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The project to which this and other papers in this series belong was completed over the course of several months by a small in-country and remote research team. Though the paper provides a baseline assessment of community capital in the above-named location, the authors recognize that such an exhaustive topic would certainly benefit from sectoral expertise. As such, this and other reports in the Community Capital series should be considered as summary overviews.
FIGURE 1. Ar-Raqqa city
Introduction

In November 2011, President Al-Assad made the first visit to Ar-Raqqa by a sitting Syrian President since 1947. In one sense, the event served to highlight the long-standing social, economic, and political marginalization of the city by the central government. Although relatively large in size, Ar-Raqqa had been primarily regarded as a provincial capital known mainly for cotton and wheat production, and for a cultural heritage reaching into remote antiquity. Indeed, the city has seldom featured in Syria’s modern history, and besides simmering tensions produced by state-led agrarian reform in the 1970s, has passed much of the past 50 years in relative anonymity. Al-Assad’s decision to come to Ar-Raqqa was nevertheless deliberate, and the factors that likely prompted his arrival resonate in ways which inform contemporary readings of the city despite the massive change it has experienced over the past 9 years.

For a city long ignored by the Government of Syria (GoS), Syria’s protest movement was first met with unusual calm in Ar-Raqqa. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the strongest factor was the extent to which local tribal leadership structures were embedded within state systems of preference and patronage. State intelligence networks were strong, informants were everywhere, and the appetite for change amongst powerful local figures was limited. A localized rebellion was therefore unthinkable, but the government’s grip ultimately proved weaker than Al-Assad might have assumed in 2011. Small-scale demonstrations soon took place, and their violent suppression triggered the formation of local armed opposition groups. Ultimately, it took just three days for a consortium of opposition militia to overrun GoS defences in March 2013. For a time, civil society flourished, but groups foreign to the city began to exert their influence, thereby opening the door for opportunistic tribal figures to ally with ISIS in early 2014. Having pledged their allegiance to the GoS at the outset of the crisis, the alignment of local tribal elites with extremism was a surprising turnaround, and especially for a city unknown for its religiosity. However, it was a reflection of the kind of pragmatism that is again nearing into focus now that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurdish Self-Administration (SA) face mounting challenges to their authority in the city.

Already beset by massive challenges of governance and reconstruction after the anti-ISIS ‘Euphrates Wrath’ offensive, territorial gains by the GoS, the drawdown of U.S. military support, and recent Turkish incursions to the north have compounded the difficulties faced by Ar-Raqqa’s Kurdish-majority administrators. In this context, criticism from elements of the city’s majority Sunni Arab tribal population has been unavoidable. Tribal alliances are the stage upon which the political economy is ultimately played out in Ar-Raqqa, and there is a growing sense amongst some tribal leaders that a return of the state would offer them more than the SA. Anti-SDF militia with noticeably tribal dimensions have therefore gathered momentum, Arab-Kurdish tensions have been aggravated, and the SDF has been forced to permit the entry of GoS and Russian forces in nearby areas to defend against Turkish military opportunism.

Combined with rumours of an imminent government return from the Damascus-based media, these factors lead many to assume that state institutions will soon move back into Ar-Raqqa. The reality, however, is that pro-government networks have yet to fully take hold, and the city’s cadre of revolutionary activists have been unable to muster significant support. Meanwhile, the SA continues, and Russian observation posts now insulate the city from the effects of further Turkish military advances. A strange kind of political-military paralysis is therefore found, in which the SA’s administration...
and the relative stability provided by the SDF are tolerated in spite of their shortcomings because no credible political/military alternatives exist. Looking ahead, it is likely this situation will persist until Kurdish authority becomes untenable owing to broader geo-political and military developments in the northeast. Should any such change take place, local elites will almost certainly look to the GoS to continue the city’s reconstruction.
The Asayish has conscripted a large number of locals, and implemented a variety of heavy-handed security measures including crackdowns on protests, strikes, and other civil demonstrations. They have also inflamed local sensitivities by imposing curfews, curtailing freedom of movement, raiding homes, and conducting inspections in response to perceived security threats. Other media reports on this issue cite claims that corrupt SDF officials smuggled ISIS fighters from local prisons to non-SDF-held territories.

Now increasingly viewed as an alien governing authority seeking to impose its political ideology onto a traditionally conservative Sunni Arab tribal society, the Asayish’s recent behaviour has drawn unfavourable comparisons with the pre-war oppression of the Syrian government. Some activists have even gone so far as to label the SDF and the Asayish as the “Yellow ISIS”. In typically pragmatic fashion, local tribal actors that once stood alongside the SDF have now begun to question the legitimacy of Kurdish control, and rumours regarding a potential GoS return have snowballed in tandem with the withdrawal of direct U.S. military support, Turkish-led military incursions to the north, and the steady encroachment of the GoS into the last remaining areas beyond its control. Combined, these developments challenge the long-term prospects of Kurdish authority in Ar-Raqqa, and have created a local climate prone to security incidents and instability.

Anti-SDF Activity

Serious criticism of Ar-Raqqa’s Kurdish authorities began in November 2018, when the SDF was accused by local tribal leaders to have ordered the killing of a former SDF liaison, Sheikh Faisal Al-Huweidi. Al-Huweidi had been a vocal critic of the SDF, and days prior to his death had reportedly informed SDF commanders that they should consider themselves merely guests of the city. Local tribal leaders claim this advice was regarded as an impermissible challenge to Kurdish rule and prompted the SDF to issue the assassination order. Statements subsequently appeared which labelled local Kurdish authorities as ‘occupiers’, and there were calls that all Ar-Raqqa-based tribesmen should refuse to coordinate with Kurdish-led entities. Since this time, no fewer than nine armed groups allegedly in receipt of support from the SA’s rivals have declared their opposition to the SA/SDF in northeastern Syria, many of which derive representation from tribes local to Ar-Raqqa. Among these groups are the Ar-Raqqa Military Council, based in Urfa, Turkey. This umbrella organization includes Soqour Al-Sham Brigade, Osoud Al-Islam Brigade, Al I’zza B’illah Brigade, Al-Baraa Brigade, Tajamo’ Ahrar Ar-Raqqa; Jabhat Al- Asala Wal-Tanniya. The Council also includes some generals that defected from GoS armed forces, as well as notables from across Ar-Raqqa governorate. The Ar-Raqqa Military Council announced it would initiate anti-SDF operations in April 2018, and seeks to create a unified military front against the SDF.

Organized anti-SDF sentiment has also been expressed through local armed opposition groups deliberately sidelined by the SDF since it took control of the city. Liwa Thuwar Ar-Raqqa is one such
group, and despite having previously been a strong SDF partner, was blocked from participating in the ‘Euphrates Wrath’ operation and saw hundreds of its fighters detained in 2018. Obstruction of the group was likely concerned with preserving the SDF’s military monopoly in the city, but it has generated lingering tensions between the two that have surfaced on occasion. This could result in localized power struggles should the SDF’s military position weaken in Ar-Raqqa or elsewhere. In the meantime, it is plausible that groups like Liwa Thuwar Ar-Raqqa will support anti-SDF operations, and could even look to increase their influence by aligning with the Syrian or Turkish governments.

Broader geopolitical developments in Syria’s northeast over the past 18 months have only emboldened anti-SDF actors, and security incidents targeting the SDF, Ar-Raqqa Civil Council officials, and Asayish personnel remain a feature of the local operational environment. This presents a direct security threat to local partner organizations where they are/may be perceived as SA and or SDF associates, particularly given a variety of civilians have been among those targeted in SDF-held areas across the northeast. Reputational and access-related challenges may also arise from association with SA/SDF-linked actors, and could persist throughout any change of political/military control to the GoS.

**Looking Ahead**

Though it appears inevitable that GoS forces will return to Ar-Raqqa, this is unlikely in the near-term. Talks on the reintegration of Kurdish-held areas have been mooted for some time, but to date, there has been no threat so great that the SA has been forced into anything more than piecemeal discussions. Late last year, Turkish-linked incursions to the north and northeast of Ar-Raqqa prompted the SDF to engage the GoS in defensive military coordination, allowing GoS forces to take up positions at the military airbase at Tabqa, and Russian military observation posts to be established on Ar-Raqqa’s northern periphery. However, these were relatively minor changes to the status quo, and given the continued inability and/or unwillingness of the GoS to enforce itself, have combined with broader developments which have in fact stabilized the SDF in the city. Indeed, the SA’s administrative authority remains intact, SA oil access has been guaranteed by a continued U.S. presence, and Turkish advances have been curtailed by the combined effect of GoS deployments, Russia-Turkey agreements, and the threat of U.S. sanctions against Ankara. No Kurdish rival is therefore in a position to challenge the SDF in Ar-Raqqa, but this does not exempt the city from geopolitical instability. Ar-Raqqa is close to the centre of an area reaching from northern Homs to Kirkuk (Iraq), in which Russian, U.S., Iranian, GoS, Turkish, and Kurdish interests collide, and where militia dynamics and ISIS still present complex security problems. Security conditions in Ar-Raqqa will be bound to this web of interests for some time, meaning aid donors must remain vigilant at local, national and regional levels.

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7 Liwa Thuwar Ar-Raqqa’s headquarters was raided by the SDF in June 2018, resulting in the arrest of over 200 members. This came after the group criticized SDF conscription policy in the city.

8 On June 25, 2018 Abu Issa, commander of Liwa Thuwar Ar-Raqqa, was reportedly detained by the SDF on charges of negotiating with the Turkish government.

9 For instance, on 22nd February, 2020, two IEDs were detonated in the vicinity of the SDF’s headquarters in Ar-Raqqa city.

10 Syrian Observatory (2020), Russian forces establish a military post in the Ar-Raqqa countryside.
Political Capital

PLATFORMS FOR POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Kurdish pragmatism vis-a-vis Ar-Raqqa likely to result in a (largely peaceful) political surrender deal.
- Respect for tribal custom and tradition provides a platform for the mediation of local disputes.
- Considerable civic pride shown by Raqqawis to reconstruct and reclaim their city post-ISIS.
- Although unpopular, the Asayish are an effective force for internal security.

IMPEDEMENTS TO POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- The RCC is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy.
- RCC authority rests on Kurdish-led security provision, but this pillar of governance is weakening.
- Kurdish-linked figures likely to leave RCC if the GoS returns, producing discontinuity of governance.
- Civil society interference by the SDF, particularly on politically-sensitive matters (e.g. human rights).
Governance Systems

It is likely the liberation of Ar-Raqqa from ISIS would have been bloodier had it not been for the support of local tribal figures united under the SDF umbrella. In one sense, this can be lauded as a triumph of Kurdish tribal engagement. The reality, however, is that tribal support of the SDF was rather more a reflection of local hatred towards ISIS, and — as has become increasingly apparent — was heavily contingent on U.S. sponsorship. This much is obvious from the growing crisis of legitimacy experienced by the city’s pre-eminent governing body, the Ar-Raqqa Civil Council (RCC).

Though vaunted as a structure designed to diffuse perceptions of the SDF as an occupier of an Arab-majority city, the RCC has found it increasingly difficult to defend against accusations of pro-Kurdish bias and underperformance, and particularly since challenges to the control of the SA and the SDF have intensified across the wider northeast. This is a major problem in a city where the challenges of recovery are great, and generates a degree of uncertainty over the longer-term engagement of local governance systems for donor-funded relief, development, and reconstruction activities.

Ar-Raqqa Civil Council

The formation of the RCC marked the beginning of Ar-Raqqa’s recovery from the worst violence of the Syria crisis, but its efforts to help rebuild the city under the auspices of the SA have been marred by questions over its performance and accusations that it fails to represent city residents. Local Arabs may serve the SDF and the Asayish, either due to conscription, out of socio-economic necessity, or a desire to protect their hometown. But they are doing so on behalf of the RCC, an organization which serves the SA, an overarching political body whose secular governance culture clashes with local norms, and which has shown limited interest in meaningful power sharing in Arab majority communities like Ar-Raqqa.

Kurds and figures from the Ar-Raqqa countryside constitute the majority of the RCC across both its legislative and the executive councils, with Kurds alone representing around a third of all council members. Given Ar-Raqqa’s pre-war population was roughly 1%-2% Kurdish, this is deeply disproportionate, and compares unfavourably with the mere 10% of legislative council members that hail from the city’s predominantly Arab urban core. Official rhetoric from the SA signals inclusiveness and pluralism, but the composition of the RCC invites claims that it is a vehicle for the expression of the Kurdish national aspirations, and that Ar-Raqqa’s population is secondary to the political-military objectives of the dominant forces within the Kurdish movement in Syria, namely, the PYD, and the YPG/J.

BOX 1: Ar-Raqqa Civil Council Composition

Based in Ayn Issa (50km north of Ar-Raqqa) and formed several months before the SDF captured Ar-Raqqa, the RCC was a product of SDF-led negotiations with tribal sheikhs concerned with developing a plan for Ar-Raqqa’s post-ISIS future. It consists of legislative and executive branches and is best understood as a governorate-level administration under the political authority of the SA. In line with SA policy to install joint gender equal leaders of government offices under the political authority of the SA, a male Arab tribal sheikh, Mahmoud Shawakh Al-Bursan, and a female civil engineer, Leila Al-Mustafa, were appointed co-chairs of the RCC. Both leaders reportedly believe in a democratic Syria, and Ms Mustafa is a strong advocate of women’s rights. They are supported by three deputies and a series of technical committees covering all areas of governance. Other members of the 350 person council are independent technocrats with professional specializations including lawyers, engineers, social workers, and teachers.

The RCC fares little better on matters of performance. Soon after ISIS was forced from the city and the scale of destruction became apparent, it was reported that the RCC had received limited funding from the SA to provide for even basic needs. A lack of reconstruction support from international donors was unsurprising given Coalition member countries insisted they would not go beyond stabilization (i.e. activities to help prevent a resurgence of ISIS). Neither was it especially shocking given the limited western-sponsored funding.
14 According to local sources. Of note, three neighbourhoods reportedly have improved water access after the completion of remedial water network works: Al-Raqdhah, Al-Nahda, and Al-Hurriryeh.

reconstruction undertaken in Kobani since ISIS was defeated there in 2015. However, the inability of the SA to support the RCC effectively crippled attempts to embark on the enormous challenge of rebuilding the city when it was in the international spotlight. Resources for the RCC have reportedly diminished further as the anti-ISIS fight moved southeastward.

As a result, anecdotal reports from the city describe that the reliability and affordability of basic services has barely improved in most city neighbourhoods, and there is a sense that whilst welcome, cosmetic improvements to public spaces mask everyday challenges. Two city stadiums and numerous public parks have been rehabilitated, upbeat graffiti lines the main thoroughfares, and a new ‘I love Raqqa’ sign may sit in the central square, but there are no functioning wells in the city and residents are still widely reliant on private water trucking services. The state of power networks, sewage systems, roads and bridges tell a similar story of neglect, and such limited investment in the city’s most critical problems have lessened the goodwill initially extended to the SDF, the Coalition, and the RCC.

Left largely to fend for itself, there is a growing sense that Ar-Raqqa is considered as a bargaining chip to be leveraged against political-military pressure on Kurdish core territories further north/north-east. Besides issues of political representation and governmental
effectiveness, recent events suggest it may not be long before that option is exercised. Kurdish governmental authority in Ar-Raqqa has been tolerated because it has delivered a measure of security seldom seen in the city since 2013. However, this is becoming an increasingly fragile pillar upon which to rest the RCC’s legitimacy, with mutually reinforcing internal and external pressures triggering a growing sense of local instability. As detailed in ‘Security Overview, Turkish advances have forced the SA into strategic cooperation with the Syrian government and its allies, U.S. support to the SDF has wavered, and a new cadre of anti-SDF actors has emerged. In this context, each anti-Arab provocation, every security incident that slips past the Asayish, and any escalation in the wider northeast will further highlight the weakness of the SA’s political leadership in Ar-Raqqa. This, in turn, will only further signal the end for the RCC in its current configuration and feed the appetite of those wishing for a return of the GoS.

Whether the RCC will be disbanded in the event of a GoS return is unknown. In many ways, the RCC reflects the mandate and coverage of governorate level councils in government-controlled areas and could therefore be retained. Based on experience from other parts of Syria that hosted alternative governance structures under opposition military protection however, personnel and institutional reporting lines would almost certainly be changed. This could result in discontinuity and disruption to ongoing programmes administered by donor organizations, and will submit programme activities to the discretion of the Syrian government. As COAR has detailed elsewhere, this is unlikely to produce a clear legal, regulatory, and security environment for relief and development activities.15

Justice and Civil Society

Post-ISIS Community Justice
Having experienced extraordinary loss, violence, and destruction, Ar-Raqqa’s judicial system has been overwhelmed by a deluge of complex cases. Many complaints have been filed with the RCC, and though some have been resolved by resort to respected forms of tribal mediation, questions as to what justice looks like in the post-ISIS era have yet to be addressed with any real nuance. Determining who should be prosecuted, for which crimes, and by whom are deeply complex policy questions impeded by numerous factors. Indeed, any functioning legal system would find sorting the many alleged crimes of Ar-Raqqa’s ISIS affiliates a challenge, let alone a legal system administered by a likely temporary governing authority working in a highly politicized environment under conditions of conflict. Understandably, the RCC has yet to substantively deal with the city’s ISIS-related caseload, often preferring the bluntest of instruments. Local terror cases are commonly forwarded to the SA’s People’s Protection Court,16 but when it secured the city in late-2017, the SDF set about destroying the homes of former and suspected ISIS members in a sweeping display of collective punishment.

Clearly, not all ISIS affiliates are alike, and there is a need to distinguish between those co-opted ‘into’ the group and active members responsible for the worst crimes. The RCC has sometimes shown that it is willing to recognize this fact, granting an amnesty to several dozen low-ranking members captured by the SDF in Ar-Raqqa governorate in June 2017.17 But while this may have relieved some pressure on Ar-Raqqa’s prisons, there was concern that those released were linked with tribes that the SDF had sought to placate to promote stability. Though it is some time since this event, the caseload remains high and many grievances have been unaddressed. Ar-Raqqa’s recovery not only rests on the restoration of services and functioning economy, but also requires city authorities deliver justice to prevent acts of revenge in a city where conflict-related suffering is great, and where socio-economic circumstances are poor. This equally applies to the challenge of addressing a deluge of property and personal disputes that have arisen during the conflict.

Civil Society
Inevitably, an end to ISIS has seen an upturn in the number and variety of civil society organizations in Ar-Raqqa.18 From cultural heritage restoration, to deradicalization, to initiatives seeking to

16 The People’s Protection Court was established by the SA to apply counterterror law adopted by the legislative council of the SA in 2014.
17 The amnesty may have sought to trigger desertions ahead of the battle for Ar-Raqqa city.
18 Note that some form of civil society did continue in the city during ISIS control, most notably in the form of ‘Ar-Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently’, a media organization that reported on ISIS crimes.
For instance, the ‘Nahnou Ahlouha’ (We Are Here) campaign, launched October 2019, intends to strengthen women’s political participation and address the legacy of extremist ideology. The campaign has the support of numerous CSOs, including the House of Citizenship, found online, here (AR).

SNHR, (2019), SDF arrested a humanitarian organization worker in Raqqa city on December 17.

Al-Hussein (2019), SDF accuses activist, former ISIS prisoner, Hasan Qasab of being an ISIS member.

For example, to enhance women’s participation in civic life, there is a relatively active cadre of grassroots civil society organizations now working throughout the city. Most organizations tend to offer a combination of social services, relief, and development work, were formed at the initiative of local technocrats, engineers and civil servants, and are driven by citizens committed to reclaiming their city from its association with ISIS. Organizations widely receive U.S. stabilization funding and are administered by the similarly U.S.-funded Civil Society Support Centre, established in March 2018 to coordinate local civil society activities. This forms the bottom-up component of the U.S.’s two-pronged approach to stabilization in Ar-Raqqa, with top-down stabilization administered by the RCC via its U.S.-funded Reconstruction Committee.

The operating environment for the nascent civil society movement in Ar-Raqqa is a challenging one however, and those involved claim their work is subject to overbearing scrutiny and interference from the SDF and the RCC. All humanitarian and development organizations working in Ar-Raqqa — local and international — are required to secure approval from the RCC’s Bureau of Organizations and must renew permits every three months. This can be problematic given the application process can take weeks to complete, and it is reported that organizations are commonly required to focus on service provision as opposed to the more diverse domains of civil society, such as human rights. Perhaps more concerning is the recent behaviour of the local Kurdish authorities in relation to perceived acts of dissent. In August and October 2019, a series of local activists were arrested on suspicion of terror links, though evidence in all cases is lacking and they have each since been released. Several of the arrests should serve as a warning for partner safety: Mazen al-Harami, a civilian activist working for the U.S.-funded We’am (Harmony) programme, was arrested for visiting Saluk, a town under the control of the Turkish-backed forces of the Syrian National Army, whilst Husan Qassab was arrested on suspicion of terror links, but had been a prisoner of ISIS and a vetted Programme Director for the U.S.-funded Furat initiative.
Socio-Economic Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- City population bound to the countryside through land ownership and agricultural heritage.
- National/regional demand for agricultural produce likely to trigger sustained investment in farming.
- Strong potential of agricultural sector and relatively straightforward intervention options (e.g. inputs).
- Insecurity on M4 Highway (likely temporarily) heightens Ar-Raqqa’s importance as a trade hub.
- New economies and livelihoods derived from conflict present programming opportunities.
- Intermittent security incidents are a factor, but the SDF is likely to retain relative stability.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Reconstruction continues, but serious damage to basic infrastructure remains.
- Irrigation system damage (especially to the south) increases reliance on suboptimal rain-fed options.
- Kurdish authorities unable to mitigate effects of broader financial climate.
- Kurdish administrators may privilege spending in ‘core’ Kurdish areas over Arab-majority Ar-Raqqa.
- Basic service monopolization by Kurdish-linked private actors a reminder of war economy dynamics.
The Recovering Economy

There is clear evidence that nascent, often small-scale and informal commerce has returned to Ar-Raqqa. On the streets, Ar-Raqqa’s two main markets, the ‘White’ and Al-Hal markets, are again full of shops, petty traders, and traffic, whilst farmers have returned to the fields in greater numbers as problems of damage, unexploded ordnance, and access have been (at least partially) addressed. Returnees have also stimulated activity in neighbourhoods that previously hosted limited commercial activity given damage in pre-war business centers. Less visible forms of progress have also been reported: The Economy and Trade Committee of the RCC claims that over 450 licences have been granted to commercial and industrial businesses over the past two and a half years, whilst an informal business cooperative, the Ar-Raqqa Merchant Chamber, has been established to promote business by providing loans, networking, and collaboration opportunities.

Of course, as a city decimated by widespread destruction, large-scale human capital flight, and severe trade and value chain disruption, Ar-Raqqa is far from business as usual. Compared with the pre-war period, agriculture has assumed a greater proportion of local output, but has itself experienced relatively severe contraction in a broader climate of political, financial, and military uncertainty. This reflects the shortcomings of other industries and livelihood types when it comes to picking up the local economic slack, and is a strong indicator of agriculture’s importance and feasibility in the current climate. Given the pre-war strength of the sector, the devastation caused to human and physical capital in urban areas, and few prospects for investment in sustainable alternative industries, Ar-Raqqa city must capitalize on the pre-war agricultural tradition of the Euphrates River basin.

Agribusiness

Prior to the conflict, the productive lands surrounding Ar-Raqqa’s urban core played a major part in the governorate’s status as Syria’s second-most important agricultural region. This remains the case to date, and Ar-Raqqa is somewhat fortunate that it has been able to emphasize agricultural production to partially offset losses across other sectors of the economy. Indeed, much of the city’s second and third sector commerce is related to agribusiness, with most post-ISIS activity of this kind being industrial food and animal product processing facilities (cereals, dairy, olive oil, sugar, leather, and wool).

Of course, agribusiness faces its own challenges, many of which are found widely across rural Syria: Local sources report that market access is constrained by infrastructure damage (roads and bridges) and trade embargoes (instituted in particular by the Turkish government in Turkish-held parts of northern Ar-Raqqa); lower rates of local consumption reduce farmer revenues (and therefore business investment), agricultural inputs are expensive, unavailable in sufficient quantities, or of poor quality (e.g. seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, machinery and other equipment); and there are water supply problems across the Ar-Raqqa countryside owing to damaged irrigation infrastructure (especially in southern areas). Damages to agricultural infrastructure are an abiding concern, with a need for rehabilitation to irrigation canals additional to work on storage warehouses and silos. Left unaddressed, basic farming infrastructure shortfalls severely hamper the auto-recovery efforts of local farmers and pastoralists, many of whom are bound to the sector through land ownership and family heritage.

Heavy local reliance on agriculture means it has received relatively concerted attention post-ISIS. Institutional support has been redeveloped by the RCC after it established the Agricultural Society Development Company (ASDC) in 2019. Administered by the RCC’s Economic Committee, the organization distributes agricultural inputs at fixed subsidized prices, purchases local output, and identifies and delivers key sectoral development projects. The ASDC also coordinates with international donors, such as those housed under the Syria Relief Fund, which are currently undertaking a long-term...
16 million Euro project to enhance the resilience of the farming sector in Ar-Raqqa governorate. Locals are generally supportive of the ASDC, but it should be noted the organization is limited in what it can achieve. For instance, the ASDC does not have the resources to insulate local farmers from Syria’s broader economic climate, with prices for cotton around half what they were in late 2019 owing to fluctuating exchange rates. Producers may opt to sell to private traders at dedicated ‘Khan’ marketplaces in Ar-Raqqa city, but prices at these locations are seldom better given Khans are effectively middlemen that incorporate their own overheads into the purchase price.

Trade and Turkish Control
Ar-Raqqa is central to three of Syria’s most critical economic regions, namely, the Euphrates River basin, oil rich Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor governorates, and the industrialized cities of western Syria and greater Aleppo. This location makes it something of a crossroads for trade, with domestic goods historically flowing in either direction to/from Deir-ez-Zor and Aleppo governorates, and imports/exports passing mainly to/from central Iraq and south/central Turkey. Underdevelopment of local services and manufacturing means opportunities presented by Ar-Raqqa’s location have traditionally been underexploited, but the city could witness increased importance as a trade hub following Turkey’s acquisition of territory between Tel Abyad and Ras Al-Ain and related insecurity on central portions of the M4 Highway. Quantitative data speaking to this effect is unavailable, but it is reasonable to assume that traffic ordinarily passing via the M4 may instead opt to transit Ar-Raqqa, thereby generating additional revenue and increased economic importance. The duration of any such economic boost is hard to assess. On the one hand, there is a mounting confrontation between Turkish and GoS forces across northern Syria, which in turn produces continued insecurity along the M4. On the other, the GoS and its partners will be eager to resolve tension over the M4 and restore Syria’s second-most important land-based trade and access route.

Service Privatisation
Like other parts of the country with severe public service shortfalls, private service providers have filled the gap in Ar-Raqqa. This has created a new — predominantly Kurdish-managed — political-economic powerbase that differs little from the manner in which GoS-linked war economy actors have moved into spaces abandoned by the state in other parts of the country. This has partially filled service gaps in key areas, most notably through the provision of water, via trucking services, and electricity, via micro urban islet generator systems. However, there are several long-term questions around the current state of service provision in the city, namely: How will services be managed, and how will ownership be arranged?

Service Privatisation
The RCC has established a dedicated office for the administration of private service contracts, which is in turn overseen by the SA. Local sources link this structure to reports Kurdish-dominated monopolisation and manipulation of service provision, noting two specific examples. First, the Asayish reportedly exerts considerable...
influence over public service businesses, and claims that it has been pressing the RCC to grant licences to Asayish affiliates. Second, potable water tanks in the city are owned mainly by the Dandal and Al-Huwaidi families, both of whom have likely benefitted from strong representation on the RCC. Clearly, control over basic services by figures linked to the SA recalls local Kurdish-dominated war economies, and invites potential abuse and corruption. Experience from Aleppo further highlights how the monopolisation of such services by partisan private actors can reinforce social inequalities.²⁹

The second issue relates to the fact that private basic service provision is neither legal nor institutionalized. One can envisage the current owners of private basic service systems seeking to reach an arrangement with the GoS whereby they would be permitted to continue operations in the event of a government return to Ar-Raqqa. However, the GoS has shown little interest in surrendering its control over basic services to private actors elsewhere in the country, and is only likely to tolerate private operations to a point. That said, experience from Lebanon illustrates the extent to which the private service market can survive the best efforts of the government in post-war transition periods. Demand was already outstripping supply prior to conflict in Syria, and though Ar-Raqqa’s post-ISIS population is now much reduced, it is hard to foresee that the GoS will be able to cover service needs without allowing private involvement.

BOX 2: New Business and Livelihoods
Several new economic activities have emerged in Ar-Raqqa throughout the conflict. Most are in some way related to relief, recovery, and reconstruction, and include real estate and property development, heavy machinery (for construction, debris clearance), basic service provision and potable water sales, repair workshops, and trade in locally extracted fossil fuel. Additionally, local youth have benefitted widely from the opportunities provided by aid funding deployed to Ar-Raqqa. Though several of these businesses are dependent on the SDF’s continued control over the city and are incapable of replacing traditional livelihoods, they represent a solid income for a good portion of the labourforce and may be candidates for business and livelihood support programming.
Natural Capital

PLATFORMS FOR NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Natural wealth of the Euphrates River basin and proximity to extensive man-made watercourses.
› Favourable agro-ecological conditions for summer/winter cropping and livestock.
› Land is by far Ar-Raqqa’s most critical asset and supports strategic crops.

IMPEDEMENTS TO NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Traditional (rather than modern/industrial) farming methods are relatively common.
› Negative health and environmental impacts of continued makeshift oil extraction.
› Unilateral and potentially punitive Turkish mismanagement of the upstream Euphrates River.
Building on the richness of land local to the Euphrates watershed, massive state-led investment in water infrastructure and agricultural production turned Ar-Raqqa into something of an oasis between Syria’s more populated west and its eastern desert. Starting in the 1960s, this investment transformed Ar-Raqqa from an area renowned largely for fine pasturelands into a city at the heart of an agricultural economy with excellent access to domestic and regional food and animal product markets. The boom was not to last however, as the city had few means to adapt to the liberalization of the Syrian economy in the early 2000s, increasing rates of rural-urban migration, and the later withdrawal of key state agricultural subsidies. Local farming was therefore in a state of decline when the current crisis struck, and has only been further weakened by conflict-related trade network interruption, agricultural value chain disruption, damage to land and agricultural infrastructure, and conflict-related displacement. Like other parts of Syria, it could take decades for the sector to recover from these effects, but for an area with few alternative routes to economic recovery, support to agricultural production must be emphasized.

Lake Assad, the Tabqa Dam, and a vast associated network of canals and water channels were intended to roughly double Syria’s irrigated arable land as part of a Euphrates irrigation project initiated in the 1970s. However, the project was not as successful as first hoped, and government analysis in the mid-1980s found that just 10% of the project’s long term target to irrigate over 600,000 hectares had been met. These disappointing results were attributed to a variety of complex interrelated technical problems in Ar-Raqqa governorate, but the project nevertheless had a largely net positive effect near Ar-Raqqa city, where proximity to the Euphrates River basin enabled the planting of gypsum subsoils to a variety of strategic crops. Cotton, wheat, sugarbeet, rice, and grains were therefore cultivated widely in the years prior to the current conflict, and the banks of nearby Lake Assad were planted within thousands of olive trees.

Satellite imagery suggests that cultivated land in and around Ar-Raqqa remained relatively constant throughout the period during which ISIS was in control of the city. This contrasts with local and other reports, which note that ISIS had little to gain from investment in agriculture, and therefore provided limited support to the sector. Financial and technical assistance to farmers was reportedly limited, irrigation projects were neglected, market access was restricted mainly to ISIS-held areas, and the deteriorating security situation forced many landowners from the area. This suggests satellite analysis of the kind shown above is a reflection of high rainfall in 2014-16, as well as the natural richness of vegetation of the Euphrates River basin rather than continuity in production levels. Indeed, there is little qualitative evidence which indicates that Ar-Raqqa fared any better than other parts of Syria when it came to common conflict-related problems of seed, fertilizer, pesticide, and equipment procurement costs and availability, fuel and electricity for water pumping and machinery, and key agriculture infrastructure maintenance.
Oil

Several oilfields are located in the vicinity of Ar-Raqqa, but production at these sites has either stopped or slowed owing to damages caused by international bombing campaigns targeting oil infrastructure formerly under ISIS control. Output from larger wells southwest of Ar-Raqqa was most heavily affected, and although these sites are now under the administration of the Syrian Ministry of Oil, they remain largely inoperable and in need of major rehabilitation. Besides these more significant pre-war wells, three smaller sites held by the SDF produce around 400 barrels per day. Administered by the Syrian Democratic Council, these wells hold relatively small proven reserves, and their output is largely sold into the Ar-Raqqa market after being processed at the Wadi Ubayd refinery to Ar-Raqqa’s southeast.

Of more significant interest to relief and development actors are the numerous makeshift oil facilities found dotted throughout the southern Ar-Raqqa countryside. Artisanal facilities like these have resulted in many of the same environmental and health-related issues described in the Al-Hasakeh report in this series: Respiratory disorders, cancer, liver and kidney problems are likely amongst non-professional civilian operators and nearby residents, whilst soil and surface and groundwater pollution resulting from leakage threatens agricultural land and residents using local water for irrigation, drinking, and domestic purposes.

As in Al-Hasakeh, the proliferation of primitive oil extraction and refinement methods results from the confluence of several factors: The flight of local oil industry professionals; U.S.-led coalition and Russian airstrikes on formal oil infrastructure; and the imperative to secure an income in a heavily constrained local economy. The full impact of these factors is beyond the reach of relief and development actors, but there is nevertheless scope to help Ar-Raqqa mitigate some of the public health and environmental effects caused by oil pollution that have seldom been addressed in other situations of conflict in the region. Even in the event of an anticipated change of control in the city, relief and development stakeholders could work to identify makeshift oil facilities, assess their impact in partnership with civil society and governmental authorities, help develop locally-led health and environmental responses, and explore alternative livelihood options for those compelled to work at informal oil sites. This work could go beyond Ar-Raqqa and span Syria’s oil-producing regions.

Strategic Water Infrastructure

Completed in 1974, the Tabqa Dam impounds the waters of Lake Assad, a 50 mile long reservoir to Ar-Raqqa’s immediate west on the Euphrates River. Combined with a vast network of associated irrigation canal projects, the creation of the dam and expansion of the lake was instrumental to the growth of local agriculture and massively increased the size of Syria’s irrigated land. Besides their value to the local economy, Lake Assad and the Tabqa Dam carry major strategic importance for basic services across several governorates: Drinking water from Lake Assad supports 5 million people, mainly across Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates, whilst...
Karnieli, A. et al. (2019), Was drought really the trigger behind the Syrian civil war in 2011? Importantly, this study claims that whilst prolonged drought conditions exacerbated the agricultural collapse experienced by Ar-Raqqa and other primarily rural Syrian economies, unsustainable water management in Turkey was a key proximate cause behind the public anger that motivated the Syrian protest movement.

Chudacoff, D. (2014) Water War threatens Syria lifeline. Local sources report that power was available for up to 16 hours per day in Ar-Raqqa during ISIS control. Such access to electricity was far beyond what the vast majority of civilians in other parts of the country enjoyed.

Besides allowing GoS military forces to secure the Tabqa Dam, the October 13 agreement permitted the GoS to deploy to key areas in Ar-Raqqa governorate and across northeast Syria and highlight mounting technical and military coordination between the SA/ SDF and the GoS in response to Turkish pressure. See, for instance: Al-Jazeera (2019) Northern Syria: Regime forces enter the Euphrates Dam, and the Americans and Kurds will withdraw (AR).

The hydroelectric power station at Tabqa supplies electricity to GoS-, SDF-, and Turkish-held areas across Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Homs, Hama, Rural Damascus and (parts of) Al-Hasakeh governorates.

Politics on the Euphrates River
Key water infrastructure has thankfully escaped any serious damage, but it is notable that water levels at Lake Assad have fallen in recent years. A six metre drop was reported from 2011 to 2014, with a study on the issue arguing that changes in cross-border discharge, water reservoir volumes, and transborder groundwater flows over this period indicate unilateral diversion of the Euphrates by Turkey at the upstream Keban and Ataturk Dams. Declining water levels at Lake Assad and associated irrigation canals were further aggravated when ISIS controlled the Tabqa Dam (2014-17). The group reportedly overexerted power generators in order to bolster its public legitimacy through electricity service provision, with generators often drawing far more water than the Euphrates could replenish.

The rate of decline has slowed now that control of the dam has passed to GoS engineers subsequent to an October 2019 agreement between the SDF and the Syrian government. However, it appears the challenge of sustainable water services to Ar-Raqqa and beyond lies less in effective management, and more in international water-use treaties and the resolution of disagreements through international water law. Given Turkish opposition to the SA and the SDF, GoS-Turkish aggression in Syria’s northwest, and Turkey’s presence in northern Ar-Raqqa governorate, the likelihood of near-term progress on either count is improbable. That said, an accurate characterization of the environmental factors behind water use and their repercussions is critical if relief and development actors are to help prevent further conflict and address future climate refugee issues in a city that has previously been seriously affected by drought.
Social Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Ethnic and religious homogeneity: Sunni Arab tribes constitute the vast majority.
- Respect for tribal tradition and custom in dispute mediation.
- Few historic local tensions outside of those produced by state-imposed agrarian reform.
- Cadre of civil society organizations dedicated to social cohesion and healing.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Need to balance the institutional dominance of minority Kurds with Arab majority population.
- ISIS legacy contributes to insecurity, and former affiliates are poorly regarded and marginalized.
- Fragmentation of inter- and intra-tribal relationships makes tribal categorization problematic.
- Poor progress on the identification of the dead and disappeared impedes community healing.
Identity

Despite its Kurdish administration, Ar-Raqqa is — and has always been — a provincial city hosting a largely homogenous Sunni Arab-majority population and little in the way of notable social fissures. Indeed, Kurds were barely a factor in local affairs prior to the current conflict as they represented just a fraction of the population and most were rooted in more northerly, identifiably more Kurdish communities like Tel Abyad. Intercommunal tensions were therefore limited largely to short-lived disputes between individuals or small groups, most of which were ordinarily resolved by appeal to well delineated clan leadership structures and widespread respect for tribal tradition and custom. Indeed, kinship of this kind was the principle upon which relationships between different local tribes were balanced, and this enabled local government authorities and community leaders to peacefully manage the vast majority of local political or socio-economic differences.

Clearly, much has changed since the beginning of the crisis. Inter- and intra-tribal bonds have fragmented over recent years as clans, families and individuals within local tribes have variously allied with the city’s numerous controlling actors (and the GoS). Some, like the Al-Bureij clan of the Bu Sha’ban tribe, can broadly be identified as having been associated with ISIS. But this is no indication of the allegiances of every Al-Bureij member, and practically all local tribes must be understood as representing merely another layer of distinctly individual identities. Meanwhile, the arrival of Kurdish authority in an Arab-majority has generated more apparent mistrust between Arab and Kurds/Kurdish-linked figures, which is unhelped by the sometimes heavy-handed treatment of dissenting locals.

Arab-Kurdish Tension

Having always been a minority in Ar-Raqqa, Kurds now represent just a fraction of the population. Few have returned to the city after displacement, and local reports claim only a handful of Kurds now live in the area, most of whom are employed by local public institutions. Given the number of Kurds is vastly disproportionate relative to the political, economic, and military power wielded by Kurdish and Kurdish-linked figures, there is a palpable sense of mistrust towards the SA’s control. Criticisms include a lack of Arab representation, the application of heavy-handed security measures (arrests, shutting down demonstrations), and the erosion of local identity through the imposition of a brand of politics alien to the local Arab majority. Whatever the cause for Arab anxiety, each such concern has been magnified by the ongoing struggle of the SA and the SDF to secure and rebuild Ar-Raqqa, which has in turn reduced the goodwill initially extended to the Kurds and its anti-ISIS forces.

BOX 3: Land, Property and Opportunism

Local sources report significant justice-related matters surrounding property ownership subsequent to the damage caused to the city, mass evacuations, and buildings appropriated/destroyed by ISIS and the SDF. Having been practically deserted in late-2017, the SDF set about destroying properties belonging to former ISIS members in a move that was perceived locally as an indication of a Kurdish-led effort to engineer demographic change. Ultimately, this kind of collective punishment did not result in significant numbers of Kurdish arrivals to Ar-Raqqa. However, when combined with the abandonment of thousands of properties, it did create space for Kurds to invest in the reinvigoration of the property market. The purchase of land and property by wealthy Kurds — many of whom do not live in the city — is viewed unfavourably by locals, many of which were displaced and later returned to homes destroyed by the SDF/Coalition operation. The kind of economic opportunism displayed by Kurds in Ar-Raqqa is unlikely to diminish Arab-Kurdish tensions, and could leave a lasting sense of resentment if large numbers of Arabs are forced to rent from Kurdish property owners.

Presently, this does not manifest as ground level intercommunal tension, and can be described in the civilian domain as a sense of public disaffection. However, it must be recalled that disaffection provides a platform for more extreme kinds of local Arab-Kurdish
conflict, and contributes to the kind of local instability touched upon in ‘Security Overview’, above. Most obviously, there is an identifiable Arab tribal dimension to military opposition to Kurdish rule in Ar-Raqqa and nearby areas, much of which is likely supported by the SA’s political opponents in the Syrian and Turkish governments. A number of attacks against Kurdish figures and institutions in the city can be attributed to local Arab anti-SDF/SA militia, and should engender cause for concern for aid programme continuity and partner safety. Such issues highlight the importance of balancing the institutional dominance of the city’s Kurdish minority with the needs of its Arab majority population.

Tribes and the ISIS Legacy
Like elsewhere in eastern Syria, a core component of ISIS’s acceptance strategy in Ar-Raqqa was to enlist tribal figures in systems of patronage and clientelism. This was achieved not only through its trademark brutality, but also by providing opportunities to individuals to wield increased influence, by harnessing long standing anti-government sentiment, and by capitalizing on changing tribal structures in which younger members refused to accept traditional chiefdoms. These approaches were so successful that — at least initially — there was relatively little active resistance to ISIS rule in Ar-Raqqa. Moreover, public services were often more consistent under ISIS than the GoS, and it was hoped that natural resource wealth would be more evenly distributed than by the historically neglectful Syrian government. Of course, this was not to last. After three years of ISIS rule, local tribes exhausted by oppression, random arrests, censorship, and anti-ISIS airstrikes soon sided with the SDF and other parties to the conflict.

Though its systems of patronage may have proven temporary, the penetration of ISIS’s radical philosophy is likely to resonate across Ar-Raqqa’s tribal groups long into the future. Inter- and intra-tribal structures have fragmented subsequent to the different positions taken by tribal figures during ISIS control, and although tribal custom and tradition still predominate, relationships between ‘pro-’ and anti-ISIS tribal factions have frayed, new leading figures have emerged, and some tribal configurations have been tarnished by their prior association with extremism. Certainly, few of Ar-Raqqa’s influential tribal figures can claim to have been on the right side of history given they have each allied with parties that have variously inflicted injustices on the city and its residents. Whether linked to the GoS, ISIS, the SDF, or the opposition, each tribe bears some responsibility for enabling the real and perceived crimes of their affiliates. For the visceral manner in which it commanded consent however, grievances directed at tribal actors previously linked with ISIS are likely to live longest in the city’s memory, and could pose an enduring obstacle to social cohesion.

At the community level, many alleged and actual sympathisers and co-conspirators continue to suffer everyday consequences of the ISIS legacy. The SDF has practiced systematic discrimination against those suspected of collaborating with the group, ranging from intrusive screening and monitoring, to detention, property
Syria: U.S. Coalition should address civilian harm.

ANF (2020), Raqqa working on mass grave: 5,700 bodies recovered so far.

Where recovery teams have been unable to identify bodies, they have reportedly endeavoured to store the bodies in the hope that the means of identification will be available in future.

BOX 4: Identification and Investigation of the Dead and Disappeared

The arrival of the SDF and the Coalition raised hopes that local authorities and foreign actors would lead on determining the fate of the many thousands of people known to have disappeared from Ar-Raqqa over the past seven years. Reports on the issue from rights organizations were scathing on the progress made in this regard however, noting in 2019 that the city’s Kurdish authorities had failed to allocate the resources necessary to carry out forensic analysis of bodies found during rubble clearance or those uncovered in mass graves. Similarly, there has also been little formal investigation into Coalition attacks on the city and their effects on the population, nor has any programme for condolence payments for those harmed by Coalition operations been established. Speaking on the issue, the U.S. Department of Defence has stated that “practical limitations” and “limited US presence” reduced the “situational awareness required to make ex gratia payments”.

Customary international humanitarian law outlines the responsibility of conflict parties to prevent the despoilment of bodies, motivate the search for dead persons, and to commission reparations in the event of unlawful or indiscriminate attacks. By February 2020, response teams working with the RCC’s Emergency Response Team had recovered a total of 5,700 bodies, but had only been able to identify 700 of that number owing to decomposition and a lack of training and DNA testing equipment. The recovery, proper burial, and identification of people found dead or assumed disappeared is an important step towards reconciliation and healing in the city. As is creating avenues for legitimate condolence payment claims. Material and advocacy support to identify and ensure the proper investigation of those killed in the city — at the hands of any belligerent — could represent an important addition to the work of those helping bring a greater sense of justice to those affected by the conflict.
Human Capital

PLATFORMS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Active and motivated cadre of civil society workers.
› Kurdish control allows for women’s empowerment, leadership and participation.
› Space to mobilize women and youth groups to inform programming and peacebuilding.
› Potential for radicalization should drive an economic opportunity-focused agenda for youth groups.
› Considerable scope for education programming alongside school rehabilitation.
› Resilience and knowledge of agricultural workers.

IMPEDEMENTS TO HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Difficult to reverse displacement owing to severe public service shortfalls and economic weakness.
› GoS return is likely to trigger the displacement of those at risk of detention, especially young males.
› Nearly half of city schools are out of operation, leaving thousands without a formal education.
› Civil servant flight and political uncertainty militate against revitalization of local technocracy.
› Largely un/undereducated and non-professional workforce stymies economic diversification.
› Poor service provision and a weak local economy may contribute to a new generation of extremism.
Displacement
As the Syrian uprisings turned violent and the casualty count rose, tens of thousands of people arrived in Ar-Raqqa from the embattled cities of Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and Deir-ez-Zor. For a time, the city swelled, and became known as ‘the hotel of the revolution’. This was something of a contrast to the previous decade, during which Ar-Raqqa’s faltering local economy prompted many to relocate to Syria’s more populous and industrialized west. However, the trend towards inward migration was only temporary. With the arrival of ISIS and the later campaign to force the group from the city, Ar-Raqqa experienced massive levels of displacement. Entire neighbourhoods were deserted, educated professionals left the area in high numbers, and although several hundred thousand people have now moved back/into the city, it is unlikely that many original residents will ever return given the current public service shortfalls, destruction to home and property, and the continued threat of local insecurity.

Civil Service Flight
Besides meeting Ar-Raqqa’s strategic, ethnic, and tribal complexities, responding to local needs is essential: Responsive service delivery can bolster the credibility of local governance structures, diminish social tensions, and provide a platform for self-recovery and development. In the brief period during which the Ar-Raqqa Local Council exercised governance over the city, it was regarded as one of the most effective institutions of its kind in Syria. This was a testament to the city’s local administrative talent, but many of the experienced technocrats serving in local governance bodies fled to Europe and Turkey when ISIS assumed full control in January 2014. For as long the character and composition of governing authority is uncertain, the return of many of these former civil servants is improbable. Some will be concerned that real power in the city lies with the SA rather than the RCC, whilst others will fear a return of the GoS given the experience of local council officials in areas that have been recaptured by the state in recent years. Though the strength of Ar-Raqqa’s civil service is therefore diminished, it must be added that the current crop of civil officials under the RCC are extremely devoted and care deeply about Ar-Raqqa’s future. Not only do they confront a giant governance and recovery challenge, they work under pressure with limited resources and, in some cases, work at great personal risk owing to their alignment with the unpopular Kurdish-led administration.

Working-aged Males: Protection Concerns
As the GoS has looked increasingly likely to return to Ar-Raqqa, young men have reportedly been fleeing the city in growing numbers. This is a rational response given the behaviour of GoS security forces in areas retaken from opposition actors by means of military force or political agreement. In all cases, residents of such ‘reconciled’ communities have faced a variety of protection issues shortly after the GoS returned, ranging from limited freedom of movement, arrest, harassment, property confiscation, and the imposition of arbitrary fines. Males previously involved with opposition armed groups, anti-government movements, and alternative governance structures (including civil society), are generally at higher risk of such protection issues, and many will also be targets for conscription and military service-related arrest. Anecdotal reports describe that practically every residence houses someone that is likely wanted by the GoS, and though this may be an exaggeration, it nevertheless highlights the very real sense of concern amongst the population over a probable GoS return.

Youth
It should be considered deeply troubling that a profoundly conflict-affected generation of young people was revealed upon the liberation of Ar-Raqqa in 2017. Besides living amidst a general state of nationwide insecurity for nine years, Ar-Raqqa’s young people experienced daily trauma under ISIS rule and suffered the effects of massive destruction caused by the anti-ISIS campaign. With schools and medical services steadily coming back into operation, the scale of the problem for young people’s mental health, socio-economic prospects, and general wellbeing is now coming to light. Developmental
milestones have been missed, thousands of children have received a substandard education, young people struggle with mental health problems, and many struggle to envisage a positive future. Given it is unlikely that public services and livelihood opportunities will reach a level that attracts further returnees and migrants for some time, Ar-Raqqa will be heavily reliant on its own population for the foreseeable future. With over half of the city’s population 25 years of age or under, sustainable recovery in Ar-Raqqa must therefore place a strong emphasis on youth opportunity and fulfilment.

**Mental Health**

Levels of violence witnessed by children in the city are described as having caused “severe” and “unprecedented” signs of trauma. Evidently, the detrimental effects of such trauma are not limited to specific mental health diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, but include a range of multifaceted developmental outcomes and functional impairments that compromise family and peer relations, socio-economic performance, academic achievement, psychical health, and general wellbeing. There is also a high risk that children growing up under conditions like those seen in Ar-Raqqa are at greater risk of developing challenging behaviour problems associated with traumatization, which in turn exposes the city’s youth to more violent and coercive treatment from parents and adults similarly struggling to manage the various impacts of war. Mental health is often under-prioritized by aid and development responses to crises, but Ar-Raqqa presents a compelling case for concerted attention on this issue, particularly because the city is unlikely to be an attractive destination for internal migrants for some time, and will instead rely on its own population to drive local recovery.

**Education**

Over 60% of primary and secondary schools were destroyed by the time the SDF had declared the liberation of Ar-Raqqa, but work undertaken in the past two years has helped to restore some semblance of normalcy to the local education system. The creation of the Education Committee within the Ar-Raqqa Civil Council in 2017 has been central to these efforts, and it has assumed a leading role in working with partner organizations to restore school infrastructure and human resource capacity.\(^4^4\) Acknowledging staffing shortfalls caused by conflict-related displacement and migration, it has also prepared training programmes to help compensate for fewer local teaching professionals, and has granted licences to private institutions (mainly at infant level). As a result, local sources state that around 32,000 students across primary and secondary education are now able to attend classes at 27 local schools. Though positive, much remains to be done: Of the 32,000 children attending classes in Ar-Raqqa today, relatively few are in secondary school and none reportedly attend later years of secondary education. Moreover, with 22 schools still out of operation owing to conflict-related damage (or other uses),\(^4^5\) thousands are left without access to an education. Indeed, several neighbourhoods have no functional schools whatsoever (Al-Baath, Al-Mahdi, Ar-Rifqa, Ar-Raqqa).

\(^{44}\) Local sources estimate that 70%-50% of damaged schools have been rehabilitated over the past two years, with 30%-50% of destroyed schools restored over this period.

\(^{45}\) For instance, one school in Ar-Raqqa is currently occupied by the SDF, and another is being used as a headquarters for a local civil authority.
Ammar Bin Yasser, and Al-Yarmuk), and there are no tertiary institutions in Ar-Raqqa after local universities were forced to close owing to staffing shortfalls or damage/destruction. In this context, local sources report that parents and children commonly elect to avoid formal education, either because they have little confidence in the local system, or because local tradition and economic necessity have kept young people at home or in the workplace.

As such, many local young people either leave the area or join the labour market early, but the opportunities they find in the city seldom offer the kind of long term future associated with a full education. Combined with the fact that many children and families opted to avoid school when the ISIS curriculum was in effect, there are a large number of children in the city who lack important years of schooling and normal childhood development. The longer-term socio-economic consequences of this situation for both individual children and community recovery are well-understood, and priority must be afforded to work that provides Ar-Raqqa’s young people with the ability to accomplish their goals. Improved local schooling and training will be insufficient however, and must be accompanied by mental and psychosocial support, including training and equipping teachers to respond to trauma and anxiety.
Physical Capital

PLATFORMS FOR PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Significance of nearby Tabqa Dam and Lake Assad lend strategic importance to Ar-Raqqa.
- Though unexploded ordnance remains a problem, transit and programming is now much safer.
- Vast pre-existing irrigation networks.
- Rehabilitation of cultural heritage represents a potentially powerful source of social cohesion.

IMPEDEMENTS TO PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Massive damage to city-based public service and economic infrastructure.
- Recovery effort has slowed with the (territorial) defeat of ISIS.
- Under-resourced RCC is unlikely to see major investment from Kurdish authorities.
- Improbable that a return of GoS control would result in noticeably higher funding
- Destruction to cultural heritage, including historical and touristic sites.
Urban Environment

Despite claims of the most “precise air campaign in the history of warfare”, the U.S.-led coalition’s operation to oust ISIS from Ar-Raqqa in partnership with the SDF resulted in the kind of destruction seldom seen since the Second World War. Thousands of air and artillery strikes were carried out in support of the SDF ground offensive between June and November 2017, and thousands were killed or injured as a result. Regardless of whether broader principles of distinction and proportionality were ignored and indiscriminate bombing took place, the fact remains that large swathes of Ar-Raqqa’s urban centre were flattened. Despite international and civilian-led recovery efforts, the scale of destruction has impeded the restoration of adequate local services, undermined core local industries and livelihoods, and weakened Ar-Raqqa’s cultural significance. Combined, these conditions attenuate problems of displacement, limit the rate of return, and are highly likely to prolong the recovery of parts of the city that are able to return to normal.

Damaged Public Infrastructure

Initially, there appeared to be a great deal of momentum behind the rehabilitation of Ar-Raqqa post-ISIS. Top-tier officials from Western government departments would reportedly visit the city to support the activities of the RCC, and the funding and interest provided by their departments was instrumental in delivering some notable improvements to local public infrastructure. Sewage and water networks were restored in the Al-Rawdah, Al-Nahda, and Al-Hurriyah neighborhoods, most rubble and unexploded ordnance was removed from the city centre, and lighting returned to streets in the north and northwestern parts of the city. Over time, however, the visits became less frequent, particularly after U.S. funding for Syria was cut in 2018 and the fight against ISIS moved southeastward. High ranking political figures were soon replaced with agricultural or civil society specialists, and local government was increasingly forced into adopting ad hoc responses for essential reconstruction projects.

Although a variety of internationally-funded projects are ongoing alongside continued civilian and civil society initiatives, members of the RCC complain that international actors have lost interest in restoring critical city functions. Evidently, an apparent lack of local and foreign reconstruction resources is a major problem for a city where levels of destruction are so great as to defy even summary description. Indeed, a vast amount has yet to be accomplished: From the installation of reliable and affordable electricity infrastructure to improved healthcare access, a variety of fundamental needs are identified by residents as demanding concerted attention. Moreover, these works are required not only to meet immediate needs. In a context where extremism took hold, was taught for several years in local schools, and may variously remain in pockets of the city, some are anxious that a failure to restore basic services could contribute to a new generation of disenfranchised and radical locals.
Swift action is therefore required if international stabilization efforts are to be sustainable, but greater investment into public service development is unlikely given the SA and the SDF are increasingly on the political and military back foot. It is equally improbable that the anticipated return of the GoS will result in a notable increase in public funding. Indeed, having been in opposition hands since 2012, and with nearby strategic infrastructure resources now back under government control, it is hard to envisage Ar-Raqqa receiving much attention from the GoS should Ar-Raqqa be surrendered to the government.

**BOX 5: Ar-Raqqa’s Health System**

After having reportedly been reduced to just one functional hospital following the anti-ISIS operation in 2017, Ar-Raqqa’s health sector has shown good signs of recovery. Previously described as “woefully inadequate” at the height of the offensive, seven of the city’s eleven hospitals are now in operation. Five are privately-owned (Modern Medicine, Al-Furat, Dar Ash-Shifaa, Al-Mashhadani, and Ar-Risalah), and two are run publicly with support from international and local aid actors, namely, the National, supported by MSF, Medical Relief, and Humanity and Inclusion, and the Maternity and Pediatrics Hospital, supported by the local NGO, Syria Relief. Reports indicate the number of dispensaries, private clinics, and analysis laboratories is growing, however, it should be noted that the health sector is heavily reliant on third sector support and that medicines and other medical equipment remain expensive for both providers and patients. Need for advanced care equipment is high, with CT scan services required across all but two city hospitals. It goes without saying that

**Cultural heritage**

Inhabited since remote antiquity and sometime capital of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 AD), Ar-Raqqa hosts a series of important cultural artefacts. Though the vast majority of devastation caused in the city was inflicted on Ar-Raqqa’s modern urban fabric, damage to heritage dating from these periods has also been significant. This is a consequence of the perverse interpretation of monotheism to which the city was subjected by ISIS between 2014 and 2017, and the later — more destructive — battlefield damage caused by the bombing and ground offensive that forced the group from the city in 2017. As a result, some cultural artefacts have been forever lost to Ar-Raqqa, but the devastation caused to local cultural heritage should not be considered irreversible and has received notable attention from civil society in recent years. ISIS looted items from the Ar-Raqqa museum dating as far back as the 3rd millennium BC and vandalized other key local heritage sites including the 8th century Baghdad Gate, and the medieval Qasr Al-Banat (Palace of the Ladies). Coalition bombing also blasted two giant holes in the 2.5km Rafiqah ramparts that surround the Old City to enable SDF troops to storm ISIS hideouts in Ar-Raqqa’s historic centre. Though scarred, these edifices are still recoverable.
Certainly, the Ar-Raqqa museum’s cultural significance is much diminished having been vacated of its most valuable assets. However, work to restore such buildings is often underappreciated by development organizations, and it must be recalled that their rehabilitation not only has cultural value, but can also provide a platform for reconciliation through the recognition of shared memory, identity and common cause. Indeed, though relatively small in comparison to similar museums in Damascus and Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa museum’s collection spanned the entirety of human history in the region, and was a symbol of civic pride and Raqawi identity. Grassroots civil society organizations operating out of the Civil Society Support Centre and in partnership with the RCC’s Office of Antiquities and Museums have been working to improve Ar-Raqqa’s cultural sites since 2018, and represent a potentially powerful force for post-ISIS social cohesion.
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