



## Pending Assault on Raqqa Sparks Talk of Syrian Partition

*Experts believe U.S. unlikely to return territory captured from Islamic State to Assad regime*

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Several top foreign-policy experts in Washington say they are confident the United States won't return Syrian territory taken from Islamic State fighters to the Syrian government and hint that the U.S. may be headed toward long-term occupation of parts of the country.

"I think if eastern Syrian is done correctly, Fred Hof of the Atlantic Council told LifeZette, "it can become a very large protected area."

"If it's given to the Assad government, it's entirely self-defeating," he said, referring to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, comparing such a scenario to "putting the arsonist in charge of the fire department."

Hof previously worked on the issue of Syria at the Department of State, under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. But an expert at a leading conservative think tank in Washington, the Heritage Foundation, has a similar take.

"It wouldn't be turned over to Assad," said Jim Phillips of the Heritage Foundation, talking about the city of Raqqa.

Raqqa, a city of about 22,000 in northeastern Syria, is the last large urban area in Syria firmly controlled by ISIS. It is now surrounded on three sides by Syrian Defense Forces (mostly Kurds) and by U.S. Special Forces, who are expected to launch an offensive to take the city center in coming weeks.

But what happens to Raqqa after ISIS is driven out?

"It would be part of Syria, but not part of Assad-ruled Syria," says Philipps.

Philipps says he doesn't think Syria will ever be a "unified state" again, and that what President Donald Trump said on the campaign trail about the U.S. staying out of Syria "may no longer be operative."

“It’s not realistic for the U.S. to turn over areas liberated from ISIS to Assad,” he said.

The day before both experts spoke to LifeZette, there was a celebration in Damascus — an independence day celebration — celebrating 71 years since the French colonial rulers were driven out and the Syrian Arab Republic established. The day is known in Syria as Evacuation Day.

Syria’s borders were drawn by the British and French during World War I and have remained the same ever since — for 100 years. But will they remain much longer?

Hof says a large, protected area of eastern Syria not under the control of the Syrian government would not mean Syria had been partitioned. But it would then be hard to know what to call it.

He says locals would serve as administrators of the city, ideally, with protection provided by the U.S. and its allies and by NATO.

“You could have an administration arise that the U.S. would recognize,” he said.

John Glaser of the Cato Institute, warns that the fight to drive ISIS out of Syria may only result in temporary victories.

“There doesn’t exist a long-term military solution to the problem of ISIS,” he said, noting that ISIS is a Sunni insurgency that arose following the U.S. involvement in Iraq.

Taking Assad out of the equation, he says, is probably not the answer.

“At least in the immediate future, without the Assad regime, you’re going to have a political vacuum,” he told LifeZette.