

SITREP: ISIS strikes back in Syria: Seizing Palmyra, isolating Homs, threatening SDF Advance on Raqqa



Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces Western Raqqa

Source: ARA news

When President [spoke](#) to US CENTCOM troops at McDill Air Base in Tampa, Florida on December 6, 2016, he gave the impression that the 70 nation US Global coalition was winning the war against ISIS. He effusively said:

The results are clear: ISIL has lost more than half its territory. ISIL has lost control of major population centers. Its morale is plummeting. Its recruitment is drying up. Its commanders and external plotters are being taken out, and local populations are turning against it.

As we speak, ISIL faces an offensive on Mosul from Iraqi troops and coalition support. That's the largest remaining city that it controls. Meanwhile, in Syria, ISIL's self-declared capital in Raqqa is being squeezed.

We have attacked ISIL's financial lifeline, destroying hundreds of millions of dollars of oil and cash reserves.

The bottom line is we are breaking the back of ISIL.

We're taking away its safe havens. And we've accomplished all this at a cost of \$10 billion over two years, which is the same amount that we used to spend in one month at the height of the Iraq War.

The events of less than 10 days later given a significantly troubling situation report in Syria. This despite the defeat of rebel forces in Aleppo by the combined Russia air and Assad regime ground forces after taking the last position held by rebel forces in the last pocket of resistance in Aleppo. Fighting against the ISIS forces inside Syria is quite another matter. After combined Russian Syrian Armed Forces took back Palmyra on May 2015, an ISIS assault reclaimed it on December 12th, quickly overtaking the Russian-Syria T-4 airbase, with abandoned anti-air defense systems, weapons and armored vehicles. ISIS forces have moved on to cut off the main supply road between Homs and Palmyra. Moreover, they are engaged in suicide attacks against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that is driving to encircle Raqqa from the west preparing for a final assault on the city itself. The SDF Forces had liberated six villages in the vicinity of Raqqa. The SDF forces are assisted by embedded US Special operators. Outgoing US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter [announced](#) an additional allotment of 203 additional US Spec ops troops bringing the total to 503. He calls them the 'connection' between the SDF and the US coalition. The Pentagon [announced](#) the take out by air strikes of three key ISIS leaders, involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks on November 2015 and March 2016. Meanwhile, there are reports that the Pentagon is [preparing](#) tougher measures for the

incoming Trump Administration as options for ostensibly gaining closure in the war against ISIS.

Thus, Obama's counterterrorism legacy involving letting others do the fighting in place of sending in US forces appears to be confronting faltering progress and reversals leaving it up to the new Administration on January 21, 2017 to pick up the pace of in terms of force commitments. All of this in retrospect might have been avoided if the outgoing Obama Administration had concluded a status of forces agreement with the corrupt al-Maliki regime in Baghdad in 2011 which might have precluded the mass jail break in 2013 of former Saddam Hussein Ba'athist officers who promptly joined forces with ISIS. There are [now](#) upwards of 5,000 US troops in Iraq assisting the combined Peshmerga and Iraq National Forces in the Battle for Mosul, which has slowed against the intense Islamikaze fighting by ISIS, amid [reports](#) from Pentagon chief Ashton Carter at a briefing in Iraq that there are an estimated 2,000 ISIS dead. US Lt. Gen Stephen Townsend commander of [Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve](#) [estimated](#) there upwards of 6,000 ISIS fighters still in Mosul.

Conclusions

Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah support of Assad forces does not appear to be having much success in fighting ISIS as distinct from the war against Syrian rebels in Western Syria. Whether the suggestions of Operation Inherent Resolve US Lt. Gen. Townsend that the coalition can take back Palmyra and destroy the weapons and dangerous air defense systems abandoned by the Russians and Syrians will be a daunting task. The lack of an effective US ground force working with the Kurdish-led SDF to fend off ISIS suicide attacks and take the Administrative Capital at Raqqa is another major concern. This despite their advances to within less than 25 miles and closing the noose in western Raqqa in Operation Wrath of Euphrates. The Obama Administration strategy of war on the cheap has failed to degrade let alone destroy ISIS. We'll see

what the Pentagon under the incoming Trump Administration in the first 100 days to achieve operational objectives during the ensuing year ahead.

Note these excerpts ARA News, Debka reports and News Comm.au that present a disturbing picture of the lack of a coordinated strategy to finish the fight against ISIS.



Women and Children Liberated in Western Raqqa by SDF December 2016

Source: ARA News

December 12, 2016 ARA NEWS: [SDF expel ISIS from Six Villages after Launching 2nd Phase of Raqqa Campaign 12-12-16.](#)

After launching the second phase of the Euphrates Wrath Operation against ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on Sunday reported new gains in the fight for Raqqa—de facto capital of the Islamic State (ISIS).

The SDF seized control of several villages in western Raqqa in an area measuring approximately 8 square kilometers.

The Kurdish-Arab alliance of the SDF on Sunday captured six villages after clashes with ISIS militants.

“The liberated villages include Merwaniya, Krajah, Hamer Saghir, Hamer Kabir, Qerefdan and Draniya,” a spokesman for the SDF told ARA News at the battlefield of western Raqqa.

According to SDF’s leaders the second phase of the operation is aimed to liberate the western countryside of Raqqa and tighten the siege on the ISIS-held city. Additional to the previous SDF factions, some 1500 new Arab fighters have joined the campaign.

“The time has come to liberate Raqqa and its people from ISIS terrorism. We will enter Raqqa city with help from our Kurdish brothers and the Arab factions of the SDF,” Hussein al-Awak, chief of the SDF Relation’s Office, told ARA News.

Al-Awak confirmed to ARA News that the US-led coalition has provided them with some advanced weapons in support of the Raqqa campaign.

“We have received advanced weapons from the US-led coalition, besides preparing strategic operations against ISIS headquarters,” the SDF official said. “After completing the second phase of the Euphrates Wrath, we’ll move to the final stage of this operation to eliminate ISIS in Raqqa completely.”

During the first phase of [Euphrates Wrath](#), SDF soldiers captured an area measuring approximately 560 km², containing dozens of towns, villages and farms. Military sources told ARA News that more than 185 ISIS jihadists have been killed since November 6. The operation’s long-term objective is the isolation and elimination of the Islamic State in Raqqa.



12-12-16 ARA News: [Retaking Palmyra ISIS Assaults T4 Airbase near Syria's Homs](#)

Islamic State (ISIS) militants assaulted the T4 Military Airport on Monday, breaching its defenses with mortar batteries and heavy machine guns.

Amro al-Hussein, a media activist, reported that ISIS “destroyed at least three warplanes in the T4 Airport and captured some parts of the base, after clashes with the Syrian Army.”

Located in the Homs’ eastern countryside, the T4 Airport is a critical security installation, providing regime forces with close air support. ISIS jihadists were able to storm into the base after seizing security checkpoints in the nearby Mashtal and Qasr al-Hir Districts.

Monday’s assault came just one day after the hardline group recaptured the ancient city of Palmyra in Homs Governorate. Activists and military sources confirmed the rout, reporting that the army had been forced to withdraw under fire.

“The army withdrew after the clashes reached the city center and it became impossible for them to push ISIS back,” local media activist Abas al-Omar reported.

Regime forces were obliged to evacuate their headquarters in Palmyra, heading westward toward Doua District and the T4 Airbase.

According to al-Omar, ISIS had “continued shelling the army’s positions inside Palmyra with mortars and heavy artillery for hours, causing large losses in the army ranks.” Dozens of soldiers were killed on Sunday and a number of others remain unaccounted for, likely taken as prisoners.

Russia had supported the Syrian Army in Palmyra, with airstrikes and logistical support but their efforts were apparently insufficient to save the city.



Russian Vehicles taken by ISIS in Palmyra

Source: Amaq

12-12-16 Debka: [ISIS Seizes big Russian Syrian T-4 air base](#)

Islamic State forces pushed their assault forward to retake the central Syrian town of Palmyra Monday, Dec. 12. By evening, they had entered the big Russian-Syrian T-4 air base outside the town, carrying off substantial quantities of Russian armaments. Reporting this, Debkafile's military sources add that the booty they snatched included different types of ground-to-ground missiles as well as anti-tank and anti-air rockets.

Russian forces manning the base were hurriedly evacuated from Palmyra and the T-4 base, after the worst defeat Russian armed forces had ever experienced at ISIS hands in Syria. Military circles in Moscow commented grimly that the Russian army had suffered "a major disgrace" in Palmyra.

According to our sources, long convoys of ISIS fighters backed by tanks taken booty from the Syrian army, first forced the Syrian 11th Tank Division to abandon the strategic Jhar Crossroad. After that, the way was clear for the jihadis' column to reach the T-4 base.

12-14-16 Newscom.au: [Fleeing Russians leave anti-aircraft missiles to Islamic State](#)

The top US general leading the fight against IS told reporters last night that Syrian Government and Russian forces had "taken their eye off the ball" and fled the ancient Palmyra ahead of a new jihadist attack.

Of greatest concern, however, was the extensive stock of ammunition and weapons the fleeing Russians left behind.

Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend said Russia and Syria was likely to attempt to take the city back again. But if they don't, he said, the US-led coalition will take action, particularly if insurgents start moving weapons out of the city.

"We believe it includes some armored vehicles and various guns

and other heavy weapons, possibly some air defense equipment," General Townsend said.

"Anything they seize poses a threat to the coalition, but we can manage those threats and we will."

However speculation has been growing that among the hastily abandoned Russian/Syrian army base was an advanced, long-range mobile anti-aircraft system. Mounted on the back of armored vehicles, these could be deployed against coalition aircraft.

Fox News reports anonymous US defense sources as saying the captured missile system dated from the Soviet era and had the NATO designation SA-3.

General Townsend said he anticipates that the coalition will soon strike the captured Russian equipment and kill the militants operating it.

Islamic State's *Amaq* news agency released video of what it claims to be the abandoned Palmyra camp, showing food and Russian-language books left on tables along with other personal items – indicating a rapid, unplanned departure.

Amaq claims to have seized 20 tanks, some armored personnel carriers, antitank guided missiles and howitzers.

12-14-16: ARA News: [ISIS militants cut off regime supply route in Syria's Homs 12-14-16](#)

Homs – Militants of the Islamic State (ISIS) on Tuesday made new gains in their fight with the Syrian Army forces in the central governorate of Homs.

ISIS fighters captured the main road between al-Qaryatain town and Homs city, which used to be a key supply route for the Syrian regime's army forces.

The radical group seized control of the supply-line after capturing military checkpoints that were previously held by

the Syrian regime's troops.

"Subsequent to clashes with the Syrian Army forces, ISIS fighters took over four checkpoints in the vicinity of al-Qaryatain, which enabled the group to block the army's supply route," local media activist Amro al-Hussein told ARA News.

"The route was a main supply line for the Syrian Army in Homs Governorate. The army forces have been relying on this route to send military reinforcements from al-Qaryatain town to the T4 Airbase and further into Homs city," al-Hussein reported.

12-15-16: [ISIS Suicide Bombers hit Kurdish positions West of Raqqa to Impede SDF Progress 12-15-16](#)

Raqqa – The Islamic State (ISIS) radical group launched on Wednesday several suicide attacks in western Raqqa, targeting defenses of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

ISIS suicide bombers targeted security checkpoints of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—leading member of the SDF— near Ain Issa town.

"Members of the radical group carried out four simultaneous attacks at YPG checkpoints in the vicinity of Ain Issa," media activist Jivan Mustafa told ARA News.

The number of casualties remained unknown.

The Kurdish forces have not issued any statements yet with regard to the attack.

This comes days after the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces launched the second phase of the Euphrates Wrath Operation to capture western Raqqa.

"Daesh terrorists try to impede our progress through launching such suicide attacks," an SDF officer told ARA News in western Raqqa, using another acronym for ISIS. "But such cowardly attacks won't affect our advance."

The Syrian Democratic Forces [announced](#) the beginning of the second phase of the Euphrates Wrath Operation last Saturday. While the first phase focused on securing both banks of the Balikh River, the second phase aims “at liberating the western countryside of Raqqa.”