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Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? Two years after an abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops followed by a Turkish incursion, Raqqa is largely quiet. Yet the stability of this Kurdish-controlled predominantly Arab province in north-eastern Syria is precarious and hinges on U.S. deterrence of military moves from Turkey and/or Russia in tandem with the Damascus regime.

Why does it matter? Raqqa's trajectory and fault lines provide insight into the challenges ahead in Syria. Regional and international forces use the area to project power and pursue their security interests. Any sudden shift in the balance of power is liable to lead to violence, severe humanitarian crisis and mass displacement.

What should be done? The Biden administration has signalled that it will maintain U.S. forces in Syria for the time being. While the deployment continues, the U.S. and other anti-ISIS coalition members should promote steps to stabilise the north east, including areas like Raqqa. They should seek diplomatic arrangements to avert further disruptive offensives.

Executive Summary

Raqqa, the former de facto capital of the Islamic State (ISIS), today is among the more stable areas in Syria. Yet this relative success rests on wobbly foundations. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who control Raqqa city as well as the majority of the province govern efficiently, but high-handedly as some perceive it, fomenting occasional unrest. The province in which the city sits remains divided and contested among Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime, while ISIS remnants exploit porous internal borders to move around. Tit-for-tat confrontations between Turkey and the SDF keep the northern border on edge and could escalate. Crucially, Raqqa's stability depends on the U.S. troops stationed further east, whose presence deters what otherwise could be a violent free-for all. While this deployment continues, the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition should carry on investing in stabilising the area; encourage the SDF to adhere to ceasefires and reduce its monopoly upon local governance; and work toward negotiating sustainable arrangements sufficient to avert potentially destabilising military moves.

In the battles leading to ISIS's defeat in Raqqa, the city and its immediate surroundings underwent destruction on an almost unimaginable scale. Today, the area has come back to life. With support from the coalition, the SDF established an array of institutions to secure, rebuild and administer the province, with a particular focus on the city of the same name. Despite the abrupt partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from Raqqa in October 2019 and the subsequent Turkish military incursion, security, economic conditions and governance practices are better in Raqqa than elsewhere in Syria, including in adjacent regions that equally suffered under ISIS rule but were reclaimed by Damascus.

Yet the potential for renewed destabilisation and conflict remains. Raqqa governorate is divided into three areas, distinctly controlled by rival powers, each with its own limitations. Most of the province, including the city, is under control of the SDF, a non-state actor with connections to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish militant group fighting an insurgency against Turkey since 1984. The northern part along the Turkish border is in the hands of Syrian factions ushered in by Turkey's October 2019 incursion. Small pockets on the south-western edge are controlled by the Syrian regime, which has proven unable or unwilling to provide basic services and security to the population there. Russian forces also are on the ground; they do not hold territory, but they have established bases from which they conduct joint patrols with Turkish troops and, separately, with SDF and regime units under the terms of the 2019 ceasefire.

Any number of developments could violently upset the status quo. Resilient ISIS elements could exploit the lack of coalition presence in Raqqa, local Arabs' alienation from SDF rule or deteriorating economic conditions to make new inroads with the hope of staging a comeback. Frictions between the SDF and the regime over governance, security and resource streams in areas where they uneasily coexist or are immediate neighbours could bring the two sides to blows. Turkey, which sees the SDF's links to the PKK as a threat to its national security, could go on the offensive again,

for example in response to attacks originating from SDF-controlled areas on its forces or the factions it backs in the north.

For now, these scenarios are kept at bay by the presence of a small contingent of U.S. forces further east and the support it provides for SDF control of the area. Absent an agreement between these actors and the SDF that provides credible guarantees against violent competition over territory and resources, there is a high probability that, were the U.S. to withdraw troops precipitously, north-eastern Syria would descend into chaos liable to trigger a severe humanitarian crisis and massive displacement. The Biden administration has signalled that it does not intend to withdraw U.S. forces for the time being; the criticism it has received for the chaotic pullout from Afghanistan makes such a move even less likely.

While the U.S. deployment continues, Washington and other anti-ISIS coalition members should use the leverage their presence in the north east affords to keep investing in the area's stabilisation, encouraging negotiations among the parties and working in parallel to reach diplomatic understandings that would avert military moves by Ankara or Damascus if and when the U.S. does leave. Such efforts are key to addressing governance gaps and grievances that ISIS could exploit. Assistance should be contingent on the SDF both adhering to ceasefires and reducing its monopoly upon governance, including by enabling more substantial participation by non-SDF-affiliated Arabs and Kurds in the autonomous administration and local government's decision making. The U.S. should push the SDF to restrain insurgent attacks on Turkish-controlled areas in the north, while seeking to dissuade Ankara from escalating on its end. At the same time, Washington should signal to all involved parties – Damascus, Moscow, Ankara and the SDF – its interest in exploring arrangements that could stabilise the area in a sustainable way.

Raqqa/Ankara/Brussels, 18 November 2021

Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery

I. Introduction

Raqqa's population has lived through some of the Syrian war's most dramatic shifts. Since 2011, Raqqa has changed hands four times, with waves of displacement, looting and destruction accompanying every battle. In March 2013, Raqqa city became the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control.¹ A mix of shifting tribal loyalties and minimal Syrian regime resistance facilitated the takeover. The rebels showed little interest in governing the area, and even less capability for it. In 2013, the Islamic State (ISIS), an Iraqi group re-empowered in the brutality and chaos of the Syrian civil war, ruthlessly exploited the vacuum to establish itself. By November that year, it had absorbed, killed or pushed out any challenger and co-opted or intimidated much of the population.² Four years later, the Syrian regime recaptured pockets south and west of Raqqa governorate, expelling ISIS, while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led alliance with international backing, seized most of the governorate from ISIS, and established its administrative headquarters in Ain Essa, in the province's northern part.³

Despite the bloody legacy of ISIS's four-year rule and the massive destruction inflicted by the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, relative stability prevailed in the province until late 2019, when a series of erratic U.S. decisions shifted the balance of power and created new lines of control.⁴ In October of that year, President Donald Trump abruptly ordered U.S. troops to withdraw from the area, in effect clearing a path for Turkey to act on its repeated threats to launch an incursion into Syria to fight the SDF, of which the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) are a major component.⁵ The YPG are a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a guerrilla war against the Turkish state for over 30 years, and which Turkey, along with the European Union (EU) and the U.S., has designated a terrorist organisation. Ankara thus views the SDF's – and the YPG's – control of north-eastern Syria's strategic territory and assets as a national security threat that amounts to having a PKK-run statelet on its border, protected by U.S. air power and arms supplies.

Turkey's offensive altered the status quo and introduced additional competing protagonists to the scene in Raqqa.⁶ Turkey inserted Syrian factions it backs to control Raqqa province's northern Tel Abyad district.⁷ This move prompted the SDF

¹ Raqqa has been one of the country's main breadbaskets, feeding millions. The countryside around Raqqa city produces large amounts of crops, and the province is the site of massive grain silos. The province had a pre-war population of around one million. No reliable current population figures are available.

² "How Raqqa Became the Capital of ISIS", *New America*, 25 July 2019.

³ "Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps", BBC, 28 March 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group witnessed unimaginable levels of destruction in and around Raqqa city during visits in 2017.

⁵ Crisis Group Alert, "Calling a Halt to Turkey's Offensive in North-Eastern Syria", 10 October 2019.

⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°72, *Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East*, 27 November 2019.

⁷ See Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Who are Turkey's proxy fighters in Syria?", *The New York Review of Books*, 27 November 2019.

to invite several thousand Syrian government troops to redeploy in the area in an attempt to deter Turkey and shift the battle to an inter-state one. The SDF had long resisted a regime return to the north but faced a difficult choice, given the prospect that they might be overwhelmed by Turkish forces and their Syrian partners. In practice, Syrian troops have played little more than a symbolic role, doing very little actual fighting. The SDF was forced to retreat from several areas that Turkey captured or that became unsafe due to regular Turkish shelling, and removed its administrative headquarters from Ain Essa, but otherwise stayed in control of most of Raqqa governorate along with the rest of the north east.

A mix of U.S. carrots and sticks halted Turkey's military advance and froze the new status quo. At first, the Turkish leadership may have read the withdrawal of U.S. troops from areas immediately adjacent to the Syrian-Turkish border as a green light for its own forces to cross into Syria. Turkey launched its operation just three days after the U.S. soldiers departed.⁸ As soon as the operation was under way, however, Trump threatened to "wipe out the Turkish economy" if Ankara did anything he considered "off limits"; imposed sanctions against Turkish ministries and senior officials by executive order; and warned of further punitive measures unless and until Turkey embraced an immediate ceasefire.⁹ At the same time, the U.S. offered to lift those sanctions once Turkey halted its offensive, which it did when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to a ceasefire on 17 October.¹⁰

Five days later, Erdoğan travelled to Sochi to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Syrian regime's main foreign sponsor along with Iran, and one of the chief power brokers in the conflict. The two presidents agreed on Turkey's exclusive control of a 32km-deep band of territory south of the border, stretching from Raqqa's Tel Abyad district to Ras al-Ain city in al-Hasakeh, on the Syria-Turkey border.¹¹

Occasional skirmishes aside, the ceasefires have mostly held since then, but the risk of renewed escalation remains high. As of October 2021, Turkey has been threatening to move against the SDF near its border in response to attacks that it attributes to the YPG, while the YPG has made little effort to establish a détente with Turkey that could protect the area from further violence.¹² From its side, the Syrian regime could attempt to stir up trouble between the SDF and Arab groups, or capitalise on

⁸ "Trump makes way for Turkey operation against Kurds in Syria", BBC, 7 October 2019. The White House said in a 7 October 2019 statement that Turkey would "soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria", adding that U.S. forces would abandon their positions in the incursion's expected path.

⁹ President Trump froze Turkish officials' assets in the U.S. by executive order and banned their involvement in transactions involving the U.S. financial system. He also ordered a hike in steel tariffs and cancelled negotiations over a \$100 billion U.S. trade deal with Turkey. "Trump says he will wipe out Turkey's economy if it wipes out the Syrian Kurds", Reuters, 9 October 2019; "Turkey-Syria offensive: US sanctions Turkish ministries", BBC, 15 October 2019; and "Donald Trump asks Turkey for ceasefire and orders sanctions as violence escalates", *The Guardian*, 15 October 2019. Trump's withdrawal decision created a significant domestic backlash. "Trump's decision on Syria has already turned into a foreign policy disaster", NBC, 14 October 2019.

¹⁰ "The United States and Turkey Agree to Ceasefire in Northeast Syria", White House, 17 October 2019.

¹¹ "Turkey and Russia agree on deal over buffer zone in northern Syria", *The Guardian*, 22 October 2019.

¹² "Ankara-backed Syrian forces 'prepared' for Turkish operation", *Al-Monitor*, 19 October 2021.

local grievances to destabilise the area. The SDF's Kurdish leadership is still struggling to secure the support of the area's predominantly Arab population. Raqqawis sense – rightly – that the SDF-linked governance bodies run primarily on party loyalty, rather than merit, and lack the sort of transparency that could generate trust.

While the U.S. has no physical presence in Raqqa, the tenuous calm that now prevails in the province largely depends on the U.S. military presence further east. Since late 2019, the U.S. has maintained bases scattered across eastern al-Hasakeh and Deir al-Zor up to the Iraqi border. From these bases U.S. troops patrol the lands east of Tel Tamr, while U.S. planes control the skies over the same vicinity, occasionally carrying out airstrikes on suspected ISIS elements, including outside this area.¹³

A continuing U.S. military presence is not a given, and in and of itself might prove insufficient to maintain stability in the area. The U.S. has been reluctant to help resolve the YPG-Turkey standoff and has made clear its desire to reduce its military footprint in the Middle East; it has also stated that its focus in Syria remains the anti-ISIS fight. That said, it appears unlikely the Biden administration will remove the troops any time soon; indeed, officials confirm that withdrawal is probably off the cards, especially after the chaotic U.S. pullout from Afghanistan and the Taliban's subsequent seizure of power there.¹⁴ From their side, European members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have kept both their diplomatic efforts and financial contributions in the area to a bare minimum for fear of running afoul of their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally Turkey and of being surprised by a sudden U.S. withdrawal, which was a serious possibility during the Trump administration.

In sum, the residual U.S. force in eastern Syria, as well as the two ceasefires mediated by the U.S. and Russia, temporarily froze the conflict and prevented what could have become broader, regionally destabilising hostilities. But the area got no closer to a sustainable solution.¹⁵ By leaving Turkey's national security concerns along with questions about a viable end-state for the north east unaddressed, these stopgap arrangements have left the door open for new rounds of military confrontation that could derail stabilisation and counter-terrorism efforts.

This report takes as its starting point the status quo created in north-eastern Syria in October 2019, proceeding to focus on subsequent developments in Raqqa governorate. In many ways, the report shows, the Syrian conflict's key fault lines, replete with fragile ceasefires and competing local, regional and international interests, appear in microcosm in Raqqa. The report is based primarily on more than 100 interviews in Syria, the U.S. and Turkey with civilian and security officials, civil society and communal leaders, humanitarian aid workers and ordinary residents, including in government-, Turkish- and SDF-controlled districts of Raqqa. It also builds on Crisis Group's previous reports and briefings on the Syrian war.¹⁶

¹³ The reported number of U.S. troops in Syria is around 900. In addition to bases in the north east, the U.S. also maintains an intelligence presence in Qamishli and an outpost in al-Tanf, near the tri-border region with Iraq and Jordan in south-eastern Syria.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, October 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Briefing, *Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

II. Layered Military Control in Border Areas

Two years after the precipitous U.S. withdrawal from areas west of Qamishli (including Raqqa governorate), security and governance in the province have remained remarkably stable. The arrival of Russian and regime forces in parts of the predominantly Arab governorate raised questions about the SDF's ability to maintain control, but so far none of the parties has been able to shift the new demarcation lines. Since these forces deployed, their presence has not resulted in an expansion of the regime's control. Likewise, Turkey and the Syrian factions it backs have been confined to the strip of territory they captured in northern Raqqa. As a result, control of the governorate remains divided among three competing forces, with the SDF maintaining the upper hand over the majority of the province.

A. *A Regime Return That Wasn't*

The abrupt U.S. drawdown in 2019 raised fears across northern Syria that the regime's security forces might reassert themselves in areas that have been out of their hands for years. As the U.S. was pulling out of its bases, the SDF reached an alternative defence arrangement with Russia and the Syrian regime.¹⁷ SDF commander Mazloum Kobani (also known as Mazloum Abdi) said he went to Damascus immediately following the launch of the Turkish incursion to pursue such a deal.¹⁸ At first, he said, the regime refused to budge from its demand that the SDF dismantle its security apparatus and hand over all areas and institutions under its control to Damascus.¹⁹ The YPG rejected this demand, insisting on maintaining the unity and command of its civil and military institutions. It was only when it became clear that the U.S. was not pursuing a full withdrawal from Syria, Kobani said, that the regime, with Russian mediation, acquiesced to the YPG's conditions.²⁰ According to Kobani, it then agreed to a partial redeployment of the Syrian army as part of a military cooperation arrangement with the SDF, including in border areas in northern Raqqa, to deter any further advance by Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian groups.²¹

Damascus at the time celebrated the deal as a full return of the state with all its institutions to north-eastern Syria. President Bashar al-Assad said: "The Syrian army will not deploy in north-eastern Syria only to play a military and security role. It will

¹⁷ See tweet by Mutlu Civiroglu, Kurdish affairs analyst, @mutludc, 3:07pm, 13 October 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Mazloum Kobani, October 2020.

¹⁹ Mazloum Abdi, "If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people", *Foreign Policy*, 13 October 2019. Some Syrian officials, including the foreign minister, express antagonism toward the SDF, accusing its leaders of being separatists and U.S. agents. They further claim that the SDF's presence gives Turkey a pretext for its occupation of the border strip. See "Syrian regime refuses talks with the Kurds and accuses them of treason", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 October 2019 (Arabic).

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Mazloum Kobani, 18 September 2020. See also Dareen Khalifa, "The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 25 November 2020.

²¹ *Ibid.*

be accompanied by all state institutions".²² While the return of state institutions did not come to pass, Syrian forces deployed to the 93rd Army Brigade base at Ain Essa, north of Raqqa city, in October 2019, close to the contact line with Turkish forces, as well as Tel Tamr. Syrian media also showed video footage of elite Republican Guard units entering the towns of Manbij and Kobani in Aleppo governorate, and lower-tier Syrian army units, such as the 17th Division and border guards, to the towns of Malikiya and Darbasiya in al-Hasakeh governorate.²³ The swift deployment scored headlines, but most of these units subsequently withdrew from the towns to border areas.

Their arrival during the last week of October and first week of November 2019 created great concern, bordering on panic, among the population.²⁴ Locals tried to find ways to either flee the country or strike "reconciliation" deals with Damascus – individual arrangements with regime security branches for pardons allowing the person to return home. Without clear information about the scope of the regime's return and the delineation of responsibilities between it and the SDF, residents feared retaliation and collective punishment.²⁵ The SDF's attempts to reassure them were hindered by lack of trust in the YPG's intentions among Arabs. Many Arabs fear that the Kurdish leadership will sell them out to the regime in a trade-off that would allow the YPG to keep control of majority-Kurdish areas in return for relinquishing most of Raqqa governorate and its majority-Arab population.²⁶

Contrary to such fears, however, the SDF carefully circumscribed the Syrian army's return to the north. In contrast to areas in south-western Syria, like Deraa, which reverted to government control in July 2018 through Russian-brokered deals between Damascus and local rebel groups, the army's return to parts of the north east, including pockets of northern Raqqa, was not followed by violence, arrests or intimidation.²⁷

One reason for the regime's relatively smooth return was that it was limited in both size and capability. Syrian army units are deployed in certain areas on the governorate's boundaries as determined by the SDF. Troops are not allowed to leave their bases without coordinating with the SDF. They are blocked from engaging in combat independent of SDF command, and otherwise are allowed to patrol only within SDF-drawn zones. The SDF also prohibits them from entering city centres or interacting

²² "President Assad: The Turkish occupier is a U.S. agent in the war and, if it does not leave completely, there will be no option but war ... the army's entry into northern areas is tantamount to the state's re-entry", SANA, 31 October 2019 (Arabic).

²³ "People in Tal Tamr town in north-western Hasaka welcome Syrian Army units", SANA, 14 October 2019. See also Gregory Waters, "Return to the northeast: Syrian Army deployments against Turkish forces", Middle East Institute, 20 November 2019. The SDF estimates the number of regime troops in SDF-controlled parts of north-eastern Syria in May 2021 at between 1,000 and 4,000. Crisis Group interview, senior SDF commander, Raqqa, May 2021.

²⁴ See Mariya Petkova, "Raqqa residents flee amid fear of Syrian government return", Al Jazeera, 15 February 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, locals in north-eastern Syria, October 2019.

²⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, tribal notables from Manbij and Raqqa, October 2020. These concerns find echoes in other predominantly Arab areas under SDF control, such as Manbij and Deir al-Zor.

²⁷ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°196, [Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South](#), 27 February 2019.

directly with the population, thus limiting their ability to carry out arrests.²⁸ Failure to comply with these rules has led the SDF to arrest numerous Syrian soldiers and thwart army attempts to set up checkpoints to press Raqqawi men into military service.²⁹

Regime troops deployed in Raqqa in October 2019 were also hobbled by the army's own weakened capabilities. They arrived poorly equipped and unprepared to engage in direct combat with Turkish or Turkish-backed forces. Turkey, from its end, was not politically deterred by the army's presence on the border, and it did not hesitate to attack regime forces the same way it fought the YPG. As a result, the army suffered dozens of casualties from Turkish shelling and in combat with Turkish-backed Syrian groups.³⁰ Regime forces' small numbers and lack of capacity made them dependent on the SDF for free food and fuel, as well as stipends and combat support.³¹ They also resorted to looting to provide for themselves, a behaviour they share with army units and associated forces elsewhere in the country.³² This situation continued until Russia started channelling weapons and military supplies to the army units in the north east, including night thermal sights and anti-tank guided missiles.³³ Regardless, the SDF has maintained the upper hand, keeping regime forces under tight control.

Damascus has attempted to win hearts and minds in areas where its troops deployed in Raqqa, but it appears to have had little success thus far. Unlike other parts of eastern Syria, such as Deir al-Zor, Raqqa has not, throughout the war, been a hub of pro-opposition activity, which worried the SDF that the regime's efforts might gain traction. It also raised the regime's ambitions to regain influence in Raqqa after ISIS's 2017 defeat, and especially after it was able to deploy its troops there in 2019.³⁴ Senior regime officials met with Raqqawi tribesmen to win them over, reportedly to no avail.³⁵ Syrian army commanders also made several visits to the Raqqa countryside

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, SDF commanders, Raqqa, November 2020, May 2021.

²⁹ Local sources reported that, in November 2019, army officers established a makeshift checkpoint at the entrance to Ain Essa and began checking passing men's names against computerised lists, then arrested some who were wanted and others between the ages of 18 and 45 for army (active or reserve) service. The men were released after their families complained to the SDF, whose fighters engaged in an altercation with the troops stationed at the 93rd Brigade base. The army then removed the checkpoint and stopped questioning or detaining people on the roads. Crisis Group interviews, Raqqa, September 2020.

³⁰ Because the army is stretched thin fighting insurgencies in central and eastern Syria, Damascus sent a hodgepodge of soldiers to the north, drawing them from nearly two dozen divisions and regiments from across the country instead of deploying whole units. See Waters, "Return to the north-east", op. cit.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Arab SDF commander, Raqqa, September 2020.

³² Crisis Group interviews, SDF-affiliated internal security officers, Raqqa, November 2020. For accounts of looting elsewhere by regime forces, see Rafya Salamah, "The looting years", *Al-Jumhuriya* (Damascus), 24 October 2018.

³³ Crisis Group interview, SDF official, Qamishli, November 2020.

³⁴ The Syrian regime continued efforts to win the support of tribes in Raqqa. In January 2019, Damascus announced that its officials had met with tribes in the Ithriyah region (125km south of Raqqa city), with hundreds of regime-supporting tribal figures in attendance. See Ammar al-Musarea, "The Role of Syrian Tribes: Betting on a Lost Cause", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 March 2021.

³⁵ "Ali Mamlouk calls on the Jazira tribes to defect from SDF", Enab Baladi, 6 December 2019.

throughout 2020 to project the regime's influence, and pro-regime media regularly spread rumours about an imminent government takeover of Raqqa to encourage defections from the SDF and boost morale within Syrian military ranks.³⁶ The YPG leadership is aware of these attempts to draw the population away from the SDF, but it has not been able to put a stop to them.³⁷

The YPG and many locals additionally believe that the regime is actively trying to destabilise areas outside its control in Raqqa by fanning grievances among Arabs, encouraging defections from the SDF and organising anti-SDF protests.³⁸ The SDF has tried to block such schemes by arresting the alleged instigators and intensifying its own outreach to Arabs to reassure them that its grip is firm.³⁹ Both the YPG and some tribal figures claim that the regime – as well as remaining ISIS cells – are paying people to plant explosives, conduct hit-and-run attacks and start fires on agricultural lands.⁴⁰ Regardless of the merits of such accusations, they have become so widespread as to feed anti-regime sentiment in Raqqa.⁴¹

The general sense in Raqqa appears to be that while people would welcome the return of the state's administrative services, they are terrified of being subject once again to the regime's repression. As a Raqqawi notable put it:

The people of Raqqa don't want the return of the military recruitment department, military bases, security branches, Baath Party branches or police. They want the government's official stamps to complete their administrative papers; they don't want the Assad regime's crackdowns and corruption.⁴²

Locals are also keenly aware of the situation in regime-controlled parts of Raqqa. Many people living in those areas cross the line of control into SDF-held districts in search of economic opportunities. Students in SDF-held areas often cross into government-controlled parts of Raqqa to take their exams in government-accredited schools. People also frequently travel through government-controlled parts of Raqqa on their way to receive medical care in Damascus.⁴³ A farmer from the regime-held town of Maadan, 60km downstream along the Euphrates from Raqqa city, said: "When the government returned to our areas, we expected it to provide us with basic services. This never happened. Instead, it set up security branches and drafted young

³⁶ In one instance, Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan, commander of the 25th Special Mission Forces Division, also known as the Tiger Forces, made a surprise visit to Raqqa's regime-controlled western countryside, signalling that the regime might make a military move on Raqqa. "Why did Suheil al-Hassan visit Raqqa?", *The Syrian Observer*, 8 July 2020. See also a story filed by correspondent Omar al-Shabali on Facebook, 25 October 2019.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, co-president of the Raqqa civil council, Raqqa, May 2021.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, SDF officials and local Arab representatives, Raqqa, May 2021.

³⁹ See Patrick Haenni and Arthur Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy", European University Institute, 7 August 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, SDF officials and tribal figures, north-eastern Syria, November 2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Raqqawis, November 2020, May 2021. The leadership in Damascus has also hinted at its ability to stir up local resistance to what it described as the occupying force in the north east. See tweet by Elizabeth Tsurkov, analyst, @Elizrael, 4:35am, 12 March 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Raqqa, March 2020.

⁴³ See Hussam al-Omar, "Iran-backed militias wreaking havoc on Raqqa countryside – locals demanding liberation", Enab Baladi, 30 April 2021.

men, while looting and extortion continued".⁴⁴ Areas of southern Raqqa wrecked by regime and associated forces during the 2017 anti-ISIS war have not been rebuilt and remain unsafe. People in regime-controlled towns and villages in Raqqa, including Rasafa, Maadan and al-Sabkha, complain of recurrent theft, extortion and murders by unknown gunmen.⁴⁵

In sum, and contrary to Assad's 2019 statements, the army's deployment in Raqqa neither brought a return of government services nor re-established regime sovereignty. Instead, it revealed the power imbalance in the north east between Damascus and the SDF, a force that continues to enjoy U.S. backing. While Damascus has access to and influence among some local tribes, its ability to draw them away from the de facto governing authority seems to be limited as long as that imbalance holds.

B. *Russia's Limited Role*

Washington's partial withdrawal from northern Syria, including Raqqa, has for the most part presented only a limited opportunity for Moscow to expand its footprint. Russia managed to insert itself diplomatically in the region by mediating a defence arrangement between the SDF and Damascus and a cessation of hostilities with Turkey. It also scored media headlines by taking over bases that the U.S. had evacuated in 2019. But its forces failed to take effective control of subsequent events.⁴⁶ Almost two years later, Moscow's ability to extend its military and political reach in the area has proven limited, at least partly because the U.S. kept a residual force in place rather than carrying out a full withdrawal.

Russian attempts to box the U.S. out of the north east arguably even backfired. On several occasions in 2020, Russian military vehicles came into close contact with U.S. armoured vehicles, causing injuries among U.S. soldiers in one incident in al-Hasakeh governorate in August 2020.⁴⁷ Brett McGurk, the U.S. special envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition during the Trump administration (and now White House coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa), stated on Twitter at the time: "These incidents have been ongoing for months", and blamed them on what he described as "Trump's impetuous withdrawal decision" in October 2019.⁴⁸ Moscow may have intended to complicate the U.S. presence in Syria and confirm the instincts of those officials in Washington who favour a full U.S. withdrawal from Syria, but the incidents instead prompted the U.S. to dispatch extra troops and force protection supplies

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Maadan, Raqqa, September 2020.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews and observations, 2020-2021.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior SDF official, May 2021. See also Brian Katulis, "Russian flags over an American base", Center for American Progress, 6 December 2020.

⁴⁷ The incident took place in Deyrik near Malikiya, a town close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders. "Syria war: American troops hurt after Russian and US military vehicles collide", BBC, 27 August 2020; and Lolita Baldor and Robert Burns, "Vehicle collision with Russians injures 4 US troops in Syria", ABC News, 26 August 2020. A video of the incident is available in a tweet by Rob Lee, doctoral student, @RALee85, 10:05am, 26 August 2020.

⁴⁸ Tweet by Brett McGurk, (then former) U.S. official, @brett_mcgurk, 1:32pm, 26 August 2020. McGurk had resigned over the withdrawal decision.

in September 2020.⁴⁹ That, in turn, appears to have persuaded Russia to halt such incidents.

Beyond mediating the narrow October 2019 defence arrangement at a time when the YPG faced a major threat to its presence in northern Syria, and occasionally resolving local SDF-regime standoffs, Moscow's attempts to broker a settlement between the YPG and Damascus have also been unsuccessful. Russian officials blame what they describe as the YPG's tough negotiating position toward Damascus, which they see as a function of the group's confidence in continued U.S. protection.⁵⁰ The YPG, in turn, portrays Damascus's position as uncompromising, and expresses little trust in Russia's guarantees for the deals it has brokered, based on Moscow's inability or unwillingness to uphold its promises in other parts of Syria, where opposition groups acquiesced to so-called reconciliation deals negotiated under Russian auspices only to face arbitrary arrests and kidnappings.⁵¹ Additionally, whatever trust might have existed between the YPG and Russia dissipated after Moscow greenlighted Turkey's attack on the predominantly Kurdish district of Afrin in northern Syria in early 2018, which the YPG has not forgotten.⁵²

For its part, Turkey accuses Russia of having under-delivered on its promises in north-eastern Syria.⁵³ According to the October 2019 agreement between Ankara and Moscow, Russian military police and Syrian border guards were to facilitate the removal of YPG fighters and their weapons from along the Turkish-Syrian border to a depth of 30km.⁵⁴ Russian officials say they followed through on that pledge, but both Turkish and YPG officials counter that Moscow has not attempted to persuade the YPG to relinquish control of the border area.⁵⁵ The Russia-Turkey agreement also states: "All YPG elements and their weapons will be removed from Manbij and Tal Rifat".⁵⁶ To date, however, the YPG continues to operate in all border areas of north-eastern Syria that are not Turkish-held; it also holds Manbij and is present alongside

⁴⁹ "Syria war: US deploys reinforcements to Syria after Russia clashes", BBC, 19 September 2020. The U.S. claims to have 900 troops on the ground, but this number may not be accurate. See David S. Cloud, "Inside U.S. troops' stronghold in Syria, a question of how long Biden will keep them there", *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Geneva, March 2020.

⁵¹ From the YPG's standpoint, the recurring arrests and forced disappearances in Deraa highlight the unreliability of Russia's commitments and thus the importance of maintaining the military capacity to protect itself. See footnote 99 in Crisis Group Report, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, op. cit.

⁵² Afrin has historically been a YPG stronghold, a predominantly Kurdish district with wide popular support for the YPG and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. SDF commander Mazloum Kobani said: "Afrin is one third of Rojava [the Kurdish region of Syria]. We have thousands of Kurdish families currently displaced because of the Turkish invasion who are not able to go home. We are under a lot of pressure [from our people] because of this". Crisis Group interview, al-Hasakeh, 25 November 2020.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, January 2021.

⁵⁴ "Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation", Russian Presidential Office, 22 October 2019.

⁵⁵ Turkish officials claim that when they asked their Russian counterparts about the YPG's presence in the border area, the latter responded by saying they had removed the YPG entirely – incorrectly, according to the officials. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, January 2021.

⁵⁶ "Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation", op. cit.

regime forces in Tel Rifat.⁵⁷ The YPG has also been regularly shelling Turkish-controlled areas from territory under Russian protection, such as Tel Rifat, killing two Turkish officers in October 2021.⁵⁸ While Ankara at first said little about Moscow failing to uphold its end of the bargain, Turkish officials have started expressing frustration at what they see as an unfulfilled promise.⁵⁹

Russia was able to chalk up one notable gain in October 2019. It won control of parts of the strategic M4 highway linking Aleppo to the north east. The M4 had been a vital route for trade and humanitarian assistance to Raqqa from northern Iraq, as well as the main artery for military supplies from the YPG's stronghold in Qamishli to Raqqa. The YPG was compelled to hand control of parts of the highway over to Russia to protect it from Turkish strikes, though attacks on the M4 from the Turkish-held side have continued intermittently, disrupting traffic and often rendering the road unsafe, including for Russian-escorted commercial and military convoys.⁶⁰

Beyond this gain, Russian and regime forces have been unable to expand their presence. Notwithstanding Trump's bungled attempt to pull out, Moscow appears to believe that the U.S. is likely to maintain a military presence in Syria for the foreseeable future.⁶¹ Indeed, some senior U.S. officials have signalled that they see the U.S. military presence in Syria as necessary to avert the type of violence that would threaten Washington's local partner, the SDF, and destabilise the region, potentially enabling an ISIS resurgence.⁶² Accordingly, Moscow seems more focused on preserving its existing footprint than on trying to enlarge it.

C. Governance Challenges

Along the lines of military control, governance in Raqqa is divided into three zones, each with its distinct *modus operandi* and complex set of challenges. Damascus governs pockets south of the province along the Euphrates river, Turkish-backed Syrian groups have set up their own governing councils in Tel Abyad district (as well as in al-Hasakeh governorate's Ras al-Ain city) with direct support from Turkey, and SDF-affiliated local councils continue to govern most of Raqqa governorate with backing

⁵⁷ Crisis Group visits to north-eastern Syria in November 2019 and May 2021 suggest that the YPG is still present in Manbij and all areas north east of the Euphrates, except for parts captured by Turkey in October 2019.

⁵⁸ "Erdogan says latest Kurdish YPG attack on Turkish police is 'final straw'", Reuters, 11 October 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Turkish official, April 2020; Turkish officials, Ankara, January 2020. The Turko-Russian disagreement in the north east presents similarities with the situation in Idlib, where Moscow complains of what it sees as insufficient Turkish efforts to fight the locally dominant group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°213, *Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, 14 May 2020.

⁶⁰ "Fighting continues over flashpoint town in northern Syria", Voice of America, 5 January 2021.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Ankara, September 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, north-eastern Syria, May 2021. To signal their commitment to U.S. troops staying in north-eastern Syria, Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary Joey Hood, joined by the deputy assistant secretary and acting special representative for Syria, the deputy envoy for Syria and the National Security Council director for Iraq and Syria, travelled there in May 2021 for meetings with SDF and autonomous administration senior officials, as well as ranking council members and tribal leaders. See "Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary Joey Hood Travels to North East Syria", U.S. Department of State, 17 May 2021.

from the U.S. and other Global Coalition members. The U.S. presence allows the SDF to shepherd resources and pay the running cost of the autonomous administration. The U.S. and the coalition also train and equip both the SDF and the internal security forces affiliated with the autonomous administration. Additionally, the SDF gets political and diplomatic backing through engagement with the U.S. and other coalition members.

The Kurdish-dominated SDF has established a relatively effective administration in the Arab-majority governorate, but its rule has not been without flaws. The main problems, as noted by the local population, are the overbearing influence of PKK-trained party cadres on administrative decision-making; the opaqueness of party-linked money-making ventures and certain policies, such as forced conscription and reduction of subsidies on bread and fuel; and perceived corruption on the local level. These features of SDF rule have at times alienated locals and stirred up unrest.⁶³

What is indisputable is that Raqqa has experienced a remarkable transformation since 2017. The international coalition's preponderant use of air power during the anti-ISIS fight left nearly 70 per cent of Raqqa city and its surroundings obliterated and emptied the town of its inhabitants. Residents spoke of destruction on a stunning scale.⁶⁴ With U.S. and coalition support, the SDF then began to restore essential services to both the town and its environs, working alongside a number of Western-funded local organisations.⁶⁵

The Raqqa civil council, the administrative governing body affiliated with the SDF, employs and pays salaries to over 9,000 civil servants, including teachers.⁶⁶ This number has increased as the economic conditions in government-held areas deteriorated, prompting people to seek opportunities in SDF-controlled areas, where the autonomous administration pays salaries up to ten times higher than the regime does in areas it holds. With U.S. support, the SDF has also managed to restore water and electricity to almost 70 per cent of the governorate. Raqqa residents attest that even limited Western investment in Raqqa, such as in putting up streetlights, significantly reduced crime and ISIS-linked attacks.⁶⁷

Despite these improvements, the SDF has incurred much local criticism. While it has recruited tens of thousands of locals (from diverse ethnic backgrounds and

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Arabs and Kurds throughout north-eastern Syria, November 2020 and May 2021.

⁶⁴ Local sources say the destruction in the city's major neighbourhoods reached 60 to 70 per cent, hitting 80 per cent in some areas, such as al-Thakana and al-Fardous, and 40 per cent – as in Al-Mansour street – or 20 per cent in others – as in Hisham bin Abdulmalak street. Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2021. Observations from Crisis Group visits in October 2017 confirmed that the destruction was massive.

⁶⁵ While the SDF has not made its budget for north-eastern Syria public, SDF officials have stated privately that the autonomous administration's running costs, including civil servants' salaries, are around \$45 million monthly. Crisis Group interview, senior autonomous administration official, Raqqa, March 2019. The SDF also implies that its major source of income is revenue from selling oil it extracts in eastern Syria to the Damascus regime via Syrian businessmen. Crisis Group interviews, autonomous administration officials, Qamishli, November 2020. While there are no official numbers, some observers estimate that the SDF sells around 30,000 barrels of oil per day. Crisis Group telephone interview, former U.S. official, July 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Leila Mustafa, co-president of the Raqqa civil council, November 2020.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Raqqa, November 2020.

political affiliations) to work for civil and military-affiliated institutions, it has been reluctant to delegate authority to them beyond day-to-day bureaucratic dealings. Decision-making on more important matters remains secretive, with ultimate authority residing in a few PKK-trained cadres appointed by the party in closed-door meetings.⁶⁸ These cadres draw up the administration's budget, appoint front-line and regional commanders, oversee distribution of military supplies and coordinate with the Global Coalition.⁶⁹ Raqqa'is complain in particular that qualified technocrats have lost senior positions in favour of Kurds with YPG and/or PKK party affiliations and militant backgrounds.⁷⁰ For instance, residents point to the fact that the Kurdish president of the Raqqa civil council has held her position since the council's establishment, while several Arab co-presidents, whose roles are broadly seen as cosmetic, have served only brief terms.

Residents also complain about the opaque way in which the YPG has allocated the resources it obtains from taxation and its control of the north east's oil and gas resources and cross-border trade with Iraq, as well as international support (channelled primarily through the U.S. government) to stabilise areas captured from ISIS. Arab contractors claim, for example, that budgets for public works are sometimes inflated, allowing Kurdish cadres or others in the administration to skim off a significant part of the allocated money.⁷¹ Perceptions of corruption are widespread. While specific allegations may be difficult to substantiate, the perception itself can be almost as damaging as actual corruption and reveals a general lack of trust in governance or feelings of exclusion.

That said, the SDF so far has been able to manage local frustrations with its rule in Raqqa by addressing tensions between the local administration and the population with an agility it has not displayed in some other areas it controls, such as parts of Deir al-Zor. The international attention and resources given to Raqqa, and the SDF's use of well-regarded Kurdish interlocutors (not always present in, for example, Deir al-Zor) who acted as trusted focal points, contributed to its success. Raqqa'is in particular appear to view positively one of the main senior YPG cadres who, while not holding an official position in the Raqqa civil administration, became the go-to person to resolve all sorts of governance-related issues. Having lived in Raqqa since 2017, he has become accustomed to local traditions and tribal dynamics – an important asset.⁷²

Generally, the entrenchment and acculturation of PKK-trained Syrian cadres in local communities has become increasingly evident across the north east. Yet public sentiment against the SDF prioritising party affiliation over merit at senior administration levels still prevails and could stir ethnic and political tensions in the absence of structural governance reforms that would devolve decision-making power to locals.⁷³

⁶⁸ Turkey estimates that there are about 2,500 PKK-trained cadres in north-eastern Syria. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, June 2021.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group observations on frequent visits to north-eastern Syria since 2016.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Raqqa, November 2020.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Raqqa, November 2020.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Raqqa, November 2021.

⁷³ In November 2020, the autonomous administration held a conference in al-Hasakeh attended by civil society and tribal representatives from across north-eastern Syria to cap off a series of town

Additionally, the overall deteriorating economic situation in Syria has taken its toll on the autonomous administration. Hyperinflation and the severe devaluation of the Syrian pound – compounded by U.S. and European sanctions on the regime – have all had their impact on Syria's north east, leading to a precipitous drop in purchasing power. To respond to the crisis, the autonomous administration raised civil servants' salaries by almost 100 per cent. Yet only a couple of months after raising salaries, it issued a decision to increase fuel prices by more than 200 per cent.⁷⁴ The price hike triggered fierce protests, with angry demonstrators blocking roads and storming SDF offices, leading the administration to reverse its decision.⁷⁵

Adding to the overall economic crisis is an unprecedented water shortage in the area. The Euphrates has reportedly dropped to critically low levels, with significant implications for wheat production.⁷⁶ The low water level has adversely affected the Tishreen Dam's hydroelectric potential, causing blackouts across north-eastern Syria.⁷⁷ The SDF claims that neighbouring Turkey is deliberately withholding water upstream to put pressure on the SDF and destabilise the area it controls.⁷⁸ But experts contend that drought in Turkey and global warming are the main reasons for the shortage.⁷⁹ The serious decline in water availability is harming the SDF's ability to provide potable water, electricity and bread, among other essential services, to the population. Residents of Raqqa said the city was getting electricity for only seven hours per day in June 2021, compared to 2020, when it had up to fourteen hours of power per day.⁸⁰ Such supply problems are spreading discontent.

The SDF's conscription practices have likewise run into controversy. In an attempt to limit popular backlash, the SDF did not impose conscription in Raqqa city when it first arrived, but it has been drafting men born between 1990-2003 in other parts of the governorate. Young men thus fear being pressed into service if they leave the city. In 2021, the SDF started conscripting young men from predominantly Arab cities like Raqqa and Manbij. Forced recruitment that included schoolteachers and medical personnel infuriated the public, triggering demonstrations across north-eastern Syria throughout 2021.⁸¹ Some of these protests have been met with violent SDF

hall meetings. As a result of these consultations, they agreed to reforms that would devolve decision-making in local governance. Crisis Group observations, al-Hasakeh, November 2020.

⁷⁴ On 17 May, the price of gasoline was raised from 150 to 400 Syrian pounds per litre, and the price of cooking gas cylinders from 2,500 to 8,000 pounds. See "Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring Pilot Project May 2021", COAR Global, 30 June 2021.

⁷⁵ See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Following protests, Kurdish-led authorities in northeast Syria overturn fuel price increase", *Kurdistan* 24, 19 May 2021. Prices for subsidised gasoline, which reportedly is of low quality, stand at between 200 and 250 Syrian pounds (\$0.07) per litre. Gasoline of higher quality reportedly smuggled from the Kurdistan region of Iraq sells for ten times that price.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Raqqa, May 2021. An autonomous administration official said that as of May 2021, the river in Raqqa had dropped by as much as 5m compared to its water level a year earlier. Crisis Group interview, al-Hasakeh, May 2021.

⁷⁷ See "No Peace for the Dammed: Alarming Water Scarcity in Northeast Syria", COAR Global, 10 May 2021.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Leila Mustafa, co-chair of the Raqqa civil council, May 2021.

⁷⁹ See "No Peace for the Dammed", op. cit.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2021.

⁸¹ See Hassan al-Kassab, "SDF's forced conscription campaign in Raqqa threatens instability and potential displacement", *Syria Direct*, 16 March 2021 (Arabic).

crackdowns, further fuelling local anger.⁸² The recruitment drive has also extended at times to minors, who are abducted, in effect, by Kurdish militants with ambiguous links to the YPG but perceived to be operating outside of the SDF's authority.⁸³

Education policies imposed by the autonomous administration are also creating backlash. In 2016, the administration started replacing the Syrian government school curricula in predominantly Kurdish areas with its own Kurdish course of study. The practical effect of this decision was that students would receive graduation certificates that are not recognised anywhere else in Syria, limiting their options in pursuing higher education. The decision led those who could afford it to send their kids to private schools or hire private tutors to teach them the Arabic government-accredited curriculum. In a highly controversial move in late 2020, the administration started shutting down private institutions that taught in Arabic in Qamishli, arresting those running them.⁸⁴ While the unaccredited curriculum has not been imposed in Raqqa or on Arabs under SDF control, the policy has created widespread concern among Arabs and Kurds alike throughout the SDF-held region who fear that the SDF could force it upon them in the future.⁸⁵

Declining international support has also been a major challenge for those governing Raqqa, as it is in other parts of Syria's north east. In addition to overall Syria fatigue, reflected in shrinking Western pledges for humanitarian assistance, donors have been reluctant to support anything beyond the restoration of essential services to avoid being seen as involved in reconstruction as part of a nation-building effort.⁸⁶

As a result, most services are supported only by U.S.-funded stabilisation schemes, which the Trump administration scaled back significantly in its later years.⁸⁷ While the autonomous administration continues to coordinate with U.S.-funded local NGOs on restoring services such as water and electricity, and getting schools and hospitals running again, the number and scope of those NGOs have diminished, as they operate with a limited budget following the March 2018 U.S. presidential freeze of stabilisation assistance for Syria. Although the freeze has been lifted, and the U.S. State Department obligated some assistance while it was in effect, U.S. officials say its im-

⁸² On 1 June 2021, between six and eight people were reportedly killed and at least 25 injured in Manbij when the SDF cracked down on demonstrations against military conscription. Public pressure then led the SDF to halt its conscription campaign in Manbij. See "Deadly SDF Crackdown and Conscription Campaign Sparks in Menbij", COAR Global, 7 June 2021.

⁸³ Amberin Zaman, "Child recruitment casts shadow over Syrian Kurds' push for global legitimacy", *Al-Monitor*, 7 December 2020.

⁸⁴ See Mohammed Hardan, "Authorities in northeast Syria struggle to impose Kurdish curriculum", *Al-Monitor*, 24 February 2021.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Raqqa, November 2020.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°209, *Ways Out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, 25 November 2019.

⁸⁷ In March 2018, President Trump ordered a freeze on \$230 million in U.S. stabilisation aid to Syria. That November, the U.S. State Department reported that more than ten Coalition members had filled the funding gap in "very hard contributions", including Saudi Arabia with \$100 million and the United Arab Emirates with \$50 million, as well as Germany and the UK. See "Trump freezes \$200 million in aid promised to Syria", ABC News, 31 March 2019.

pact will likely continue to be felt through 2022.⁸⁸ The burden of meeting the basic needs of Raqqa's residents thus falls on the autonomous administration, as more people return to their homes in the province and others move there in search of economic opportunities.⁸⁹

In successive U.S. administrations, some officials have framed stabilising areas formerly controlled by ISIS as a national security imperative. They highlight the challenges the SDF would face in trying to contain thousands of ISIS detainees (as well as fighting resurgent militant cells) in areas previously under ISIS control without continued financial support and military cover.⁹⁰ Certainly, Western countries' hesitation to invest in areas they helped capture from ISIS has a direct impact on the SDF's ability to stabilise these areas. The SDF's initial legitimacy stems from having defeated ISIS militarily and presenting itself as a more benevolent alternative to the Syrian regime. It could gradually diminish as local frustration increases because the SDF cannot continue to provide basic services, even if the group succeeds in maintaining security.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, July 2021. See also U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2021-March 31, 2021", 4 May 2021.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior autonomous administration official, Raqqa, May 2021; civil society representative, Raqqa, May 2021. Also see "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to the United States Congress", *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ In August 2020, U.S. Central Command commander General Frank McKenzie said if countries fail to repatriate ISIS-affiliated citizens detained in SDF-run facilities and displacement camps in Syria, the Coalition's efforts against ISIS "may be for naught". "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020-September 30, 2020", U.S. Department of Defense, 30 October 2020.

III. A Fragile Calm

U.S. and Russian diplomacy halted the fighting in and around Raqqa in October 2019, without addressing the drivers of conflict. As a result, a fragile stalemate has prevailed, punctured by occasional clashes between opposing forces, while ISIS attacks continue in regime-, SDF- and Turkish-controlled districts of Raqqa.

Renewed Turkish military moves against the SDF are the main potential threat to the area's stability. Given that Ankara views the SDF's control over north-eastern Syria's strategic territory and assets as a national security threat and unacceptable, it has used brinkmanship and shown willingness to take political and military risks to address its concerns.⁹¹ As a result, the ceasefires remain brittle and may crumble. The area has seen cross-line attacks by the YPG and Turkish-backed groups, YPG-linked attacks in Turkish-controlled regions of Raqqa and Aleppo, and Turkish drone strikes targeting the YPG along the border. The SDF has publicly distanced itself from bombings directed at Turkish-backed groups but appears to do little to stop those attacks, which have killed or injured dozens of civilians.⁹² Many such bombings involve improvised explosive devices smuggled in from SDF-controlled areas.⁹³ Kurdish militant groups with ambiguous links to the YPG and that enjoy some protection and freedom of movement within north-eastern Syria have claimed some cross-line attacks.⁹⁴

Despite distancing itself from the attacks, the SDF claims they are legitimate and justified. SDF leaders say attacks strike only military targets and are carried out in response to attacks by Turkey and Turkish-supported groups.⁹⁵ They cite as another motivating factor Turkey's occupation of Afrin, a district in north-western Syria which had a Kurdish majority until Turkey and Syrian rebel groups it backs seized it in March 2018, resulting in the displacement of many Kurdish inhabitants.⁹⁶ International organisations have alleged widespread human rights abuse by the new authorities, which some SDF leaders view as justifying resistance to an "occupying power".⁹⁷ The SDF also claims that abuses by Turkish-backed groups in Turkish-held areas are fuelling violence.⁹⁸ Such abuses, if not addressed firmly, may create both a humanitarian problem and a longer-term political one, and damage Turkey's reputation.

⁹¹ In August 2016, Turkey conducted a cross-border operation named Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate, capturing these areas from ISIS. In January 2018, Turkey launched another military operation, this time targeting Afrin district, pushing out the YPG and handing control of the area to Syrian opposition groups it backs.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, YPG official, al-Hasakeh, November 2021.

⁹³ See Khaled al-Khateb, "New Kurdish group in Syria attacks Turkish-backed opposition in Afrin", *Al-Monitor*, 24 April 2021.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Mazloun Kobani, SDF commander, 18 September 2020.

⁹⁶ "More than 150,000 people in Syria's Afrin displaced: Kurdish official, monitor", Reuters, 17 March 2018.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kurdish official, al-Hasakeh, November 2020. On human rights violations in Afrin, see "UN rights chief calls for Turkey to probe violations in northern Syria", *UN News*, 18 September 2020.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Mazloun Kobani, SDF commander, al-Hasakeh, 25 November 2020.

For its part, Turkey, while wary of launching a new ground offensive and thus antagonising the new U.S. administration, has kept up military operations against the YPG. Turkish forces have periodically attacked senior YPG cadres along the border and buffer zone with drone fire, reportedly causing civilian casualties on a couple of occasions.⁹⁹ (A senior SDF commander claimed that, in addition to killing civilians, Turkish drones, apparently by accident, on one occasion struck a Russian patrol that was on its way to investigate Turkish attacks in the area.¹⁰⁰) For its part, Turkey claims it has mostly been targeting non-Syrian PKK cadres with its drone strikes.¹⁰¹ According to the SDF, Moscow also several times pulled Russian forces out of the area north of Raqqa to allow Turkish forces to put pressure on the SDF.¹⁰² Shelling by Turkish-backed forces has intensified only intermittently; Moscow's attempt to press the YPG to hand complete control of the area over to the regime also came to nought.¹⁰³

Still, continued YPG-linked attacks could at some point trigger a more forceful Turkish reaction and thus unleash an escalatory cycle of fighting. A Turkish official said in early 2020: "From our perspective, the ceasefire is no longer in effect. The YPG is breaking it on a daily basis and we will eventually respond decisively to their attacks".¹⁰⁴ Indeed, in October 2021, Turkey stepped up its rhetoric and transferred military equipment to its Syrian partners, threatening a new military move against the YPG.¹⁰⁵

Another major threat to calm in Raqqa governorate is recurring ISIS attacks. The security situation has noticeably improved compared to the immediate aftermath of the battle against ISIS. Yet it remains vulnerable. In 2017, the city and its outskirts were littered with antipersonnel mines and improvised explosive devices planted by ISIS. Moving around in the area was extremely dangerous; hundreds of civilians fell victim to mines.¹⁰⁶ Today the area has been mostly cleared, but intermittent ISIS attacks continue, including by improvised explosive devices, hit-and-run assaults and assassinations in both the city and the governorate at large, especially in the eastern al-Karama district, a former ISIS stronghold.¹⁰⁷

Throughout the past year, ISIS launched repeated operations targeting the SDF's internal security forces and their checkpoints in Raqqa.¹⁰⁸ A senior SDF security official said in May 2021: "61 of our internal security forces and 32 SDF fighters in Raqqa were killed by masked guys on motorbikes or roadside bombings throughout the last

⁹⁹ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Turkish drone strike kills 3 women in north Syria's Kurdish city of Kobani", *Kurdistan 24*, 23 June 2020; and "Turkish drone strike injures civilian near north Syrian town of Kobani", *Kurdistan 24*, 23 January 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, al-Hasakeh, November 2020.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, September 2021.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, SDF official, Qamishli, May 2021.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group telephone interview, SDF official, December 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, January 2020.

¹⁰⁵ See Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian rebels mobilise for possible Turkish attack on Kurdish fighters", *Reuters*, 4 November 2021.

¹⁰⁶ "Syria: Landmines Kill, Injure Hundreds in Raqqa", *Human Rights Watch*, 12 February 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group observations and interviews, civil society representatives, Raqqa, May 2021.

¹⁰⁸ See Abdullah Al-Ghadhawy, "ISIS in Syria: A Deadly New Focus", *Newlines Institute*, 28 April 2020.

year”.¹⁰⁹ ISIS also attacked regime targets in SDF-controlled areas in the Raqqa countryside.¹¹⁰ The U.S. Central Command assesses that ISIS likely has sufficient manpower and resources to operate indefinitely at its present level in the Syrian desert. Since 2019, the group has refrained from attacking U.S. troops and instead directed its fire at the SDF; during the past year, it has stepped up attacks on the regime and the Iranian-aligned militias cooperating with it.¹¹¹

The SDF attributes the attacks to the frequent infiltration of fighters, often disguised as civilians, from government-controlled parts of Raqqa into SDF-controlled ones, and then on to Turkish-controlled Tel Abyad district.¹¹² The majority of ISIS attacks in Raqqa governorate target security forces in regime-controlled areas in the south, however.¹¹³ Many strikes have hit Syrian army positions and patrols, while a few have targeted oil fields south of Tabqa.¹¹⁴ The proximity of regime-controlled parts of Raqqa to northern Homs and Hama, where ISIS has regained strength, has made them especially vulnerable.

A final threat to stability in the north east is the potential for a regime military advance. The U.S. residual troop presence in eastern Syria has kept a lid on Russian and regime military moves. But absent a détente between the SDF and Damascus regarding the oil-rich region's future, Damascus will undoubtedly expect to be able to recapture the area or impose its terms on the YPG in the event of a U.S. withdrawal.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Raqqa, May 2021.

¹¹⁰ “Statement Issued by the General Command of the Internal Security Forces – Raqqa Province”, Internal Security Forces – North and East Syria, 12 May 2021.

¹¹¹ “Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2021–June 30, 2021”, U.S. Department of Defense, 17 August 2021.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, SDF commander, Raqqa, May 2021.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, SDF commanders, Raqqa, May 2021.

¹¹⁴ A Syria expert reported 70 confirmed ISIS attacks in southern Raqqa between January 2020 and September 2021. Crisis Group interview, Gregory Waters, October 2021.

IV. Helping Stabilise Raqqa

In the four years since the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS levelled much of Raqqa city and its surroundings, the governorate has experienced a remarkable revival. Yet its recovery is both precarious and partial, because some of the main underlying challenges remain unaddressed.

The province remains a playground for adversaries competing for control and influence. The majority of Raqqa remains under the military control and administrative governance of a group – the SDF/YPG – that is deeply at odds with the regime in Damascus and antagonistic to Turkey. With such foes, it might not be able to maintain its rule without the protection of a small U.S. military contingent. Yet, notwithstanding the Biden administration's stated intent to stay in Syria for now, it remains uncertain how long the U.S. will keep its troops there. Nor is it clear that Washington is ready and able to use forces deployed as part of counter-ISIS efforts to act as a buffer between the SDF-controlled area and its two competing foes. The regime would like to retake the area once it regains its strength and can summon Russian and Iranian support. For its part, Turkey, at least so long as it sees the YPG as an extension of the PKK, will remain intent on ending YPG rule in the north east, viewing it as a threat to its national security.

Still, amid the horrors of the Syrian war, Raqqa has turned into a success story of sorts. The gains it has made are worth preserving, especially in the absence of a timely, credible path to a negotiated settlement of the overall conflict. Progress is even more remarkable given that stabilisation and reconstruction occurred without much planning, much less a coherent strategy, amid reluctance by coalition members and international organisations to engage in rebuilding, severe limitations on access and uncertain U.S. financial or military investment. It continued even after the U.S. withdrew its remaining forces from Raqqa to neighbouring Deir al-Zor and al-Hasakeh governorates in October 2019. In stark contrast to many areas reclaimed by Damascus or Turkish-backed factions, SDF-held areas of Raqqa enjoy a decent level of security, moderate prosperity and fairly capable local governance which, for all its faults, has created conditions that have made the area a magnet for migrants and investment from other parts of Syria.¹¹⁵

For this reason, the U.S. and other Global Coalition members should use the relative calm in former ISIS strongholds, including Raqqa, to address the underlying threats to these areas' stability.

Western states that contributed to Raqqa's destruction as members of the Global Coalition should protect the area from an ISIS resurgence and contribute to its rebuilding. European countries should likewise work to address the damage done to the area and its people in the process of fighting ISIS. This support should not be unconditional, however. As the U.S. starts releasing Congressionally appropriated stabilisation funds to Syria, it should take into account the following factors.

First, the international coalition, and the U.S. in particular, should ensure that its protection of the SDF and autonomous administration does not turn north-eastern Syria into a staging ground for militant attacks on other parts of northern Syria, or in

¹¹⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins*, forthcoming.

Iraq or Turkey. The SDF, which wields effective control over the area, should be held accountable for the actions of other Kurdish militants there. The U.S. should leverage its increased stabilisation assistance to achieve a cessation of insurgent attacks emanating from the north east on Turkey or Turkish-controlled areas of Syria. In parallel, Washington should work with Ankara to improve the human rights situation in areas the latter controls in northern Syria, including Afrin, Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, which have seen killings, kidnappings and seizures of property; and to make conditions in these areas safer for displaced people who wish to go home.¹¹⁶ Washington should also press Ankara to rein in the Syrian groups on its payroll, compelling them to cease human rights violations in Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria and to impose firm penalties for repeat offenders.

Secondly, the YPG's readiness to credibly devolve governance responsibilities will be crucial to preventing local grievances from turning into ethnic or political vendettas. The YPG has been a very effective and committed military partner in the anti-ISIS fight to the U.S. and the international coalition, who in turn empowered its leadership through diplomatic and military support. This U.S. approach, however, has alienated the north east's Arab population, and excluded many in the Syrian diaspora from strategic conversations about the area's governance and future.¹¹⁷

This situation needs to change. Western countries should direct their assistance to the autonomous administration to support governance reforms that would substantively expand decision-making beyond the YPG's power structure, thus providing pathways to more meaningful participation by residents outside the YPG's inner orbits. They should also encourage the YPG to take steps to effect greater transparency on critical issues such as revenue generation, budget allocation and political talks with the U.S., Russia and the regime.

Thirdly, Raqqa is an integral part of Syria, as is the entirety of the north east. The key to avoiding further violent conflict is that the SDF and its international backers act accordingly. Western states should therefore discourage the SDF from taking steps in administration and governance that could be perceived as a step toward a de facto separation, such as the imposition of unaccredited school curricula. They should instead encourage the SDF to pursue ways to restore administrative links between the area and Damascus on issues such as education. Such steps would be a relief for locals, who suffer from a lack of formal documentation (such as professional degrees and civil status papers). For their part, Damascus and Moscow should resist the temptation to use military altercations or insurgent proxies to press the U.S. toward a full withdrawal from the north east. Such moves could inadvertently trigger difficult-to-contain escalations.

¹¹⁶ On human rights violations, see "Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 18 September 2020.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, tribal figures, north-eastern Syria, May 2021.

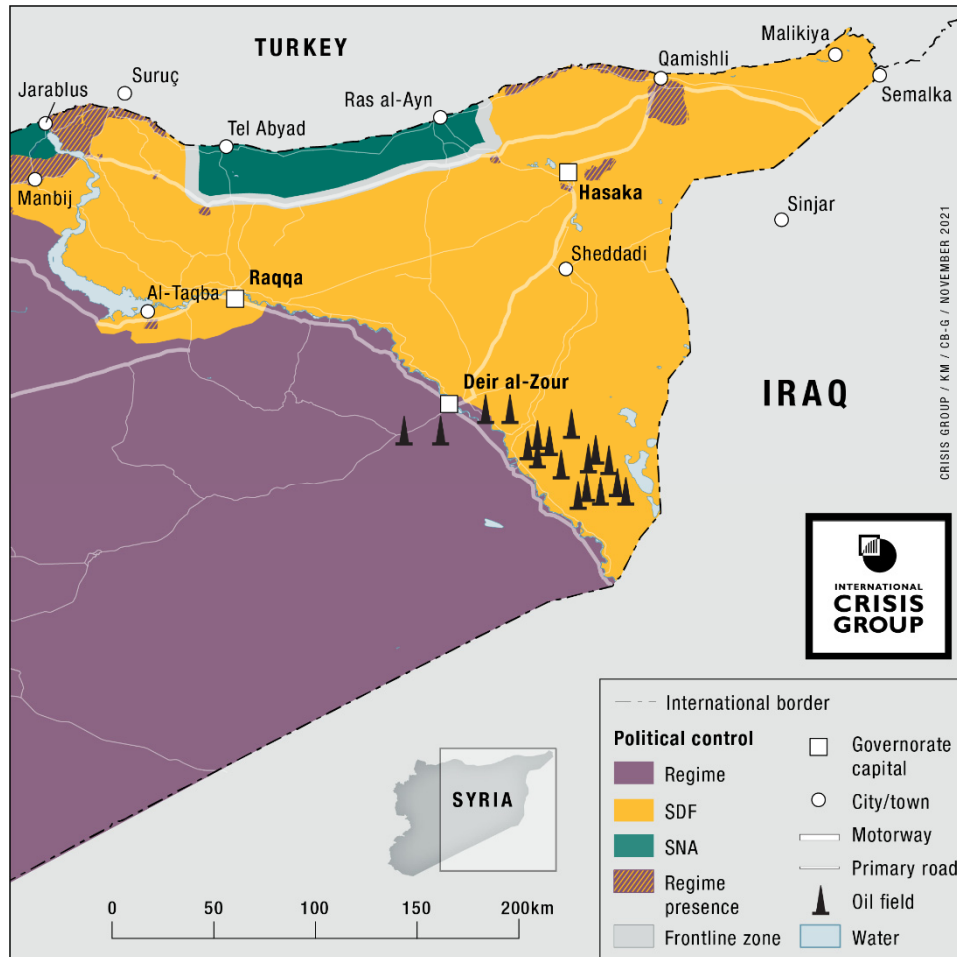
V. Conclusion

The situation in Raqqa is much improved since the province suffered devastation in the war between ISIS and the U.S.-led coalition assembled to defeat it four years ago. But the future of the province and its capital city remains on a knife's edge, balanced between competing forces whose fortunes depend to a great extent on the presence of the small contingent of U.S. troops and military advisers in north-eastern Syria and U.S. surveillance craft in the skies above it.

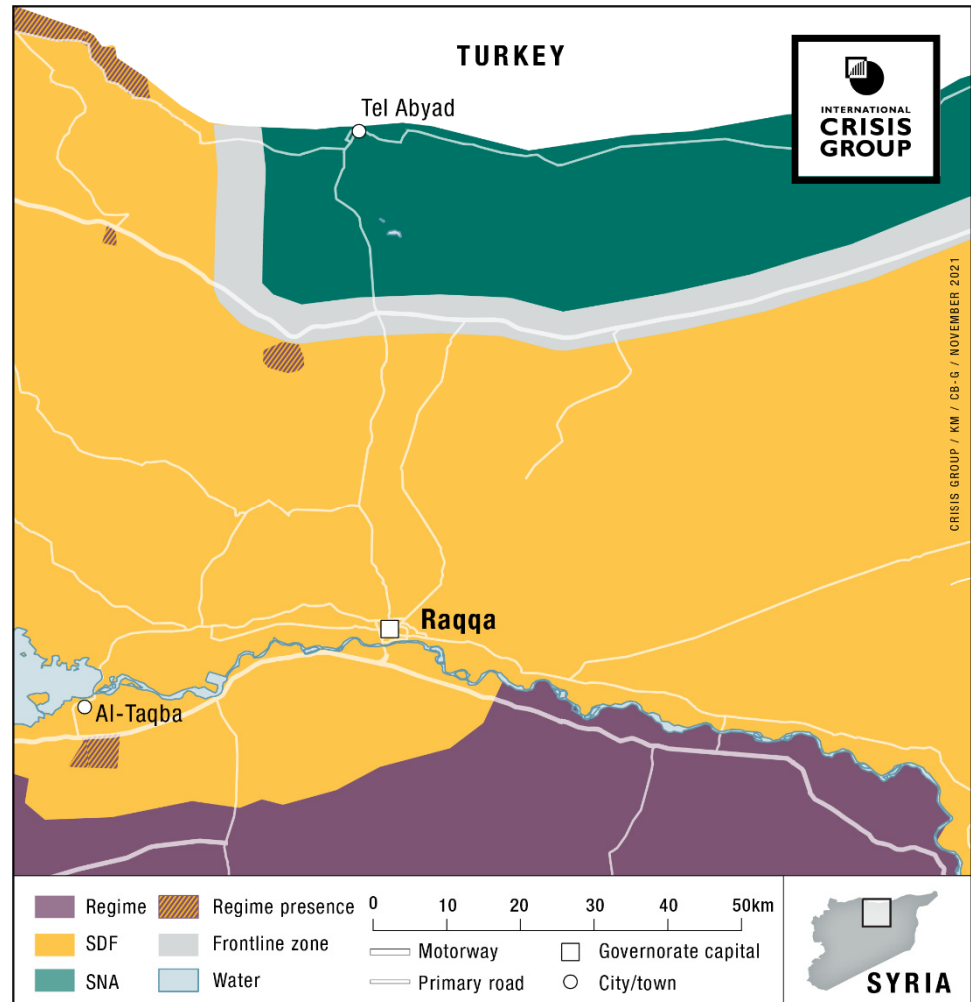
Given the pivotal U.S. role, the Biden administration's Syria policy will play an outsized part in determining the north east's fate. The area's population already once experienced the fallout from a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, which was aborted just as abruptly, but not before it did real damage. It enabled a Turkish military incursion that sent hundreds of thousands of civilians temporarily fleeing their homes, followed by the deployment of Syrian regime troops and Russian military monitors. The resulting jumble of forces vying to control the area has further complicated efforts to stabilise it. In Raqqa, this situation is compounded by tensions between the SDF and the Arab population. For the sake of a population that endured enough pain under ISIS rule, the Biden administration should set out a policy that helps rebuild the area in the short term and deploys U.S. diplomatic heft now to ensure its stable future.

Raqqa/Ankara/Brussels, 18 November 2021

Appendix A: Map of Political Control of Northeast Syria



Appendix B: Map of Political Control of Raqqa



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

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