

CentCom Breaks “Safe Passage” Deal in Syria and Iraq- Making Its Allies Bleed for It

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On Friday the U.S. “Inherent Resolve” command of its operations in Syria and Iraq released a statement that points to unnecessary intensified fighting about the city of Raqqa and elsewhere.

[SAC and SDF Liberate Tabqah](#)

The Syrian Arab Coalition and their Syrian Democratic Force partners completed the liberation of the Tabqah Dam, as well as the city of Tabqah and its nearby airfield May 10.

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In Tabqah, the SDF’s increased pressure on ISIS from each flank allowed it to accelerate the pace of the fight, clear the final neighborhoods of the city, and isolate Tabqah Dam. Approximately 70 ISIS fighters conceded to the SDF’s terms, which included the dismantling of IEDs surrounding the dam, the surrender of all ISIS heavy weapons, and the forced withdrawal of all remaining fighters from Tabqah City.

The SDF accepted ISIS’s surrender of the city to protect innocent civilians and to protect the Tabqah dam infrastructure which hundreds of thousands of Syrians rely on for water, agriculture, and electricity.

(The “Syrian Arab Coalition” is U.S. propaganda parlance for its own forces in the area. That force is part of its Central Command. The “Syrian Democratic Force” are predominantly fighters of the Syrian-Kurdish YPG and a few U.S. special forces embedded with them.)

The Kurdish forces obviously made a deal with the ISIS rearguard. They offered safe passage (safe conduct) to the ISIS fighters if those would dismantle their demolition charges on the Tabqa dam and leave their heavy weapons behind. The ISIS group accepted and fulfilled its part of the deal. The dam was saved. The ISIS forces withdrew.

The Kurdish commander had made the right decision. Any fighting around, on or within the dam structure could have led to a catastrophic dam failure which would have killed ten-thousands (at least) further down the Euphrates.

The next line in the U.S. press release is therefore ominous:

The Coalition tracked fleeing fighters and targeted those that could be safely hit without harming civilians.

The U.S. military broke the “safe passage” deal the Kurds had made with the ISIS fighters.

Quoting that press release [via](#) an AFP reporter [I remarked](#):

Moon of Alabama @MoonofA -3:03 PM - 11 May 2017Ahh - the outrage from @afp if the Syrian government would do alike - targeting rebels after they surrender their weapons and move out ..

[and](#):

Moon of Alabama @MoonofA - 7:26 PM - 11 May 2017ISIS fighters got screwed on deal, were promised free escape then killed. That trick works only once.

To be able to make such deals in similar future situations one needs to keep them.



The Syrian government managed to reconcile with about 1,500 towns and local areas that had taken part in the insurgency against it. It promised an amnesty for the fighters and reestablishment of public services. If it would have broken this contract with some of the first areas that took part in it, others would never have agreed to such deals but would have fought down to the last man, woman and child. The Syrian government also offered safe passage to al-Qaeda held Idlib for various Jihadist groups in besieged areas. It stuck to those deals and never attacked the departing enemies. This enabled it to make more such deals. Large parts of Homs, Aleppo and Damascus thereby returned to government control without destructive fighting.

In Tabqa the U.S. military broke the deal and the word its Kurdish allies had given to ISIS when the deal was made. It tracked and killed those who were guaranteed safe passage, likely from U.S. helicopters or jets. Like me, the Wall Street Journal found this [odd](#). It asked the Pentagon for an explanation:

“This was an agreement for them to leave the Tabqa Dam and to leave the remaining portions of the city they held, but it doesn’t change the fact that when we see ISIS fighters on the battlefield and we have a clean shot at them, we will continue to take it,” [Pentagon spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis] said. Capt. Davis declined to answer whether the U.S. is bound in any way when an ally like the Syrian Defense Forces make an agreement on the battlefield.

“I think SDF let them have safe passage out of Tabqa, but once they continued on the battlefield, I don’t know if that’s something we’re required to honor,” he said.

The U.S. military did not hit the ISIS group “on the battlefield”. Its own press releases quoted above said it “tracked fleeing fighters and targeted those”. Those ISIS people were not fighting. They were not on the immediate battlefield. They were not “fleeing” either. They had been guaranteed safe passage.

I have yet to see a comment from the Kurdish commanders on the ground who made the deal, or from the U.S. special forces embedded with them. If I were in their place I would be furious. The breaking of this deal guarantees that no future deals can be made. ISIS fighters would never again feel bound to them. They will now kill hostages, not negotiate about them. They will blow up infrastructure instead of accepting deals about preserving it in exchange for safe passage. The Kurdish soldiers on the ground will have to bleed for this stupidity. This was some extremely short sighted and vindictive behavior by the U.S. commanders of the overall operation.

The WSJ points out that the problem is wider. The U.S. military itself urges ISIS fighters to surrender, but has no idea what it would do should they actually do so:

Pentagon officials have said in the past that Islamic State fighters can surrender on the battlefield, but haven’t provided details on how such negotiations might proceed, or who would take the lead on such matters since local forces lead the fight in Syria and Iraq.”..those who do not surrender to the Iraqi security forces will be killed there,” Col. John Dorrian, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria said in February.

The U.S.-led coalition didn’t respond to a request for comment or an explanation of policy.

It would be very helpful for the Kurdish and Iraqi forces on the ground if they would have clear public guidelines for handling surrendering enemies. But the U.S. command seems to have none of those for them. This will lead to a TINA mentality: “there is no alternative, we’ll have to kill them all” on both sides of the fight.

In terms of propaganda this will work to ISIS’ favor. Instead of TV pictures of demoralized, defeated and surrendering ISIS fighters the relevant public will see more ISIS “martyrs” who “heroically” blow themselves up as the only way out. This will reinforcing ISIS’ apocalyptic message.

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