



International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



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Is ISIS Moving its Capital from Raqqa to Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor?

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There is a recurring scene of cheerful crowds in Iraqi towns and city that have been liberated from ISIS; older women, men, and young adults exhaling cigarette smoke and grinning as they relish in this recent regained symbol of liberty and freedom. There was a moment circulated on social media of an older woman cursing ISIS on camera after her town was liberated by Kurdish-led forces. She didn't hold back! One grievance that she ranted about more than any was ISIS' ban of cigarettes and smoking.

On the evening of March 30, 2017 we communicated with some of our contacts in Raqqa. A number of trusted sources reported something extraordinary was taking place in the city: more and more people were smoking in public. If it were an act of defiance, it would have come at a steep price—at least 16 lashes, a prison sentence, and a fine. Smoking was not only about defiance; it was also about sating their long-repressed cravings for nicotine in the absence of an enemy that forbids it. Our sources confirmed that ISIS cadres are rarely seen in the city. It was also reported that ISIS had shut down all of its directorates there. It seemed that civilians were beginning to experience some sense of normalcy with the absence of ISIS operatives at every corner.

Since the battle to retake Tabqa dam started in March 2017, ISIS has reacted in unexpected ways. One of these reactions could be sensed by their minimal presence in the city of Raqqa, Syria. However, this limited presence resembles a similar trend that occurred in 2014. Then, ISIS was on the retreat, or at least it appeared to be, when al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-sham, and affiliates of the Syrian army were battling it to retake Raqqa. Notwithstanding their efforts, the aforementioned groups lost that battle against ISIS. ISIS fighters carried out significant attacks from the outskirts of Raqqa city, weakening their rivals, and ultimately defeating them. After that battle, ISIS grew stronger with a greater presence in Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor, Syria. Currently ISIS does appear to be on the retreat in Raqqa governorate. Multiple sources have confirmed that they rarely see any ISIS operatives in Raqqa, including both foreign and local ISIS members. One source reported hearing ISIS members who were fleeing the city asking civilians to "Forgive us." Other sources confirmed that injured ISIS members who were involved in the fighting in Rif Dimashq governorate were only in the city to receive medical treatment.

However, one might argue that ISIS is using the same strategy that previously gave its adversaries the illusion of winning, while actually out maneuvering them. It would be shocking for one of the most ruthless non-state actors to flee its declared capital without a fight. In two separate investigations, one on the significance of the Tabqa Dam¹ and the other on ISIS security forces (forthcoming), evidence points to some degree of readiness and preparation to relocate its stronghold in Syria from Raqqa to the city of Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor.

Financial Operations

Trusted sources from the city of Raqqa reported that between the second half of February and first half of March 2017, ISIS security forces pressured the directorates of public services, electricity, communication (landline and satellite internet), agriculture, water, and finance to expedite the collection of all outstanding bills, fines, and taxes, according to one source within one month's time. It was reported that other directorates that functioned within this same controlled territory experienced the same pressure. However, unlike the directorates mentioned earlier, we were not able to directly confirm that this same pressure

was applied to the other Raqqa directorates. For the specified directorates, other trusted sources confirmed the reports and added that ISIS security forces assigned a financial inspector to oversee the implementation of this order. Additionally, the inspector was reported to lead a team of members from ISIS security forces. This team was tasked with listing the details of those involved in the collection of outstanding taxes and fines with each directorate. Members of the team made sure that all collected money was reported and that each directorate didn't exceed a month to fully implement the order.

The inspector and his team were reported to meet at the Wali's (ISIS governor's) office every day after 5 p.m. to report to the leadership of ISIS security forces and the Wali of Raqqa. In addition, the team and inspector assisted another group formed by ISIS security forces to transport the collected money. On an almost weekly basis, the group provided security to move money collected by the directorates within Raqqa city to the city of Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor. On one occasion ISIS security forces managed to move just over USD \$20 million. One source described the operation, that ISIS security forces carried out an operation to move such large amounts of money. The source added that ISIS used three taxies, two medium agricultural trucks, and three pick-up trucks to move the money. The pick-up trucks provided security and were full of ISIS fighters. The agricultural trucks had civilians and their belongings along with two armed ISIS fighters in each truck. The taxis transported the cash and had women and children in them.

The timing, pressure, and detailed workforce involved in implementing the financial collections order within Raqqa city indicate some degree of urgency. It is unclear why ISIS made such a move. Raqqa city is not only an ISIS stronghold in militant terms but also functions as the center of its financial operations. Its grip on the financial aspects of the provision of public services, oil and gas, real estate, and dealing in stolen goods (e.g., vehicles) has allowed the group to finance its operations within Syria, Iraq, and abroad.

To that effect, ISIS might be moving its cash reserves to reduce the losses it might endure if the American forces and their Syrian allies manage to succeed in their operations within Raqqa city. Another justification could be the increasing pressure of forces around Raqqa governorate. In this sense, ISIS might be planning to relocate its financial center to the city of Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor. In either case, ISIS loses much of its maneuvering power if its financial reserves and operations are eliminated. To execute this, American forces and their Syrian allies may need to consider simultaneous attacks, not only in Raqqa but also in ISIS controlled territories in Deir ez-Zor.

Key Figures and Their Families

Details from trusted sources showed that during the second half of August 2016, key ISIS players and their families were moved from the city of Jarabulus in Aleppo to the city of Tabqa in Raqqa governorate. In Tabqa, units from ISIS security forces hosted the members and their families for a day and then suggested moving them to Raqqa city. ISIS' decision to get the families out of Tabqa was due to a number of mysterious assassinations of the major ISIS players in the city. On the first day of the families' arrival in Raqqa city, ISIS security forces provided them protection and escorted them to the city of Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor. Moreover within the same month, ISIS security forces removed additional major players and their families from Raqqa city. It seemed that the additional ISIS members who were relocated from Raqqa had prior knowledge of such an order. Those members were reported

to have sold their belongings (personal cars and real estate) for extremely low prices. In addition, ISIS restricted the movement of unauthorized operatives from the southern outskirts of Raqqa city. Civilians who did not reside in that area were totally banned from any entry into the southern outskirts of Raqqa city. Furthermore, it was reported that ISIS kept only trusted residents and moved the ones who were not deemed to be as such to Raqqa city.

Sources reported that during late September 2016 ISIS moved leading foreign members (not Syrians or Iraqis) to the eastern outskirts of Raqqa city. Many of those members were staying at Al-Thakanah, Raqqa city. During October 2016 over 500 fighters and their family members were resettled in Al-Thakanah. The order for that resettlement came from the leadership of ISIS security forces. All of the resettled fighters came from Mosul, Iraq. As of mid-November 2016, leading Iraqi ISIS members who had fled Mosul were settled in the southern outskirts of Raqqa city.

Recently obtained information indicates that a large number of leading foreign and local (Syrians and Iraqis) members of ISIS and their families were moved to the city of Mayadin and towns in close vicinity of it. Moreover, the movement of key ISIS members and their families were restricted to Mayadin. Those members needed to obtain permission and protection prior to any movement outside the city and towns within close vicinity.

To that effect, the city of Mayadin is clearly viewed by ISIS as safe haven. Information obtained from trusted sources has shown a trend of ISIS moving highly valued members to the city of Mayadin. The data indicates that the trend started during the second half of 2016. This makes the city of Mayadin of great significance in the fight against ISIS. If high numbers of key ISIS members are indeed operating from this place, it might be worthwhile to consider taking the fight to that city. However, the American forces and their Syrian allies are at a disadvantage there. Deir ez-Zor presents a mixed cocktail of extreme violent jihadists and Syrian regime forces, backed by the Russians and Hezbollah. It is important to note that controlling the city of Mayadin and towns in its immediate vicinity gives ISIS a financial advantage. That is to say, through the oil and gas fields in that area, ISIS may be able to generate more revenue—including selling commodities to the Syrians—to fund its ongoing operations.²

Conclusion

Information obtained from trusted sources presents concrete evidence of the value of Mayadin city in the fight against ISIS. Recent accounts indicate ISIS financial reserves have been moved to that city. In addition, leading foreign and local ISIS members have made the city their safe haven. As mentioned earlier, such operations might be in place to reduce the potential losses in the event that American forces and their Syrian allies take the fight to ISIS' stronghold and self-declared capital. It might also be a ploy to draw the American forces and their Syrian allies to the city of Raqqa only to carry out a major assault against them. The American forces and their Syrian allies might try to reduce civilian casualties, slowing down their reaction time in hitting potential civilian targets. ISIS has proved that the loss of human lives is inevitable in their fight and civilian lives are expendable for them. In fact, statements from their social media operatives suggest that they might be preparing the local population in the city of Raqqa for such a loss. ISIS social media operatives presented on Telegram a hadith, a saying from Mohammad, the Islamic Prophet that suggests that out

of a hundred, only one righteous believer will survive to carry out Jihad.³ Below are some comments on it.

The screenshot shows a Facebook post with the following content:

- Post title: Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently
- Post text: #الرققة_تذبح_بصمت #Raqqa #Syria #ISIS #YPG #الرققة خروج سد الفرات عن الخدمة وتنظيم #داعش يعلن انه غير قادر على ارسال ورشات الصيانة نتيجة للغارات الجوية من قبل التحالف الدولي
- Post engagement: 16 Shares, 2.1K reactions
- Comment 1 (Houseen Alahmad): و عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه قال : قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم : لا تذهب الدنيا حتى ينجلي فراتكم عن جزيرة من ذهب ، فيقتلون عليه ، فيقتل من كل مائة تسعة و تسعون . رواه حنبل بن إسحاق في كتابه الفتن (ص 216) بسند صحيح .
- Comment 2 (احمد علي): عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه قال : قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم : لا تقوم الساعة حتى يُخسر الفرات عن جبل من ذهب يقتل الناس عليه ، فيقتل من كل مائة تسعة وتسعون ، فيقول كل رجل منهم : لعلي أكون أنا أنجو .

Moreover, the Russians, through their forces and influence on the Syrian regime, have an advantage in taking the fight to the city of Mayadin. The current American administration has been preaching about the invaluable significance of American-Russian cooperation in the fight against ISIS. The Whitehouse, insofar, has given the Russians the benefit of the doubt on many domestic and foreign issues on the premise that this unusual trust will prevail in such a moment.

In this report we argue taking the fight to ISIS' safe haven in the city of Mayadin could result in massive financial and insurgent losses on the part of ISIS. It might very well be a key operation that leads to the decline of ISIS in Syria. More fundamentally, if the United States cannot and or will not get the Russians' support in taking the fight to ISIS' safe haven then why is such cooperation needed? If not to eliminate ISIS operations in the city of Mayadin, then where and when will this cooperation come into play?

The sign of ISIS' defeat in Syria might be people triumphantly cheering—and defiantly and jubilantly smoking cigarettes in the city of Mayadin. ISIS' defeat might first be sensed in Mayadin barbershops where men are getting their previously imposed beards shaved. It might be also seen as the city dumps become littered with burqas. However, foremost it will

be sealed by an older woman recounting the horrors of ISIS as she inhales the smoke from her long-awaited cigarette.

Asaad H. Almohammad, Ph.D. is a Syrian research fellow and novelist. He completed his doctorate in Political Psychology and Marketing. His academic work addressed how psychopolitical factors alter implicit and explicit emotional responses and to what levels these responses are predictive of political behavior. He has also spent several years coordinating and working on projects across ISIS-held territories. To date, drawing upon a strong network of sources on the ground in Syria, he has addressed a number of financial, operational, and militant activities of the terrorist organization. He is also interested in political branding, campaigns and propaganda, post-conflict reconciliation, and deradicalization. In his spare time Asaad closely follows political affairs, especially humanitarian crises and electoral campaigns. He is especially interested in immigration issues.

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¹ Asaad Almohammad and Anne Speckhard, "Why Taking the Tabqa Dam is Important in the Fight against ISIS and Retaking of Raqqa," International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, Washington, DC, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/why-taking-the-tabqa-dam-is-important-in-the-fight-against-isis-and-retaking-of-raqqa/>

² Speckhard, A. (April 27, 2016). ISIS revenues include sales of oil to the al-Assad regime. *ICSVE Brief Reports*. Retrieved from <http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/isiss-revenues-include-sales-of-oil-to-the-al-assad-regime/>

³ "Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The Last Hour would not come before the Euphrates uncovers a mountain of gold, for which people would fight. Ninety-

nine out of each one hundred would die but every man amongst them would say that perhaps he would be the one who would be saved (and thus possess this gold). (Book #041, Hadith #6918)”