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The Phony War in Syria

ERIC MARGOLIS

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The great, long-awaited counterattack against ISIS has finally begun. The offensive that spans Syria and western Iraq is targeting the ISIS-held cities of Raqqa and Mosul, Iraq's second largest city.

For a variety of reasons, the much ballyhooed “final offensive” against ISIS is moving with all the speed of a medieval army of drunken foot soldiers and all the audacity of a lady's garden party.

As a former soldier and war correspondent, I find the spectacle both pathetic and weird. Back in my army days, our tough sergeants used to call such behavior “lilly-dipping.” There's no risk that this pathetic campaign will go down in the annals of military history.

In fact, the whole business smells to high heaven.

In the west, the Syrian government and Kurdish troops, stiffened by US, British and French special forces, and backed by US close air support, are inching towards ISIS-controlled Raqqa, a dreary, one-camel town that sits on some strategic roads. Syrian troops just retook Palmyra, once the desert capital of the fabled Queen Zenobia. The battle was hardly a second Stalingrad: ISIS fighters piled into their pickups and skedaddled.

Washington has been slowly massing Iraqi and US forces for the campaign against Mosul, an important city of 64,000 that is the gateway to Iraq's northern oilfields. Arabs and Kurds have been battling over Mosul for decades. Iraq's Kurds, now allied to the US, are set on cementing their hold on Mosul and its oil-producing region...and probably expelling many of its Arab inhabitants. The Turks, who once ruled this region, are angry as hornets and fearful that an independent Kurdish state may be proclaimed at Mosul.

To get to Mosul, all the US-led forces need do is start their vehicles and drive a few hours up the highway to that city. Iraq has excellent roads thanks to its murdered president, Saddam Hussein. US-led Iraqi government and Kurdish forces are similarly close to Mosul from their bases in western Iraq.

If Germans or Russians were running this mini-war, they would have taken Mosul last year.

What strikes me as so curious is that in reality the dreaded ISIS is little more than a bunch of 20-something kids without any military training or professional command except for some veterans of Saddam's disbanded army.

ISIS has almost no artillery and only light anti-aircraft guns. Their supplies are scanty; their communications listened into by nearly everyone. US, British, French, warplanes buzz overhead, ready to blast anything that moves in the flat, empty desert terrain. ,

In WWII the Germans would have sent a couple of jeeps commanded by sergeants roaring into Mosul, ordering its defenders "hands up, thrown down your weapons, and surrender. Schnell!"

This how the audacious Germans took bridges and towns across Holland, Belgium and Yugoslavia. A single jeepload of German soldiers reportedly took Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital.

The notion that a rabble of 20-something ISIS kids can stand up to highly trained heavily armed western troops and their native auxiliaries is absurd. ISIS is what the Ottomans used to call, "bashi-bazooks," armed street thugs used for looting and attacking civilians.

The small Russian air contingent in Syria has proven far more effective than the US and its allies. The mighty US Air Force has continued pinprick attacks on ISIS positions in what has become a pantomime war. It's almost as if the western powers are playing make-believe in Syria.

Perhaps they are. The Saudis and Turks, both very close US allies, have been arming and supplying ISIS in order to topple the Damascus-based Shia regime of President Bashar Assad. Washington has gone along with this covert fight while lamenting the terrors of "terrorism."

Washington's strategy in Syria has become so comically inept that the Pentagon and CIA are actually backing rival Syrian jihadist groups who are fighting with one another. The Russians are mocking Washington. Who can blame them.

The Obama administration is clearly reluctant to use “force majeure” against ISIS. So it continues to tip-toe and lilly-dip in Syria and Iraq, likely assuring that the US will eventually