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WHY IS THE ISIS FLAG BEING FLOWN OVER RAQQA ONCE AGAIN?

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There has been a video of an ISIS flag been flown on Raqqa which has been circulating a lot around digital media in the last days. One would be forgiven for thinking that it was taken back in 2016, when ISIS still controlled the city and used it as the capital of its caliphate. But in fact it was taken in 2026, just a few days ago. So, why is this happening? Had ISIS not been defeated? For those who are concerned with the possibility that ISIS may resurge once again and want to understand what is happening, this article will try to explain it without assuming any previous knowledge of the situation.

WHAT IS ROJAVA?

The region known as Rojava is the part of Kurdistan (the land where the ancient Middle Eastern Arianic Kurdish people live) which is occupied by the Syrian state. During the different regimes that have ruled the country, the Kurdish people have faced discrimination and violence of many kinds and have never been seen as true citizens of Syria (they were not even given birth certificates, so officially they did not even exist for the state).

During the "Arab Spring" that swept the Middle East in 2011, the people in Syria rose up against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Initially there were many popular and event leftist elements among them. But different powers such as Britain wanted to overthrow the al-Assad regime and replace it

with a government more friendly to the West (like they did in most other countries at this time), and so they supported different factions of radical Islamists groups that ended up monopolizing the so-called "Syrian opposition". Despite the initial weakness of the regime, Russia saw it as an ally against the increasing influence of the West in the Middle East, so it propped it up and allowed it to stay in power. At the same time the opposition had the backing of external powers to train them and arm them, so they were also not defeated and the country devolved into a bloody civil war that lasted years and created one of the biggest humanitarian crisis of modern times.

The exception to this was the Kurdish region of Rojava (Kurdish for "West"). Since the 80s the Kurdish people had been organized by the PKK. The PKK (the Kurdistan Worker's Party) was a Kurdish political party created in Bakur (the part of Kurdistan occupied by Turkey) in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan and other Kurdish and Turkish militants to pursue the liberation of Kurdistan. Although initially a Marxist-Leninist organization that pursued national liberation through guerilla warfare, since the 90s it had slowly changed its ideology, adopting a form of socialism known as "Democratic Confederalism" which does not seek to create a separate nation-state nor to destroy the existing ones but instead to organize society outside of it at every level to achieve its rights and demands in a peaceful manner while only defending itself when attacked. Its main pillars are communal radical democracy, women's liberation and communal eco-industry. The PKK and its ideology also had a great influence on Rojava and was widely supported, with different underground committees and self-defense units being organized since at least 2004. So when the uprising started in Syria and the forces of the regime were weakened, the Kurdish people seized the opportunity and declare their "autonomy" from the state, not fully separating themselves from it but creating structures of self-governance and self-defense following their ideology. This is what is known as the Rojava Revolution and its political self-administration eventually comes to be known as the AANES (later DAANES). While still facing war and isolation, the region of AANES enjoyed a relative peace and stability for all ethnicities and religions inside of it through its confederal and pluralistic system of political organization.

WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH ISIS?

The other main thing Rojava is known for is being one of the main actors in the defeat of ISIS. Although the origin of ISIS is subject to discussion, it is clear that they were a project created by different state-powers to pursue their agendas in the Middle East. Among them most likely the UK, Turkey, Qatar and Pakistan were involved. When ISIS came to Syria they expanded rapidly, with no force able or willing to oppose. And they created the capital of their caliphate in Raqqa (the place where the picture is from). But then, despite having the chance to go to Damascus and take the capital of the country practically unopposed, they instead suddenly changed course and attacked the Kurdish areas. This is probably a consequence of Turkey's influence, since the Rojava Revolution has been and is being seen by Turkey as a big threat, as it is the main enemy of the Kurds and specifically of the PKK. But in the battle of Kobanê (a small Kurdish city in Rojava) the Kurdish forces put on a fierce resistance street by street and house by house and managed to deal the first significant defeat to ISIS.

At that point, the USA which until then was mostly watching from the sidelines to see who would come on top, suddenly came to the support of the Kurds. Presumably they feared they would lose their influence in the region if they didn't intervene. And thus the "International Coalition" to fight

against ISIS was created and the USA entered into an uneasy alliance with the nascent Kurdish-led project.

WHEN DID THE CURRENT CONFLICT START?

Now moving forward to 2024, ISIS had been basically defeated by the SDF (the multi-ethnic military force created because of the expansion of the Rojava Revolution from its initial borders into majority-Arab regions) and its main surviving cadres are imprisoned. Now, there was a delicate balance between the different forces in Syria (al-Assad, the different opposing militants and the SDF), since nobody seems to be able to defeat the other but still violence erupts from time to time. But there is something else happening in the world, and that is the war in Ukraine. This has taken a lot of the attention and resources from Russia. And apparently, at some point a deal is struck between NATO (aka USA and Britain) and Russia. It's not known exactly what they agreed on, but presumably for the USA to reduce its support for Ukraine in exchange for Russia to withdraw its support from Syria. Once this is done, at the end of 2024, the West mobilizes all of its militias against the regime and, through the collaboration of elements inside the regime that most likely had been infiltrating it for years, the regime falls in a matter of weeks with almost no fighting after more than a decade of civil war.

And who is chosen to replace it? Ahmed al-Sharaa, previously known as al-Jolani, a former Al Qaeda sunni Islamist leader, who in the last years had been moderating his rhetoric. This is probably part of the strategy of the West since 9/11: to replace their radical Islamist operatives with "moderate Islam" ones, and al-Sharaa is just one of the figures who accepted to work with them and in consequence was trained and prepared to take the position of al-Assad. This is why there was such a smooth transition after he took power, donning a modern look and appealing to the West with its rhetoric while integrating many Islamist factions into his regime.

After this happened then came a period of "negotiations" between the new Damascus regime and the DAANES/SDF. The latter wanted to integrate into the new administration while retaining its autonomy to pursue its own political and social project and in fact proposing it as an example in which different peoples and religions could live together under a new decentralized, pluralistic Syria. The former seek to impose a centralist Arab state that follows Islamist principles. So as one can imagine the negotiations were difficult. And in the interim several massacres took place against other minority populations in Syria, such as the Druze and the Alawite. Damascus wanted to neutralize other possible obstacles for its centralist regime, as they prepared to deal with the SDF.

Finally, at the end of last year 2025, the negotiations completely broke down and Damascus moved to attack the regions of the DAANES. They had a lot of success initially, like gaining support in the majority-Arab regions of the DAANES of the leadership of many Arab tribes. They capitalized on the political and economic interests of Arab elites, their rejection of the women's freedom ideology of the administration and the distrust for the Kurds, who some of them saw as forcefully imposing their system on them, despite attempts to include them on equal terms over the years. But more importantly, in the al-Jolani administration, being backed by the West, they saw the opportunity to become citizens of an internationally recognized state, overcoming the embargo and isolation to which both Baathist Syria and the Autonomous Administration had been subjected to for years. So once again al-Jolani was able to win not so much through military force but by taking advantage of internal division among his opponents and using the support of the West. As a result, most of the

Arab-majority areas previously held by the DAANES are now in the hands of the Damascus regime.

During their attacks, the new regime and its affiliated gangs have unleashed a wave of violence that recalls that of ISIS, accompanied by a huge disinformation campaign to justify it and hide their atrocities. In fact, when the SDF lost control of the prisons, in which the ISIS militants were being held, many of them were liberated and started to immediately reorganize themselves and commit massacres. This lead to the famous photo with which we started this article.

WHY ARE THE WESTERN POWERS NOT HELPING?

It is said that the USA is allowing this to happen because they plan to bring these ISIS militants to fight against Iran-aligned militias in Iraq (in fact they already began to transport them there). And that one of the reasons they have withdrawn their support from the SDF is because the Kurdish leadership refused to support them in this conflict.

Ultimately, the USA wants to reduce its direct involvement in the Middle East so they can concentrate on reinforcing their control over the American continent (the recent kidnapping of Maduro in Venezuela is an example of this). Their objective is to diminish the conflicts in which they are directly involved without giving up areas of influences and important trade routes. Their objective is to start to decouple from China's economy. They see the Asian giant as their main opponent and they are preparing themselves to confront them in the future. In the Middle East, they are getting rid of whatever opposition is left and supporting regional partners aligned with them to oversee it. Israel will play the role of representative of the West and main hegemon in the region. And Western-aligned Arab states like Saudi-Arabia and the developing Al-Jolani regime will be its collaborators. What matters now is not "importing democracy" into the region, but willingness to support the West against their enemies. In exchange, Islamist and authoritarian rule are tolerated, mirroring the model that Trump and the Republican party is building at home.

After Syria, Iran is probably next, after all its main partners in Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq are eliminated one by one. Turkey may also be on the chopping line if they don't give up their expansionist policies and resign themselves to have a secondary role in the region under Israel's supervision. And Britain, even though they prefer not to shine light on their role in all of this, has a hand in everything that is taking place, with years of experience and preparation in the region which even the USA lacks.

Israel for its part is wary of the Islamist government of al-Sharaa and they probably don't want ISIS to spread again. So they may be willing to collaborate with the Kurds, but only on the conditions that they give up on their socialist ideology and become a classical nationalist ethnic movement under its protection. This would turn the Kurds into just another tool for the West, so they will fight to stop this from happening at all costs. Other Western powers, such as France, have made their intent of supporting the new Syrian regime clear. Recent Whatsapp chats between Macron and Trump, leaked by Trump himself, show that the French president is "totally in line on Syria", demonstrating that they are willing to sacrifice the Kurds as an attempt to dissuade the Americans from taking over Greenland. Germany has deep economic and political ties with Turkey and has been at the forefront of Kurdish repression in Europe since the 90s, so no help will be coming from them either. And neither China nor Russia would gain anything from intervening. No, Rojava can't count on any state power to help them out of the goodness of their heart.

SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

Although the al-Sharaa faction has some ideological differences with ISIS, which has caused conflict among them in the past, it is clear that is much more willing to work with them than with the DAANES. At least they are very happy to unleash them upon their enemies, both in Syria and Iraq, presuming they will be able to deal with them once they have done their dirty work. Whether this actually materializes or ISIS will be able to reestablish itself in the region is hard to say at this point. But in the end both the Damascus government and ISIS are seeking to establish an islamist regime that will only bring more suffering to the people of the region. So anyone who hopes for peace and stability in the Middle East (and by extension, in the world) should not see much difference between the two, if there is any at all at this point.

But. The Rojava Revolution is not over yet. The forces of the SDF have retreated into the majority-Kurdish areas (Rojava) and have declared that they will fight until death if necessary to defend themselves and protect the gains of the revolution. So far they have successfully repelled all the attacks in their main strongholds. And, as we speak, there are hundreds of people who are crossing the borders to reach Rojava and join the fight. There is even a caravan that has been organized to travel from different parts of Europe all the way to Rojava to support it. At the same time, many actions and protests are taking place all around the world in solidarity. So, although it is fair to say that the vision of a peaceful and united Middle East, exemplified by the Rojava Revolution, has been gravely wounded, it is far from dead. It has been victim of a conspiracy between Western powers, local authoritarian nation-states and their Islamist collaborators. So their best hope at this point is the support of grassroots initiatives from all around the world to put pressure on the Syrian regime and every other country involved in the conflict to stop the violence. Already, due to the wave of support after the attacks started, the Damascus government announced a 4 days cease-fire, which has been prolonged already. Although they have not really stopped the attacks, this shows that they are vulnerable to the pressure and want to preserve their moderate image towards the West. This is why everyone should follow what is happening and support Rojava in any way they can. Because at this crucial moment, not only the fate of the Kurds and other peoples living in the North and East of Syria is at stake. But the hope for a peaceful, democratic and united Middle East.



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