STUDENT HANDOUT

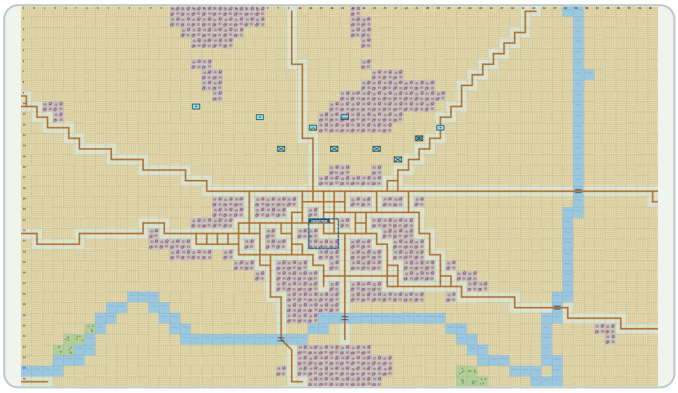
Raqqa: The City Offensive

Raqqa, Syria · 6 June to 17 October 2017

Historical episode, sources reviewed October 2026



Scenario illustration · AI generated



Student map · own side only · Simulation situation map · reconstructed terrain and estimated deployments; not verified historical positions.

Learning objectives

- Locate Raqqa between its river and northern approaches.
- Follow four dated stages of the city offensive.
- Distinguish coalition strike drones from small local observation and bombing drones.

Run time and a good result

Default run clock: 7 minutes 0 seconds at 1×, excluding pauses, briefing and discussion. Time controls change elapsed play time.

Objective: Take the marked stadium sector before the episode ends. The SDF captured Raqqa in October.

Raqqa: The City Offensive: Take the marked stadium sector before the episode ends. The SDF captured Raqqa in October. Occupy the marked zone with at least one combat unit and no opposing combat unit for 8 continuous simulation seconds. The authored limit is 420 simulation seconds across 4 stages. Compare objective progress, time, losses, drone expenditure and recorded civilian harm with a second run. A strong classroom result also explains the source evidence and reconstruction estimates; it does not verify a historical casualty count.

Atrocity notice

Amnesty International documented civilian deaths and possible violations by the U.S.-led coalition in the 2017 Raqqa offensive, alongside IS abuses that prevented civilians from escaping. Historical casualty and accountability evidence remains separate from the modeled run.

Studying or commanding a side does not endorse its conduct. Drone Front never lets players target civilians, hospitals, schools or places of worship. Civilian harm from simulated strikes is counted and shown in the debrief, including nonzero harm. Civilian massacres are never playable operations. Designated terrorist forces and Wagner remain computer controlled; Gaza war events remain excluded from play.

▼ Dated reports and findings

- 2018-06-05 · Amnesty International: War of annihilation, devastating toll on civilians in Raqqa

Learn more: the laws of war

- ICRC: Geneva Conventions and commentaries
- ICRC: Customary IHL database
- UN: Genocide Convention (9 December 1948)
- UN: Rome Statute (17 July 1998), articles 6–8

Historical source notes

Capturing a city does not end its civilian crisis.

Observation drones and armed drones serve different roles.

Dates and districts matter when comparing accounts of an advance.

Civilian harm

Amnesty International and Airwars reported more than 1600 civilian deaths from coalition air and artillery strikes. Amnesty directly verified 641 on the ground; other cases had multiple-source support. The investigation also described ISIL restricting escape and attacking fleeing civilians.

Evidence for learning objectives

The model selects a stadium sector for capture; it does not measure restored services or safe return.

Amnesty and Airwars reported more than 1600 civilian deaths from coalition strikes during June to October 2017.

Removed counters mean lost combat function; MQ9B and TB2 proxy Reaper observation and strike roles.

Timings

For 60 minutes, brief for 15, run with pauses for 25 and discuss for 20. For 90 minutes, compare the phases. For 180 minutes, compare Raqqa and Mosul.

Session	Plan
45 minutes	Brief: 10 min; Run: 15 min; Collect: 5 min; Review: 15 min
60 minutes	Before questions: 5 min; Brief: 10 min; Run: 20 min; Collect: 5 min; Debrief and after questions: 15 min; Discussion: 5 min
90 minutes	Before questions: 5 min; Brief: 10 min; Run 1: with drones: 20 min; Run 2: without drones: 15 min; Collect: 5 min; Compare and discuss: 25 min; After questions: 10 min

Session	Plan
180 minutes	Before questions: 10 min; Brief and staff roles: 15 min; Run 1: with drones: 25 min; Run 2: without drones: 20 min; Break: 10 min; Run 3: syndicates: 30 min; Collect: 10 min; Seminar replay and debrief: 40 min; After questions: 10 min; Close: 10 min

Staff roles

commander
Track the central sector objective.

intelligence
Compare dated reports and the map.

fires
Record simulated effects and civilian exposure.

droneOps
Compare observation and armed roles.

Decision points

- Opening: which approaches are represented?
- Middle: how does the dated phase change the area held?
- Final: what remains after the military objective is reached?

Before and after questions

1. **Which approach describes Amnesty and Airwars' Raqqa investigation?**

   A. Derive each death total from destroyed building counts.
   B. Use coalition acknowledgements as the entire death total.
   C. Cross-check fieldwork with imagery and other evidence, rather than counting repeated posts as independent corroboration
   D. Treat shared social posts as separate witness accounts.

2. **What does the briefing's 1600 field represent for Raqqa civilian deaths?**

   A. Exactly 1600 civilian deaths verified by onsite interviews.
   B. Over 1600 military deaths attributed to coalition strikes.
   C. Exactly 1600 civilian deaths acknowledged by the coalition.
   D. Over 1600 civilian deaths attributed to coalition strikes.

3. **What does a successful stadium capture establish in the Raqqa model?**

   A. The selected stadium sector has met the capture rule.
   B. City services have recovered across all Raqqa districts.
   C. All civilian residents can safely return to their homes.
   D. Every damaged building has become suitable for housing.

4. **What does removal of a Raqqa formation counter mean according to the accuracy notes?**

   A. A verified number of personnel killed in that formation.
   B. Loss of represented combat function, not a death count.
   C. A verified number of residents displaced from its sector.
   D. The complete destruction of every vehicle in its sector.

5. **Which distinction is central to RAND's Raqqa assessment?**

   A. Military success establishes that services have recovered.
   B. Damage to buildings provides the full civilian death toll.
   C. Military success can coexist with severe civilian harm.
   D. Coalition casualty admissions resolve disputed death reports.

Discussion

- How does the city capture differ from rebuilding civilian life?
- Why can aerial observation leave important facts uncertain?
- Why must estimates of civilian harm retain their source and scope?

Debrief rubric

Strong
Meets the objective or explains why it was not met; uses the published sources and run evidence, separates known facts from assumptions, compares both sides' losses and cost exchange, and evaluates precautions against civilian harm.

Adequate
Describes the objective and main decisions, identifies at least one source and model limitation, reports losses and harm, and gives a reasoned change for a second run.

Weak
Reports only victory or points, treats teaching settings as real performance, gives unsupported historical claims, or omits uncertainty and civilian harm.

Published readings

1. UK Ministry of Defence: RAF air strikes in Iraq and Syria, July 2017

2. Amnesty International and Airwars: Joint Raqqa investigation, 25 April 2019
3. Reuters via VOA: US Backed Syrian Militias Push Into IS Held Raqqa, 10 June 2017

Complete source list

Wikipedia: Battle of Raqqa 2017, accessed 5 October 2026
UK Ministry of Defence: RAF air strikes in Iraq and Syria, July 2017
Amnesty International and Airwars: Joint Raqqa investigation, 25 April 2019
Reuters via VOA: US Backed Syrian Militias Push Into IS Held Raqqa, 10 June 2017
Airwars: Raqqa, a city destroyed then forgotten, 12 March 2018
Reuters via Egypt Independent: Islamic State defeated in its Syrian capital Raqqa, 17 October 2017
RAND, Michael J. McNerney and colleagues: Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts, 31 March 2022
Reuters, Zohra Bensemra: Battle for Raqqa, photo 13, 21 August 2017