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Dabiq, which lies about 10km from the border with Turkey, features in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their "Roman" enemies based on a hadith. The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have said that "the last hour will not come" until Muslims vanquished the Romans at "Dabiq or al-Amaq" - both in the Syria-Turkey border region - on their way to conquer Constantinople (Istanbul).<sup>1</sup> But in October 2016, the fall of Dabiq did not start the apocalypse but the countdown to the end of the Islamic state.

## Operation "Euphrates Shield" - The attack on Dabiq

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ISIS fighters fancied themselves as the true Muslims, and the Turkish-backed rebel forces as the infidels. But fears that the thousand-or-so jihadi fighters holed up in Dabiq would fight to the death were quelled, as the militants simply took to their heels and ran, leaving the Free Syrian Army to walk in without much of a battle.<sup>2</sup>

In the operation's early weeks, Jarabulus and Al-Rai became the first two major settlements to be captured from the ISIS. The attack on Dabiq started on October 15, 2016. Rebels have also taken the villages of Irshaf and Ghaitun, which would cut off Dabiq and another large village, Soran – all in preparation for a ground offensive on the two areas.

ISIS had been sending reinforcements into Dabiq over the past weeks, including one of their most elite units, known as Jaish al-Isra, which arrived in recent days<sup>3</sup>. Experts estimate that ISIS has deployed around 1,200 of its fighters in Dabiq.

On October 16, 2016, Syrian opposition fighters backed by Turkey have taken control of Dabiq from the Islamic State (ISIS). Following heavy shelling and air strikes conducted by both Turkish and international coalition warplanes, some 2,000 opposition fighters pushed into Dabiq with tank and artillery support from the Turkish army. A commander of the Syrian opposition Hamza Brigade said ISIS fighters put up "minimal" resistance, before withdrawing in the direction of the much larger ISIS-held town of al-Bab to the south.<sup>4</sup>

## The propaganda value of Dabiq <sup>5</sup>

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The Syrian town of Dabiq, has figured heavily in ISIS's propaganda since 2014 and is the name of its English-language magazine.

Although the group has been exploiting this apocalyptic imagery aggressively since its 2014 land-grab in Iraq and Syria, references to the Dabiq prophecy have been used by IS and its precursors for far longer.

After the group announced its expansion from Iraq into Syria in 2013 - long before IS seized Dabiq from Syrian rebel fighters in August 2014 - the group's videos began to cite the prophecy routinely, suggesting that the town was in its sights.

Many of the films have been signed off with an image of an IS fighter walking slowly across a landscape carrying a large black banner accompanied by an audio clip from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant who founded al-Qaeda in Iraq, that mentions Dabiq.

Al-Zarqawi, who was killed in a US air strike in Iraq in 2006, is heard to say: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify... until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq."

That quote dates back to September 2004 - a few days before Zarqawi's group captured a Briton and two American hostages who were later beheaded.

The ISIS integrated Dabiq into its propaganda when Jihadi John - a British-Kuwait foreign fighter named Mohammed Amwazi - was believed to have beheaded one of his victims at the site.<sup>6</sup>

It has since been used extensively in Dabiq magazine, whose launch two years ago signaled a clear intention to use the apocalyptic imagery to reach out to an international audience. Every new edition of the magazine opens with a quote by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of Isil's precursor, the Islamic State of Iraq. "The spark has been ignited in Iraq, and its flames will grow until they burn the Crusader armies in Dabiq," he once said.<sup>7</sup>

Taking in consideration the fall of Dabiq, in a recent edition of its al-Naba online publication, ISIS appeared to step back from its Doomsday prediction, saying that the coming battle for Dabiq between it and the Turkey-backed rebels was not the one in the prophesy.

## **The involvement of Turkey**

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Turkey has four main strategic goals in the current military campaign:

- To create a terror free security zone along its border with Syria.
- To contain the Kurdish enclaves along the border.
- To send back into the liberated territories in Syria about 3 million Syrian refugees.
- To gain a symbolic victory over the Islamic state.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said on October 15, 2016 that "We entered Jarablus, and then al-Rai, and now we are moving where? To Dabiq. We will declare a terror-free safe zone of 5,000 [square] kilometers". Erdogan was referring to areas in Syria already captured by Turkish troops and Turkey-backed opposition forces.<sup>8</sup>

In his speech, Erdogan suggested that once the areas are retaken from ISIS, some of the nearly three million Syrian refugees in Turkey could return to their homes. "They can go to their own lands, we can let them live there safely," he said. "That's the step we will take. We have given our proposal to coalition powers and we are moving together."<sup>9</sup>

A Turkish military source said that the 'The operation for Dabiq started ten days ago. We started the effort to take control of the region from the south. Daesh (Islamic States) targets are being hit by Turkish fighter jets and artillery,' the source said.<sup>10</sup>

Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said that Turkish-backed operations will continue until the border area is fully secure. "Strategically, it is important that the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army forces will continue their advance toward al-Bab, a key terrorist stronghold".<sup>11</sup>

## **Saudi Arabia**

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Saudi Arabia has welcomed the liberation of the Syrian town of Dabiq from ISIS and has commended the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army forces for the success.

A statement released by the Saudi Press Agency quoted an official source at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as confirming that "this victory is a blow to ISIS given the symbolic significance this town represents to this terrorist organization, and it is an important step towards defeating terrorism."<sup>12</sup>

## **Summary**

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Dabiq was considered a major ISIS stronghold with symbolic importance to the group. The fall of Dabiq is a significant setback for ISIS because it is not only a strategic town but it also holds a huge symbolic value for ISIS. The group's propaganda, citing ancient prophecy declaring Dabiq as the scene of an apocalyptic battle between Christianity and Islam. The group named its online magazine after the town, which it has occupied since August 2014. Now that the Dabiq is gone, the Islamic state would be humiliated and unable to justify its own ideology.

In 2016, the Islamic State has lost the historic city of Palmyra and the town of Manbij, north of Aleppo, as well as much of its holdings in northern Syria. In Iraq, it lost its stronghold of Falluja in the summer along with much of Anbar province. The fall of Dabiq is another mile stone in the setbacks of the group and took place on the eve of the battle of Mosul, the largest and most important city it has held since its lightning advance across Syria and Iraq in 2014. The end of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a caliphate is near, though, not of the ideology and the terror capabilities of the organization. Countdown to the end of the state started with two contemporaneous events the fall of Dabiq in Syria and the battle of Mosul in Iraq.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Dabiq: Why is Syrian town so important for IS?,BBC News, October 4, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Paul McLoughlin, Apocalypse on hold: IS prophesy fails, as Dabiq falls, The New Arabs, October 17, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Syria: Turkish-backed rebels advance on ISIL-held Dabiq, Al Jazeera, October 15, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Syria war: Turkish-backed rebels seize Dabiq from ISIL, Al Jazeera, October 16, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Dabiq: Why is Syrian town so important for IS ? BBC News, October 4, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Paul McLoughlin, Apocalypse on hold: IS prophesy fails, as Dabiq falls, The New Arabs, October 17, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Syrian opposition advances on Isil's symbolic stronghold of Dabiq, The Telegraph, October 15, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Syria: Turkish-backed rebels advance on ISIL-held Dabiq, Al Jazeera, October 15, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Syria: Turkish-backed rebels advance on ISIL-held Dabiq, Al Jazeera, October 15, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Robb, Syrian rebels attack Dabiq – the site Isis believes will bring the apocalypse, Metro.co.uk, October 15, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Syria war: Turkish-backed rebels seize Dabiq from ISIL, Al Jazeera, October 16, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia welcomes liberation of Dabiq from ISIS, Al Arabiya, October 17, 2016.