



## *Introduction*

On 19 December, the United States officially announced the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. Following this policy shift by the Trump administration, The Stabilisation Network (TSN) sought to understand how Raqqawis view this decision and its ramifications on their society, city, and lives.

In the 24hrs after the announcement, TSN gathered the opinions of over forty individuals of both genders via TSN's networks in Raqqa Province. The overwhelming majority expressed confusion and shock over the decision and fear and uncertainty about the future. In general, most Raqqawis were concerned first and foremost with the security situation. At the forefront was anxiety about the regime's return, followed by scepticism about Turkey's war with the Kurds and its potential stabilising role in Raqqa, and finally apprehension about Daesh's return to Raqqa. Another important concern for Raqqawis is the economic situation after the US leave. The US fostered an environment that allowed for the proliferation of international non-governmental organisations. Without the US, the jobs and relief these organisations provided are now called into question. Importantly, not a single interviewee supported the decision.

## *A Security Vacuum*

TSN contacts were overwhelmingly concerned about the security situation. Indeed, most interviewees believed that the US's withdrawal will create a security vacuum in Raqqa, upsetting the tenuous calm that has defined life in Raqqa since October 2017 when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) removed Daesh from the city and province. When asked about who they believe will become the new power broker in Raqqa, many said the Syrian regime. For most Raqqawis, this is a negative outcome. One interviewee stated that the US was "a safety valve for Raqqa" which prevented the regime from re-taking control of the province. Another resident reported that the American withdrawal is a "disaster" and he has heard rumours that the regime's *shabiha* [Alawite militias that do the regime's dirty work] is already threatening revenge against Raqqawis.

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For similar reasons, Raqqawis that TSN interviewed expressed scepticism over Turkey's potential new role in Raqqa and believed that Turkey will not want to act as a stabilising force in the province. Rather, most believe Turkey will attempt to expel Kurdish forces from the province and then hand over Raqqa to the regime. Multiple interviewees believed that the SDF will not go away easily, and that a war between Turkey and the Kurds in Raqqa is imminent. One interviewee specifically reported cynicism about the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), believing that they are "mercenaries, unaffiliated with the old revolutionary FSA members."

Another widely commented on outcome is Daesh's resurgence in the province. Those that commented on Daesh believed that the group's resurgence in Raqqa will result in more



Figure 1 : al-Na'm Traffic Circle in Raqqa City (Source - Arab News)

bloodshed as it kills those Raqqawis that were against the group in its final days. Less common were feelings of anxiety about Iran or Iranian militia intervention in Raqqa, with only one male Raqqawi commenting on this potentiality.

### *Economic Uncertainty*

Many of TSN's contacts, both male and female, also reported fear and uncertainty about the economic situation. Many benefited from the proliferation of international non-governmental organisations that followed the SDF into Raqqa in October 2017. One woman reported that she is the family's breadwinner, and she fears that she will lose her job and be unable to provide for her family and community. She commented that her situation is not unique and many of her friends are in a similar situation. Another woman was not so certain. She heard that the international organisations will remain and most Raqqawis will

keep their jobs. She was part of the small minority of Raqqawis that TSN interviewed who were not as pessimistic about the American withdrawal. Another woman reportedly heard that the Raqqa Civil Council will continue to operate, and that the US will still play a role in Raqqa, just without a military presence. A Raqqawi man stated that if the US left it would "create chaos on all levels, political, economic, and social." However, he believed that the American withdrawal is all talk, and that nothing will change on the ground.

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### *Conclusion*

The underlying emotion expressed in these interviews was war-weariness. Interviewees were tired of conflict and many reported fear of being forced to leave their homes and becoming refugees once again following the US withdrawal from Raqqa. In short, most Raqqawis believe that an American withdrawal will upset the tenuous calm and throw Raqqa back into a state of chaos. One Raqqawi woman was blunt, "The American decision is not welcomed at all, we are all lost. The international organisations and the governance structures will all go with the US. We don't know what the future is."





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