

Iraq: US military extends its offensive into the northern city of Mosul

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Since January 1, American and Iraqi government forces have been conducting a major offensive, codenamed Phantom Phoenix, against Sunni Arab-based resistance groups in northern Iraq. Operations have already been conducted in the province of Diyala and in the Arab Jabour district to the south of Baghdad. They have been characterised by some of the heaviest aerial bombardments of the war and the mass round-up of anyone accused of being members or sympathisers of the Sunni fundamentalist organisation which calls itself Al Qaeda in Iraq.

US authorities have seized upon the activities of this outfit to designate all Sunni-based resistance to the foreign occupation as terrorism. Rear Admiral Gregory Smith told the media on January 20 that the latest offensive had already resulted in the death of 121 “terrorists” and the detention of 1,023.

The killing and repression is now being extended to Mosul, an ancient metropolis on the banks of Tigris River and Iraq’s second largest city after Baghdad. Mosul is the capital of Nineveh province, which borders Syria to the west, the Kurdish autonomous region to the north and east and the predominantly Sunni Arab provinces of Anbar and Salah Ad Din to the south. It had an estimated pre-war population of 1.7 million. Sunni Arabs comprised the majority, but lived alongside large Kurdish, Turkomen and Assyrian Christian communities.

The US occupation has faced continual resistance in Nineveh since the 2003 invasion. A number of Sunni Arab resistance groups and tribes in Anbar province and Baghdad struck deals with the US military during 2007 and ended attacks on American and Iraqi government forces, but that has not taken place in Mosul. The predominantly Sunni districts of the city remain guerilla strongholds.

The US military alleges that many of the fighters in Mosul fled from the areas where American troop numbers were built up as part of the Bush administration’s surge, or where the Sunni “citizens groups” were established and began collaborating with the occupation.

Some 5,000 US troops and as many as 18,000 Iraqi government troops are expected to take part in securing Mosul. Over 2,000 predominantly Kurdish troops of the Iraqi Third Division, who have been fighting alongside American forces in Baghdad, have been redeployed to the area. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki declared last weekend: “Today our forces are moving towards Mosul. What we have planned in Nineveh will be final. It will be a decisive battle.”

Difficult urban counter-insurgency fighting is being anticipated. An American commander in the area, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Simmering of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, told journalists this week: “The thing about the insurgency in Mosul is that there are many different facets. This is going to be a long, protracted push by coalition forces and more importantly by Iraqi security forces to reestablish security. If you’re looking for one big culminating event, you’ll never see it. I call this the ‘campaign for Mosul’.”

The initial stages of the US push into the city began in the southern suburbs a week ago. On January 23, an insurgent arms cache hidden in an abandoned building in a residential area exploded as government troops closed in. The massive explosion, which left a 10-metre deep crater, devastated surrounding homes, killed at least 60 people and wounded more than 280. Iraqi authorities immediately labelled it a terrorist atrocity, but its cause is not clear. Locals appear to have blamed the government security forces. The Nineveh provincial

police chief, Salah Mohammed al-Jubouri, was stoned by a distraught crowd when he visited the site the next day and assassinated by a suicide bomber as he attempted to flee to his vehicle.

On Monday, five US troops were killed by a roadside bomb and the rest of their unit engaged by heavy small arms fire while attempting to secure an insurgent-controlled mosque in south-eastern Mosul. The guerillas retreated before they could be attacked by US air strikes and a ground assault on the mosque by government soldiers. The casualties pushed the US death toll for January to 36 and the overall number of American deaths since the invasion to 3,940. Dozens of government soldiers and police have also been killed this month. A police patrol was ambushed on Monday, leaving two dead.

Over the coming days and weeks, US and government troops will have to move into areas in which insurgents have had years to entrench themselves, lay booby traps and conceal firing positions. A spike in US casualties is likely, particularly when Iraqi guerillas are forced to make a stand. In Diyala province, however, the main insurgent tactic has been to avoid frontal clashes with the vastly better equipped and armoured American forces. Instead, they have sought to melt into the civilian population, relying on the popular sympathy to live to fight another day.

The result is a frustrating, nerve-racking and never-ending war for the American forces. In Diyala province alone this month, according to US general Mark Hertling, his troops have had to disarm 386 roadside bombs, 28 car bombs and 38 “house” bombs. Fifteen soldiers have been killed, including six who died when they entered a booby-trapped building.

In the Arab Jabour region south of Baghdad—an area of small villages, irrigation channels and orchards—the US air force is carrying out repeated bombardments to try and clear roadside bombs and mines. Thirty targets were struck on January 20 with 20,000 pounds of high explosive bombs, following the pounding of 99 targets between January 10 and 16 with over 99,000 pounds of bombs.

US tactics increasingly rely on massive air strikes, combined with the indiscriminate detention of suspected resistance fighters. According to figures provided in the Pentagon press briefing by Rear

Admiral Smith this month, the US military detained 8,800 alleged “Al Qaeda in Iraq terrorists” during 2007 and killed 2,400. These figures do not include the thousands of alleged Sunni nationalist fighters or anti-occupation Shiite militiamen who were detained or killed. As many as 35,000 prisoners are being held in US-run camps inside Iraq and a similar number in Iraqi government facilities.



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