

Syria war: US-backed forces 'control' Raqqa



Image copyright REUTERS

Image caption The official declaration that Raqqa has been recaptured is expected soon

US-backed forces in Syria say they now control so-called Islamic State's one-time capital of Raqqa, with only a few dozen militants remaining in the city.

The Syrian Democratic Forces say they have retaken al-Naim square, where IS once held public executions.

The official declaration that the city has been recaptured is expected soon, a BBC correspondent reports.

Earlier, a convoy of local IS fighters and their families left Raqqa as part of a preplanned departure.

No foreign fighters were allowed to join them, the SDF says.

More than 3,000 civilians have escaped the city in recent days, local forces say.



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Image captionUS-backed militias have been besieging the city for months
Raqqa was one of the first large cities IS took over in 2014, and had held control there for three years.

But the SDF, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias, has been besieging the city for nearly four months.

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On Monday, the SDF told the BBC that about 50 IS fighters remained around the city's hospital and stadium.

The BBC gained access to Raqqa earlier on Monday, and for the first time in months there were no air strikes, shelling or gunfire, the BBC's Quentin Sommerville reports.



Quentin Sommerville @sommervilletv

2h

Raqqa: BBC gained access to Raqqa today, for the first time in months, for hours there was no shelling, airstrikes nor sound of gunfire.



Quentin Sommerville

@sommervilletv

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At Naim Sq - Paradise Sq - SDF forces posed for selfies. A truck with loudspeaker urged residents to come out and "eat hot soup" pic.twitter.com/1RIR0NQB6C

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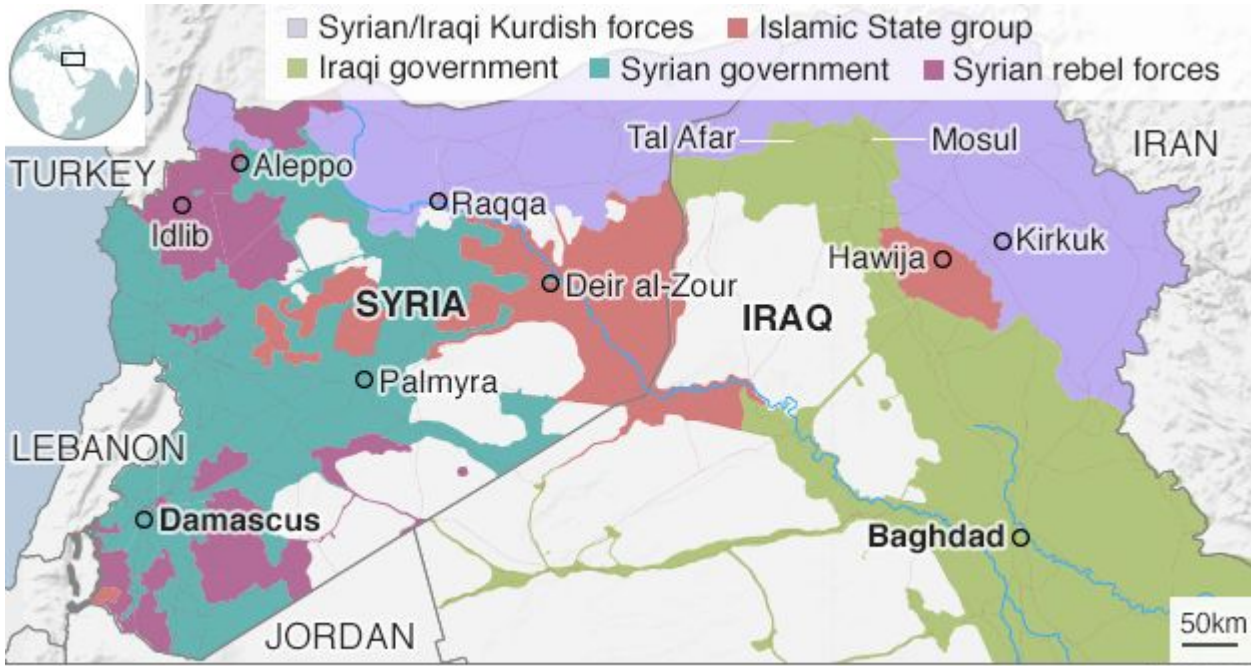


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An SDF vehicle has been patrolling the ruined streets with a loudspeaker urging people to come out into the open and "eat hot soup", our correspondent says.



The SDF's earlier decision to allow some of the militants to go out of the city, leaving only a hardcore group of fighters behind, was designed to shorten the battle.

The loss of Raqqa will be seen as another blow for IS, which has been steadily losing ground in both Syria and Iraq over the last two years.

IS, which attracted fighters from across the globe with its extreme interpretation of Islamic law, used beheadings, crucifixions and torture to terrorise residents who opposed its rule.

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41646802>

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