

## April-02-17 – The US Has Opened a New Front in Syria by an Air Assault Operation

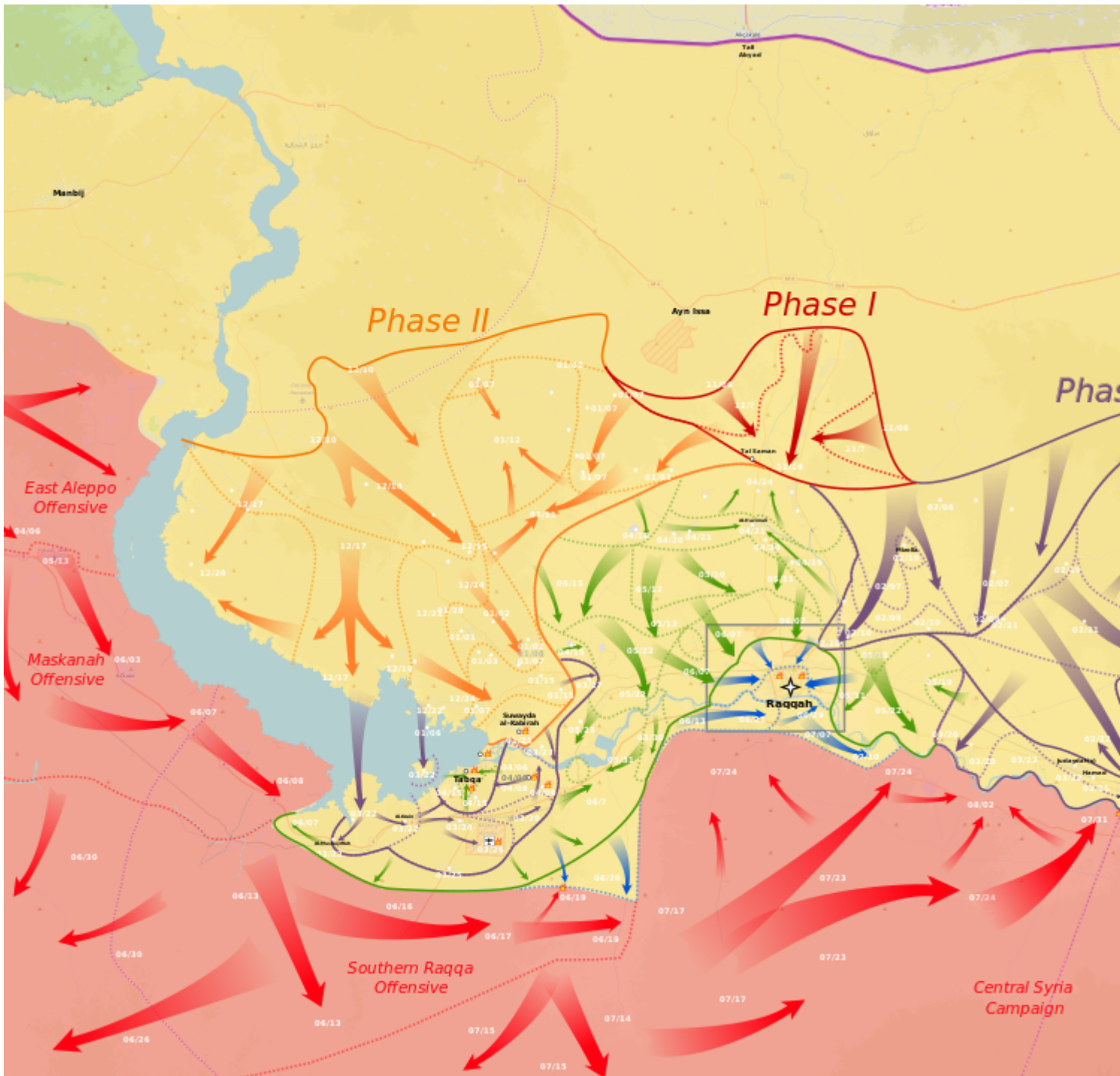
### Description

By Valentin Vasilescu

Trans. by Alice Decker



Raqqa, the Islamic State “capital,” was cut off from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) trained and led by the US military from the north, west and east, within a radius of 20–35 km. The city’s defenders had only one link left with other territories: that from the south. Some 45 km southwest of Raqqa is Tabqa City, an important outpost for the defense of Raqqa on the banks of the river Euphrates. After the Syrian army liberated Dayr Hafer from ISIS, they advanced to Tabqa on the southern shore of Lake Assad, 40 km from the city. To the west of Tabqa city is a strategic objective — the Tabqa dam. It was built in the 1960s and 1970s with help from the USSR. It is a major dam, 4.5 kilometers long, and provides 35% of the electricity in Syria. There is another, smaller dam on the Euphrates River, called the Baath. It is 20 km east of Tabqa dam, between Tabqa and Raqqa.

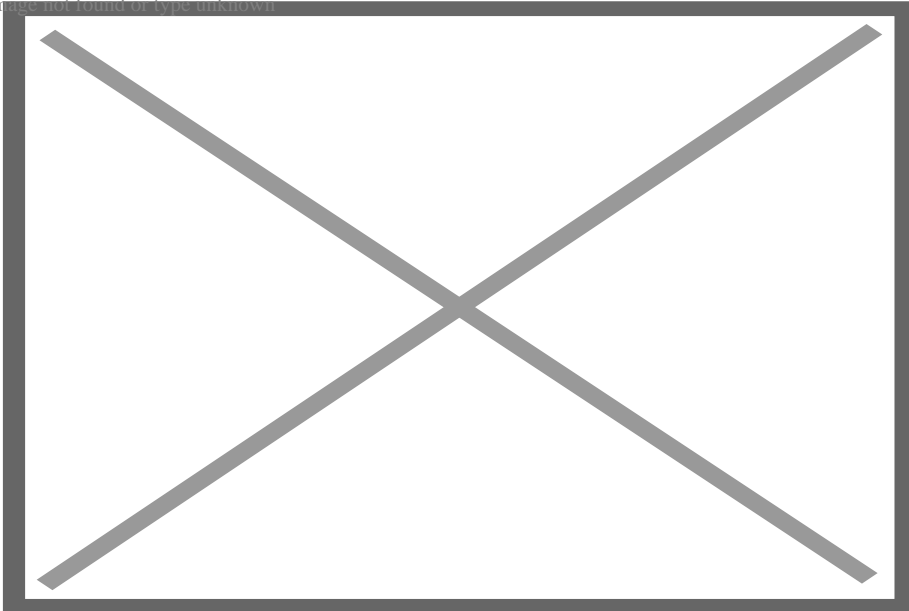


On the night of 21/22 March 2017, the US military launched a joint airborne operation in Syria, carried out initially for about 80 American soldiers from the 75 Rangers Regiment Special Operations Forces and 400 Kurdish YPG fighters, now called SDF. The purpose of this operation was to occupy a strategically important area on the southern shore of Lake Assad and the Euphrates. The area is bounded to the west by a portion of the road linking Tabqa with Aleppo, in the middle by the Tabqa dam and the Tabqa Air Base, and in the east by a portion of the road that connects Tabqa and Raqqa. This operation occurred a week before the Syrian army's maneuver, preventing it from participating in the liberation of Raqqa city from the Islamic State.

The operation started 48 hours before the actual transport, when the US led nearly 50 coalition airstrikes against ISIS. They targeted pockets of resistance, ammunition depots and 50 Islamic State military vehicles. The targets were the city of Tabqa, Tabqa Air Base and near the Tabqa dam. After nightfall, about 75 US Marines in expeditionary unit 11 crossed Lake Assad using dinghies. Their mission was to create a safe overflight for American aircraft by clearing the southern shore of Lake Assad of Islamic State fighters.

At around 04.00 on March 22, in the district where the boarding for the airborne operation was to take place, just north of the town of Jab?r on the northern shore of Lake Assad, about 30 MH-47F helicopters and OV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff aircraft took off from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) Command. The OV-22 Osprey is a tiltrotor vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. It combines the flight characteristics of winged aircraft with those of a helicopter, in that the wing on which the two engines are mounted can change its position by 90 degrees around the transverse axis of the aircraft. The OV-22 can transport 24 soldiers or a 4x4 Badger Phantom vehicle and has not only a gun inside the hatch but also a rotating machine gun with six barrels (7.62 mm caliber, firing at a rate of 6,000 projectiles per minute), operated by remote control, under the belly of the airplane. Now the OV-22 can protect itself in all directions while landing.

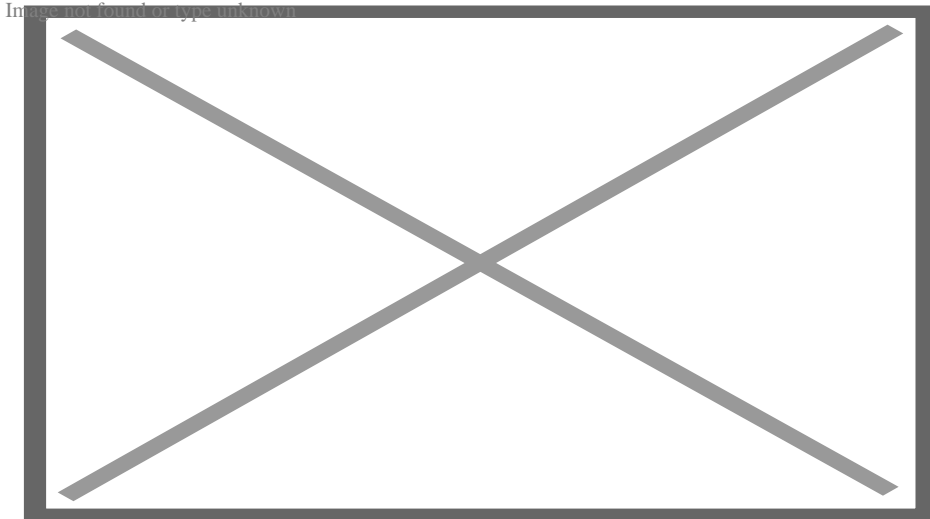
Image not found or type unknown



In the flight path and near Abu Hurayrah peninsula, the designated landing area, the transport aircraft were protected by US AH-64 Apache attack helicopters. Another 124 American marines from the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit were deployed near the town of Jabar. They run a battery of M777 howitzers (155 mm caliber) and, together with the AH-64 Apache helicopters, they neutralized any attempt by Islamic State fighters to fire on the landing areas. The M777 howitzer fires Excalibur-type high-precision projectiles with a range of up to 40 km and is accurate to 4–10 m, due to the use of GPS and a digital fire-control system.

Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoi, Chief of Operations of the Russian military's General Staff, said the Americans' 155 mm caliber projectiles had damaged one of the sluice gates and compromised the

Tabqa dam. It is jammed shut, and there is danger of catastrophic flooding.



The distance between the boarding area of Jabar and the landing in Abu Hurayrah is 25 km. Thus, by March 22, 08.00, US aircraft made at least 60 deliveries including 480 troops, with weapons, ammunition, food, equipment engineers, etc. Note that the MH-47F helicopter is capable of carrying the 75th Rangers Regiment's Humvee light armored vehicles. The first flights carried exclusively American servicemen and their armored vehicles. The MH-47F helicopter transports 33–55 troops, or weapons and ammunition up to 10,886 kg. They defend themselves with a 7.62 mm caliber machine gun operated from the open hatch at the tail. The mission of the 80 US soldiers from the 75th Rangers Regiment was to secure the two landing areas on the Abu Hurayrah peninsula.

By the end of the day, March 22, a bridgehead was established on the southern shore of Lake Assad. About 3,000 fighters and 300 SDF Marines or US Special Forces had been flown in. Additionally, the US Marines also provided landing ships which helped to deploy the SDF's heavy machinery (Humvees, armored personnel carriers, mortars, artillery, bulldozers), on the south bank of the Euphrates. Later, the Tabqa Air Base was captured and most of the troops were deployed 10 km east of Tabqa in the direction of the Baath dam to prevent the Islamic State troops from migrating from Raqqa to Tabqa.

Because of the potential failure of the Tabqa dam, the original plan of operation was changed, meaning that SDF troops who had reached the northern end of it did not go ahead and seize it. Thus they missed the opportunity to open up transport routes for the SDF troops on the southern shore of Lake Assad. The American landing troops then proceed to encircle the Islamic State at Tabqa and to occupy the Baath dam. By crossing the Baath dam, SDF can pop up behind the Islamic State's defensive deployment, located on the north bank of the Euphrates. By this means, the SDF troops on

