return and that the city doesn't anew become the breeding ground or refuge for extremism**.
- The Counter-IS Coalition, through its working group on stabilization (Germany/UAE as co-leads), should devise a communications strategy to explain to the broader public the need to pivot to non-kinetic efforts in particular stabilization as a primary focus for Counter-IS Coalition.
- **Counter-IS Coalition members, particularly Europeans, should engage more on Raqqa stabilization** even if risks are high and push-back from Turkey is possible.

¹ A great thanks to research assistant Katelyn Gough for both working diligently on the workshop and on assistance in producing this report. The recommendations do not necessarily represent a consensus among participants and the author takes responsibility for this final product.

- A major challenge for stabilization in Raqqa is Kurdish military and civilian dominance through the SDF and the Raqqa Civilian Council (RCC), which creates potential for conflict with the majority Sunni Arab local population. Suggested measures to mitigate potential conflict include:
 - Securing local elections to ‘make Sunni Arab majority capable of voting Kurds out peacefully,’ as one participant expressed. Local elections should be accompanied by US encouragement to the Syrian Kurds to devolve authority to Arabs and local tribes. In tandem, these measures could gradually reduce the geographical expanse of Kurdish-controlled territory. In addition, it could potentially prevent the YPG from using the future status of Raqqa as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with the Assad regime and/or Russia.
 - Continuing efforts to include elements of the alternate Raqqa Council based in Turkey to address Turkey’s concerns.
 - Simultaneously, and more broadly, the US and other C-ISIS partners could engage PYD on changing party structure and severing links with the PKK, thus creating long-term options for reconciliation between Turkey and Syrian Kurds. Turkish relations with the KRG demonstrate that this isn’t impossible.
- Another challenge is that in Syria/Raqqa, there is no reliable government partner (opposite the case in Iraq/stabilization) and there is no collective UN-led coordination.
 - Need to think creatively and **employ smaller multilateral settings** such as Syria Recovery Trust Fund (understandably difficult with Turkey’s opposition) and a Raqqa donor-consortium through the Counter-IS Coalition.
 - Gulf partners in the Counter-IS Coalition should increase funding for stabilization in Raqqa. Such support would also be welcome signaling to temper Turkey’s opposition.
 - Pass assistance through civil society and employ a bottom-up approach including buying materials for stabilization locally to foster economic growth and bolster local markets.
- **Immediate stabilization efforts should focus on the removal of unexploded remnants of war and mines (ERW/IED)** left primarily by IS. ERW/IED threats make it impossible for displaced people to return. Again, funding for this needs diversification of donors, also out of burden sharing with the US, so that there are resources left for the next phase of stabilization.
- **Long-term stabilization efforts should be multi-faceted and address broader governance.** There is worry that US and Counter-IS Coalition engagement in Raqqa will be only address essential services. There is also a need for education — to counter IS brainwashing of the young generation, and on psycho-social trauma. Finally, property disputes and health care were mentioned by Syrian participants. Without addressing these, displaced persons won’t return. There is possibility for general expectation gap with local population in Raqqa on what stabilization might bring versus reconstruction, where the US won’t engage inter alia because it is seen as part of nation-building. Raqqa is symbolically so important to make inhabitable again so there should be some flexibility on the stabilization vs. reconstruction divide. As the freshly minted National Security Strategy puts it “instability and weak governance threaten U.S. interests.”

- On a broader strategic level, stabilizing Raqqa raises the question of how the city fits into evolving discussions about Syria's future and possible new conflict lines. Will Iran and/or the Syrian regime test US resolve to stay and support local partners in SDF? Will Russia insert itself as a new mediator with Syrian Kurds? Will Turkey lose patience and attack Kurds in the north? Many possible negative scenarios abound.
- **US Syria strategy** is still under internal consideration in administration. There is acknowledgement that priorities are often contradictory in nature (working with Russia might not further pushing back on Iran; working with SDF complicates relations with Turkey, and is withholding Western reconstruction funds enough leverage to get Assad to agree to transition in the Geneva-framework?).
 - Many participants saw a clear need for the US and Counter-IS Coalition to stay in Syria also militarily but **warned of substituting general strategy for a pure counterterrorism focus.**
 - President Trump has placed strong priority on defeating IS. This suggests a lesser, not greater role for US in Syria in the next period. Yet, a **rapid time-conditioned withdrawal of US troops as IS is militarily defeated could make it more likely for regime/Iran to test the US militarily in Raqqa and/or for the re-emergence of ISIS.**
 - **Cooperating with Russia may not bring results for the US in Syria:** Putin wants to make Russia great again in the Middle East and beyond. It means coming out on top of the Syria conflict and diminishing the US. Even if desirable, it would be impossible to disentangle Russia from Iran, which is the Russian partner on the ground. And they are strategically united in their desire to push out the US. Thus, Russia can't be expected to assist the US in curbing Iran.
 - **Stay the ground in IS-liberated areas such as Raqqa– also as leverage for Syria's political transition.** And perceive the relations with the Syrian Kurds as continued US leverage also in Syria's political transition and not just as a counter ISIS short-term partner. The alternative would be to leave the mediation to the Russians who could use Kurds as one among several wedges for long-term influence over NATO-ally Turkey. Paradoxically, the US should double down on maintaining relations with the Syrian Kurds. To be sure, the relationship will be a continued irritant to the Turks. However, if handled deftly, the Americans could demonstrate to Ankara that having them as a mediator is far preferable to Putin. The relatively warm relations between the Turks and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq demonstrate that Kurdish-Turkish enmity is not set in stone.