

Ten Years on, Raqqa's Residents Wonder Who the Next Ruler of their Battered City Will Be.

A field-based commentary from Raqqa, Northern Syria, showcasing different views on the severe impacts from ten years of conflict.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

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What began in March 2011 as peaceful protests against President Bashar Al-Assad quickly escalated into a full-blown war that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. In 2013, Raqqa became Syria's first provincial capital to fall entirely to rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighting to bring down the regime. The city then became a stronghold of the Islamic State group (ISIS) before the militants were driven out by the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Now, some residents wonder who their next ruler will be, with some fearing that a return of the Assad regime is inevitable.

"I joined factions at the beginning of the revolution to fight the Syrian regime. It was a dream for us to topple Bashar al-Assad. We felt free for the first six months,"

Recalled Muhammad Faraj al-Hamoud, a former FSA fighter from the Raqqa countryside and a prominent member of the Al Walda tribe, that numbers several hundred thousand men scattered along the banks of the Euphrates.

Al-Hamoud does not refer to himself as an FSA anymore since Ankara-backed armed groups claiming to be part of the opposition took part, in recent years, in successive military offensives against the SDF, which has controlled the region since the end of the war against ISIS.

"The revolution is the revolution of all Syrians and we have no other intentions than to overthrow the regime," al-Hamoud told the BIC.

"There is a difference between the opposition and the revolution. Now, the opposition is just made out of mercenaries working for Turkey."

On 15 March 2011, the rumblings of the revolution resounded for the first time in Damascus, and then in Deraa a few days later. In the following months, the streets of the country were taken by storm by demonstrators seeking to oust President Bashar al-Assad. In Raqqa, it was not until the spring of 2013 that a jubilant crowd toppled an Assad statue, making it the first provincial capital to fall entirely into the hands of the opposition.

The euphoria was short-lived. The FSA was quickly swallowed up by the jihadists of the al-Nosra Front, leading the way to a total take-over of the city in 2014 by the Islamic State group. Raqqa then became the capital of the self-styled "Caliphate".

ISIS was eventually ousted from Raqqa by the SDF in October 2017 after a four-month-long, bloody battle that left most of the city in ruins.

"When ISIS came, they fought us because they considered us to be 'apostates,' forcing us to hide. It was a huge disappointment that we didn't reach our goal," al-Hamoud said. "But the revolution never dies. Even after my death, the next generation will take over. I have no doubt that Bashar al-Assad will eventually fall."

"We still have hope because the revolution is an on-going process," Mahmoud Hadi, a long-time political activist, and the director of a local NGO, told the BIC. "The revolution is not about weapons but people, and now we see militants in Europe, for example, working hard to expose the crimes of the regime," he said in reference to investigations and trials that are taking place against officials in the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. "After all these sacrifices, it is impossible to go back," he insisted.

Raqqa's iconic Clock Square had been renamed "Freedom Square" by the revolutionaries, before becoming the scene of crucifixions during the ISIS occupation. Today, the roundabout is again a focal point of the city. A dozen fruit and vegetable merchants set up in a crescent moon are haranguing passers-by still swarming before dusk.

Ahmed is one of those Raqqa residents who has never held the butt of a gun but has often found himself in the crosshairs. But combat is less of a concern to this greengrocer than the economy. When asked about his view on the different authorities that have ruled his city since 2011, he avoided clearly stating his opinion and complained instead about the soar in food prices.

"Under the regime, everything was cheap. Today, oil, bread, rice, and sugar are unaffordable," he told the BIC. "Before 2011, I had a good situation and a happy life, but since then we have been living in hell and we are hungry."

According to the World Food Program, the price of the average food basket increased by 236% in December 2020 compared to December 2019, making it more than 29 times higher than the pre-crisis average.

Even though he is only commenting on the cost of living and the collapse of the Syrian pound, Ahmed asked for his full name not to be disclosed. He plans to travel to Damascus to treat his four-year-old twins, who were deafened by an airstrike in 2017, so he prefers to avoid any trouble. "You understand..." he whispered, clasping both wrists together to mime handcuffs.

Like Ahmed, many here concluded that Bashar al-Assad is now a fact of life. Living outside of its grip is no reassurance that they will not eventually have to deal with the regime one way or another.

The fear of a regime come-back to Raqqa only grew stronger when Turkey's "Peace Spring" military offensive in October 2019 forced the SDF to strike a deal with Damascus, under the aegis of Moscow, letting regime forces into the north for the first time since they had withdrawn in 2012 to stop the advance of Turkish-backed rebel groups.

"Since the redeployment of the regime in parts of north-eastern Syria and the partial withdrawal of US troops, we grew more afraid of seeing the regime take over the city again," Mahmoud Hadi confirmed.

Despite being weakened by the Turkish offensive, Kurdish-led forces managed to safeguard their de facto autonomy in north-east Syria. And the fact they still hold major oil and agricultural resources would give their self-administration leverage in the event of political negotiations with the Syrian regime, which Kurdish leaders have said they are seeking.

"Despite the regime's stubbornness, the door for dialogue is open. And we have the means to put pressure on the regime [to force them to the negotiating table] because the whole economy revolves around north-east Syria, like water, electricity, wheat, and oil,"

Top Kurdish official Ilham Ahmed, the co-president of the Syrian Democratic Council (the political arm of the SDF), told the BIC.

"We want to solve the problem through a political solution and if not, we're going to put pressure on the regime through the economy."

The perspective of a political deal between the Syrian regime and Kurdish authorities gives pause to the Raqqa residents who fiercely oppose Bashar al-Assad. "There is a difference of vision between the civil society here and the self-administration and they need to make their position clearer: are they with the regime or are they truly independent?" Mahmoud Hadi wondered.

He also points to the fact that the autonomous administration's survival relies almost entirely on the presence of US troops on the ground and that any withdrawal might lead to its demise, with the Syrian regime and its Russian ally immediately stepping in to fill the vacuum.

Another issue he and other residents raised is that the autonomous administration “cannot be considered as the rightful authority yet” because it was not democratically elected but rather imposed after the military conquest to eject ISIS from Raqqa.

On that issue, Ilham Ahmed told the BIC that elections will be held in the city before the end of 2021. “Elections will be held on everything from the municipalities to the city head, and there will be electoral standards, and everyone will be able to stand for the elections,” she claimed.

When the Kurdish-led autonomous administration took control of the Arab-majority city, many were relieved the horrors of the ISIS occupation were finally coming to an end. But the coexistence between segments of the population and a new authority considered by some as alien to the region is an uneasy one. When the BIC visited Raqqa early March, the SDF had launched a conscription campaign, with checkpoints spread across the city to catch those wanted for military service.

Several young men told the BIC they were trying to avoid compulsory recruitment because the salary is too low, and they are the primary earner in their household. Others said they simply want to remain neutral and thus refuse to take up arms.

The multiplication of checkpoints inside the city means those avoiding conscription may be stuck at home as long as the campaign continues. And because permanent checkpoints were put in place all around Raqqa since 2017, they can never leave the city.

“I feel bad because I am in my own country and yet I cannot move around freely. If this continues, I will think of paying a smuggler to emigrate,” a 30-year-old Raqqa resident trying to avoid military service told the BIC. “I got white hair during ten years of war because we lived in a constant state of fear and terror and now, I can’t even leave my house,” he said showing his greying temples. He sighed, echoing the sentiment of many: “I am so tired.”

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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