

The Race To Raqqa Is On - To Keep Its Unity Syria Must Win

By [Moon of Alabama](#)

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The race to Raqqa is on. Syria and its allies are competing with the U.S. and its allies to snatch east Syria from the Islamic State.

Raqqa in eastern Syria is held by the Islamic State as are the other cities along the Euphrates towards Iraq. To defeat the Islamic State in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and other eastern Syrian towns and to liberate them is the aim of all purported enemies of the Islamic State. But this question has to be seen in a larger context.

Could the U.S. and its allies capture Raqqa or Deir Ezzor and with it parts of eastern Syria it could use them as a bargaining chip to gain some negotiation power with Syria and its allies over the future of Syria. Alternatively it create a Sunni state in east-Syria and west-Iraq. Mosul would be part of such a Sunni state and it would probably be put under the tutelage of Turkey. There have been U.S. [plans](#) for such a "[Sunnistan](#)" and a revision of the Sykes-Picot borders for some time.

For Syria and its allies the upholding of the unity of Syria is a major objective. To leave Raqqa and the eastern oil fields to the U.S. would be a devastating loss. Syria and its allies have therefore to beat the U.S. and its allies in the race to Raqqa and the larger east Syria.

According to [Southfront](#) Syria just made the first major move. A brigade of the Syrian Arab Army attacked the positions of the Islamic State along the Ithriyah to Raqqa road. The town Tal Abu Zayhn has been taken on the way to the first objective, the Tabaqah military airport. Additional supporting forces from various allied groups are assembling in Ithriyah to later support the attack.



map [via Southfront](#) - [bigger](#)

The U.S. move towards east-Syria is still in preparation. The first U.S. plan was to use the Syrian-Kurdish YPG forces of north-east Syria. These were labeled Syrian Democratic Forces

after attaching a few fighters from Arab tribes. These forces would have attacked Raqqa from the north. But the Kurds did not want to invade the Arab lands they would not be able to hold. Their aim is to connect to the Kurdish enclave in north-west Syria along the Turkish border.

The U.S. is coming up with a new plan. There are only sketches visible so far and the following is just somewhat informed speculation.

The U.S. has [extended the runway](#) of the agricultural [Rumeilan/Abu Hajar airfield](#) (map) in the Kurdish held area in north east Syria to be able to supply larger operations in the wider area:

This location has been chosen because it's just 100 miles (160 kilometers) from ISIS frontline positions and some of its lucrative oil fields, but well within territory held by Kurdish fighters known as the YPG. The runway is being nearly doubled in length from about 2,300 feet to 4,330 feet (700 to 1,320 meters) — long enough, say, to receive C130 transport planes. A small apron is also being paved.

Some U.S. special operation forces are said to already operate from there. This is the vanguard on a reconnaissance mission.

It was publicly [disclosed](#) that one brigade of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division would go to Iraq to train, advise and assist the Iraqi forces for an attack on Mosul.

Some 1,800 soldiers from the 101st's Headquarters and its 2nd Brigade Combat Team will deploy soon on regular rotations to Baghdad and Irbil to train and advise Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga forces who are expected in the coming months to move toward Mosul, the Islamic State group's de facto headquarters in Iraq.

But Col. Pat Lang [was told](#) that two brigades of the 101st would deploy:

I was told today that two brigades of the 101st Airborne Division are going to Iraq, not just one. This probably is related to the Saudi Juggernaut. pl

The Saudi "juggernaut" was the recent announcement that the Saudis would be willing to send troops to Syria. Nobody was, at first, taking that serious but it now starts to make some sense. The Saudis today [confirmed](#) their intent:

Saudi's decision to send troops to Syria in an attempt to bolster and toughen efforts against militants is "final" and "irreversible," the Saudi military spokesman announced on Thursday. Brig. Gen. Ahmed Al-Assiri, said that Riyadh is "ready" and will fight with its U.S.-led coalition allies to defeat ISIS militants in Syria, however, he said Washington is more suitable to answer questions on further details about any future ground operations.

...

The statement comes as Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman visited NATO headquarters in Brussels to discuss the Syrian civil war.

The Saudis would fight under the control of the one brigade of the 101st airborne that was not announced to go for Mosul. The Saudis would deploy from Saudi Arabia likely via a U.S. controlled airstrip in west Iraq towards Syria while the brigade from the 101st would probably deploy from the Kurdish area in north Iraq through the Kurdish areas in north-east Syria towards Raqqa. Raqqa would thereby be attacked from a north-eastern and a south-eastern. The airport of Rumeilan/Abu Hajar would be one of the major supply bases.

Such a move of forces would be quite large and over relative long distances. But most of the area is desert and modern motorized military equipment could easily cover those distances in a day or two. This would put Saudi troops into Syria. If they would take Raqqa or Deir Ezzor and the eastern Syrian oilfields they would NEVER let go of it unless Syria would bend to the Saudi demand of introducing an Islamist led government.

The plan [is workable](#) but it would also instigate a large mobilization of Shia forces and could lead to a bigger conflict. The Russian Prime Minister Medvedev [warned today](#) that new Arab forces entering the Syrian war could spark a much wider war.

The Saudi operation was said today to start within two months. The Syrian government forces and their allies will now have to rush to the east to protect the unity of the country. The U.S. for its part may want to hinder the Syrian advantage by whatever means it has, including - possibly - some "erroneous" bombing.

The race for Raqqa, and Syria's future, is on.

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