

The day after the battle for Syrian city of Raqqa

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The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a powerful Kurdish-dominated militia, claims that their big advance on Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State's steadily shrinking caliphate, will begin in April.

The advance is likely to result in a bloody fight but the city of about 200,000 people in northern Syria will no doubt fall during the US-led campaign, which is expected to include round-the-clock air strikes by the Americans and their allies and significant ground support by US Marines and special forces.

Hundreds of US troops with heavy artillery and armoured vehicles have been moved into position, with many more likely to follow.

Represented in their ranks are several hundred US Army Rangers who were redeployed from Iraqi Kurdistan. These elite troops have been used before for sensitive operations in Baghdad, Mosul and Kabul.

The Rangers will play a key role in pushing the Islamic State (ISIS) out of the Euphrates River city, its last major urban stronghold in Syria, in a battle that is likely to change the dynamics of Syria's 7-year-old conflict and mark a turning point in the global war on terror.

The multipronged assault on Raqqa is set to begin at the same time US-backed Iraqi government forces are tightening the noose around hardened ISIS fighters in Mosul, ISIS's last citadel in Iraq, where a drawn-out battle has advanced street by street and house by house for the last six months.

Militarily, Raqqa presents less of a challenge than the ancient city of Mosul with its narrow streets. Raqqa's thoroughfares are wide and its buildings are low – usually only three or four storeys – making them easier targets for air strikes and more accessible to armoured vehicles.

The city also lies atop a reservoir of water created by the Euphrates,



Rivalries. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters north of Raqqa city, on February 3.

(Reuters)

making it impossible for ISIS fighters to replicate the labyrinth of underground tunnels they built in Mosul, which proved extremely difficult for opposing forces to overcome.

Raqqa is surrounded by the SDF and the forthcoming battle is being fully coordinated by the Americans and Russians, who control the skies over Raqqa.

Moscow hopes that SDF fighters will hand Raqqa to the Syrian Army once they conquer it – just as they did with the strategic city of Manbij, 30km west of the Euphrates.

Manbij was overrun by SDF forces in August and delivered to the Syrians in March, much to the displeasure of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has insisted his forces control Syrian territory along Turkey's southern border.

Rather than having Manbij fall into Kurdish hands, Erdogan wanted to incorporate the city into a cordon sanitaire to shield Turkey's

borders from ISIS and prevent a Syrian Kurdish statelet from emerging on territory he has designated as the site for millions of Syrian refugees to be relocated. Some of the refugees have lived in Turkey since 2011. In Raqqa, Erdogan wanted his own men to secure liberation.

■ According to the SDF, Raqqa will be liberated in a matter of weeks.

More than 5,000 Turkish-backed irregulars have been preparing for the Raqqa offensive and are awaiting orders to join the assault.

If not in taking Raqqa, Erdogan hopes that the United States will turn to him for help in maintaining control over the strategic city, given the fact that US forces cannot stay to help manage the aftermath and a Kurdish presence would not be tolerated by Raqqa's Arab tribes.

Syria expert Joshua Landis, a professor at the University of Oklahoma who runs the influential Syriacomment.com website, said: "Government forces are the only Arab forces capable of ruling and administering the Euphrates Valley."

"If the US wants to destroy ISIS quickly, it will have to allow eastern Syria to be divided up between the Syrian Army and Kurdish-led forces – that is unless the United States wants to impose a mandate itself over east Syria."

"Some think-tanks in Washington have proposed the 'mandate' idea, some calling it a 'safe zone' or 'federalism', so the idea isn't as far-fetched as it sounds."

"But [US President Donald] Trump is unlikely to want to take ownership of Syria, which means that the Kurds and the central government forces will have to come to terms and govern together."

Until they do that, ISIS is preparing for the worst in Raqqa. All able-

bodied men over the age of 18 have been banned from leaving the city and have been given arms to take part in the coming battle.

The self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has reportedly fled his headquarters in Mosul and is said to be on his way to Raqqa to lead his troops in the battle ahead, which could be his last in Syria.

The SDF said Raqqa will be liberated in a matter of weeks, no later than late May.

After the initial victory, however, another, more divisive battle is likely to erupt over who will control the city, which could block any move towards a peace settlement.

The upcoming scramble underlines the mind-numbing complexity of the Syrian war, where sectarian and ideological enmities of Syria's diverse forces and the rivalries of outside powers that support them – primarily Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia – comprise the very requisites for an ISIS revival.

Why would Assad risk backlash by using chemical weapons?

Viewpoint



Mohamad Bazzi

The April 7 strike against an airbase in northern Syria shows that US President Donald Trump is more willing to use military force in Syria than his predecessor, Barack Obama, but it raises other questions.

Why would Syrian President Bashar Assad, whose regime has consolidated control over Syria's largest cities in the past year and put the rebels on the defensive, risk a new international backlash by using chemical weapons? If he is winning, why would Assad take such a risk?

The answer lies in Assad's refusal to compromise or offer any significant concession since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. Assad overplayed his hand after being emboldened by recent statements from White House officials that it was time for Western powers to accept the "political reality" of Assad's continued dominance.

Assad likely decided to test those boundaries, not expecting Trump to respond militarily because the US president has made it clear that he sees fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) as his

highest priority in Syria and Iraq.

Aside from his brutality, Assad's staying power is rooted in a convoluted foreign policy pioneered by his father, Hafez Assad. Syria played the role of a regional broker and Arab nationalist standard-bearer since 1970, when the elder Assad seized power through a military coup. He perfected the art of creating defensive alliances, nurturing proxies in neighbouring countries and keeping his enemies stalled in costly battles.

Since he rose to power after his father's death in June 2000, Bashar Assad learned to keep all options open and to play Syria's friends and enemies off one another. Assad seems determined to replicate the foreign policy of his past, when he was able to hold on to power by being brutal, focusing outward and waiting for regional dynamics to change in his favour.

When popular protests swept the Arab world in early 2011, Assad was confident that he had nothing to fear because he continued his father's foreign policy legacy: He did not depend on American military and political support like the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen.

Instead, Assad and his allies formed the "axis of resistance" – Iran, Syria and the Islamist militant groups Hezbollah and Hamas. They boasted that the revolts had proved that they are

the true representatives of the majority of people in the Arab and Muslim worlds, who for decades had been stifled under regimes that sold out to the United States.

In refusing to make substantial concessions, Assad has relied on another tactic he learned from his father: The Syrian regime does not make compromises under pressure, whether external or internal. This principle had served it well in times of crisis.

Assad also saw the initial response to popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt and he likely concluded that, by not cracking down forcefully, those rulers appeared weak and encouraged protesters to broaden their demands. So, when his own people revolted, Assad decided to crush the uprising.

At the start of the rebellion in 2011, Assad used Islamic militants to destabilise his opponents, as he had done nearly a decade earlier in Iraq. The Syrian regime released hundreds of al-Qaeda activists and other militants from its prisons and they became leaders of ISIS and other jihadist groups.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Trump said he wanted to avoid direct US involvement in the Syrian conflict, which had expanded into a regional proxy war. Russia and Iran, along with Shia militias such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, helped Assad consolidate control and regain territory

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he lost to the rebels.

After Trump was elected, Assad likely became more confident because Trump had pledged to end US support for rebels fighting the Syrian regime and direct most American efforts to fighting ISIS. Since November, the United States has helped mobilise nearly 50,000 Kurdish and Sunni Arab fighters to encircle Raqqa and cut it off from all sides. The offensive is supported by American air strikes and hundreds of US troops.

Trump's missile strikes on the Syrian airbase could slow the offensive to oust ISIS from Raqqa and other parts of eastern Syria. The Pentagon coordinates with Russian forces in Syria, especially in planning air strikes, and Russian officials threatened to suspend those communications after the US attack on the Syrian airfield.

Assad has suffered a setback because of the American attack but Trump's limited intervention is unlikely to change the course of the Syrian war and Assad will continue his scorched earth policy against rebels and civilians, even if he will now think twice about using chemical weapons.

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Assad learned from his father that the Syrian regime does not make compromises under pressure.