

US-backed Kurdish militia announces assault on ISIS capital in Syria

James Cogan
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On Sunday, just two days before the US presidential election, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-armed faction comprised largely of ethnic Kurdish militia, called a press conference to announce that it had begun “a major battle” to retake Raqqa from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Raqqa, a city of some 200,000 in central Syria, is often referred to as ISIS’s “capital.”

The SDF, one of several US-backed Syrian “rebel” coalitions seeking to overthrow the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, said at the press conference that it will eventually deploy 30,000 fighters for the assault on Raqqa. With next to no mention in the America media, let alone in the election campaign, at least 300 US Special Forces personnel are already on the ground with the SDF, training and “advising” its fighters and targeting air strikes on ISIS by US, British, Australian and French aircraft.

The press conference was held in Ain Issa, a Kurdish-controlled town 50 kilometres to the north of Raqqa. A US military spokesperson in Iraq, Colonel John Dorrian, admitted to journalists via email that it “may be some time” before the SDF actually attacks Raqqa. Whether it begins in weeks or months, the offensive is expected to consist of increased air strikes and attempts to isolate the city by surrounding it and cutting off supply lines.

The largely rhetorical announcement appears primarily aimed at bolstering, in the final days of the election campaign, the claim of the Obama administration and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton that they have a plan to deal with ISIS in Syria. The campaign of Republican Donald Trump has attempted to gain mileage by blaming the policies of Obama and Clinton, who served as Obama’s secretary

of state during his first term, for the ability of ISIS to seize large areas of Syria and Iraq since 2013.

In the final weeks of the election campaign, the Obama administration has directed a massive escalation of military violence in the Middle East. In mid-October, tens of thousands of US-backed Iraqi forces launched an assault on the ISIS-held city of Mosul in northern Iraq.

Three weeks later, Iraqi government troops are bogged down fighting street-to-street battles in the eastern suburbs and are still more than four kilometres from the southern districts of the city. As many as 1.5 million civilians, including hundreds of thousands of children, are believed to be trapped in Mosul, under constant US aerial bombardment and lacking food and medical services.

The Syrian regime, as well as the Russian government, have publicly raised questions about the Mosul operation, accusing US and Iraqi forces of deliberately leaving open escape routes to the west. They allege that ISIS fighters and supporters are being allowed to make their way unimpeded to Raqqa, where they can join operations against the Syrian government.

Sections of the US media have substantiated the Syrian and Russian claims. On November 3, the Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News, which is sympathetic to Trump, ran a prominent report that stated: “As bullets fly in Mosul, the rural roads leading west are choked with traffic—much of which is believed to be ISIS fighters fleeing to the terrorist army’s Syrian stronghold some 275 miles away in Raqqa.”

Fox asserted that “some experts” in the US “blame a premature pullout of US troops [from Iraq under Obama] for giving rise to the black-clad jihadist army now seen moving along the backroads that span its twin strongholds.”

The announcement that the US-backed Kurdish militia will launch an attack on ISIS in Raqqa has implications far beyond any claims the Obama administration may make about confronting the Islamist extremists or any impact it might have on the US election.

SDF advances toward Raqqa will heighten the danger of US and allied forces clashing with Syrian government troops. Since June, the Syrian army has been preparing to launch its own offensive on the ISIS capital, backed by Russian air power. If the rival forces converge on the city at the same time, the prospect of conflict will be considerable.

Under conditions where the primary aim of the US intervention in Syria is to install a US client state, a clash over control of Raqqa could easily become the pretext for a wholesale attack on the Assad regime, risking a confrontation with Russia and other backers of the Syrian regime, such as Iran and Iraqi Shiite militias.

The reliance of Washington on the SDF could also worsen already volatile relations with Turkey. The bulk of the SDF fighters belong to the Popular Protection Units (YPG), which are based in the self-declared autonomous region of Rojava in the majority-Kurdish areas of northern Syria that border Turkey. The Turkish government asserts that the YPG is a front for the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in eastern Turkey, and has labelled the Syrian militia a “terrorist organisation.”

As the YPG has gained control over more territory in northern Syria, the Turkish military has carried out at least 22 artillery bombardments or air strikes against its forces. The most recent attack was in early October, against YPG fighters who drove ISIS out of Tel Abyad, a town some 90 kilometres from Raqqa.

The SDF underscored the tensions at its press conference. Its spokesperson warned that Turkey should “not interfere in internal Syrian affairs.” Several days earlier, the SDF had declared that there could be “no Turkish participation” in operations in Raqqa.

The Obama administration is making high-profile efforts to ensure that Turkey collaborates in its plans to utilise the Kurdish forces as Washington’s proxy in the offensive. The day the SDF announced its plans, Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in Turkey’s capital Ankara for a one-on-one

meeting with the country’s top military officer, General Hulusi Akar.

Dunford told journalists: “The coalition and Turkey will work together on the long-term plan for seizing, holding and governing Raqqa. Obviously, as a close ally, we really just want to make sure that we’re completely tight as we work through some challenging issues.”

The assurance that has been given by the US to Turkey is that ethnic Arab fighters of the SDF, not Kurdish militia, will “hold” and “govern” Raqqa after it is taken from ISIS. Under conditions in which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has launched a brutal crackdown on Kurdish political parties within Turkey, and with ethnic tensions soaring, the situation could easily spiral out of Washington’s control.



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