



# The Islamic State in Raqqa and Mosul

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## 1. Executive Summary

"Their death is an affront to humanity... These heinous acts of the Assad regime cannot be tolerated!" These are the words of President Trump following the chemical attack that took the lives of more than 80 Syrian civilians, on April 4th, 2017; a tragic event that led to retaliation by American forces. While Western countries have pointed to the responsibility of the Assad regime, Assad himself and his ally Vladimir Putin have dismissed such accusations and maintained that the regime is innocent.

Guilty or not, the Assad regime cannot be considered as the only suspect in this attack. As one of the most significant armed actors in the region, the Islamic State, whose exact capabilities remain unknown, can also be considered as a potential suspect. The armed group has considerably benefited from the civil war in Iraq, following the American invasion in 2003, as well as in Syria, after the Arab Spring in 2011, in order to take control of a vast swamp of territories and establish a proto-state with Raqqa and Mosul as its capitals.

In the course of this paper, we will, however, focus on the study of the Islamic State and its deployment, actions, gains and losses in Raqqa and Mosul, each one considered as its stronghold in Syria and in Iraq respectively.

Our main goal is to understand the issues at stake for the Islamic State in Raqqa and Mosul. Why and how these cities came to be the capitals of the Islamic State organization (Section 1) What are the responses of the international coalition and jihadist forces (Section 2)? What will the consequences of the liberation of both cities be, for the allies and for the Islamic State (Section 3)?

## 2. Section One: Context Analysis

### 2.1 The deployment of the Islamic State in Raqqa

Since 1970 when the ruling Baath Party established a dictatorship via a coup d'état on November 13th, the Sunni population (70% of the overall citizenry) has been oppressed by the ruling minority - the Alawites. It worsened in 2011 when the Arab Spring revolutions broke out, leading the country into a civil war. This was an opportunity for about two-thirds of the military forces to join the opposition rebels. Raqqa is the first major Syrian city to be taken away from pro-Assad forces in March 2013, but also be claimed by numerous different armed groups (among them rebels, such as the Free Syrian Army) including Islamists (mainly the former al-Nusra Front currently known as Fatah a-sham). The latter organization, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, rapidly took control over the whole city.

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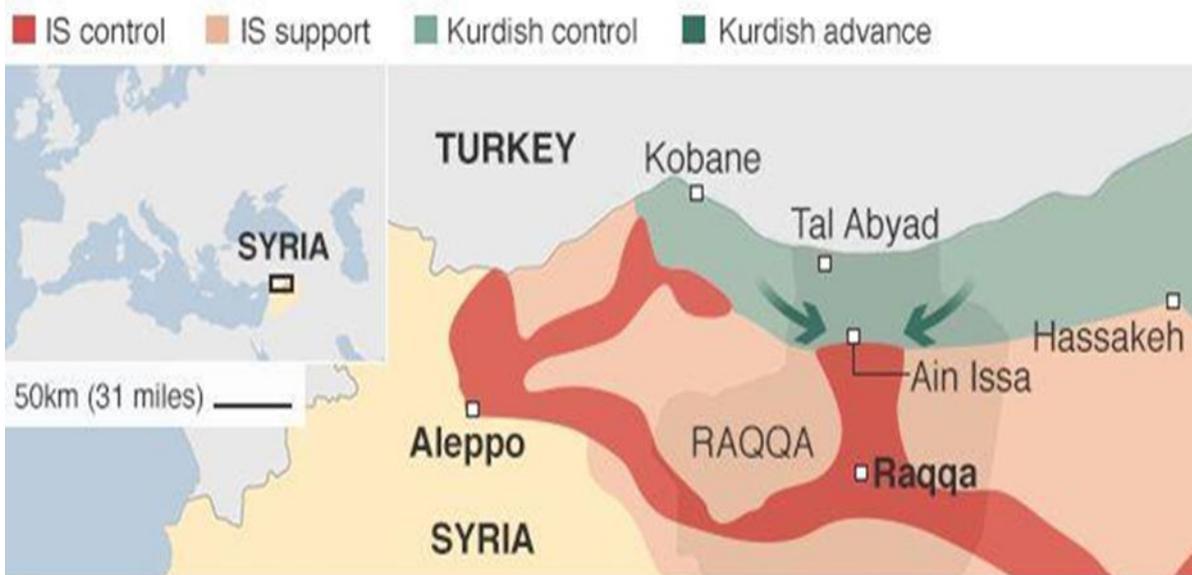
<sup>1</sup> Bourreau, Marie, and Gilles Paris. "Attaque Chimique En Syrie : à L'ONU, Les États-Unis Menacent D'une Action Unilatérale." Le Monde.fr. Le Monde, 06 Apr. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

“Raqqa changed hands several times before finally coming under the control of the Islamic State, on January 14, 2014<sup>2</sup>.” The organization soon declared Raqqa as the capital of its so-called Caliphate.

There is a symbolic explanation for the city to be chosen as a capital by the jihadists. Raqqa, an old Roman, then Byzantine city, was conquered by Muslims in the 7th century. It then became the capital of the Abbasid Empire, when the caliph settled his palace there, until the 10th century - when the monarch returned to Baghdad. This historical and religious reference may have weight in the choice of jihadists who consider the period of Islamic conquests as a “golden age<sup>3</sup>.”

In some ways, Raqqa has always been in the hands of the Islamic State, as they are the result of a split in Al-Qaeda (through the former Jabhat al-Nusrah): The Islamic State in Iraq (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) announced that the former al-Nusrah Front, now known as Fatah al-Sham was, in fact, part of the Islamic State, but the Fatah al-Sham leader then stated that he would not join them. After an eight month long argument, the Islamic State announced that it would split from Al-Qaeda in 2014<sup>4</sup>. For almost two years now, many have tried to take over Raqqa from the Islamic State, without succeeding to expel the jihadist combatants. The Kurds have managed to stop the expansion of the terrorist organization in the north of the country, and from November 2016 have participated in Operation “Wrath of Euphrates” to isolate Raqqa and eradicate Islamists. As of 2017, the international coalition is preparing a military operation with an identical purpose.

### Kurdish forces advance on IS stronghold of Raqqa



Source: ISW

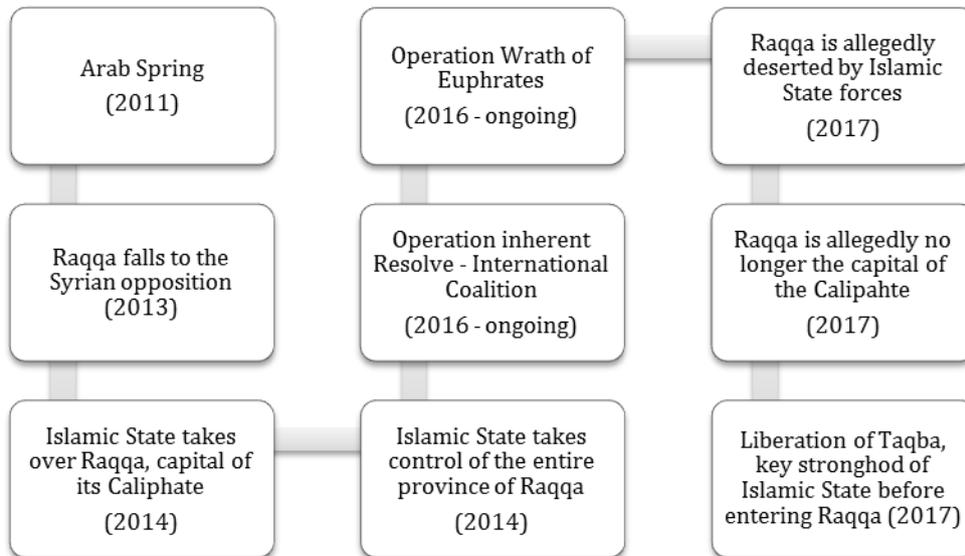
“Islamic State conflict: Kurds’ capture Syrian town north of Raqqa”, BBC, 23/06/2015

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<sup>2</sup> Kajjo, Sirwan. "The Fight for Raqqa." Carnegie Middle East Center., 03 June 2014. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Licourt, Julien. "L'Etat Islamique a Voulu Faire De Raqqa La Ville Symbole Du « califat »." Le Figaro.fr., 11 Nov. 2016. Web. 6 May 2017.

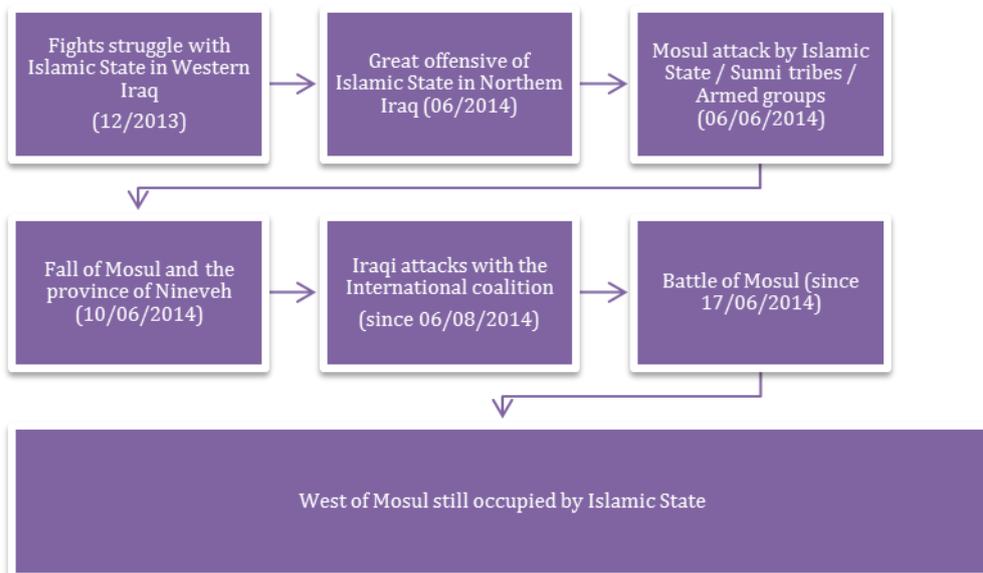
<sup>4</sup> Krohn, Petri. "How Did the Islamic State Capture Raqqa?" Fort Russ., 30 Mar. 2016. Web. 06 May 2017.



Timeline based on: “*Timeline:2011-2017 Rise and Spread of the Islamic State*”, Wilson Center <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>

## 2.2 The deployment of the Islamic State in Mosul

An Iraqi city used by some great empires (Assyrian / Persian / Ottoman / Western powers), since 2014 Mosul has been under the occupation of the Islamic State. After many showdowns between the Iraqi forces and the jihadists, with the flight of soldiers and policemen, the authorities ordered the evacuation of the city and Mosul fell into the hands of the Islamic State on June 10th, 2014.

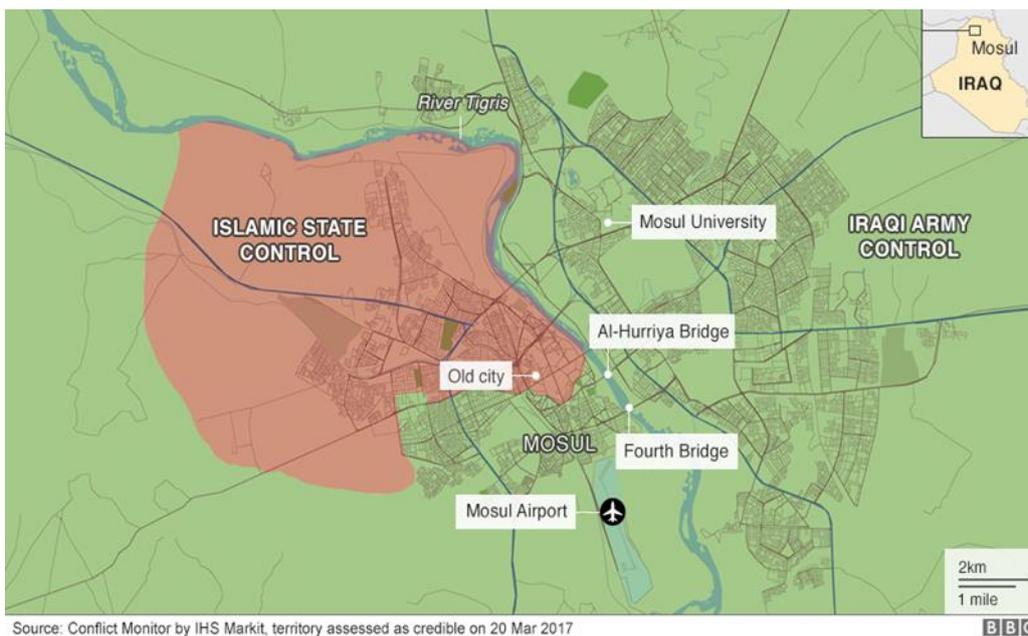


Timeline based on “*Iraq profile -timeline*”, BBC, 01/05/2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14546763>

Even though Iraqi soldiers were accused of incompetence, relinquishing their positions and of corruption, the facts remain the same: the head of the Iraqi parliament declared the loss of the province of Nineveh and the Islamic State took possession of the military armoury as well as the cash resources of the banks of Mosul. Mosul became the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq, where it declared the establishment of the caliphate on 2014, June 24th.

The fact that Mosul has been chosen as the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq is not a mere coincidence, either. Indeed, Mosul is the second largest city in the country and the largest in Northern Iraq, with some 1.5 million inhabitants. Crossed by the Tigris, Mosul constitutes a real strategic point as a commercial platform between Turkey, Syria and the rest of Iraq. That being said, the strategic wealth of Mosul resides amongst other things, in the oil resources of the surrounding lands and its population, mainly composed of Sunnis (80%) in a predominantly Shiite country. This community feels it has been oppressed by a Shiite government and army and feel their living circumstances have been improved by the Islamic State, especially when it comes to nutrition. Last but not least, an international airport whose takeover complicates military intervention adds to the value of the city.

Amongst the factors that led to the fall of Mosul one can count the military deficiency of the Iraqi forces and internal rivalry and disagreement. Upon their takeover of the city the Islamic State fighters quickly captured ammunition and equipment from the Iraqi army. According to Military Times, even though the Western part of the city was the hub of the Islamic State fighters, and that the “Iraqi forces spent three months driving [the Islamic State] from eastern Mosul, the militants appear to have left sleeper cells to carry out attacks behind the front lines<sup>5</sup>.” As we will demonstrate in the next paragraphs, Mosul up to this point has been a theatre of war between Islamist combatants and their opponents for the control of the city.



<sup>5</sup> Janssen, Bram. "Iraqi Forces Advance on Islamic State-held Western Mosul." Military Times., 19 Feb. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

## 3. Section Two: Context Analysis

### 3.1 The different armed actors within the both cities

Currently, there are several different armed actors implicated in the actual war theatre in Mosul and Raqqa, with mostly one interest in common, that is the defeat of the Islamic State.

	Main Armed Actors in Mosul	Main Armed Actors in Raqqa
National Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Iraqi army and police</li> <li>• Elite forces of the Counter-terrorism Service</li> <li>• Shiite militias (Popular Mobilization Forces)</li> <li>• Sunni and Christian militias</li> <li>• Kurdish Peshmerga</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Syrian Democratic Forces</li> <li>• Forces Al-Sanadid</li> <li>• Fatah al-Sham</li> <li>• Kurdish Forces (YPG/YPJ)</li> </ul>
International Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coalition (United States / France / Canada / Turkey / United Kingdom)</li> <li>• Iranian backed forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coalition</li> </ul>
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Islamic State</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Islamic State</li> </ul>

### 3.2 Actions and responses of domestic and international forces against the Islamic State

During the occupation of Mosul by the Islamic State, many people have fled from the city while many others, mainly Sunni civilians (80 percent), have accepted the occupation, preferring it to that of the Iraqi army, notorious for its discrimination against the Sunni population. Two months after the beginning of the occupation, Iraqi forces, supported by the international coalition, began to attack the jihadists to liberate Mosul, to no avail. However, with the recent operation named “We are coming Nineveh,” the battle for Mosul has taken off, led by a joint offensive of the Iraqi (government forces, Shiite militias, and the Regional Government of Kurdistan) and international forces. While the liberation of the towns around Mosul was easy, it has not been the case for the capital of the Islamic State that remains even today, with the western part of the city under the jihadist occupation while the war continues to rage.

Unlike the theatre of actors in Iraq where the international coalition works closely with the more-or-less functioning Iraqi government, the United States and the partners who make up the coalition rely solely on Arab and Kurdish opposition fighters. Many of these groups are also rivals at best and sworn enemies at worse. The presence of Russian and governmental forces, not to mention those of Turkey, also fan the flames of these tensions. This is also best observed in Raqqa where the battle to retake the city is politically doomed given the disagreements and the conflicts of interest that are a result of the ethnic diversity of actors involved. Moreover, Turkey has refused to allow the participation of one of the leading suppliers of ground forces, that is Syrian Kurdish fighters associated with the People’s Protection Unit (YPG), whom Turkey regards as an enemy, just like its mother branch in Turkey, known as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

The US-led coalition aircraft started destroying the main water pipeline supplying Raqqa, as well as two bridges, though the water supply was later repaired by the Islamic State<sup>6</sup>. The coalition is currently backing up the Syrian Democratic Forces, gathering Kurdish forces (Raqqa being encompassed in their potential autonomous lands), Arab forces and Assyrians<sup>7</sup>. The strategy in place relies on besieging the whole city<sup>8</sup>.

According to military sources as of April 22, 2017, the Islamic State group has moved its capital from the Syrian city of Raqqa to the Deir ez-Zor Province, south of Raqqa and near Iraqi borders, due to the intensive air strikes carried out by US-led international coalition<sup>9</sup>. Local forces are joining this massive coalition led by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as territories are being delivered from the Islamic State. The local population, mainly Sunni Muslims, volunteer to fight against the terrorist organization and their role is crucial: indeed, only Sunnis are considered legitimate enough to take over Raqqa whereas Syrian Democratic Forces are mainly consisting of Kurdish forces.<sup>10</sup>

## 4. Conclusion - Consequences of the liberation of these Jihadist capitals

The capital of the whole Caliphate, Raqqa, is progressively being freed from the Islamic State fighters. It took only a few weeks for the Syrian Democratic Forces to liberate most of the province and to start the encirclement of the capital of the Caliphate.

It shall be pointed that the future of the province will not be handed over to the Syrian government once liberated: a civilian council is considered to govern the stronghold of the Islamic State mainly made up of Syrian Kurds. Surprisingly, the latter would, therefore, rule in spite of the city's location outside the Kurdish-majority Rojava region and the lack of support on behalf of the city's inhabitants towards the Kurds. The Rojava region has already declared itself as a de facto autonomous region on March 16th, 2016, and is yet another sign of Kurdish ambition towards more self-determination in the region. The U.S. military had previously hinted that support would be given to rebel groups following Raqqa's "liberation."<sup>11</sup>

As far as Mosul is concerned, we cannot say that the city is free yet from jihadist occupation. The battle for the liberation of Mosul has just begun and - even though the jihadist forces are composed of some three to five thousand combatants against 30.000 men of the Iraqi coalition - the Islamic State maintains its control on the West of Mosul. This battle will be long and the terrorist organization is not going to abandon so easily for several reasons. First, they cannot let go of one of their capitals as well as their utopia of a real city governed by the Islamic law; second, loss of Mosul could mark the beginning of the end for the Islamic State in Iraq, or at least for this part of the country. Third, the consequences could be terrible and irreversible, amongst which the loss of influence, of natural resources (mainly oil) needed to finance their campaign and they may, as a last resort, increase terror attacks.

Nevertheless, the liberation of Mosul doesn't mean peace for the city. Indeed, with the destruction of their common enemy, the good old quarrels between Iraqi actors can come back to the scene. Furthermore, it is necessary to conceive the "after-Islamic-State" chapter with the reconstruction of the city, the restoration of an administration, and the displaced civilians taken into account. All these issues require a response if we are to establish a sustainable peace in Mosul, and in Iraq. It is indisputable that the occupation of Mosul and Raqqa by

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<sup>6</sup> Worley, Will. "US-backed Syrian Forces Announce New Phase in Battle to Retake Raqqa from Isis." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, 04 Feb. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Merchet, Jean-Dominique. "En Syrie, La Date De L'offensive Sur Raqqa Se Précise." L'Opinion. PressReader.com, 28 Mar. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> "Kurdish-Led Forces Gain Control Over All Strategic Highways Leading to Raqqa." Sputnik International., 24 Apr. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Adel, Loaa. "Islamic State Moves Caliphate to New Capital in Syria." Iraq News, the Latest Iraq News by Iraqi News., 22 Apr. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "En Syrie, Aux Portes De Raqqa." LeJDD.fr - Actualités Politiques. , 04 Apr. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Webb, Whitney. "After "Liberation," U.S. To Give Control Of Raqqa To Rebels, Not Syrian Government." MintPress News., 24 Apr. 2017. Web. 06 May 2017.

the combatants of the Islamic State who used them as their 'capitals' have a number of similarities but are also very different. Such is the case for the battle towards the liberation of each city.

The similarities are due to the actions and the strategy of the Islamist group, the differences are evident in the very different natures of the cities, their geography, and their ethnic composition and of course the broader context of the countries they are located in. Mosul is almost 3 or 4 times larger than Raqqa whereas its population, at 2 million before the war was in sharp contrast with that of Raqqa, standing at 300,000 with another 200,000 in the surrounding communities. Consequently, with a much better trained, better equipped and better functioning Iraqi army, it took almost six months to take Mosul back; whereas the taking over of Raqqa did not require as much time, despite the shortcomings of the Syrian army, and the other political issues and conflicts of interest present on the terrain due to Kurds, the Syrian government and of course Turkey.

Highly threatened by the military operations launched to liberate Mosul and Raqqa, it has been released that the Islamic State's leaders would engage in talks on an alleged merger with their former "mother company", Al-Qaeda. They would join forces to extend their area of terror, as the Islamic State alone is flinching before its long-list of foes.

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