

## As IS' role in Syria wanes, other conflicts take the stage

U.S.-backed forces have barely begun to clear the land mines from Raqqa, Syria, after pushing the Islamic State from the city, the de facto capital of its self-declared caliphate.

But the militants' defeat there is already setting the stage for a new round of conflict and instability in Syria's long civil war.

Fleeing jihadists are regrouping in remote areas, rearming with the help of desert smugglers. Tensions are brewing over who will ultimately control Raqqa, where U.S.-backed Kurdish and Arab forces declared victory on Tuesday.

And as the Islamic State threat wanes, the Syrian government is expected to return its military attention to the Syrian rebels, intensifying the kind of bombardment that has led to mass civilian casualties, with no sign of a political solution in sight.

To defeat Islamic State, myriad international and Syrian combatants — many of them sworn enemies — banded together or put their conflicts on the back burner. Now, even as they close in on Islamic State's last territories near the Iraqi border, their submerged tensions are rising to the surface.

Raqqa was taken by a U.S.-backed militia made up of Syrian Kurds and Arabs. Soon after, celebrating Kurdish fighters raised flags adorned with the face of Abdullah Ocalan, a Kurdish militant leader. Many of Raqqa's Arab residents, who consider Ocalan a terrorist, were appalled. Some are calling the Kurds new occupiers.

Others downplayed the prospect of tensions between Arabs and Kurds. The U.S.-backed militia says it will soon hand formal control of Raqqa to a civilian city council made up of representative local residents.

"We are all on the same ship," said Hassan Mohammad Ali, a Raqqa resident involved in rebuilding the local government. Both Arabs and Kurds want "a democratic, pluralistic Syria," he said, and would not try to impose their will on each other.

### Assad's control

But the Syrian government has no intention of letting that arrangement stand.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad now controls most of the country, having taken back much of the territory once held by rebel groups who took up arms after the government cracked down on protests in 2011. Backed by Russia and Iran, Mr. Assad has vowed to recapture all of Syria, including Raqqa and the areas beyond it where the Kurds have established a semi-autonomous zone. It remains unclear how far the U.S. would go to stop him.

Pentagon officials say, for now, the U.S. military will continue to defend areas like Raqqa. In June, the military shot down two Syrian drones that U.S. officials said were threatening U.S.-backed troops.

That posture has not changed, the officials said, and Syria experts say they expect it to continue for the next few months. What happens after that — and how willing the United States is to become engaged in a war against the Assad government and its international backers — is an open question. "The issue of self-defence will certainly continue as long as the fight against ISIS

continues,” said Andrew J. Tabler, a Syria expert with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “But what goes on after that with the political process, I don’t know.”

## **Military campaign**

Trump administration officials acknowledge privately that the military campaign in Syria has by far outstripped the diplomatic campaign, to the point now where there is no real plan for what to do in a post-Islamic State Syria.

That is not for lack of trying by John Kerry, the Secretary of State under President Barack Obama, who sought a political solution for a post-Islamic State Syria, and Brett H. McGurk, the Trump administration’s point man on Syria.

With the Islamic State far from defeated the U.S.-backed coalition is “not quite ready to take their foot off the gas pedal yet,” said Eric Robinson, an analyst with RAND Corp.

The militant group still controls close to 6,400 sq. km. of territory on either side of the Iraq-Syria border, harbouring an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 fighters.

As its fighters are pushed out of their strongholds, many are going underground, vowing to continue their battle as hit-and-run insurgents. There are growing pockets of them in the eastern desert areas of at least three Syrian provinces, including many hiding in areas under government control, according to fighters and residents of the areas. NY Times

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