



# Challenges for peace in Syria without East Euphrates

September 2020

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# IMPACT

**Civil Society Research  
and Development**

Published by:

IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development e.V

Keithstraße 10 ,

10787 Berlin

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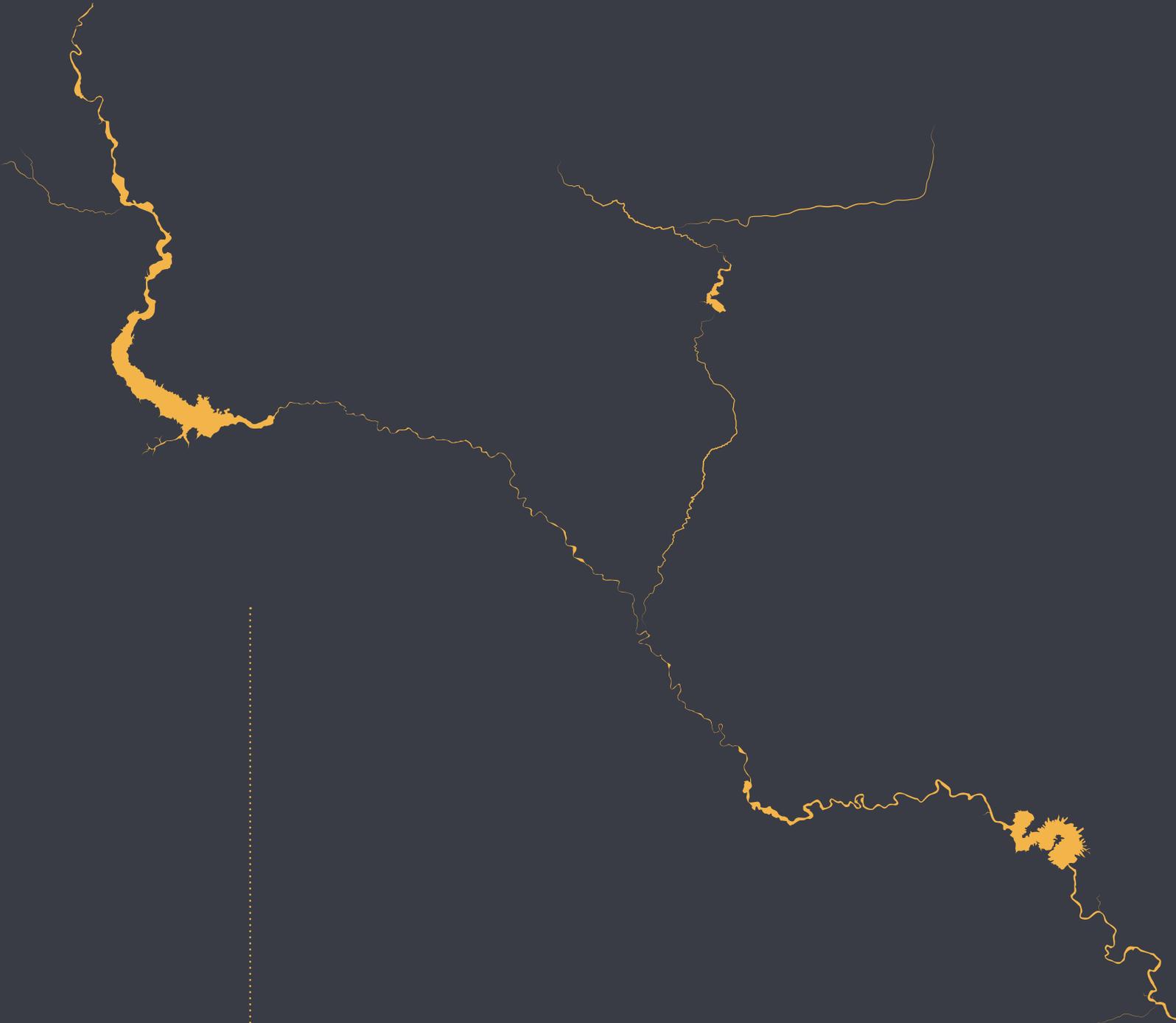
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## SUMMARY

The region east of the Euphrates has become a major component in Syria's ongoing conflict. To this day, it is still subject to shifting borders and the presence of a wide variety of local, regional and international forces. The ongoing instability of this region means that no political deal for Syria will conclusively resolve the overall conflict without including this region. But the tensions that make the area so important to resolving the broader conflict are also making such a deal unlikely in the near-term.

## MAIN POINTS

- The defeat of IS did not bring peace to the area. The presence of the regime, the Turks and some remaining IS presence on the borders are keeping tensions high.
- International and regional powers continue to view the region as a “post-IS” area, but in fact the volatility is more a legacy of four decades of regime control-and the vacuum left by its absence-than of the jihadi group’s relatively limited time there.
- Since mid-2012, the region has been in a constant state of self-perpetuating instability, with each power’s intervention generating further instability, culminating with the recent Turkish military intervention.
- Russia’s presence has been more important following the Turkish military intervention. Russia has become more active, just a few kilometers from the US base. This makes the area a new field of influence for Russia and increases the likelihood that

# INTRODUCTION

the regime presence will stay in place for the foreseeable future.

The part of northeastern Syria east of the Euphrates River, known in Arabic as Sharq al-Furat, has become highly significant to the Syrian conflict. The area-which is largely controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<sup>1</sup>-borders Turkey, Iraq and regime-controlled parts of Syria. Practically every local, regional and international player in the Syrian conflict has some sort of presence in the area: Russian forces are deployed along with the Syrian regime; US troops and others affiliated with the anti-ISIS coalition are stationed there; and the Turkish army, in alliance with local Sunni Arab militias, has taken control of several areas along the border.

Despite the diversity of forces there, the region is also highly isolated: To varying extents, SDF leaders have troubled relations with all of their neighbors. The affiliation of some leaders with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has created hostility with Turkey, as well as tensions with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Relations with the Syrian regime and its backers are also tense. As a result, the borders with all of these territories are either closed or open only to limited traffic.

The complexities of the region have only deepened over the course of the conflict as a variety of actors have intervened and sought to impose their particular ideological and political projects over the territory. In 2014, the Islamic State organization seized control over much of the area, imposing its own strict interpretation of Islamic law and incorporating the region into what it portrayed as a restoration of the Islamic Caliphate. Following a long military campaign, the SDF, in alliance with Western powers, defeated the Islamic State, taking control over a massive territory encompassing large urban centers such as Raqqa and putting it under the management of its "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" (NES). The NES proceeded to launch another experiment in governance, informed heavily by the leftist philosophy of "democratic confederalism" advocated by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. This experiment only increased the isolation of this region from its neighbors, in particular as tensions with Turkey rose. These tensions culminated in October 2019, when Ankara launched a military campaign and seized territory from Ras al-Ain to Tel Abyad, further increasing the region's already-high levels of militarization and inaugurating a new, third phase in the region's tumultuous history of governance.

The increasing importance of this region to resolving the broader Syrian conflict raises the question of what, exactly, its future holds. Any national-level political deal for Syria will probably not include this area, due largely to the objections Ankara would inevitably raise. At the same time, without such a deal, the area is unlikely to be stabilized, making the overall conflict difficult if not impossible to resolve.

The dilemma of the northeast can be summarized by: a potent mix of institutional vacuum; overlapping and conflicting international and regional agendas; polarized and fragile local dynamics; and the dominance of a domestic player-the SDF, whose legitimacy is contested by a variety of local and international actors. These factors will continue to guide the trajectory of Syria's northeast for the foreseeable future-and, with it, the shape of the conflict in Syria at large<sup>2</sup>.

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1 - The SDF is a complex organization including fighters from a wide variety of ethnic and political backgrounds. The organization's leadership is composed of a mix of leaders from local communities as well as leaders from multiple Kurdish parties, including some former fighters with the PKK in the Qandil Mountains region of Iraq.

2 - This study is based on interviews conducted by the IMPACT team and data compiled between December 2019 and May 2020 in Syria

# Overview of the region

This region has been undergoing continuous conflict and fluctuation since 2011, with a wide variety of opposition, jihadist and Kurdish actors, as well as major international and regional players. The Turks, the regime, the United States, the Russians are all involved to some extent.

Until the regime withdrew from the area in the summer of 2012, the area was composed of the three governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hassakeh and parts of Aleppo governorate. These remained governorates until 2014, when the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) divided the area into "cantons" as part of their experiment in governance (the administrative boundaries did not precisely correlate with the previous governorates). When the Islamic State group took Raqqa and other parts of Syria's east from the opposition groups that controlled it at the time, it demolished the border with Iraq and incorporated the area into its wilayat system. When, in 2017, IS was defeated, the area was incorporated into what is now referred to as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES).

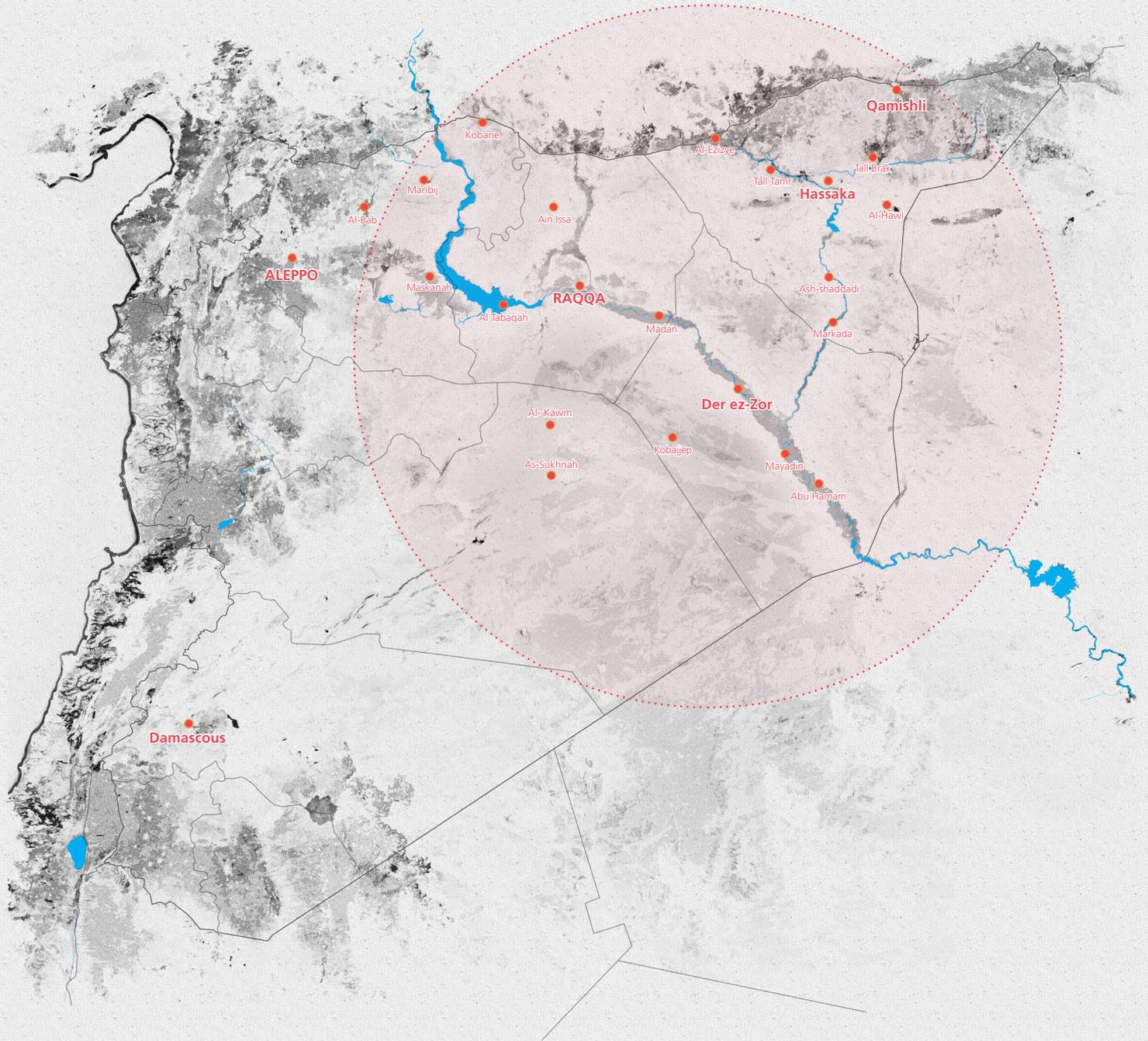
The recent Turkish military incursion has further reshuffled the area. The Turks took an area stretching from Ras al-Ain to Tel Abyad. The United States withdrew its forces from these areas, the Russians established a presence in the town of Amouda near Qamishli, and the Iranians developed a presence on the south side of the region.

The region's borders are still dynamic and subject to change. Unusually, they include crossings with both state and non-state actors. With the regime, they include the Tabqa crossing point, as well as several crossings on the Euphrates River at points where the zones of control between the two forces come into contact. Many of the crossings on the Euphrates are illegal and are used for smuggling. The region also has crossings with the Turks: One of the most prominent is Aoun al-Dadat, which is a crossing between the NES area and the Turkish-controlled Euphrates Shield area. It is used largely for trade, although it is not an official crossing. The area also has the Semalka crossing with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, as well as the Yaarbiya crossing.

Finally, the region also hosts six camps for displaced people, including the al-Hol camp, with about 70,000 people, including many families of IS fighters.<sup>3</sup> The region also has a large prison with about 10,000 former IS fighters. The resulting mix is extremely volatile and liable to face continuing shifts.

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3 - Camp and Informal Site Profiles: Northeast Syria, October 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camp-and-informal-site-profiles-northeast-syria-october-2019>



ALEPPO

RAQQA

Der ez-Zor

Hassaka

Qamishli

Damascus

Al-Bab

Manbij

Kobane

Ain Issa

Al-Eziye

Tall Tamr

Al-Hawl

Jal-Brak

Maskanah

Al-Faqah

Madan

Ash-shaddadi

Markada

Al-Kawm

Kobajep

Mayadin

Abu Hamam

As-Sukhnah

# Legacy of the regime

The current complexities and paradoxes that complicate efforts to find a political solution for the region today can be traced back to the legacy of regime governance.

The regime exerted strong centralized control over the region from the late 1960s up until it started to lose control in late 2011. When the regime began to withdraw from the area, it left a major vacuum, giving rise to a chaotic situation in which a wide variety of groups were able to step in. Eventually, the chaos culminated with IS taking full control in 2014, including major centers such as Raqqa, allowing them to fill the gap left by the regime with their own political and ideological project for the following three years.

The area suffered heavily under IS and the fight against IS took a major toll on the area's infrastructure and social relations. In the end, the SDF took over huge swathes of territory from IS with support from the US-led international coalition. This raised a dilemma in terms of how to govern this territory, much of which lies outside the traditional areas in which the SDF had operated. The territory amounted to around a third of Syria's total, and included many Arab and other communities in addition to Kurds. To deal with these areas, the SDF introduced a light version of the autonomous administration model, including the commune system developed by the PYD in areas it had previously controlled. They called this the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, now the NES.

The tensions resulting from the attempt to impose this system in such a short time have contributed to the ongoing instability in the area.

# Fragmentation

One continuous development in the areas east of the Euphrates throughout the conflict has been a fragmentation of previously cohesive territories. The region of Deir ez-Zor is a prime example. Before the conflict Deir, ez-Zor was a center for the governance and control over its surrounding environs, acting as a key hub for eastern Syria, much as Aleppo acted as a key hub for northern Syria. Also like Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor lost control over its environs during the course of the war, losing its status as an administrative center for those regions. The implications for the area have been significant.

Deir ez-Zor is divided into four areas, cut through with two dividing lines. The first of these lines is the Euphrates River itself, which divides the area into the so-called “shamiya” and “jezira” regions. Shamiya is south of the river and is controlled by the regime, while jezira is the area north of the river, controlled by the SDF. Within these two areas, there are areas known as the khat sharqi (“eastern line”) and khat gharbi (“western line”). The western line is also sometimes known as the khat baggara, in reference to the Baggara tribe that inhabits the area. The eastern line is inhabited largely by the Agaidat tribe.

The governorate of Deir ez-Zor has been shattered by the war. While the main city of Deir ez-Zor is controlled by the regime, territorially, the governorate is divided between the SDF and the regime. Again, this is similar to the patterns that have played out in Aleppo, where the regime has control over the city, but parts of the countryside remain contested.

In the spring of 2017, the town of Kasra in a Baggara “khat gharbi” area became a military hub for the SDF to attack local ISIS positions. The same year, in September, the area became relatively stable and secure after the defeat of ISIS.

To govern the territory, the SDF created a model that differed from the administrative structures in the Kurdish-majority areas, calling it the Majlis Deir ez-Zor al-Medani (the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council). It invited university graduates and educated figures from the region into an initiative to establish the council. Historically, Deir ez-Zor was ruled from the city of Deir ez-Zor-but, given the regime presence in the city, this wasn’t possible, and so they needed to find an alternative. In the beginning of 2020, they settled on the al-Salihiya region, which is between the khat sharqi and khat gharbi areas, and therefore is seen as more politically neutral because it is not overly affiliated with either region.

The head of the civil council is Abu Omar al-Shaiti, who is a Baggara. His deputy is from the eastern countryside, from the Agaidat tribe. Both of them and the council itself are affiliated with the Self-ES’s regional government president, Abd Hamed Mahbash.

What this shows is that Deir ez-Zor is fragmented into two parts, divided between great powers-the United States on one side, and Russia and Iran on the other. The Deir ez-Zor of history-the first city built after the Tanzimat times of the Ottomans-is essentially gone. One part of what remains is attached to Damascus, the other to Qamishli.

# Militarization

The area has remained heavily militarized, and tensions have run particularly high since the Turkish intervention, which took Tel Abyad, among other territories. There were three major consequences of the advance, which took place in October 2019.

First, members of the SDF, specifically its Arab members, had their fate tied more and more closely to the SDF and the NES, since they feared that the Turks and allied Arab groups would take revenge on them for working with the SDF. They likewise feared similar treatment from regime forces, which also advanced. The result was that the SDF and the NES became more coherent, and more closely linked to Arabs in the region.

Second, the Turkish intervention took away the former center of the NES, which had been in Ain Eissa since 2017. The SDF was forced to move its leadership to an area close to the American base near Qamishli. The NES moved to Raqqa. Today, the NES continues to function but lacks as clear a physical center as it once did, which has had negative consequences for its ability to carry out its governance projects in the area.

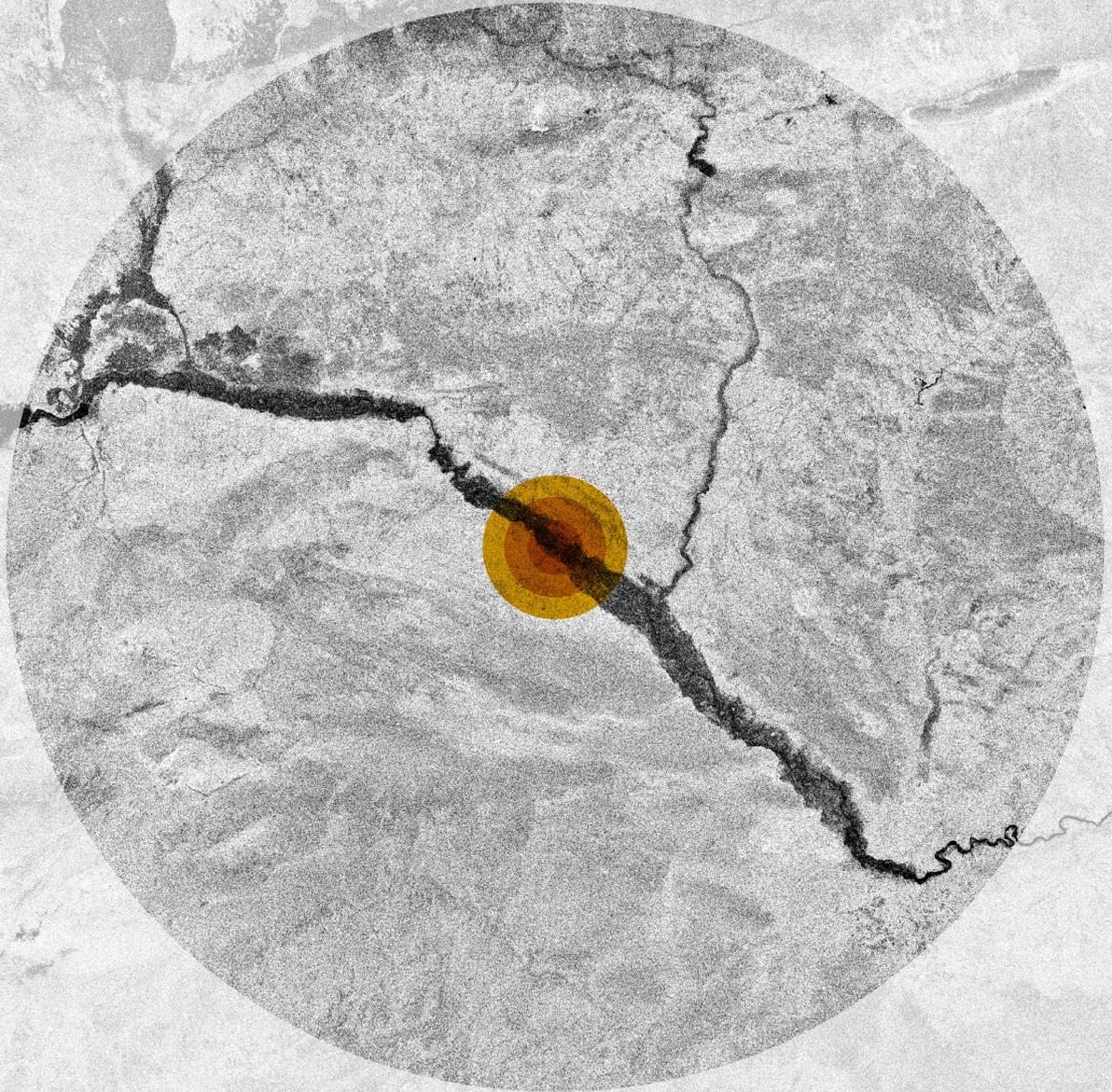
Third, the intervention facilitated increasing Russian involvement in Qamishli. They continue to work through the regime, but have become a much more notable and active presence in the area. The US, regime, SDF, Russia and Turkey are all now highly active in a very small area, creating a potentially volatile situation.

Since the defeat of IS, millions of dollars have been poured into the reconstruction and return efforts of international NGOs, American contractors, and local authorities. However, the ongoing security tensions have ensured that progress has remained limited and unstable throughout the region. The area has remained effectively an island, hit by tensions from the south, where the regime has advanced, and the north, where Turkey has a major presence.

This has meant that it has become increasingly militarized, not only in terms of the international presence, but also on a local level, where the lack of development has impeded the ability to move beyond this situation.

The towns of Shuheil and Jadid Aqeedat provide a clear example, showing the hazards faced by the areas in the post-IS environment. Both have had historical importance for the flow of jihadis, both into Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, and then the other way around, into Syria, after the 2011 uprising began. Given this history, the two towns are in many senses more significant examples of post-IS governance than Raqqa, which was more of a symbolic stronghold and less of a logistically important area for IS.

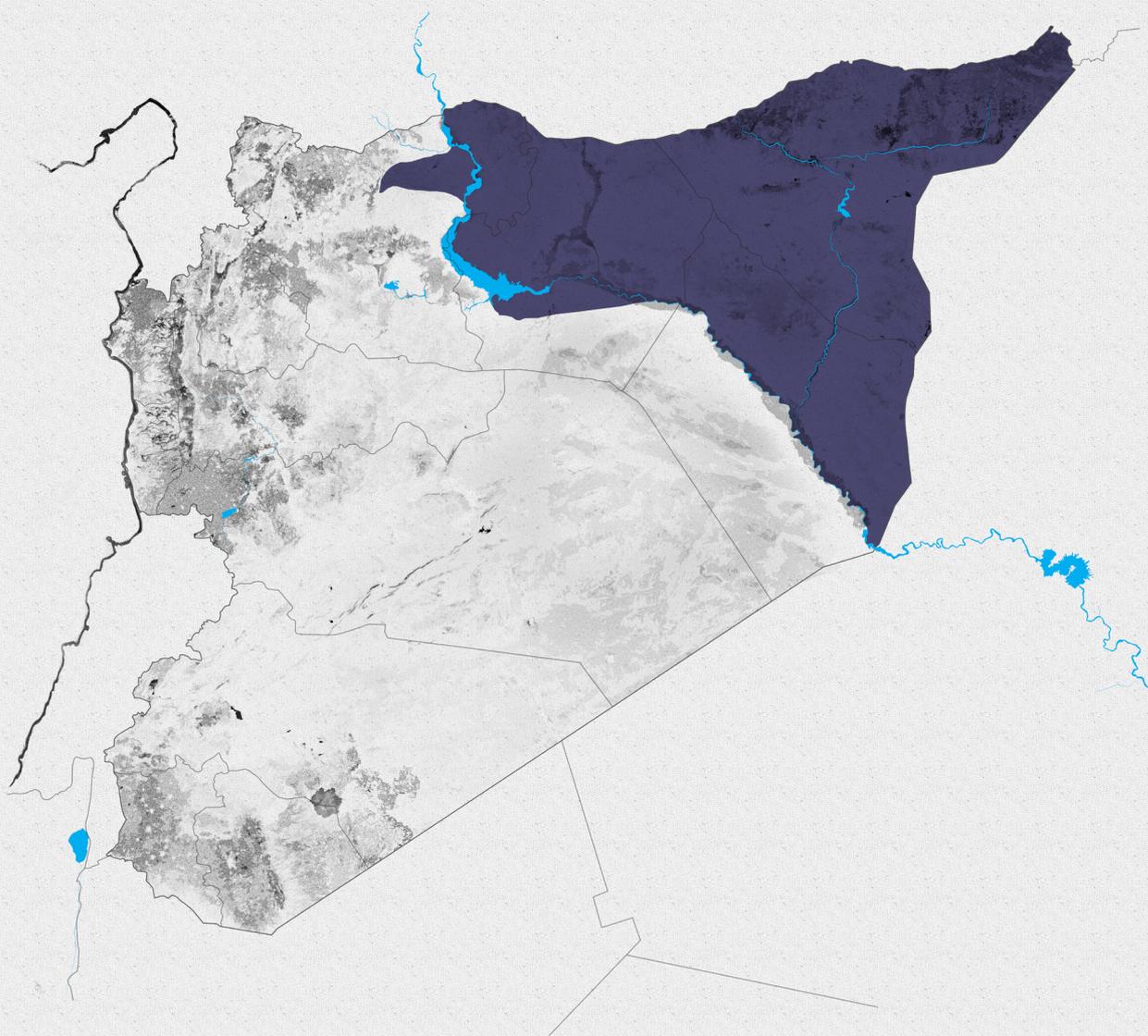
By early 2013, the al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra controlled Shuheil, while IS held Jadid Aqeedat. In the spring of the following year, IS displaced Nusra to take both. The SDF then took the territories during the 2017 fighting with IS. But under SDF rule, the economy has not recovered. There has been no movement for reconciliation taking place on the local level, and thus few incentives for refugees to come back. A continuation of these trends is likely to lead to increasing tensions and continued militarization.



## Fragile experiment

The governance of the area east of the Euphrates remains highly experimental and, as a result, it is very fragile. This fragility and the instability in the area have been mutually reinforcing, once again complicating efforts to find a political solution for the area as well as to facilitate the return of refugees, upon whom the area will be highly dependent for recovery and reconstruction.

Under SDF rule, the area has isolated itself at the same time as being isolated by others. The following is an examination of the dynamics in two of the major areas, the Jazira region and Raqqa, which illustrate the challenges ahead.



# IQLIM AL-JAZIRA

From the regime side, what is known as “Iqlim al-Jazira,” or the Jazira region, is comprised of Hassakeh province. From the perspective of the SDF, it comprises Qamishli and Hassakeh cantons. The two refer to the same boundaries and territory.

This area has four main dimensions which are key to determining the power structure in the area.

The first is its borders, which it shares with both Iraq and Turkey. Tensions with Turkey have kept their border closed, limiting economic activity and exchange. The case with Iraq is more complicated, as SDF and Iraqi Kurdish leaders have a shared security interest in the area and so have maintained a working relationship, but their overall relations remain far from warm due to historical problems and Iraqi Kurdish leaders’ relations with Turkey.

The second is the presence of Arab tribes in the area. This area is demographically rich, with Assyrians, Kurds, Arabs, and others. Kurdish-run political parties and administrative structures have a dominant role in the area. However, the Arab tribes, most of whom are now affiliated with the SDF, have been able to remain highly relevant because of their demographic weight. Even if they do not comprise an outright majority, they can still act as spoilers or stabilizers as the case may be.

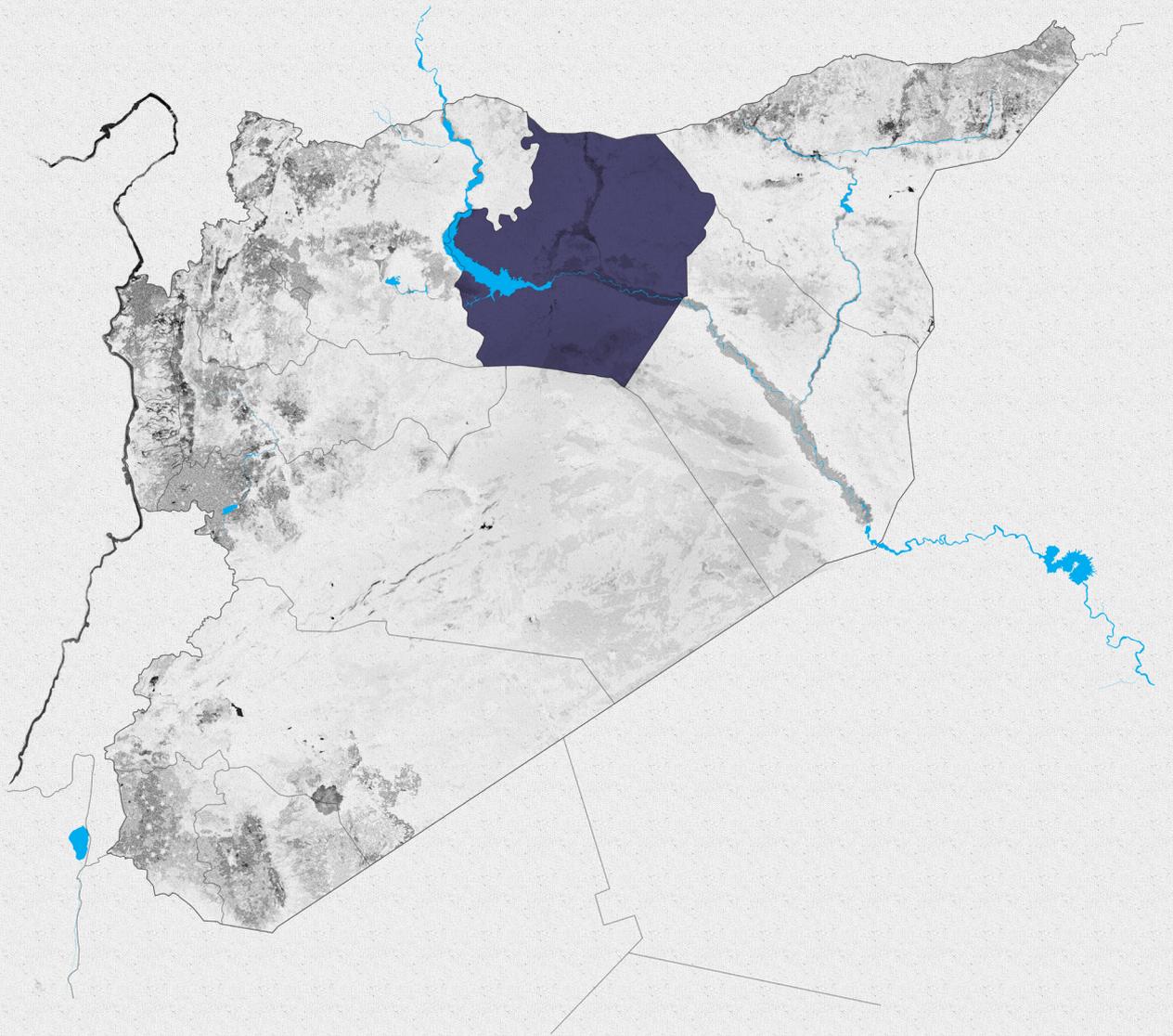
The third factor is the continuing presence of the regime. It is geographically present in the city centers of Hassakeh and Qamishli. It also maintains army bases near both those cities. The regime is also still paying the salaries of state employees even in situations where there is no institution functioning, which has helped prop up the local economy and make it relatively functional compared to the rest of Syria.

The regime has over 70,000 state employees in this region alone. The regime also maintains a presence through its relationships with local Arab tribes. For instance, Nawaf Abdelaziz al-Muslit is a sheikh of a local Arab tribe. After the uprising began, he left for Saudi Arabia and then Jordan and then returned to Damascus. He’s now a part of the regime network in the region. For instance, he acted as an intermediary between security agencies and some members of his tribe, whom he brought from Lebanon recently to the Iqlim al-Jazira area. What this example shows is that there is a type of regime presence in the area maintained through their existing networks—they are able to increase the number of loyalists in the area in exchange for taking their names off the security lists, for instance. Muslit is just one example of many local sheikhs who are affiliated with the regime in this manner.

The fourth factor is the region’s markets, which are relatively active and rich compared to other regions. For instance, in Hassakeh city, the main markets—Salahiya market, the Heyy al-Mufti market, and the Tell Hajjar market—are all under NES control, while the regime’s presence is limited to the “security square.” The NES is able to set prices and regulations, collect taxes, and provide services such as security and cleaning. This gives the NES a mechanism for influence in the area where the regime was once in command. In Qamishli, the market is similarly important and vibrant and controlled by the NES—even though here, too, the shadow of the regime is nearby.

The most effective administration established since 2014 has been in Iqlim al-Jazira, as well as in Afrin and Kobani. The presence of US troops and regime forces has created a counterbalance that has prevented Turkish military advances in the area. However, this balance has remained precarious. At the same time, the regime’s presence gives it leverage in any potential deal with the NES.

What all of this shows is that the NES’s experiment is not 100 percent complete, even in some of its core areas, because the presence of outside forces are still required to maintain a semblance of stability.



**RAQQA**

After the international coalition and the SDF expelled ISIS from Raqqa city, it became the first time the Kurdish-dominated forces had to govern an entire city-before it had mostly been governing towns and countryside. Even Qamishli was shared with regime control. Thus, Raqqa was a major experiment to see how they would govern-what would be their priorities and practices? What would be their major concerns?

The way they viewed it was in terms of security and the economy.

In terms of the economy, the city had three main vegetable markets. The entire region was over 75 percent agricultural, with strategic products such as wheat and cotton. The NES controlled these strategic products, and no one was able to buy them if they were not recognized by the NES.

To oversee security matters, they formed a body called the Majlis al-Tersheeh (the nomination committee), which was started in the town of Ain Eissa, for the figures who could nominate others to the Raqqa Civil Council. The nomination committee had over ten names, including a mix of local notables such as tribal sheikhs and intellectuals from Raqqa city and then people who had historical links to the Kurdish-dominated power circles affiliated with the PYD. Together, they formed the Raqqa Civil Council, and the co-presidency, with both men and women. The co-presidency is a feature of all the NES's administrative bodies.

When they entered into Raqqa, which is mostly Arab, such moves were interpreted of Kurds interfering in their affairs. This caused demographic problems as the NES moved to put the region under its control in security terms as well as controlling strategic crops such as wheat and cotton.

Some of the figures in control were affiliated with the PYD earlier, while others became affiliated through the SDF during the fight against ISIS. The latter category included many tribal notables, but they did not necessarily represent the tribes. This is in large part a legacy of the regime era, when changes within tribes and governance by Damascus resulted in multiple heads for certain tribes. IS later tried to use the tribes to avoid a "Sahwat"-style insurgency, as seen in Iraq in late 2006, and the SDF later relied on the tribes as well-all of which resulted in a situation where certain tribes have multiple heads and none is truly representative.

While there was a significant wave of returnees to Raqqa in late 2017 and early 2018, mainly from Turkey and nearby camps for displaced people, the overall situation discouraged many others from returning, including from the badly-needed professional class, such as doctors, engineers and technocrats like state officials and dam operators.<sup>4</sup> Many of these figures had relocated around the world, but did not come back.

In addition to breaking the region's isolation, there is a strong need for it to move beyond a "post-IS" mindset, under which it has been governed in a sort of security-minded emergency recovery fashion. IS is gone, and yet this mentality persists among both the SDF and major international actors in the area. Now is the time to move on from this perspective and think of the area as an opportunity to provide a model of governance that acts as an alternative to the regime-that is, thinking of it for the long term, and not simply as an everlasting emergency.

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4 - Ar-Raqqa City Strategic Response Plan - July 2018, OCHA, August 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ar-raqqa-city-strategic-response-plan-july-2018>.

# CONCLUSION

The area east of the Euphrates is a major component of Syria's ongoing conflict, with strong regional and international dimensions. There can be no lasting peace in Syria which does not take into account this region and which does not attempt to connect it to the rest of Syria's territory and break its isolation. Yet it is not included in the political process. This is the paradox of the area: You cannot create peace without including this region, but the Turkish veto in particular will ensure that it remains outside the framework of any potential settlement.

At the same time, the leaders of this region-some of the core leaders who were ex-PKK fighters-have managed to establish themselves in territory along the border with Turkey, creating an element of regional conflict for the area. These tensions will remain a dominant factor in the region until a Syrian-Syrian settlement that includes this area-a possibility that unfortunately seems unlikely in the immediate future.

Unlike opposition and rebel groups, the SDF has not tried to position itself as an alternative to the regime in Damascus itself. Their project, instead, is limited to a specific geography, with a political project built on top of that geography. The political ideology and rhetoric of the PYD-as well as the PKK-in recent years invokes a non-nationalistic vision linking democratic communities across a variety of territories throughout the Middle East. It is therefore inherently non-territorial in its vision, and attempts to transcend the limitations of nation-states and modern borders. However, when the SDF has attempted to spread this vision outside Kurdish-majority areas in Syria into Arab-majority areas-where it does not have prior support or strong knowledge of local social dynamics-it has proved far more fragile. What this shows is that territory still matters-that is, their political view is still linked to a specific geography, which in turn means that the project itself has a certain fragility: Any changes to the control over this geography will necessarily entail a change in the political project.

The lack of institutional stability in the area, the experimental nature of governance structures, and the presence of a wide variety of local, regional and international players with conflicting agendas is likely to keep northeastern Syria in a volatile condition for the foreseeable future. Because the region is so central to the conflict, this will need to be taken into consideration in efforts to find a lasting solution for Syria's ongoing conflict. Any settlement which does not include a consideration of the region's complex dynamics-and the barriers they have posed to stability-will be unlikely to achieve lasting stability for Syria as a whole. At the same time, any attempts to stabilize the area internally without taking into consideration a broader, national-level settlement to the dynamics that are contributing to its instability are also likely to meet with limited success.

## **IMPACT – Civil Society Research and Development e.V.**

founded in Berlin in 2013, is a non-profit civil society organization. With a team based across Europe, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, IMPACT aims for a globally active and well-connected civil society as the cornerstone for social and political change. To this end IMPACT focuses on long-term and balanced support to individuals and organizations in both conflict and developed countries through its fields of work of development, dialogue and social engagement. With a significant emphasis on research

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IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development e.V.

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