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# **BACK TO WHAT FUTURE?**

## **What Remains for Syria's Displaced People**

**Kheder Khaddour**

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## About the Author

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Previously, Khaddour has been a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago. He has conducted independent research for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and has worked as an independent journalist for Reuters.



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## Summary

The Islamic State has suffered major reversals in eastern Syria with the liberation of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. But this alone will not facilitate a large-scale return of refugees. Both governorates have lost their status as economic hubs, and rival actors are vying for control. Rising Kurdish-Arab tensions and potentially abusive security screening methods implemented by forces backed by the international coalition have all increased instability and unpredictability. This reduces the prospect of return.

### Syria's Future?

- The defeat of the Islamic State in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates will not, alone, lead to a widespread return of refugees.
- Raqqa's and Deir Ezzor's economic links with neighboring governorates are unlikely to be reestablished in the foreseeable future.
- Because of the conflict, new local leaderships have been put in place by armed groups in a top-down way, making these leaders less representative, therefore less committed to a refugee return.
- The arbitrary vetting mechanisms for returning refugees by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are open to abuse, creating fears of revenge killings.
- Arab suspicions of Kurdish aims in eastern Syria have heightened communal tensions. This, added to a deep sense of uprooting among many refugees, undermines the social cohesion essential for return.

### Recommendations/Findings

- Eastern Syria is vital in the Assad regime's efforts to reconstitute the territory under its control. It is also crucial to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces for securing political legitimacy in a postwar settlement. That is why the Islamic State's defeat may be followed by a struggle between the two, blocking a refugee return.

- A Syrian political settlement and the refugee crisis should not be addressed separately. A settlement without a refugee return will hinder reconstruction by keeping away needed professionals and civil society actors. A return without a settlement will lead to local conflicts between traditional leaderships and emerging ones empowered during the war.
- To be successful, a refugee return should be embedded in a broader political settlement that aims at restoring Raqqa and Deir Ezzor to their traditional roles in Syria's territorial order, and that engages professionals and civil society, reinforcing social cohesion.
- In areas taken by the SDF, a compromise could involve encouraging it to place local governance bodies it established under the Syrian state's umbrella, while preventing the influence of regime security figures or cadres with a background in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) over these bodies. This would help the governorates resume their role in Syria's territorial order, encourage the return of technocrats, and maintain a balance between the regime and the PKK.

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## Introduction

In late 2017, as the self-proclaimed Islamic State lost the territory it once controlled in eastern Syria, the prospect that the region's hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons would soon return to their homes gained renewed attention. For those contemplating a return, however, the decision is far from straightforward. That is particularly true of those from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, two of the most important cities in eastern Syria. Both have suffered heavy destruction since the start of the uprising in 2011, causing population displacements prior to the Islamic State's arrival, during the group's period in control, and following the cities' liberation.

While it has devastated homes, livelihoods, public services, and state institutions, the war in Syria has also deprived cities of the economic and political functions they played prior to 2011. The conflict has drawn in a wide array of local and foreign actors and fragmented the country's social structures. That is particularly true in areas that were under Islamic State control, where complex economic, social, military, and political dynamics emerged. In Raqqa, for instance, both before and after the rise of the Islamic State, the local population had almost entirely fled the city as a result of fighting.<sup>1</sup> Deir Ezzor, in turn, no longer fulfills its prewar role as a political and economic hub for eastern Syria, and today's cross-section of antagonistic military and political forces makes lasting stability improbable. Kurdish-Arab tensions add another complicating factor to prospects for a durable settlement in Syria's east.

In particular, the sense of insecurity prevailing in many areas liberated from the Islamic State may deter the return of a category of citizens upon which properly functioning local communities depend. This includes civil servants, engineers, doctors, teachers, and other professionals whose absence threatens such communities' viability. The violence that affected Raqqa and Deir Ezzor Governorates has dissolved essential social units, such as families, tribes, and professional associations while also destroying urban landscapes and severing links between populations and their areas of origin. Meanwhile, newly empowered individuals or groups in the places refugees wish to return to will use their authority in negotiations with external actors to position themselves as power brokers in the new elite emerging from Syria's conflict.

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**The defeat of the Islamic State will not be the trigger of return for those who have left; a more general resolution process for the entire country is required.**

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That is why a reconstruction process that is dissociated from a broader political settlement in Syria risks leaving these areas vulnerable to rivalries among local and regional actors. Such a situation would provide the military factions that led the campaign against the Islamic State with leverage that could complicate the stabilization of liberated territories, discouraging the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. In other words, the defeat of the Islamic State will not be the trigger of return for those who have left; a more general resolution process for the entire country is required. In Syria's east, this can only succeed by engaging community leaders from the preconflict period and by returning cities such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor to their former long-standing economic and geographical roles.

## A Shattered Territorial Order

In both the cities and governorates of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the Syrian conflict has caused major transformations and fragmentation. Each region illustrates in its own way the many challenges involved in the return of refugees. The futures of both Raqqa and Deir Ezzor remain in limbo because those who have retaken territory from the Islamic State have, for now, no clear plan for what should come after. That is partly because the statuses of the governorates are themselves unclear, in light of the large number of opposing forces operating in both areas.

### Raqqa: A Future in Isolation?

Prior to 2011, Raqqa had a population of roughly 220,000 people, with a sprawling and complex social structure. The politics of the city's elites were intertwined with those of its rural environs, those of local tribes and their particular allegiances, and those of the centralized Baathist state, on which the region relied heavily.<sup>2</sup>

Before the uprising, the government in Damascus maintained relations with the rural hinterland largely through local institutions and individuals associated with the agricultural sector. This included farmers' associations (*jam'iyat al-fellaheen*) and local state agricultural agencies, which almost entirely disappeared during the course of the war.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1960s, the Baath Party sought to break feudal patterns of rule in the area by empowering hitherto marginal tribal figures and placing them in agricultural institutions. The regimes of former president Hafez al-Assad and later President Bashar al-Assad balanced this by placing other groups of tribal background—particularly those that had been stripped of power by the previous, more radical Baath leadership—in the security services, parliament, and other institutions of governance.<sup>4</sup>

The arrival of the Islamic State during spring 2013 drove many of the local urban elites—doctors, engineers, teachers, and state employees—and tribal leaders to flee Raqqa. The urban elites had exercised influence over domains such as education, politics, and commerce, and most of them settled in either Damascus (if they sided with the regime) or Urfa, Turkey, as well as across Europe (if they sympathized with the opposition).<sup>5</sup> By 2014, the brutal rule of the Islamic State had isolated the communities that remained in Raqqa from the local elites that had left the city. As the international coalition fighting the Islamic State began its campaign in Raqqa, the group's militants imposed strong security restrictions that further integrated the city into Islamic State–controlled areas in Syria and Iraq cut it off from those who had fled. This meant that pre-war elites displaced to Urfa lost their status and influence, with no possibility of returning due to the ongoing conflict and security restrictions. Meanwhile, new social and political power structures began taking shape in Raqqa.<sup>6</sup>

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the United States and led primarily by Kurdish fighters, began its military offensive to retake Raqqa city and its outskirts in November 2016.<sup>7</sup> While the SDF includes Arab groups, it is dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG), whose chain of command largely reports back to Kurdish commanders trained by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>8</sup> Although the SDF has been successful in recapturing Raqqa, it is far from clear that it will be able to maintain order and engage in effective governance in the post–Islamic State phase. Thus far, the SDF's experience in directly governing non-Kurdish populations has been largely limited to rural areas, villages, and minor towns. For instance, in 2015, the YPG liberated the town of Tel Abyad and established a council of local notables to take charge of civic duties.<sup>9</sup> But the SDF had to deal with more complex social and political dynamics when it captured Raqqa city in October 2017, since the original population was much larger than Tel Abyad's prewar population of 15,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Raqqa was the symbolic capital of the Islamic State. With no central government—at least none the United States would have considered legitimate—to claim responsibility after the fighting ended, the U.S.-led military coalition put pressure on the SDF to develop a plan for post–Islamic State governance. In its previous experiences in other areas, the SDF had gathered notables in local councils in villages and towns prior to battle in order to address the governance needs of the population in the aftermath of military operations. But in Raqqa, the SDF's plan proved problematic.

They proceeded according to a similar pattern as they advanced in the rural areas around Raqqa city. In April 2017, in the small town of 'Ain 'Issa, 65 kilometers north of Raqqa, SDF leaders organized a gathering of tribal figures originally from the city. They formed the Raqqa Council (Majlis al-Raqqa) in

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anticipation of the Islamic State's defeat.<sup>11</sup> The council is overwhelmingly made up of Arabs friendly to the SDF and includes figures well known in Raqqa, which appeared to be part of the SDF's strategy to gain local legitimacy for its rule. However, its adoption of a motto inspired by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan—"The brotherhood of the people and coexistence are a guarantee for the democratic nation"<sup>12</sup>—suggested it sought to maintain the ideological influence of the PKK even in Arab-populated areas.

Once Raqqa was taken, however, the SDF was not able to adopt the approach employed in other liberated areas. It has postponed handing over power to the local council, as Raqqa's infrastructure was destroyed during the campaign against the Islamic State and the city still needs to be demined. The SDF manages checkpoints and has set up a local police force, but this underlines how unprepared the council remains to fulfill its duties without the SDF's support. All this makes it difficult for people to return.

Even once the city is cleared of mines, other challenges will remain. The greatest is that Raqqa will remain largely cut off from neighboring areas in Syria with which it was historically linked and upon which it depended eco-

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**It is a common refrain among Syrians in Turkey that, when asked whether they will return to Syria, they respond, "Return to where?"**

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nominically. Before the conflict, Raqqa's central location between Deir Ezzor, Hasakeh, and Aleppo Governorates made it an important trading center, particularly for agricultural products heading to Aleppo. Because the central government in Damascus viewed Raqqa and eastern Syria in general as places that produced strategic resources, such as oil, cotton, and grain, it facilitated the smooth flow of trade, for example, by appointing trusted officials to oversee silos in the area.<sup>13</sup> While the war economy and black market trade will probably continue in the governorates, the commercial trade links that existed in the past and were severed during the conflict are unlikely to be reestablished in the foreseeable future. The sheer number of checkpoints run by armed groups in the area, along with the competing and overlapping administrative structures that have been imposed in the absence of a central Syrian authority, mean that previous trade relations cannot be effectively revived today, let alone properly regulated.

A second major challenge is that urban elites in Raqqa are more likely to resist the scheme the SDF applied in small towns. The SDF will, first, need to win the trust of the civil servants, engineers, teachers, doctors, and civil society activists without whom the city cannot recover its social cohesion. That is especially true of the many who have started new lives and opened businesses in Turkey, or have otherwise found work, established new relationships, or put their children in school. While few desire to remain in Turkey indefinitely, the destruction and lack of security in Syria has prevented most from returning.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it will continue to be difficult for anyone to go back when the city has been heavily destroyed, social structures completely disrupted, and newly empowered leaders lack autonomy from Kurdish commanders in

decisionmaking and security matters.<sup>15</sup> It is a common refrain among Syrians in Turkey that, when asked whether they will return to Syria, they respond, “Return to where?” Before uprooting their lives again, local elites will need to be assured that the new governance model in Raqqa can function properly and remain stable.

A third challenge lies in relations with the regime in Damascus and with Turkey. The Syrian regime has a vested interest in the failure of governance models that are outside its authority, while Ankara is vehemently opposed to the growing Kurdish influence along its border with Syria. Many former tribal leaders from Raqqa Governorate now reside in Damascus and the regime has maintained tribal contacts who may act as spoilers in any process of political transition. The SDF’s new local governance system will create winners and losers among powerful figures in Raqqa, empowering some parties and disempowering others. This will allow those seeking to destabilize the new order to exploit any grievances to their own advantage.

Besides reconstruction and governance, potential returnees—particularly local elites who can earn a living elsewhere—fear that, upon going home, they might face new rivals put in place by the SDF or might be targeted by its security and screening procedures. If returnees feel that they no longer have a role to play in their city, despite the Islamic State’s defeat, even a full-scale reconstruction process will likely not be enough to convince them to return to Raqqa.

### **Deir Ezzor: A Destroyed Epicenter**

The governorate of Deir Ezzor suffers from numerous problems as well. Deir Ezzor city, the historic hub of the governorate, has been devastated by conflict and is unlikely to be in a position to reassert itself or regain its former role anytime soon. Even if it could do so, the rest of the governorate has been fragmented into isolated pockets that are controlled by various armed factions. This has undermined overall stability and any hope of an extensive return of refugees to the area.

Before 2011, Deir Ezzor city acted as the epicenter of eastern Syria.<sup>16</sup> The regime maintained the largest military base in the region there, and the headquarters of the powerful Air Force Intelligence Directorate (Al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyyeh) for Hasakeh, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor Governorates was located in the city. Euphrates University (Jam’at al-Furat), which drew students from across eastern Syria, was also based in Deir Ezzor. The presence of military forces and intelligence agencies in the city underlined not only its economic importance but also the regime’s anxieties that the city could slip out of its control.<sup>17</sup>

The most significant differences between Deir Ezzor and Raqqa are mainly related to geography. Deir Ezzor city is twice the area of Raqqa city, and Deir Ezzor Governorate is also significantly larger than Raqqa Governorate. Whereas Raqqa is a city surrounded by villages, Deir Ezzor city is essentially a

region surrounded by other regions, with far greater distances between population centers. The regions around Deir Ezzor city are divided by residents into quadrants: the eastern and western countrysides, referred to as Rif Sharqi and Rif Gharbi, respectively; the areas north of Deir Ezzor, referred to as the Jazira; and the areas south, known as the Shamiyya. The northern and southern quadrants are divided by the Euphrates River cutting through the city.

Due to the importance of Deir Ezzor city, the Syrian regime expended considerable blood and treasure to defend its presence there after the uprising began in 2011 and during the siege by the Islamic State between early 2015 and September 2017.<sup>18</sup> This meant that the regime was best positioned to take over control of the city and its surroundings after the siege was broken. The social makeup of Deir Ezzor is complex, containing an educated middle class and business elites, some of whose members do not currently live in the city but maintain vital connections to its economy. While the business elites in particular have necessary ties to the regime, they tend to operate independently of one another, meaning a unified endeavor to return refugees to the area is unlikely. In addition, many residents of Deir Ezzor city are of tribal backgrounds, and

their ties shape the urban geography, which tends to affirm their separation more than their unity. Certain quarters are named for tribes historically associated with those areas.

Though the regime has retaken Deir Ezzor, the city has suffered severe destruction on a scale similar to the quarters of Homs and Aleppo that were under rebel control. Most of the population has been displaced and the regime seems to have no real plan for remedying this situation soon.<sup>19</sup>

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When asked about reconciliation prospects, one regime official observed in June 2017, “We are reconciling with the land, not the people.”<sup>20</sup> What this statement suggested at the time was, first, that more people would be displaced toward SDF-held areas as the regime advanced; and, second, that the regime’s priority was to retake land, which would give it leverage to negotiate the return of the displaced on its own terms. This was similar to the regime’s logic in the eastern half of Aleppo city, which was almost empty when government forces recaptured it in December 2016.

A strategy of politically exploiting the return of the displaced would give the regime an opportunity to regain international recognition, by compelling foreign governments to negotiate with Damascus to facilitate such homecomings. This can only compound the difficulties of return, as many former residents may be reluctant to go back out of fear that they could be arrested or forcibly subjected to military conscription.

The destruction of Deir Ezzor city as Syria’s eastern hub represents a historic development with no clear resolution in sight. The regime’s main concern when it launched its offensive in Deir Ezzor Governorate was to regain as much territory as possible and reconnect these areas with those it held in the rest of

eastern Syria. The defeat of the Islamic State paved the way for a new form of competition to determine what forms of governance, and by whom, could be established in the areas formerly held by the group. Whether those displaced can return or not will depend on who will govern these areas and how. Even after the military defeat of the Islamic State, new rulers may control and even restrict refugees' return for security reasons.

## The Obstacles to a Return of the Displaced

### The Case of Raqqa

The future of Raqqa Governorate will be shaped largely by two trends that have emerged during the Syrian conflict. The first is how local power structures, particularly the role of middle-class professionals, have been transformed by the conflict and are unlikely to return to what prevailed before. The second is the new security screening mechanisms developed and applied by the U.S.-backed forces that fought to retake Raqqa Governorate from the Islamic State. The result of both trends has been the emergence of a new local elite as well as implementation of a security model in Raqqa that is invasive and largely arbitrary. Such developments will have major implications for the governorate's population and the scale of a refugee return.

When the SDF announced the beginning of its campaign to retake Raqqa, locals began fleeing to three camps for displaced people that the SDF had established north of the city.<sup>21</sup> There they have been vetted by a combination of groups that include the Asayish, a police force composed of locally recruited Arabs; the YPG; and local notables whom the Kurdish forces had empowered to build networks of trusted people who could personally vouch for the individuals being investigated.<sup>22</sup> These notables have used their familiarity with Raqqa's major families—in some cases, they are related to them—to provide valuable information and say, with a fair level of precision, whether certain people had worked with the Islamic State and to what extent.

The relatively unstructured and random nature of this vetting process, which often relies on middlemen, is ripe for abuse and may dissuade refugees from returning to Raqqa. There is also a high probability of revenge attacks and the potential for massacres, given the personal grievances harbored by many fighters. For example, an SDF combatant—formerly a member of the Free Syrian Army, who was displaced with his family when the Islamic State seized full control of Raqqa in January 2014—claimed that 180 members of his extended family had been killed. When asked who was responsible for their deaths, he did not blame the Islamic State, but instead provided a list of names of people from the city, suggesting that the Islamic State's defeat would not mark the end of his vendetta.<sup>23</sup> Were this combatant to be involved in the vetting process, he would likely be able to gather detailed information on his potential targets

and even expand his list—an option open to others in positions of authority in the SDF. The seeming ease with which the vetting process facilitates personal acts of retribution could also undermine the legitimacy of any local authority attempting to exert control and enforce stability.

So far, the SDF has assumed that the people of Raqqa city who remained after the Islamic State took over are affiliated with the group until proven otherwise.<sup>24</sup> This is due in large part to the fact that the Islamic State thoroughly embedded itself in the local social structure, requiring residents to attend mosques and small businesses to pay taxes. It is difficult today to distinguish between Islamic State sympathizers and civilians who were forced to collaborate against their will or were merely trying to survive. The guilty-until-proven-innocent approach is deeply problematic. It is conducive to abusive detentions

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and interrogations, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence that will only heighten public resentment and social instability.

What does all this mean for issues such as new leadership structures in Raqqa Governorate, the return of refugees, and reconstruction? With regard to a new local leadership, two types of groups have emerged. The SDF has empowered one group of leaders by appointing them

to governance structures, such as local councils. A second group is gaining influence through the security screening process in the aftermath of the fight against the Islamic State. These two groups will hold the keys to refugee return and reconstruction in Raqqa. The problem is that they have been selected in a top-down process, meaning that they are not truly representative of their communities. Therefore, they have little direct stake in a return of refugees, for whom they do not speak.

### **The Case of Deir Ezzor**

In Deir Ezzor, the situation is somewhat different. While taking Raqqa Governorate essentially required encircling and capturing the principal city, the military campaign against the Islamic State in Deir Ezzor involved multiple offensives launched against different geographical targets by diverse forces from many directions. In addition, the forces in Deir Ezzor represented a broader mix than those in Raqqa—not only the SDF and U.S.-led coalition forces, but also various Free Syrian Army factions as well as the Syrian Army and allied militias.<sup>25</sup> The severely fragmented nature of the region will affect the way post-Islamic State control is divided among these forces and will shape the nature of the security mechanisms they establish. This, in turn, will determine the prospects for stability and the return of refugees.

Fragmentation has undermined the role of Deir Ezzor city as an economic and political axis point for the wider governorate, while also severing its

long-standing links to Hasakeh and Raqqa. However, from the start of the Syrian conflict, the regime strived to ensure that a minimal level of state institutions would remain functioning in the city. For example, it kept the university and a few hospitals open, while also continuing to issue official documents. This gave the regime a base from which to expand its influence once the military campaign ended.<sup>26</sup>

A pressing question is what Deir Ezzor will look like in the months and years ahead. In all likelihood, the governorate will be broken up into islands of control, each isolated from one another and with its own administrative and security apparatuses that do not coordinate with those in other areas. As such, it would be impossible to make plans for a return of displaced persons to Deir Ezzor Governorate as a whole. Rather, the context of these islands will need to be assessed individually and plans of return tailored for each—a far more difficult task.

An overview of the situation around Deir Ezzor city illustrates why this is the case. In Deir Ezzor's western countryside south of the Euphrates River, the dominant Bousaraya tribe's leaders, such as Ahmed Shalash, are closely affiliated with the Assad regime. This gives the regime an advantage in the area. However, in the northwest countryside, matters are more complicated. There, the head of the dominant Baggara tribe recently resumed being a regime ally after five years of supporting the opposition.<sup>27</sup> The area is important because it borders SDF-controlled territory. However, the SDF also recruited members of the tribe in its own fight against the Islamic State in Hasakeh Governorate and other areas. This illustrates the divisions that have grown within the tribe.<sup>28</sup>

In the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, the situation is even more intricate thanks to the presence of natural resources such as gas and oil. After the uprising began in 2011, this area saw heavy fighting, largely over control of these resources.<sup>29</sup> Most groups in the eastern countryside are associated with the Aqeedat tribe, whose name is derived from the Arabic for “contract,” denoting that the tribe is an umbrella grouping of smaller tribes that agreed to unite at the beginning of the 1700s.<sup>30</sup> The capacity of the Aqeedat's subgroups to act in solidarity with one another has varied over time, reaching its low point when the Syrian uprising turned into a civil war. As of 2013, various Aqeedat subtribes and clans were fighting among themselves over control of oil resources, often reviving old feuds or grievances, or accusing each other of belonging to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) or the Islamic State.

The political implications of the conflict among members of the Aqeedat have been profound, leading to a collapse of tribal solidarity and making it impossible to base any post-Islamic State governance model on tribal identity

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and belonging. Indeed, the failure of efforts to establish unified representative bodies for tribes has appeared to confirm this. In April 2017, some local notables created the Tribal Council of Deir Ezzor (Majlis Qaba'il wa 'Asha'ir Deir Ezzor).<sup>31</sup> The opposition National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces asked the council to select three members as representatives in the coalition. The council could not agree on whom to designate, however, and a new council was created three months later in Bahrain, named the Council of the Tribes and Clans of the Euphrates (Majlis al-'Asha'ir wa Qaba'il al-Furat).<sup>32</sup> This new council was led by local notables from the region of Deir Ezzor and was active in Urfa, Turkey. Some members of the previous Tribal Council of Deir Ezzor left and joined the new council—headed by someone from the Hifl family, which has historically represented the Aqeedat—even as the former council continued to exist.

This absence of tribal solidarity in much of eastern Deir Ezzor Governorate has created a situation in which allegiances today are based largely on clan and proximity. Moreover, attempts in various districts to form local councils could be interpreted less as expressions of communal solidarity than as opportunistic attempts by local power brokers to position themselves politically for the future.<sup>33</sup> This overall fragmentation can only complicate efforts by the multiple authorities in Deir Ezzor Governorate to bring about lasting stability and, thereby, facilitate the return of the displaced.

In Raqqa, the defeat of the Islamic State was followed by a plan for governing the area, even though its success has been limited so far. Deir Ezzor required a departure from that approach, because so many parties are involved and because the local system is so fragmented. The presence of major outside actors in the governorate lent international dimensions to the battle, with broader implications for who ultimately governs Syria.

The Syrian regime took control of territory without populations as it advanced militarily into Deir Ezzor Governorate in 2017, while the SDF took over both territory and people. However, this is not actually to the SDF's benefit, because the Kurdish-dominated alliance cannot govern those populations harmoniously in the long term, providing them with an incentive to return under regime control. Now that the Islamic State has been defeated in Deir Ezzor, the displaced populations are likely to become a bargaining chip in negotiations between the SDF and the regime that will probably work to the regime's advantage.

However, political instability is not the only obstacle to return. Something more profound has taken place: refugees have been literally uprooted from their places of origin, whereby their multifaceted links to those places have been suddenly and often violently cut by the prolonged conflict. This is likely to render the return of refugees to their homes exceptionally difficult as well, and how it is addressed will also help determine if refugees come home to eastern Syria and elsewhere.

Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, together with Aleppo and Homs, have suffered extensive destruction. Starting in 2011, eastern Syria was gradually emptied of its inhabitants. Although the massive displacement of the population was concentrated in 2015, it started before that time and has continued after. People began to abandon Deir Ezzor Governorate as early as 2011, in the aftermath of the regime's attacks on protesters. In 2013, fighting between rebel groups in Deir Ezzor encouraged many more to flee. The wave of displacement peaked with the arrival of the Islamic State in the cities of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa in 2013 and 2014. The YPG's advances during 2014 provoked additional population movements, as did the multifaceted campaign in 2017 to defeat the Islamic State.

Yet the uprooting of the inhabitants of eastern Syria has gone beyond simple displacement. The most important legacy of the conflict is that it has destroyed the social environment and networks of Syrians. Violence has divided and scattered social units, most importantly families, which constituted points of reference for individuals. It has disaggregated larger social structures, such as tribes, and dissolved associations, among them professional middle class associations, depriving individuals of what had previously been their social anchors. Even if families remained geographically together, displacement and resettlement caused the breakup of essential family relations, undermining the stability of marriages and mutual assistance between parents and children. At the same time, the destruction of towns and villages often disfigured urban and rural landscapes, an important step in the gradual dissociation of Syrians from their places of origin. That is why, once the conflict ends, displaced individuals may well have the possibility of returning to their cities and villages, but it could be hard for them to again feel a sense of belonging. In many cases, a wide gap will separate postwar reality from the memories Syrians have of their previous homes.

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## Shattered Trust Between Kurds and Arabs

Tensions between Kurds and Arabs are likely to play a major role in the future stability of eastern Syria. This includes Raqqa and Deir Ezzor Governorates, as well as Hasakeh Governorate further to the northeast and parts of Aleppo Governorate. The outcome will heavily influence the return of refugees to those areas. Many Arabs living outside Syria—in many cases, for half a decade or so—still believe the Kurds are seeking to establish a state based on ethnicity, and therefore lack trust in them. Having no bridge between the two communities has hampered efforts to negotiate a return of the overwhelmingly Arab refugees to areas of Kurdish control.

During much of the conflict in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most influential Syrian Kurdish political party, has pursued the project of

creating an autonomous region in the country's north.<sup>34</sup> Described by PYD militants as “democratic confederalism,” this endeavor is not, strictly speaking, ethnically based, but rather a political project that explicitly courts social diversity in politically decentralized local communities. At the same time, it draws heavily on a historical Kurdish sense of injustice to motivate the PYD's rank and file. There is, therefore, a disconnect between the ideology promoted by PYD leaders, who support a non-ethnic project, and PYD members, who carry grievances specific to their community and believe the PYD project is a channel through which to achieve Kurdish autonomy. This has created friction in the PYD's implementation of its policies, which the party has not always been able to control.

There is a history of animosity and suspicion between Arabs and Kurds. At times, this has led to violent incidents, such as during the 2004 Kurdish protests in Qamishli against the Assad regime, which pushed some branches of local Arab tribes to side with the regime.<sup>35</sup> The incorporation of Arabs into

the SDF and the broader military framework in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor has not allayed the suspicions of the region's Arab population regarding the PYD's ultimate goals, or those of the YPG. Many fear the PYD is, at best, aiming to establish Kurdish hegemony or, at worst, to ethnically cleanse northern Syria of Arabs.<sup>36</sup> It is unlikely, however, that the PYD and YPG have a plan to clear the territories under their control of Arabs, even if many individual

actions have fostered that impression. The PYD and the YPG's actions that foster these perceptions will have significant, if discouraging, implications for future stability, impacting negatively on a refugee return.

One example of how history has informed the interpretation of current events, exacerbating Kurdish-Arab relations, is the role of Mahmoud Shawakh al-Boursan, an Arab tribal leader. Boursan hails from a group of tribal members that was resettled after the Euphrates Dam flood of 1968 by the Baathist government, which relocated certain tribes to Hasakeh Governorate, near Qamishli, a majority Kurdish area.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the motives, Kurds to this day view this move as part of a conspiracy by the Syrian government—and Arabs more broadly—to settle in and undermine their society.<sup>38</sup> Kurdish forces appointed Boursan head of the Raqqa Council as they were preparing to take power in the city after its recapture from the Islamic State. Many locals interpreted this as a signal that the Arab tribes that had been living in Hasakeh for two generations would be compelled to return to their areas of origin.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, events throughout the war in Syria have further stoked such suspicions. One example occurred in Tel Abyad, in Raqqa Governorate, where Arabs and Kurds were in roughly equal proportion before the conflict, though the exact numbers are disputed. When the Islamic State seized Tel Abyad in 2014, many Kurds were displaced. Likewise, when the YPG took the town

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later that same year, many Arabs left, or were forced to leave. YPG fighters exacted a form of revenge against local Arabs, for instance by retaking Kurdish homes the Islamic State had handed over to Arab families.<sup>40</sup> Although the extent of such operations remains unclear, the process resulted in many Arabs fleeing in fear of retaliation. Tel Abyad was then placed under the authority of the Kobani Canton of the de facto autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Syria, referred to by the Kurds as Rojava. Many Arabs took this as a sign that the Kurds were determined to appropriate Arab lands and incorporate them into their expanding territory.<sup>41</sup>

Events in the town of Husseiniyyeh, in Hasakeh Governorate, provided yet another example. In February 2014, clashes occurred between rebel factions and the YPG there, with the YPG suffering heavy losses. The town later fell under Islamic State rule until February 2015, when the YPG reentered the city. Most of the residents had fled by that time, perhaps fearing retaliation. Some of those who remained have revealed to Amnesty International that the YPG razed much of the town. The YPG accused locals of having been complicit in the death of Kurdish fighters, and of having sided with the rebels and then the Islamic State.<sup>42</sup> Whatever the Kurds' motives, Arabs saw the destruction of the town as an example of a Kurdish campaign of ethnic cleansing.

In contrast to both those episodes was the case of Manbij, in Aleppo Governorate, which is mostly Arab. When the Kurds took the town in August 2016, their actions in Tel Abyad and Husseiniyyeh were not repeated, possibly because Western military advisers were present. In addition, Manbij was not placed under the autonomous Kurdish administration of Rojava. The presence of PKK cadres remained relatively light, compared to their ubiquity in Qamishli, for example, where one source said they could be found "even in the bathrooms."<sup>43</sup>

Manbij contains an unusual mix of political forces, including outside actors. It is unclear, however, which will prevail in the end. Given the significant international presence in the areas surrounding Manbij, locals like to joke that if you set a pot of tea to boil and take a walk around, you are liable to see U.S., French, Russian, YPG, Turkish, and Syrian regime forces, and still have time to get back home before the tea is finished.<sup>44</sup> While each is investing in making local connections, so many actors competing for influence has created an atmosphere of uncertainty that particularly discourages the return of the middle class, which seeks predictability and the guarantee of stability. Despite the presence of the YPG and its attempts to set up new patronage systems, the Syrian state still maintains a presence in Manbij and continues to operate some institutions, particularly educational establishments where it pays teachers' salaries. The regime has focused on education because it believes such an investment will allow it to maintain a foothold in the city and control the school curriculum, thereby preventing the YPG from imposing a curriculum of its own. Such actions allow the regime to possibly pave the way for greater influence down the road.

Though Kurdish-Arab tensions predate the war in Syria, they have, in many cases, been exacerbated by the conflict, leading to acts of revenge and mutual suspicion on both the individual and local levels. In this situation, it is difficult for Arabs to have confidence in the PYD's motives, regardless of the party's rhetoric and attempts to involve Arabs in the military and governing processes in eastern Syria. The Kurds' attempt at window dressing—enrolling a number

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of Arabs in the SDF—has little chance of fundamentally changing things, and this distrust is likely to persist.

It is difficult to see how the SDF's entry into Arab-majority areas will encourage a return of refugees. In fact, the ensuing rise of numerous new local actors will represent a major obstacle to such a process. To many, it is unsettling to witness forces foreign to the area, who were involved in military operations against the Islamic State, setting up new governance bodies and empowering previously unknown local leaders. In the east of Syria, the PYD-YPG governance bodies remain unacceptable, even to the Kurdish middle class originally from the area. That uneasiness is likely to be even more pronounced if a return of the displaced is filtered through unfamiliar intermediaries tied to the new leaderships.

## Conclusion: A New Battle Ahead?

The defeat of the Islamic State will not automatically pave the way for the return of refugees to eastern Syria. In areas where stability is achieved and refugees are encouraged to return home, the parties that control security will have an interest in implementing a system of reintegration that secures their own power and quashes dissent or potential opposition among the population.

Put another way, the return of those who left will likely become a tool of domination by those who are in positions of authority, with refugees and the internally displaced being used by local power brokers to position themselves in the emerging elite of the new Syria. This process will likely include the rise of new leaders, with prominent members of the community serving as the faces of new administrations and legitimizing the rule of militarized factions loyal either to the Syrian regime or to the SDF. The SDF and the regime are on a collision course in eastern Syria, where each side regards its presence as of strategic—even existential—importance. The regime has its eyes on Raqqa especially, given that its primary goal is to reconnect Deir Ezzor and Aleppo Governorates, with Raqqa the connection point between them. For the SDF, remaining in eastern Syria is equally crucial as it seeks to transform its territorial gains into political legitimacy and durable relations with the United States.

A large-scale return of refugees should not be expected as hostility between the regime and the SDF escalates. Many will fear revenge attacks and instability

as local actors vie for influence in a heavily fragmented arena. The devastation of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, both physically and as economic hubs, and the suspicions bred by Kurdish-Arab tensions will further confound those prospects. Any solution seeking to ensure the return of refugees must therefore aim to address such factors. Moreover, if the refugees' areas of origin have been changed so completely as to have effectively become foreign to them, the high price of an eventual return could convince those who have resettled elsewhere, particularly in Europe, to remain there permanently.

One option to address this situation may include a hybrid proposal. This would place SDF-affiliated institutions under the umbrella of the Syrian state, while keeping both PKK cadres and the regime's security personnel away from governance bodies in areas recaptured from the Islamic State. Instead, such bodies could be run by former state employees. Such a process could avoid a rift between SDF-appointed local leaders and former local elites, strike a balance of power between the PKK-trained cadres and the regime, encourage technocrats to come back, and allow a smoother return of the refugees. It may be also be advisable to explore how reconstruction and the return of the displaced can be turned into drivers for acquiring leverage over the Assad regime so that it will agree to devolve power. This could put an end to the regime's decades-long policy of using governance to maintain a firm grip over the Syrian population.

Beyond that, however, any viable policy of return to eastern Syria should be embedded in the framework of a broader political settlement for the country that focuses on creating the conditions for return rather than simply concentrating on an end to hostilities. This would involve reinstating to the regions' cities their traditional roles in Syria's territorial order. It would also mean integrating into the reconstruction process those civil servants, teachers, and professionals who left the cities, and creating anew the social networks that would encourage people to come back. Today, such a path seems excessively difficult to contemplate, as political outcomes in eastern Syria remain blurred by the complex and opposing agendas at play. This will continue to affect the prospects for a return of refugees. For many of the refugees and internally displaced, instability and violence made them leave in the first place. Only real stability will make them return.

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