



Raqqa's Minefields

OE Watch Commentary: The US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have been nominally in control of the city of Raqqa and its surrounding countryside since November 2017. This state of affairs is opposed by both the Syrian government (backed by Iran and Russia) and by the official Syrian opposition (backed by Qatar and Turkey). Syrian loyalist and opposition groups may therefore seek to undermine the current status quo by working in the so-called “gray zone” to improve their strategic position in Raqqa. They have plenty of material to work with, as the three accompanying articles suggest.

Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS) is a civilian organization established in 2014 to document ISIS atrocities from within Raqqa. The group is sympathetic to the official opposition and some its members have received refuge in Turkey during the conflict. Since the expulsion of ISIS from the city in November 2017, the group has continued to document conditions on the ground. Their diagnosis of present-day Raqqa is not good, as illustrated by the accompanying excerpt from an article titled “Raqqa: The Full Picture,” published on the group’s website in late January 2018. The article bemoans the “extremely slow rate” at which mines, rubble and corpses are being cleared from the city, claiming that media friendly to the US-backed SDF “have sought to portray an image that differs from reality regarding the destroyed city.” Much of Raqqa remains a physical minefield, with hundreds of returnees having been killed and maimed by landmines and explosives. Harsh conditions in refugee camps, along with fears of dispossession and a desire to return home, have led many to nonetheless return. Meanwhile, the article notes, “[governing] councils are busy holding parties and making pronouncements praising [the Turkish PKK leader]” while at the same time, “SDF militias are busy setting up ambushes and arresting young men for forced military conscription, while the people of Raqqa remain stuck in displacement camps, without water or medicine.”

The second accompanying article, authored by a prominent member of the official opposition from Raqqa, lists additional complications plaguing the city. In particular, he highlights the “social and political landmines” of displacement and forced disappearances, which “will without a doubt create internecine conflict for which there does not appear to be a solution on the horizon.” The author is critical of the view that these “social and political landmines” can only be resolved as part of a broader settlement and once physical reconstruction begins, seeing in this line of argument a political ruse designed to indefinitely maintain the status quo.

The third accompanying article, from the pro-Syrian government Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, echoes the frustration of Raqqa’s residents who view the SDF as outside interlopers with political goals and interests that are at odds with their own. Citing a member of the “Raqqa Council,” a political body composed of local figures that are opposed to SDF control over the city, the article hints that the people of Raqqa may opt for armed resistance “if the Kurds continue to rule over Raqqa and its people under the pretense of having liberated it from ISIS.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

Source:

الرقعة الصورة الكاملة

“Raqqa: The Full Picture,” *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently*, 31 January 2018. <http://www.raqqa-sl.com/?p=5073>

A number of civilian testimonies from within Raqqa attest to the massive extent of destruction, affecting as much as 80% of the city’s buildings and infrastructure. Media friendly to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia and some foreign media have sought to portray an image that differs from reality regarding the destroyed city. These groups focus on photographing the returnees and those fleeing the degradation of refugee camps lacking in basic human necessities...

Today, after months of the SDF controlling the destroyed city, there are no true signs of the commissions created to bring about tangible change in the city’s situation. The efforts to clear mines and rubble or even remove corpses from beneath the rubble are proceeding at an extremely slow rate, while these councils are busy holding parties and making pronouncements praising the terrorist Abdullah Ocalan. The SDF militias are busy setting up ambushes and arresting young men to train as part of forcible military conscription, while the people of Raqqa remain stuck in displacement camps, without water or medicine.

Source:

الرقعة من يحل ملفات ما بعد داعش؟

Khalil al-Hajj Salih. “Raqqa: Who Will Resolve Post-ISIS Issues?” *al-Modon*, 16 December 2017. <https://goo.gl/riZmsC>

The sidelining of Raqqa’s people from any effective role in what happens to them and their land is met with weakness and hesitation by the official opposition and regional countries with interests in Syria, as well as the complete absence thus far of the Syrian regime...

The issue of those kidnapped and forcibly disappeared on the one hand, and refugees and the displaced on the other hand, are not separate from issues of rule of law and rights left behind by [ISIS], described as political and social landmines. [ISIS] issued deeds and papers for thousands of kidnapped and refugees and sold them or gave them to its fighters and supporters. This will without a doubt create internecine conflict for which there does not appear to be a solution on the horizon and the results of which will be mitigated by local society...

Estimates based on eyewitness testimonies regarding the damage to Raqqa’s infrastructure, housing and private property estimates that 90-100% of it was destroyed. Some, using impeccable logic, believe that dealing with the previously mentioned issues must be part of a broader context that encompasses rebuilding, which in turn must be launched with or at the end of a comprehensive political process. Therefore, the rebuilding of Raqqa, which begins from ground zero, is what will make it possible to deal with the issues of the kidnapped and missing, as well as the victims of landmines and of looting, and the return of refugees and the displaced. Yet no one explains how this will happen, unless the intention were to barter physical reconstruction for some or most of these issues.

The current political indications are bad regarding the situation in Syria or in the Syrian Jazira to be specific. This area is currently controlled by the “international coalition” and the Kurdish militias. There are no indications of any plans to rebuild by any measure or from any angle. Most likely its future will remain linked to American wishes - the strongest force in the “international coalition” - and its policies which are inscrutable in the long term, in this stage of rapid developments and changes.

Continued: Raqqa's Minefields

“...The military option is not out of the question if the Kurds continue to rule over Raqqa and its people under the pretense of having liberated it from ISIS...”

Source:

الوجود الأمريكي المُقنَّع بقوات سوريا الديمقراطية الرقة تحت الاحتلال
Firas al-Hikar. “American Presence Disguised as ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’: Raqqa Under Occupation,” *al-Akhbar*, 20 January 2018. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/289563>

A Source in the “Raqqa Council” told *al-Akhbar* that “the SDF and the PYD are occupation forces and thus sitting with them merely to negotiate would entail recognizing them, which is why we will not go”... “The military option is not out of the question if the Kurds continue to rule over Raqqa and its people under the pretense of having liberated it from ISIS, which is supported by their US ally”... The Americans will not leave Raqqa, at least for the foreseeable future, which is confirmed by American and Kurdish statements. Will the American occupation represent a reason for civilians to resist? Or will the plan to completely destroy the city succeed and keep Raqqa’s people busy for the next several years searching for ways to rebuild their homes? Until then, Raqqa will be in the hands of the United States of America.



SDF fighters in Raqqa's downtown, July 2017.

Source: Mahmoud Bali (VOA), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SDF_fighters_in_Raqqa_downtown.png, Public Domain.

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