

Iraq: US military lays waste to Tal Afar

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Early Saturday morning Iraqi time, as many as 4,000 US and 6,000 Iraqi government soldiers and police launched a final assault to seize control of the Sarai district of Tal Afar. The area was the last part of the northern Iraqi city still in the hands of resistance fighters after a two-week US siege and protracted fighting in surrounding towns and villages.

The remaining fighters could offer little resistance against helicopter gunships, tanks and overwhelming troop numbers. The Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported that the occupation forces carried out “heavy artillery shelling and air bombardment before moving into areas where they suspect the insurgents might be holding out”. The *New York Times* described “military helicopters firing rockets into buildings where vastly outnumbered bands of insurgents were holed up”. Journalists covering the operation have reported only scattered clashes since Saturday afternoon.

The city, an ancient metropolis located 40 kilometres from the Syrian border, had a predominantly ethnic Turkomen and Sunni Arab population approaching 300,000. Now it has been depopulated and laid waste to. Entire quarters of Tal Afar are being described as “ghost towns”. Last week, in the lead-up to the weekend offensive, the residents of Sarai were ordered by US-led forces to get out or risk death. As much as 90 percent of the population is believed to have left the city.

While thousands of families in outlying areas had already fled to nearby cities such as Mosul, the Sarai populace has been forced to take refuge in squalid tent camps to the east and south of the city. A Turkomen leader, Ezzedin Dowla, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “Families are homeless and the government has not provided any shelter, food or drink for them.” Conditions in the camps are reported to be desperate.

While most residents fled, thousands of families stayed, primarily due to fear of sectarian persecution at the hands of the Shiite and Kurdish militiamen that make up the bulk of the Iraqi government forces. As was the case during the assault on Fallujah last November, the US

military made no attempt to avoid casualties among the civilians remaining in the city. The head of the Red Crescent in Tal Afar, Doctor Mohammed Qassem, told *Azzaman*: “We are aware of civilians being wounded by falling debris, the result of US shelling and the collapse of their houses.”

The Red Crescent reported that 170 people from Tal Afar have been made sick by “curious poisons” resulting from “inhaling gases”. A website linked to alleged Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi accused the US military of using chemical weapons during the assault on the city and has threatened retaliation.

There are no reliable casualty figures and no reports on the number of civilian fatalities. The US military claimed on Sunday that 141 guerillas had been killed in Tal Afar since August 26, and another 211 captured. An Iraqi government defense ministry spokesman on Monday gave figures of 157 killed and 291 taken prisoner. The surviving fighters are believed to have escaped via a network of tunnels or by blending in with non-combatants fleeing the fighting.

The limited media reports indicate that the US-led offensive has left hundreds of homes, shops, offices and mosques severely damaged. US and Iraqi troops have rampaged through every home in Tal Afar searching for surviving insurgents or weapons caches. When residents are able to return to their houses, they will find their doors and windows kicked in, their furniture smashed and their personnel effects ruined or looted.

Iraqi officials predict that the sweep through the entire city will be completed by Thursday. Thousands of interior ministry police commandos, who are widely accused of having carried out extra-judicial killings, torture and arbitrary detention against opponents of the occupation, will take over security in Tal Afar.

The Bush administration and its puppet regime in Baghdad have sought to justify the operation with lurid accusations that the insurgents are “terrorists” and Islamic extremists coming into Iraq from Syria. Without providing a shred of evidence, the US ambassador in Iraq,

Zalmay Khalilzad, accused the Syrian government of allowing guerilla training camps to operate on its soil and “youngsters misguided by Al Qaeda, from Saudi Arabia, from Yemen, from North Africa, to fly into Damascus international airport”. US patience, he threatened, was “running out with Syria”.

Khalilzad’s claims are crude propaganda. Even as the Iraqi government declared the northern section of the Syrian border closed indefinitely, Al Jazeera reported that American troops based at the crossing near Sinjar were pulled out to join in the assault on Tal Afar, leaving the border wide open.

To the extent there are “foreign fighters” in Tal Afar, they are men from across the region, fighting in an Arab country against Washington’s attempt to place Iraq under long-term American domination. In the eyes of many Iraqis, the real “foreigners” are the US and allied troops occupying their country.

The bulk of the resistance fighters in Tal Afar, however, are Iraqis. Iraqi journalist Nasir Ali told Al Jazeera there were very few foreigners in the area. Drawing attention to the false US allegations of Al Qaeda terrorists controlling Fallujah before last year’s attack, Ali declared: “Every time the US Army and the Iraqi government want to destroy a specific city, they claim it hosts Arab fighters and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.”

Following the destruction of Fallujah, large numbers of guerillas dispersed to cities such as Mosul, Tal Afar and Ramadi, and other areas in northern and central Iraq, in order to continue the armed resistance to occupation. The insurgency enjoys broad popular support among the Sunni and Turkomen population in northern Iraq. As well as sharing an anti-colonial sentiment, millions of Sunni and Turkomen Iraqis fear the domination of Kurdish nationalist forces that are seeking, with US backing, to expand their sphere of political control.

The assault on Tal Afar is part of a broader offensive by the US military and the Baghdad government to suppress the widespread opposition to both the presence of US troops in the country and the draft constitution that is to be voted on at a referendum on October 15.

In the weeks since the draft constitution was ratified, Sunni and Turkomen organisations have campaigned for their communities to register and to vote down the constitution at the referendum. Hundreds of thousands of Sunnis, who boycotted the elections in January, have registered to vote across the Sunni heartland of central and western Iraq over the last several months.

A two-thirds “No” vote in just three provinces would be

enough to defeat the proposal and force the US-led occupation to restart the entire process of elections, forming a government, drafting a constitution and holding a referendum.

Sunni and Turkomen communities form the overwhelming majority of the population in at least four provinces, including Tal Afar’s province of Ninevah, and Anbar province, where Fallujah and Ramadi are located. If Shiite movements such as that led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr also backed a “No” vote, the referendum could be defeated in other provinces as well, throwing the Bush administration’s agenda in Iraq into further disarray.

Tal Afar is an indication of the methods being unleashed to prevent such an outcome. The cities and towns along the Euphrates River, where anti-occupation sentiment is strong, are going to be subjected to a military onslaught over the coming month in order to disrupt the efforts to mobilise “No” votes. Thousands of people will be turned into refugees and the cities placed under martial law by the interior ministry and Iraqi government troops loyal to the Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish parties supporting the constitution.

The list of targets to follow Tal Afar has already been named. On the weekend, Iraqi Defence Minister Sadoun Dulaimi declared: “After the Tal Afar operation ends, we will move on Rabiya (a town on the Syrian border) and Sinjar (also on the border) and then go down to the Euphrates valley. We are warning those who have given shelter to terrorists that they must stop, kick them out or else we will cut off their hands, heads and tongues as we did in Tal Afar.”

In another statement, Dulaimi ominously warned: “We tell our people everywhere—Ramadi, Samarra, Rawa and Qaim—that we are coming.”



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