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Who will govern Syria after ISIL?

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The scenes of the residents of Manbij celebrating their liberation from the horrors of ISIL were heart-warming. Who would not laugh and cry with relief after enduring two years of daily terror and insecurity – and being unable to leave for fear of being killed? With so little good news coming out of Syria these days, Manbij is an all-too-rare victory.

The real problem is: what next? In some respects, Manbij is a microcosm of the problem faced more broadly by the United States and Arab allies inside Syria. Who can take over if both ISIL and the regime of Bashar Al Assad vanish?

The country is currently divided between three groups with clear intentions: the regime, which seeks to regain control across the most strategic parts of the country; ISIL, which continues to seek to defend and expand its "state"; and the Kurdish forces, who want to secure much of the area near the Turkish border for a state of their own. As for the rest, various militia groups are battling for control, but with no clear group emerging.

In fact, the last two major victories on the rebel side were both won by deeply problematic groups. The siege of Aleppo was broken last week by Jabhat Fateh Al Sham, previously called Jabhat Al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

In Manbij, the group that liberated the town is the Syria Democratic Forces, a militia composed primarily of Kurdish fighters linked to the PKK – a group labelled a terrorist organisation by all

Nato countries, including the United States, which backed the group with air strikes. No wonder, then, that ending the Syrian war seems further out of reach than ever.

For now, there is no group that can, over the long term, administer a town like Manbij and would have the legitimacy to do so. That poses a serious problem for the people celebrating their liberation. It poses an even bigger problem for the possibility of a free and whole Syria. Today, the town of Manbij is celebrating. But when all of ISIL's territory in Syria is retaken, the same question will be asked again: what next?