The Day after the Islamic State: The Problem of Power Vacuums

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In September 2014, then-US President Barack Obama pledged to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State,[1] a Salafī jihadist organization that had enjoyed a meteoric rise in power. Today, most of the territory controlled by the Islamic State has been recaptured. Ejected from Iraq, the organization now retains limited and severely reduced territorial enclaves within Syria only. In July 2017, President Donald Trump claimed the US-led coalition is "doing very well" against the Islamic State, with the organization "falling fast."[2] However, the role of American-backed forces should not be limited to defeating the Islamic State militarily. The United States would also do well to provide assistance to local Syrians, in order to form a stable governance infrastructure in liberated territory. This task is complicated further by the friction and competition between a plethora of interested actors: from Sunni and Shiite organizations, to states such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Indeed, whereas observers once debated how to defeat the Islamic State, commentators, policymakers, and local actors are now focused on "the day after." Questions abound as to how to prevent the return of Salafī jihadist groups, while divergent actors scramble to secure order and power in the territory abandoned by the Islamic State and other rebel actors.

This essay examines the balance of power that is emerging in Syrian territory where pro-regime and other forces are struggling to gain and exert control. Specifically, it studies the ramifications of a persistent trend: devolution of power to sub-state sectarian actors, in lieu of effective state projection of sovereignty. Following a brief overview of power vacuums in Syria, the essay delineates the new governance structures in territory

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liberated from Islamic State control and examines the power relationships between rulers and ruled in those territories. It also identifies potential future trends of governance in Syria, contrasting the sectarianism practiced by pro-regime forces with a more pluralistic model of governance attempted by rebel forces in Raqqa, the liberated former capital of the Islamic State in Syria. More generally, the essay examines the negative ramifications of two ongoing trends within Syria: the lack of a stable, inclusive governance regime; and increasing Iranian influence within territory liberated from the Islamic State, through the use of Shiite militias. The combination of instability and anti-Sunni sectarianism practiced by pro-regime and pro-Iranian forces fuels Sunni grievances in the absence of any coherent, pan-sectarian national reconciliation and augurs the potential return of Salafi jihadist groups.

Syria after the Islamic State: An Overview

At the height of its strength, the Islamic State controlled territory that spanned one third of Iraq and one quarter of Syria, and contained a population of some six million. In recent months, however, the organization has lost almost all of its territorial strongholds. In June 2017, the Iraqi city of Mosul, where in 2014 the Islamic State announced the establishment of its caliphate, was recaptured by pro-government forces. In late 2017, Raqqa, a Syrian city of 200,000 civilians, was captured by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a force consisting mainly of Kurdish fighters and Sunni rebels who are not members of jihadist groups. The SDF is also trained and supported by the US, which played a pivotal role in the founding of the force. The whole area north and east of the Euphrates River and up to the Syrian-Iraqi border is now controlled by the SDF, which routed Islamic State forces and hostile local militias. Nonetheless, forces loyal to the Syrian regime reoccupied the city of Deir ez-Zor, located near al-Omar, Syria's largest oil reserve, and home to some 100,000 citizens. The redistribution of control and authority in the areas liberated from Islamic State control raises the question of what governance structures at a local level are filling the vacuum created by the ouster of the Salafi jihadist group.

Territory reclaimed from the Islamic State rarely sees a return to pre-war norms: the Syrian government remains weak, lacking governance capabilities and legitimacy. The result is a decline in basic services and quality of life for local residents. In 2015, the United Nations estimated that 80 percent of Syrians live in poverty, with life expectancy having decreased

by twenty years since 2011.[3] The ongoing civil war in Syria has resulted in the emergence of a macro trend, whereby individuals increasingly perceive their identity in local and sectarian terms, rather than in national identity. With the state failing to provide security and services, local militias have been formed, often based on ethnicity, clan, or religion, representing the privatization of the duties of the state and the re-emergence of traditional power structures. However, the increased power of local militias remains a poor substitute for the state. Rather than empower communities and individuals, the privatization of governance has largely resulted in the expansion of corruption and patronage networks in both rebel and pro-regime territory, leading to increased lawlessness and a prevailing sense of chaos and alienation.

Foreign Shiite militias – the most powerful of which is the Lebanese Hezbollah – have bolstered the depleted ranks of the Assad regime and now form a crucial part of the coalition supporting pro-regime forces in Syria. Funding and training many of these militias, Iran has also played a critical role supporting the Syrian regime. Iran seeks to increase its influence in the region by creating a land corridor controlled by Iranian proxies and allies spanning Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Though ardently opposed to the Islamic State, Iranian and pro-regime operations in Syrian territory reclaimed from the Salafi jihadist group may inadvertently encourage its return by fueling alienation from the state and feeding Sunni grievances. Reports are rife of ethnic cleansing and Sunni resentment of repressive Shiite domination.

Filling the Power Vacuum: Governance in "Liberated" Syria

Despite the survival of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the ongoing civil war has rendered contemporary Syria a de facto failed state of competing militias, tribes, and ethno-religious groups. The Syrian army no longer exists as a coherent and effective fighting force, and the Assad regime relies on Russian aid and Iranian-led Shiite militia fighters. Russia provides pro-regime forces with air support, air defense coverage, and logistical support; at least 1,200 Russian personnel are also on the ground in Syria.[4] For its part, Iran deployed some 7,000 of its own fighters during the campaign to recapture the city of Aleppo from rebel forces. Though most of the Iranian personnel later left Syria, the number of Iranian-funded and equipped foreign fighters in Syria has increased to approximately 50,000 Shiites operating in several militias, including up to 8,000 members of the

Lebanese Hezbollah organization. Pro-regime Syrians increasingly prefer joining Iranian-affiliated militias, due to higher Iranian-subsidized wages and available training when compared to the remnants of the Syrian army.[5] Thus, Iran-aligned militias in Syria are playing a pivotal role reclaiming territory and practicing local administration and governance, filling the vacuum left by the crippled state.

Pro-Assad forces in Syria have been accused of investing relatively few resources in fighting the Islamic State. Instead, pro-regime and pro-Iranian groups often focus on defeating non-Islamic State rebels, especially those who received greater support from the Syrian population and are thereby perceived as a threat to the regime, such as the Free Syrian Army. Pro-regime forces have also practiced widespread ethnic cleansing in areas of Iranian interest, such as around the border with Lebanon and in the vicinity of Damascus; in April 2018 alone, thousands of Sunni residents were displaced from the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta. This conforms to the broader Iranian goal of securing permanent access to Syria and Lebanon via a "land bridge," while also bolstering the Assad regime. Ethnic cleansing in Syria is organized and premeditated, often manifested as population exchange. Shiites and Alawites are transferred from regions deemed less essential, replacing Sunnis who are expelled by pro-regime forces from territory perceived as strategically important. The Sunnis are then transferred to demographically homogenous enclaves, such as the Idlib region. Labib al-Nahas, a spokesman for the Sunni Islamist rebel group Ahrar-al-Sham, claims: "Full sectarian segregation is at the heart of the Iranian project in Syria. They are looking for geographical zones that they can fully dominate."[6]

Ethnic cleansing is therefore strategic, conforming to the territorial objectives of pro-Assad forces. Frequently, pro-Assad forces have imposed "truces" on defeated or weakened rebel groups, which usually entail the forcible transfer of Sunnis, while their homes are confiscated and assigned to newly-arrived Shiites and Alawites.[7] Along the Syria-Lebanon border, Hezbollah has worked systematically to diminish the local Sunni population by importing Shiites from Lebanon and Iraq, while re-settling Syrian Sunni refugees who fled to Lebanon – yet did not oppose the Assad regime – inside closely supervised "safe zones" within Syria.[8] Sunni Syrian citizens were also transferred to cities deeper within Syria where fighting still continues, thereby endangering civilian lives.[9]

No coherent program for national rehabilitation exists. Instead, forces loyal to the Assad regime frequently enact "comprehensive reconciliation," a framework entailing the expulsion of anti-regime notables, while rebel paramilitaries are incorporated into pro-regime militias. Despite this combination of carrot and stick, comprehensive reconciliation relies on coercion, as the regime often reneges on pledges to exempt locals from conscription while failing to provide promised public services, exacerbating resentment.[10] Prioritizing force over governance worsens the ongoing civil war. In lieu of an authentic mechanism for rehabilitation, former Islamic State fighters have switched allegiance to other jihadist groups instead of turning away from violence.[11] Within "liberated" territory, pro-regime militias often indulge in corruption and racketeering. Rather than promote a genuine program to restore local governance and autonomy, pro-regime notables have simply taken over local militias. Thus, cities such as Aleppo lack a central authority; instead, individual militias monopolize specific public services, sharing the profits with the regime.[12] Elsewhere, traditional local authorities, such as clans and families, provide services the state fails to deliver, engendering a re-emphasis on local identities. The praxis of the pro-Assad coalition therefore impacts negatively on reconciliation: governance in pro-regime territory is characterized by ethnic favoritism, corruption, and brutality.

On a wider scale, inter-state rivalry, when played out locally in Syria, engenders instability. The continuing inability of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the US to agree on zones of influence and the failure to limit military activity against non-Islamic State forces has benefited the Salafi jihadist group. This is exemplified by the ongoing Turkish military offensive against Kurdish forces around the town of Afrin, in northern Syria. The fighting resulted in Kurdish forces withdrawing from combat against the Islamic State in order to defend their territory from Turkey.[13]

Though they agree on little, it is in the interests of all international actors with a stake in the Syrian conflict to prevent the re-emergence of the Islamic State or similar groups. Action is therefore required to establish clear boundaries of territorial influence within Syria, preventing further instability and conflict, which could be exploited by Salafi jihadist groups. Simultaneously, the continued weakness of the Assad regime means that local communities must take the lead in governing themselves, whether in rebel or regime-held territory. The challenge now facing all actors is to

ensure that these new governance structures are inclusive and serve their communities. This is far from a straightforward or simple objective.

Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa: Local Governance Compared

While global media heralds the "end" of the Islamic State, many Sunnis perceive the presence of Shiite militias and pro-Assad forces to constitute the replacement of one brutal, illegitimate occupier with another. Al-Qaeda's local Syrian affiliate, Ha'ay Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is growing stronger, its ranks buttressed by Sunni deserters from other rebel groups.[14] Discrimination against Sunnis is therefore counterproductive, feeding grievances and undermining the legitimacy of the central government, potentially precipitating further ethno-religious conflict. Sectarian actions by pro-Iranian groups inadvertently promote the return of Salafi jihadist forces, regardless of Iranian opposition to the Islamic State.

In the recent battle for Deir ez-Zor, pro-regime forces initially adopted a less sectarian model of governance, training and empowering local Sunni tribes who suffered at the hands of the Islamic State. Nevertheless, pro-Assad forces in Deir ez-Zor have been increasingly loth to employ their local power to promote stability, with reports suggesting a perpetuation of sectarian coercion. Indeed, the capture of the city followed a similar format to the re-conquest of Aleppo: Hezbollah commanders directed the offensive, while Afghan and Iraqi Shiites were front-line fighters.[15] The International Crisis Group warned that the employment of foreign Shiite fighters in Deir ez-Zor boosts the Islamic State's "Sunni credentials" and re-legitimizes the group in the eyes of Sunni locals.[16] In addition, the pro-regime forces now in control of Deir ez-Zor have to contend with significant demographic changes in the city, as refugees from elsewhere in Syria have flocked there, displacing locals and returnees. Indeed, the province surrounding Deir ez-Zor now contains around 1.2 million overwhelmingly Sunni Syrian refugees.[17] This trend exemplifies the need for comprehensive reconciliation, to prevent vulnerable individuals from being exploited by the Islamic State. Yet pro-regime forces have failed to enact a pluralistic model of local governance, instead perpetuating the grievances of locals and refugees alike.

However, an alternative to this increasingly dangerous and unstable practice exists. The pro-Iranian, pro-Assad axis is not the only coalition re-taking territory from the Islamic State in Syria. Working with the US and

other Western powers, Syrian Kurdish groups and "moderate" Sunni rebels have joined with the Syria Democratic Forces. The SDF successfully captured significant swathes of territory in northeastern Syria from the Islamic State, particularly north of the Euphrates River. Concurrently, the SDF have used the capture of Raqqa as an opportunity to create a relatively pluralistic governance model, a rare paradigm in territory liberated from the Islamic State. Though the SDF is overwhelmingly Kurdish, Arab militias played a frontline combat role in the battle for the demographically Sunni city of Raqqa, in order to legitimize occupying forces to locals. The SDF formed the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) to oversee reconstruction and deliver public services; local Sunni Arabs are heavily represented in both the RCC's police force and in the council itself. The RCC recruited and mobilized hundreds of police officers before the battle for Raqqa even began, ensuring that any power vacuums or instability would be minimalized.[18]

Nevertheless, the four tribes that exert significant power in Raqqa remain suspicious if not hostile to the SDF, harboring fears that the organization remains a Kurdish-run front, a concern shared by some Western analysts.[19] The Syrian regime also retains a degree of patronage in urban Raqqa, with many municipal workers remaining on the government payroll. Concurrently, the SDF model of supervised local empowerment, while initially perceived as successful in other towns retaken from the Islamic State, has recently been under stress in areas such as Manbij, with local actors complaining of insufficient resources for reconstruction, which in turn leads to corruption and instability.[20] Finally, formerly exiled elites and remaining locals will have to co-exist with new arrivals; as in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa has witnessed a large influx of displaced Syrians from other areas of the country.

Critically, US efforts to stabilize territory recaptured from the Islamic State are under immediate threat. President Trump recently announced his desire to withdraw US forces from Syria as soon as possible.[21] Such a policy could jeopardize the partnership forged with the SDF to deliver pluralistic local governance. Russia – employing the perceived legitimacy of its presence, having been officially "invited" to Syria by the Assad regime (unlike the US) – is attempting to minimize US involvement. Similarly, despite being a NATO ally, Turkey has expressed substantial concerns about US support of Kurdish forces, even engaging in combat with SDF-affiliated forces in and around Afrin. However, as demonstrated by its emphasis on implementing the Raqqa model of governance, the US plays a pivotal role

in rehabilitating former Islamic State-held territory and citizens. Kurdish forces receiving support from the US proved their effectiveness against the jihadists, also stopping Iranian-aligned and pro-Assad forces from filling any power vacuum. The creation of islands of stability and the promotion of local empowerment, thereby minimizing corruption, sectarianism, and the potential return of the Islamic State, is a national interest for all the involved parties. Thus, the US Central Command – though faced with the question of how long it can and should maintain combat and support units within Syria – must cooperate with a broad spectrum of actors operating within Syrian territory.

The Need for Multilateral Coordination in Syria

At a joint press conference on November 11, 2017, President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin both expressed satisfaction with the decline of the Islamic State and the multilateral "deconfliction" efforts underway.[22] However, the stabilization of territory recovered from Islamic State control and the establishment of effective national and/or local government remain urgent challenges. The fight against dangerous non-state actors in Syria is also far from over. Salafi jihadist organizations such as the Islamic State remain capable of re-filling local power vacuums. Concurrently, a revitalized, unreconstructed Assad regime, bolstered by pro-Iranian militas, poses grave implications for Shiite-Sunni relations. The perpetuation of sectarian violence and the lack of national reconciliation will prolong – rather than end – the Syrian civil war. If no action to redress these trends is taken, Salafi jihadist extremism is likely to remain vibrant, bolstered by the alienation of Sunnis.

Despite their differences, the US and Russia have each expressed a preference for pluralistic, non-sectarian governance in Syria that promotes autonomy for local actors while maintaining law and order and providing essential services. Russia understands that it is not possible to form a strong central government in post-war Syria, and therefore accepts that local authorities should be empowered, with local power dynamics recognized. Both the US and Russia can therefore work together to tailor and implement the Raqqa model within Syria, laying the foundations for a decentralized system of government in the country, while delineating commonly agreed zones of influence. Though the provision of services such as education, welfare, and healthcare may seem less imperative, it is a national security interest to both Russia and the US that can help prevent the return of Salafi

jihadist groups. Arguably, Russia has played a more constructive role than Iran and has sought to establish a political settlement involving both rebels and pro-Assad forces, as demonstrated by the pivotol Russian role played in the Astana and Geneva talks. Russia and the US – despite backing the regime and rebel forces, respectively – could play counteprart roles, advocating the Raqqa model to their respective constituencies and allies.

Another challenge for the US is the question of how to reconcile its patronage of the SDF with its long term alliance with Turkey, particularly considering the Turkish campaign around Afrin. Even before the Afrin offensive, Turkey was working to fill the post-Islamic State vacuum by launching a successful program to train police in northern Syria, with over local 5600 graduates in 2017 alone.[23] Despite their differences, the US and Turkey could and should work together to prevent the emergence of unstable power vacuums in northern Syria. Cooperating with local partners, the US, Russia, and Turkey should promote the resettlement of Sunni refugees in areas reclaimed from Islamic State control, provided they commit to cooperate with local government officials. This strategy could work to deprive jihadist groups of a principal recruiting ground and promote reconciliation in a post-war Syria.

The Trump administration should reject Russian and Syrian demands to disarm moderate rebel factions of the Free Syrian Army. Jordan has rightly expressed concerns that any such moves would create a power vacuum and encourage militia members to join jihadist groups. Similarly, the US should continue its existing train-and-equip programs to Kurdish forces, despite Turkish pressure. The announcement that the US will help train and equip a "border security force" in the Kurdish region is an important development that could prevent the infiltration of Islamic State operatives, while severing Iran's land corridor to Syria via Iraq.[24] Despite the benefits of the Raqqa model, the difficulties faced in Manbij demonstrate there is no "one size fits all"

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model of governance that can be applied throughout Syria, regardless of local demographics and characteristics. Instead, the values that underlie the Raqqa model – inclusion, pluralism, and local empowerment – should

serve as guiding principles for creating self-sufficient islands of stability, which are critical in the fight against the Islamic State.

Southern Syria in the Post-Islamic State Era: Implications for Israel

During the initial stages of the civil war, the Syrian side of the Golan Heights was relatively stable, after rebel forces took control of most of the territory and forced actors loyal to the Assad regime to withdraw. In developments that were worrisome for Israel, the Syrian Golan Heights came to be dominated by extremist, Salafi jihadist rebel groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra – a local branch of al-Qaeda – and Shuhada al-Yarmuk, which declared loyalty to the Islamic State. Nevertheless, Israel provided humanitarian, economic, and medical aid to the population of Syrian Golan. This policy proved strategically effective, successfully dis-incentivizing rebel groups from attacking Israel while also helping to establish ties between Israel and local communities.

Nevertheless, pro-regime forces have exploited the achievements of the US and its allies against the Islamic State, by using the instability to recapture significant swathes of Syrian territory from rebel forces. Thus, Israel must prepare for a centralized military effort by pro-Assad forces – including groups such as Hezbollah or Iranian-led Shiite militias – to retake the Golan Heights. If the various rebel forces are defeated in southern Syria, Iran will likely use the vacuum to increase its influence by proxy. This change in the balance of power augurs potential sectarian ramifications and negative consequences, particularly for local Syrians who "collaborated" with Israel. The local population is primarily Sunni, which suggests that relations with Shiite forces will probably be strained, leaving significant potential for local resistance, frustration, and instability. Concurrently, Salafi jihadist organizations will attempt to employ both the power vacuum and sectarian tinge of the pro-Assad forces to recruit local members.

Faced with these threats, Israel should pre-emptively and proactively expand assistance to communities in the Syrian Golan while encouraging the formation of local, moderate militia forces. Israel could also cooperate with regional allies, such as Jordan, to assist and vet local militia groups, and carefully consider the possibility of providing weapons for self-defense. Simultaneously, Israel should use its good relations with both the US and Russia to perpetuate the calm in southern Syria and prevent the infiltration of Iranian forces, in accordance with an agreement between Moscow and Washington to establish zones of non-escalation. By collaborating with and

empowering various local actors, Israel should seek to limit the ability of Salafı jihadist groups to take advantage of any instability or resentment among the Syrian population of the Golan Heights.

The Raqqa model is not a universally applicable framework of governance and instead represents a set of principles that must be operationalized on a case-by-case basis. Thus, Israel should be cautious in its involvement in the Syrian Golan. The aim of Israeli policy should be to create self-sufficient local communities, ruled and defended by local forces, which are resilient in the face of both Iranian and Salafı jihadist exploitation, rather than a coherent territorial entity controlled by Israel itself. Israel and Jordan, together with other regional actors with shared goals, should cooperate to create open, inclusive governance structures backed by real local empowerment, creating islands of stability in an unstable and unpredictable space.

Notes

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