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**What Syria Stands to Lose**

***A View From Raqqa, Where Normal Was Hard-Won***

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In April 2018, I drove into Raqqa, Syria, for the first time since reporting eight months earlier on the fight that liberated the city from the Islamic State, known as ISIS. By April, Raqqa resonated not with mortar rounds but with drilling and the rattle of generators as the city’s residents unearthed the remains of their homes from the rubble that had engulfed them. A town once inhabited by ghosts now slowly shook itself back to life, through sheer force of will and intestinal fortitude.

As I drove into the city, I found one sight particularly befuddling. There on a street full of crushed buildings was a black, proudly hanging sign, behind which a young man sat in front of dozens of glass bottles: a perfume shop, the only storefront open on its street. Who, in all the world, would open a perfume shop in a city that had just emerged from under the black curtain of war and ISIS rule? A place that needed construction companies and grocery shops and pharmacies, to be sure—but perfume?

Some months later, the young perfume entrepreneur would tell me his story of destruction and revival. It was one I had heard over multiple visits, from dozens of Raqqa citizens resuscitating their city: a tailor who now owns a pajama shop, a teacher rebuilding her school, and a hairdresser who now owns her own salon in the city center. Raqqa is stepping forward, its citizens told me, coming back to life slowly, in spite of great fragility and enormous obstacles. Young people who have not given up on their city or their society are leading this revival. And young women are at its center.

**From my five visits to northeast Syria since August of 2017, I have concluded that U.S. policy in northeast Syria is working. A modest investment of U.S. tax dollars has allowed a fragile stability to hold in a place that once served as the capital of extremism.** ISIS has remained under pressure, schools are open, and shopkeepers are bringing the city center back to life. The United States has helped defeat ISIS and prevent its resurgence, and it has **done so not solely through direct U.S. military engagement but by assisting a partner force**—one whose cemeteries are filled with the white marble tombs of young people who gave their lives battling the so-called Islamic State.

The wreckage of Syria’s war is visible the moment you enter the city of Raqqa—and so is the hum of a new normalcy, buzzing with shops, restaurants, and now traffic. That normalcy is perhaps the city’s most remarkable sight. Its loss terrifies a populace that built it on the back of the fight against ISIS. And it hangs in the balance as facts on the ground in Washington shape facts on the ground in Syria.

**WOMEN AT THE CENTER**

Raqqa’s rebuilding is underfunded, incomplete, and imperfect. But the progress is real, and it is not simply the business of men. Women are out, about, and taking part in leading their city.

Hawla is one such woman. I first met her in April, when my colleague and I stepped into her pajama shop, and I saw her again each time I returned.

Hawla said that ISIS fighters used to come to her door asking her to make their clothes, which she refused to do because she didn’t support them or their ideology. “I told them I was sick.” She kept her daughters indoors, especially after one was nearly detained by ISIS for being out on the street wearing a pajama set with a smiley face on it.

In Hawla’s shop last August I met two university students, both young women, who praised the Americans and said they hoped they would stay. **The U.S. presence, the students told me, provided the** **invisible force field that kept ISIS down and the Russians, Iranians, and Turks at bay.**

In today's Raqqa, women are out, about, and taking part in leading their city.

With only a few thousand troops on the ground in northeast Syria, the United States is nearly invisible locally, but it has produced real results. Its presence has provided the stability required for effective local forces—the kind that previous U.S. administrations struggled to coax into being in places like Iraq and Afghanistan—to do the work no U.S. ground force can do. These local forces are tasked with holding the teetering peace in place so that mothers like Hawla can rebuild their society and fight extremism.

Hawla had left Raqqa for a nearby town already freed from ISIS in 2017. Early last year, she returned. Business has been slow, but her father has encouraged her not to give up. What is moving much faster than her business, she says, is the pace of change in her city.

“There is more of a chance for work; the city is getting better, more rubble is getting removed, there are more jobs. And women are everywhere,” Hawla told me. In fact, I had spotted two women working in the Raqqa security forces as we entered the city by way of one of its many checkpoints.

Fatima, a hairdresser I met in April, is a female entrepreneur whose business is booming. At that time she worked at one of the few hair salons open in the city. She had styled women’s hair throughout ISIS’s rule in Raqqa. Some ISIS wives—including, she says, an American woman who used to show her photos of the United States, the “land of the Kafir,” on her phone—were regulars at her salon. Fatima told me she stopped worrying about the Hisbah, or religious police, detaining her once she started doing their female officers’ hair along with the wives’.

“They would take me in the afternoon and I would be out by the evening,” she said of her brief detentions, noting that they would let her out in time to do the hair of ISIS wives the next day.

Fatima wanted two things, she told me in April. One was security and an end to the war. The other was to have the most famous hair salon in Raqqa. When I saw her again four months later, the salon where she worked was hopping, full of women getting their hair done and makeup perfected. We went to the storefront across the street to talk, only to be regularly interrupted by employees with questions or customers consulting about needs for their upcoming weddings. By December, she was too busy to pin down for a ten-minute interview: she had saved her money and opened her own salon, just as she had hoped, and her only focus was on growing her business.

*Aboud Hamam/REUTERS A woman sells clothes on a street in Raqqa, May 2018*

Last summer I attended the opening of the Raqqa Women’s Council, an organization that supports local women’s economic and civil society activities. I went in expecting a dog-and-pony show created by and for foreigners. Instead I spotted no Americans, only Syrians (including one young woman wearing the then-infamous Zara coat saying “I really don’t care do U?”). In December I shared a quiet coffee with two women from the council. Both came from Raqqa and neither had ever worked outside the home before.

“Who watches your children?” I asked, as an energetic toddler bounced around one of the women’s knees. The woman, who did not want her name to be published, said she had just finished a ten-day training from the council preparing her to manage her finances and seek her own livelihood.

“My mother-in-law,” the woman said. “She told me, ‘Go, I will watch the kids.’ She said, ‘We never had these kinds of chances in our generation.’”

**A U.S. POLICY SUCCESS**

**Americans have largely missed the many advances—tentative as they are—in northeast Syrian towns from Manbij to Tabqa to Raqqa and Kobani and Qamishli. Domestic affairs seem to have left little share of mind or attention for anything beyond U.S. borders**. But there are other occluding factors. The battle to free the region from ISIS was bloody; Turkey has made clear its continuing discomfort with the Syrian Kurdish fighters who led the battle in Kobani and beyond; and Iraq and Afghanistan taught the United States to stay out of wars in the Middle East. Today so many Americans have learned the lesson of U.S. ineffectiveness in the region so well that they fail to register a story of a policy gone largely right across two administrations.

This omission is an avoidable shame. And it threatens with extinction a *conditional stability that often feels like science fiction* when you see it on the ground, *so different is it from what we have come to expect from the post-9/11 interventions*. Thanks to the courage and effectiveness of Syrian citizens and local forces, together with the Oz-like presence of the United States, things are actually on the right path—not a perfect one, but one on stable ground. And the United States has pulled this off with a barely visible footprint. I have never glimpsed the Americans out and about except on the road in their pickup trucks and at a kabob shop in Manbji—just the low profile that U.S. policymakers have always said they wanted.

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Last month, when Turkish President Recep Tayyip ***Erdogan threatened to invade*** northeastern Syria, I happened to be on a military base belonging to the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. That night I met the commander, Mazloum Kobani, whose Kurdish People’s Protection Units, or YPG, have been backed by the United States since their 2014 battle in Kobani against ISIS. A Christmas tree twinkled behind him as Mazloum told me how gravely Erdogan’s words had struck him.

**“This will affect the fight against the Islamic State,**” Mazloum told me. He would have to pull his forces back from the ISIS fight to protect Syria’s border. He spoke of those deployed to fight ISIS in Hajin, in the east. If soldiers’ families in the northeast were to be threatened by a Turkish offensive, Mazloum noted, “they will have to pull back from the fight in Hajin, and the situation will get very complicated.” Moreover, he told me, “**If the Turks attack, the Iranians will get the benefit. They want to come to this area. Right now we are stopping them from entering, but if we are occupied with the Turks, the Iranians will make the most of the chance.**”

On the other hand, Mazloum told me, “If there are no attacks from outside, no hands from outside, we will improve what we are building here. We can build on the situation. People are returning to normal life.”

**THE NEW NORMAL**

I finally met that perfume shopkeeper in December. Mohamed is 20 years old, and he has had his store for four years. “During ISIS we couldn’t continue our studies, so I wanted to have a shop,” he told me. “I opened this.”

In the final months of the fight for Raqqa in 2017, he fled west, to the nearby city of Tabqa. He returned to Raqqa nearly as soon as ISIS left and spent a month rebuilding his shop. Today his perfume business supports his parents and his siblings. “When I reopened the shop, I posted on Facebook, and people came,” Mohamed said. “At first when we opened we had 20 or 30 customers a day. Now we have 50 or 60.”

He didn’t want me to take a picture of his shop. No need to be too visible in a city where ISIS sleeper cells might be around the corner: better to blend in. Everyone knows the moment is precarious. You can feel it moving around the city: everything is okay until it isn’t. The day after my visit to the perfume shop, a military commander delayed her meeting with me because ISIS had placed an IED beneath a fellow soldier’s car. No one died, but the attempt was a reminder of the pressure on local forces to keep ISIS at bay. “We just hope we have stability like we did before the war,” Mohamed told me. On the street outside, traffic was double or triple what it had been eight months before. “The situation is improving.”

As for the question that had stayed with me since April—why sell perfume in a city struggling to revive after a war?—seated in front of glass bottles filled with fragrances in hues of beige and amber, Mohamed looked at me with an expression that betrayed how inane he thought the question. “After all,” he said, “everyone needs to smell good.”

**A PRECARIOUS FUTURE**

In April, a ***schoolteacher named Shamsa urged me to tell the world in general, and the Americans in particular, that it and they needed to stay in Raqqa, and not to give up on helping to bring a basic level of services back to her city.*** Her students had seen beheadings and hangings under ISIS, and they needed to empty their minds of such horrors. Fifteen hundred kids came to her school each day, exploding with joy and energy as they shouted their ABCs. At first parents had worried their kids wouldn’t be safe from ISIS back in school, but all the kids wanted was to be there.

**Schools like this one will be Syria’s enduring defense against extremism and the region’s best insurance for a future that looks different from the past.** But Shamsa’s school did not have enough windows. Or doors. The little ones lucky enough to have coats and ski hats wore them in the classroom to stay warm. I saw one beaming little boy, maybe seven or eight years old, in the school’s hallway wearing only a white T-shirt to protect him against the winter cold. I felt so very inadequate to his grit. So was the world.

Electricity and water are in short supply in Raqqa. Salaries don’t go far enough to cover generators. Teachers struggle to make ends meet. But the city continues to shake off its ISIS years and keep extremism at bay. **The region is standing itself up and writing its next chapter, backed by very limited U.S. investment and the lightest of U.S. troop presences. That is an actually effective policy.** Very big questions about the future loom.

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