

Trump Administration Backing “Local Security” in Liberated Raqqa is a Good Choice

Ethnic communities should be enabled to protect their own

by Walid Phares

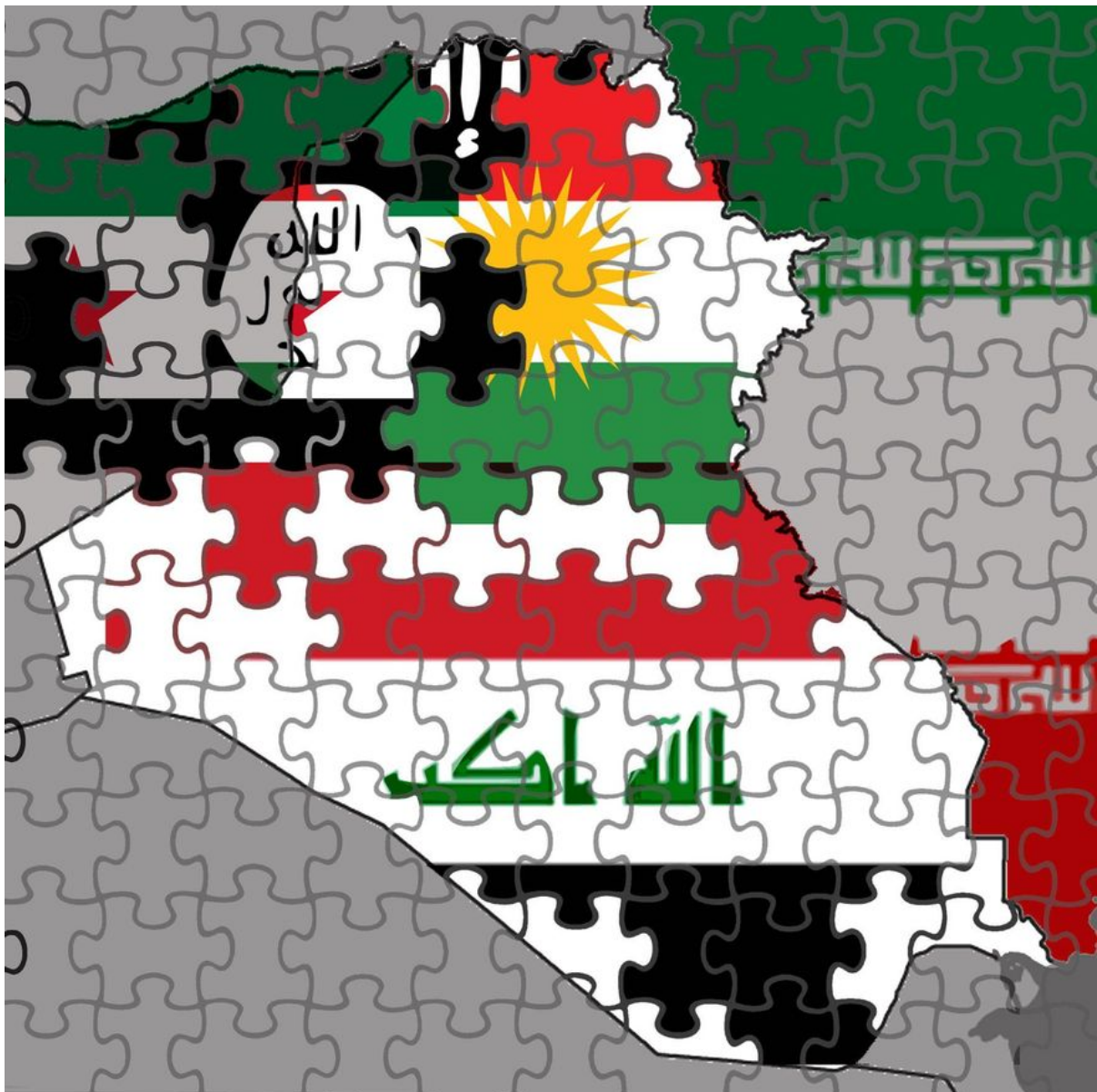


Illustration on the challenges to allotting of territory in northern [Iraq](#) by [Alexander Hunter/The Washington Times](#)

The fall of Raqqa into the hands of US-backed “northern Syria forces,” which comprise “Syria Democratic Forces” (SDF) and

local Arab Sunni militias, is signaling the beginning of the end of ISIS's geopolitical control inside Syria. The next step is the liberation of Deir el-Zour in the east and some other enclaves still held by Daesh.

The immediate issue now on the front burner is who will be in control of the areas liberated from ISIS inside Syria? Answers matter in view of the crisis now underway between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, especially after the move by Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi to seize Kirkuk from the Peshmerga. Since 2014, the Kurdish forces had controlled areas it had defended against ISIS in northern Iraq, but it is now being compelled to relinquish them to the Iraqi government. Are post ISIS realities different in Syria? Will pro-US forces on the ground keep the areas they liberate, such as Raqqa and Deir el-Zour, or will they also have to surrender them at some point?

This weekend, President Donald Trump said that the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State, would soon enter a new phase, in which the United States would "support local security forces, de-escalate violence across Syria, and advance the conditions for lasting peace, so that the terrorists cannot return to threaten our collective security again." He said in a statement: "Together, our forces have liberated the entire city from ISIS control. The defeat of ISIS in Raqqa represents a critical breakthrough in our worldwide campaign to defeat ISIS and its wicked ideology. With the liberation of ISIS's capital and the vast majority of its territory, the end of the ISIS caliphate is in sight." He added, "Together, with our allies and partners, we will support diplomatic negotiations that end the violence, allow refugees to return safely home, and yield a political transition that honors the will of the Syrian people."

In short, the Trump Administration -according to the White House- will not surrender liberated territories in Syria to the Assad regime before a comprehensive political solution

which would decide the future of security in the country. The U.S will consolidate the freed areas by backing what it calls “local security forces” and at the same time engage in talks about the future of Syria and its institutions. While Iran and Hezbollah are supporting the regime and endeavoring to regain control of zones in the hands of all “insurgency forces” including ISIS, other Islamists, Kurds, and a wide array of armed groups across the country, the US is making it clear that it will stand by its own “allies on the ground,” those who have taken Raqqa away from the “Caliphate.”

I am glad to see that the administration is adopting a policy we advocated since 2011 and called for repeatedly since 2016. That is, to support vetted local forces to liberate areas from terror groups such as ISIS and back them in the management of the freed areas, until real strategic talks yield a permanent solution for the Syria war. Back in 2013, in a piece published by Fox.com, I made the case for US support for a “small free Syria.”[\[1\]](#) The call preceded the rise of ISIS and the Trump administration. The Obama White House extended minimal military assistance to these “north east” forces, especially after the ISIS blitz of 2014, but it did not commit to assist them post ISIS. The question remains open to multiple scenarios.

One of the problems is Turkey’s sharp opposition to the Kurdish YPG component of the SDF, the other challenge is Iran and Assad’s determination that after ISIS, control would only be held by the regime. Over the past two years, I argued that in order to have successful negotiations about Syria, those negotiations need to be between two balanced forces.[\[2\]](#) The regime is already supported by Russia and Iran. Many opposition factions are said to be controlled by radical Islamist factions, and thus not trusted by the West. The sole group backed by the US remains the only party to be backed on the ground and later in the negotiations. The Trump administration adopted this equation by supporting the SDF and

US Coalition assets, helping them push back against ISIS all the way to Raqqa. After the liberation of the city, Washington had to make a decision: What happens next? President Trump clarified it: The US will support “local security forces.”

The real questions now are how and where will these local units operate? The administration hasn't yet adopted -at least not openly- an official plan. Thus, we would like to offer some additional ideas to both the White House and to Congress.

First, it is important that the coalition that would supervise the “local security forces” be inclusive and representative of all ethnic communities, as they are located on the ground. Kurds should be in charge of Kurdish areas, Arab Sunnis of their zones, and Christians enabled to protect their own towns and villages. Free Syria should be pluralistic and multiethnic in management as well, though its defense should be unified and under US supervision.

Second, it is crucial (as I briefed Congress, the European Parliament and communicated to the media when I served as a foreign policy advisor during the campaign), that the management of liberated areas be given to locally elected governments such as municipalities and representative local councils. Bottom up legitimacy is extremely important. Thus, I would recommend that the local security forces would be operating as municipal and local government police forces, preparing them to assume legal and legitimate responsibilities, away from militia status.

A free Syria in the northeast should be organized and supported as a legitimate manager of the population, but also as an acceptable party to the forthcoming negotiations on the future of the Syrian state.

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