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Battle of Raqqa

Determinates & Actors

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Contents

Introduction:.....	3
Significance of the battle:.....	4
Parties seeking to participate:.....	5
The international alliance:	5
Russia:.....	6
Turkey:	7
Syrian Democratic Forces:	8
Syrian regime:.....	9
Arab tribes:.....	10
Iraqi Peshmerga Forces:.....	11
Potential time for the battle:	11
In political terms:	11
In military terms:	12
Determinates of the battle:.....	12
1- Battle of Mosul:	12
2-Euphrates shield:	13
Conclusion:	14

Introduction:

After start battle of Mosul on October 17,2016, united states and France rushed to brandish the possibility of launching a large-scale military operation to take control of the second stronghold of ISIS in Raqqa, concurrently with the ongoing battle to control Mosul¹.

This reflects the international trend of the need for start of the second phase of the battle of Raqqa and resume military operations which has been frozen shortly after it began on May 24,2016 , the date that Syrian democratic forces announced the launch of the primaries first phase to control the city , and providing full attribution by the international alliance led by Washington².

The first phase was by progressing to the city and its northern countryside ,where Syrian Democratic forces mobilized its fighters in Tal Abiadh and moved to south to advance in depth and took control of the towns : Al-Fastah , Al-Heshah³ ,Shaikh Essa and brigade 93⁴ , and then launched an offensive toward west of Shaikh Essa within the fourth axis which aims to progress towards the city of Tabqa and within this axis it has been controlled 9 villages such as ; Khashkhash Al-Kabeer, Noukut , Beir Al-a'maa and Janaf Al-Ahmar⁵ .

Freezing of the battle was due to a wide military strategy in USA and international alliance against the organization, aims to cut the main supply routes before launching any attack on both capitals of the organization in Mosul and Raqqa, where Syrian democratic forces launched a wide

¹ US State Department: "restore Mosul paves the way to end ISIS" Arabia net, 23.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/MuQIFL> A report entitled" Holland, restore Mosul is very important, and the next goal might be Raqqa " France 24, 21.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/rqw2Yh>

² A statement of launching the battle of Raqqa entitled: Syrian Democratic Forces begins the campaign to liberate Raqqa " SDF YouTube channel, 24.5.2016, seen on 24.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/rd367b>

³ SyrianDemocratic Forces made significant progress in the first day of liberating Raqqa " Russia today channel, 24.5.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/Cf4ILP>

⁴ Rebels army declared controlling of the brigade 93 in Ain Essa, countryside of Raqqa " Aranews, 22.6.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/kZnzM2>

offensive to take control of Manbej eastern of Aleppo on May 31 ,2016⁶ until controlling it on august 12,2016⁷.

Washington and states of international alliance which provide Syrian democratic forces with broad advisory support , are focusing on Manbej because it is the main route of supply for ISIS connecting between Aleppo countryside and the capital of ISIS (Raqqa) , in addition to stopping the flow of foreign fighters from and to Europe and Syria, as Manbej is a central starting point serving this purpose , according to the western suspicious that the perpetrators of Paris and Brussels attacks moved to Europe through Manbej then to Turkey⁸ .

Significance of the battle:

The importance of controlling Manbej comes from the fear of Syrian Democratic Forces attacks the northern of Raqqa which will lead ISIS to withdrawal towards eastern countryside of Aleppo and causing a lot of military repercussions, therefore, the operation of controlling Manbej leads to separate lines of interdependence of ISIS between Raqqa and Aleppo.

The importance of taking control of Raqqa for international and local participants comes from many considerations ,such as the weakening of ISIS largely which will help in ending it later ,so Raqqa considers the capital of ISIS announced by the organization in Syria and it is a sovereign symbol for it ,and headquarters for its local and foreigner leaders so, if ISIS lost Raqqa, it means paralysis of its military power because it's a starting point for its operation : a transportation knot between the provinces (Aleppo , Hama , Homs , Deir Al-Zour and Hasakah).

Apart from the economic loss that could affect the financial treasury if the organization lost its control over the city, due to the natural sources (gas and oil) , agricultural resources (grains and cotton) , Animal wealth (meat ,dairy products ,cheese ,milk, butter and wool), and water resources

⁵ Syrian Democratic Forces controlled villages on road of Tabaqa " Russian today channel, 31.5.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/tOKjPQ>

⁶ Syrian Democratic Forces declared start liberating Manbej supporting by the international alliance "France 24 , 2.6.2016 , the link: <https://goo.gl/QcVhjE>

⁷Sharfan Darwesh to Aranews: " liberated Manbej , cleaning continuous " Aranews , 12.8.2016 , the link : <https://goo.gl/aKy4Tt>

represented by Euphrates dam on its lands which prevents a strategic reserve of water and provides electricity for most of Syrian cities and towns ,and all the previous considerations are a major factors pushing the international and local actors to participate.

By controlling of Tabqa military airport on Augusts 24 ,2014, the organization extends its full control on Raqqa⁹, while subjected Raqqa to its control on December 13,2014 after withdrawal of Al-Nusra front from the city following the upsurge of military disputes between the two sides¹⁰.

Parties seeking to participate:

At the time waiting to launch the second phase of Raqqa battle , which is more important than the first one , and waiting for international and local participants actors.

The international alliance:

Us commandos participated in the first phase of Raqqa battle as well as Syrians democracy fighters during attempts to progress to strongholds of ISIS in Raqqa in the northern countryside of city, and the estimated number of the special operations forces are about 200 fighters.

The spokesman of us forces in Iraq, colonel Steve warren talked about the role of commandos said " we provide advice and assistance for operations of Syrian democratic forces ", and it is expected if the second phase start, the us army sending more forces to its military bases northern of Syria to participate in the military operation of Raqqa.¹¹

It is also supposed that the French forces involved with advisory tasks to support the forces which might be Arab-Kurdish ,and maybe contain moderate components of regime opposition in the next battle of Raqqa, and

⁸ Obama's envoy to the war against ISIS, to CNN: Manbej in Syria is a center of planning for the organization" CNN Arabic, 17.6.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/KbAicM>

⁹ ISIS controls the last bastions of regime in Raqqa " Al-Jazeera net, 24.8.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/3HvU6J>

¹⁰ ISIS controlled Raqqa and executed 100 fighters from Al-Nusra Front " Al-Arabia net , 13.1.2014 , the link : <https://goo.gl/bTA8Nb>

¹¹ Eric Schmitt, U.S. Commandos Work with Syrian Fighters in Push Toward ISIS Stronghold. The New York Times, 26-5-2016: <https://goo.gl/rxOzpr>

this according to the statement of the French president Francois Holland which he said " the restoration of Mosul is very important , but if we let leaders of ISIS who pose a threat go to Raqqa , it is correct to say that the next target may be Raqqa.¹²"

Also, there was news on June 10,2016 that France built a military base in Mashta Al-Nour which overlooking at Ain Al-Arab (Kubani) from the south-eastern side, and consists of a building for French experts and military advisors¹³ and this base may form a starting point for French forces participation in battle of Raqqa.

Many of international alliance states have launched raids on Raqqa and its countryside, especially the us and French air force , as can be expected that the RAF will participate this assumed operation similar to its participation in support progressing of Syrian democratic forces by firearms coverage during the control of Manbej¹⁴.

Russia:

Concurrently with the launch of the first phase of the Battle of Raqqa, Russia, announced on the words of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, its readiness to coordinate with efforts of the international alliance led by USA and with the Kurdish units to restore Raqqa from clutches of ISIS, emphasizing that the military coordination between the two sides will speed up controlling over Raqqa and Mosul, the, main two strongholds for ISIS.

But he pointed to his country wants to engage the Syrian regime forces in coordination for this battle¹⁵ , but the Russian foreign ministry stressed a

¹² A report entitled " Holland, restore Mosul is very important, and the next goal might be Raqqa " France 24, 21.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/rqw2Yh>

¹³ Why did France build a military base in Ain Al-Arab (Kubani) " Orient news , 15.6.2016 , the link : <https://goo.gl/WeySF8>

¹⁴ British foreign ministry statement about UK participating in supporting Syrian Democracy Forces to control Manbej entitled: British official's statement about liberating Manbej from ISIS and the British role in this operation , foreign ministry website on twitter , 16.8.2016 , the link : <https://goo.gl/CESaSw>

¹⁵ Lavrov: "ready to coordinate efforts with international alliance about liberating of Raqqa"

Russia today, 24.5.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/JipoV5>

few days later that they hope to enhance coordination between Moscow and Washington to control Raqqa¹⁶.

It seems that the urgency of the Russian side in the military coordination with the US side, has been in secret, at a time when Syrian democratic forces froze the first phase and moved towards east of Aleppo in order to control Manbej, the Syrian regime forces launched a broad military operation aimed to get to Tabqa south of Raqqa.

And forces called Sokour Al-Sahra'a were very important during the operations, which are forces supported and have a special training by Russia.

And all of this previous information indicate that there are American - Russian coordination aimed to isolate Raqqa and end its sources of supply¹⁷, so it can believe that Russia will seek to participate in battle of Raqqa if the international alliance and USA announced its starting again.

Turkey:

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared on September 7, 2016, that his US counterpart, Barack Obama suggested to him a common cooperation regarding to Syrian Raqqa, adding that he expressed his country's readiness for the proposed offer, which came after controlling of Euphrates shield operation on Jarablos east of Aleppo¹⁸, then the Turkish deputy prime minister emphasized that his country is enthusiastic for a military operation in Syrian Raqqa to expel ISIS from it and that talks are ongoing in this regard with the US side¹⁹.

During the visit of US vice president Joe Biden to Turkey, the Turkish president told the US official that his country will not participate in any potential military operation in Raqqa to expel ISIS from it if PYD

¹⁶ Moscow: "we hope to enhance coordination with Washington about Raqqa", Russia today, 27.5.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/qd4R00>

¹⁷ Soukor Al-Sahara fight a battle of Raqqa by Russian training" middle east newspaper, 6.6.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/mIRxi1>

¹⁸ Obama's suggestion for Erdogan about a common cooperation related to the Syrian Raqqa " Turk press, 7.6.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/rc6kAs>

¹⁹ A report entitled: "Turkish Deputy Prime Minister: Ankara is enthusiastic for a military operation in the Syrian Raqqa." Turk Press, 07.09.2016, link: <https://goo.gl/EerUII>

participate²⁰, then a few days after the battle of Mosul ,the Turkish president reiterated his country's requirement that if Turkey participate the battle of Raqqa , this will be without any role of PYD²¹ .

Syrian Democratic Forces which considers the military wing of PYD, has refused the Turkish intervention definitively on October 4,2016 in the words of its spokesman, Talal salw, who emphasized that if Turkey participate the battle of Raqqa, there will not be any coordination between Syrian democratic forces and Turkish forces²².

Syrian Democratic Forces:

Syrian Democratic Forces was established on October 11,2015, for preparation to control Raqqa from ISIS, but the battle of Hasakah has begun instead of Raqqa²³, and some political and military sides attributed this turning into several reasons including:

Protecting people and Kurdish women units refused to fight battles in a demographic environment which is not incubator for them (Raqqa) first, and the fear of pushing Sunnis of Arab to join ISIS after the Kurdish experience in Tal Abiadh northern of Raqqa second , Kurds have not a popular base in Raqqa and their experience in rule in towns of Raqqa including Tal Abiadh led to increase the rift between them and Arab population who found themselves closer to ISIS than Kurds as a result of mistakes committed by Kurds in the province.

Third, the lack of sufficient military force to face the organization in its stronghold, the situation in the Raqqa is quite different from Mosul in Iraq, there is no regular ally army in the Raqqa, and the power of Kurds and

²⁰ Erdogan to Biden: We will not participate in a military operation against Raqqa in the case involving of PYD." Turk Press, 22.09.2016, link: <https://goo.gl/SIKyKp>

²¹ Erdogan shows his country's readiness for a military operation in Syrian Raqqa, Turk press, 23.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/OrIuh5>

²² Syrian Democratic Forces refuse Turkish participation in liberating of Raqqa," Kurdistan, 24.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/lk1pYb>

²³ "preparation to control Raqqa after the ethnic cleansing campaigns, the announcement of formation Syria Democratic Forces." Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 10.12.2015, link: <https://goo.gl/ckDAJV>

some Arabs are not enough to launch broad operation to liberate Raqqa, as well as the organization still retains the support of some Arab tribal such as Al-Sabkha and Al-Afadela. Fourth, because Kurds found in the battle of the Iraqi army with the organization in Sinjar an important opportunity which cannot be missed in Hasakah, in order to cut the connection of organization between Iraq and Syria²⁴.

After Syrian democratic forces controlled most of Hasaka and managed to avoid most of gaps mentioned above, especially in terms of strengthening its military structure including enhancing the Arab tribal component within its rank, the first phase of Raqqa battle has begun, and the international alliance led by USA has provided the air support needed as well as the military and advisory support.

Syrian regime:

Coinciding with the attack of Syrian democratic forces on northern countryside of Raqqa and Manbej east of Aleppo, the Syrian regime begin a broad military operation to take control over Tabqa in early of June 2016 from the side of Athreya in eastern countryside of Hama.²⁵

This decision comes after the freezing of battles in Palmyra and surroundings and delaying the battle of Deir Al-Zour which was prepared to, and the Syrian regime made progress within the administrative borders of Raqqa by Russian air attribution and with participation of local forces trained by Russia, but soon lost all these points.

In the case of the battle began, the Syrian regime will rush to participate due to the following considerations:

First, securing Khanaser -Athreya strategic road (200 km) which links the depth of southern countryside of Aleppo with northern east countryside of Hama and it is a main supply road for the Syrian regime in the north.

Second: to secure a wide area expands from Raqqa east to Khanaser west, which is an area will allow the Syrian regime to move north towards the

²⁴ Hussein Abdul Aziz < an article entitled: the battle of Raqqa and changing the strategic maps " Al-Jazeera net , 13.6.2016 , the link : <https://goo.gl/nHl2l2>

²⁵ "Syrian army kills dozens of ISIS militias and approaching from the intersection of Tabqa" Russia today , 5.6.2016 , the link : <https://goo.gl/mGLq5I>

city of Al-Bab in Aleppo, and to eastern north towards Al-Soukhna in eastern countryside of Homs.

Third: access to Tabqa will facilitate complete controlling over the southern countryside of Raqqa during the next phase by regime, which is a necessary step to surround the organization in Deir Al-Zour from two sides (Raqqa and Palmyra)²⁶.

In addition to the above, the regime is seeking to be in the geographical area of Raqqa and do not leave it for Kurds or allies Arab forces especially after the declaration of PYD that he is seeking to form a federation which would not be possible without Raqqa²⁷, and the statement of Saleh Mousallam that Kurds will not leave the province for regime after expulsion of ISIS from it has increased regime interest in Raqqa.²⁸

Arab tribes:

Arab tribes that will participate in the battle of Raqqa or probably will participate are divided between an actor with Syrian democratic forces and such as brigade of liberation²⁹ with the defectors from it, and those which forming its own faction such as the Syrian elite forces which is the military wing of Al-Ghad movement led by Ahmed Al-Jarba³⁰, as well as Syrian rebels of Al-Jazeera³¹, and active tribes alongside the Syria regime.

It is well known that ISIS depends on Arab tribes in its structure, and the Arab tribes which will participate the battle of Raqqa will face many challenges such as the issue of defection in the organization especially from the tribal component.

²⁶ Mouhammed Sukkar, an article entitled: "in 4 points, liberating Syrian Raqqa and the strategic importance" AL-Badel, 19.6.2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/CEVciI>

²⁷ Democratic Union: we will annex Raqqa to the federation North of Syria " Russian today, 26.5.2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/1zfIMr>

²⁸ An interview with head of PYD, Saleh Mousallam, entitled: "if we liberated Raqqa, we will not allow the Syrian army to enter it" France 24 on YouTube, 31.4.2016, seen on 25.10, 2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/5OTzWu>

²⁹ Defection the brigade of liberation from Syrian Democracy Forces and joining to Euphrates shield " Russia today, 2.9.2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/yYhmlO>

³⁰ "Ahmad Al-Jarba announce the formation of armed faction in Syria" Rudaw, 20.4.2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/9MIKTI>

³¹ announcing the formation of Syrian rebels of Al-Jazeera entitled: "the announcement of formation faction of Syrian rebels of Al-Jazeera" channel of Syrian rebels of Al-Jazeera on YouTube, 9.9.2016, seen on 25.10.2016, the link : <https://goo.gl/nMsxmu>

It is worth mentioning that some American advisers drew attention to the impossibility of controlling Raqqa without an active involvement of the Arab tribes in the battle³².

In the case of the Syrian elite forces participated in the battle of Raqqa that would be part of a military coordination with the Syrian democratic forces; the tribes that defected from the latter, its role will often be specific by the nature of the Turkish intervention, such as brigade of liberation, and this also applies to the Syrian rebels of Al-Jazeera.

Iraqi Peshmerga Forces:

Peshmerga follows Kurdistan of Iraq will probably participate the battle of Raqqa, and this possibility is based on the statement of the media advisor in the office of the region's president, Kifah Mahmoud, that Peshmerga are ready to involve in controlling of Raqqa under the approval of Kurdistan parliament, pointing out that the general commander of the army forces in Kurdistan, Masoud Barazani has emphasized the readiness of Peshmerga forces to expel ISIS from Raqqa in coordination with the international alliance³³.

However, this possibility seems to be difficult to apply according to the recent development took place after the battle of Mosul, where ISIS tried to control Kirkuk, one of the largest cities of Kurdistan which led Peshmerga to enhance its presence in all areas of the region except the fronts of the battle in Ba'asheqa.

Potential time for the battle:

Talking about the potential options for actors which participate the battle of Raqqa is associated with the political and military sides

In political terms:

The statement of US president, Obama, about launching of Raqqa battle coincides with the launching of Mosul battle which was announced a way

³² Fabrice Balanche, an article entitled: "Raqqa Will Not Fall Until Arab Tribes Fight the Islamic State", the Washington institute of middle east policy, 3.5.2016 the link: <https://goo.gl/S5d7Qh>

³³ Advisor in Barazani's office: Peshmerga is read to involve liberation of Raqqa" Soumarya news, 23.11.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/iYJLLP>

that contributes to support the chances of a Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, and if the forces participated in the battle of Mosul make tangible progress against ISIS before US election date.

In military terms:

US secretary of defense, Ashton Carter, announced in the meeting held on October 25, 2016 for the defense ministers of the international alliance in Paris that the preparation for battle of Raqqa were begun to isolate Raqqa the capital of ISIS to coincide with the ongoing offensive on Iraqi Mosul³⁴. But the intervention of Turkey from the north without understandings enhances the disputes between the allies participating on the ground³⁵, which will lead USA and the international alliance to intervene to prevent this to happen³⁶.

Determinates of the battle:

1- Battle of Mosul:

The isolation of the ISIS in Raqqa requires cutting most of main supply roads, which will the battle of Mosul affect it, but it is associated with steps expected from the international alliance such as stopping flow of fighters and military supply for the organization from Syria and Iraq³⁷ by cutting the main supply road of Bokmal Border crossing.

It can rely on the statement of the spokesman of new army of Syria after the failure of the attack phase that they are preparing for the second phase³⁸, where this phase will probably launch at the time of announcing the battle of Raqqa to reduce the pressure on the front of city from the west and impedes the supply of ISIS military and human from and to Iraq and Syria, which will help in impeding moving of ISIS in the battle of Mosul.

³⁴ US secretary of defense announced start preparation to isolate Raqqa, capital of ISIS" France 24, 25.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/IPba64>

³⁵ starting from shelling Syrian Democratic Forces in Afren, securing west of Euphrates is a Turkish priority within the battle to liberate Raqqa" Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 22.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/p9Tsw4>

³⁶ Syrian Democratic Forces refuse any Turkish intervention in liberating of Raqqa" Kurdistan, 24.4.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/lk1pYb>

³⁷ French source: hundreds of ISIS fighters moved from Syria to Mosul " Al-Arabia net, 24.10.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/8xMHVg>

³⁸ New Army of Syria withdrawal from Bokmal, DW, 29.6.2016, the link: <https://goo.gl/JYfyuj>

Launching the battle of Raqqa coincide with the ongoing offensive on Raqqa, according to the statement of us secretary of defense, Ashton Carter " it will contribute in dispersal of ISIS military forces' effort and prevent the transmission of fighters at once from lost area to another."

2-Euphrates shield:

Before turkey starting the battle east and north Aleppo, the international alliance supported a broad attack for Syrian democratic forces to take control over Manbej, in order to cut the main road of supply towards Europe and turkey , but the Turkish military intervention to isolate the organization from whole its boarders with Aleppo then its progress towards the city of Al-Bab enhanced the chances of isolating the organization in Raqqa.

Due to Al-Bab is the prominent remaining stronghold for the organization in Aleppo, and if the Euphrates shield dominated it, it will enhance the efforts to expel the organization out of the administrative boarders of Aleppo, where the fighters of ISIS will besiege within the administrative boarders of Raqqa .

This perception is compatible with the us statements and the plan approved by the ministers of the international alliance to isolate Raqqa.

Conclusion:

Announcing the battle of Raqqa is possible anytime during the next days, and often will announce it by the international alliance forces which will be the main leader for these operations in Iraq and Syria against ISIS, where the current us administration will record start of two battles at least within its achievements, if it could not control one of them before the election date.

Turkey is aware that its participation in battle of Raqqa is not less important than the participation in battle of Mosul, where the outcomes of the two battles will identify the form of the region in next phase, so it must participate anyway.

The Turkish statements about refusing participating if PKK has a role in this battle that turkey will not involve as much it will not allow the party to involve.

Often, the scenario will end similarly to the battle of Mosul, where turkey will involve alongside the hostile forces such as: popular mobilization and Sinjar protecting units in battle of Mosul, with the differences in fronts they fight with.

Russia will also seek to participate in the battle, especially it will take place in the lands where it is formally, where it can contribute by its aviation and by regime forces and some supporter tribes on the ground, but this involvement is associated with secret understandings between Russia and USA and even with turkey,

The battle of Raqqa is connected directly with two battles targeting ISIS currently, which are battle of Mosul in Iraq and Euphrates shield operation in Syria, and the data and outcomes of each battle will determine the time, form and size of the potential battle of Raqqa.

If both battles success, members of the organization will be pushing to Raqqa, where they will face what assumed that their last battle, and this scenario seems to be what the international alliance has planned for and it will facilitate battle of Raqqa because the organization will be besieged without supply roads

In the case of delaying the Euphrates shield operation or failure of battle of Mosul, the battle of Raqqa will be delayed and maybe replaced by mini

battles targeting to cut the linking roads between Raqqa and Mosul and other areas of ISIS.

Expulsion of ISIS from Raqqa ,which means the end of the real presence of the organization in Syria , will lead to new data maybe determine the form of political solution in Syria , and will leave an important effects on the whole area , where all parties want to participate in the battle will seek to get its share from controlling of Raqqa which will form a beginning of disputes between them after disposal of ISIS.



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