

US-backed offensives seize towns in northern Iraq

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US-backed Kurdish forces totaling some 7,500, including the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga as well as Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG), captured the northern Iraqi city of Sinjar from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on Friday.

Despite proclamations of a major victory over ISIS, resistance by ISIS fighters was limited, according to reports. YPG elements easily entered Sinjar from the west and linked up with the Peshmerga in the city center while barely firing a single shot, according to one report from a German investigator embedded with the Kurdish forces.

Simultaneous with the fighting in Sinjar, another offensive led by a US-backed militia coalition centered on YPG formations, the recently proclaimed Syrian Democratic Force, appeared to score its own victory during an assault on Hol, a key town on the Iraq-Syria border.

Inside Iraq, US ground forces are staging operations from six major “train and advise” bases, and are orchestrating three new ground operations in western and northern Iraq and one in northern Syria, according to a briefing given in Baghdad Friday by Defense Department spokesman Colonel Steve Warren.

US warplanes launched more than 250 strikes against Sinjar alone, during the lead-up to Friday’s ground assault. The town of Sinjar has been “shattered” in the course of the assault, and residents will be unable to return for the foreseeable future, according to local official Mehme Khalil.

In remarks Thursday to the US Institute of Peace, US Secretary of State John Kerry made clear that the US-backed operations in Iraq represent the opening stages of a broader escalation.

In Iraq, the US is “stepping up our strategy in all its aspects,” Kerry declared. “We are just getting started,”

Kerry said, touting the role played by the thousands of US troops deployed to Iraq since the launch of Operation Inherent Resolve in August 2014.

There are already clear signs that the US-backed Kurdish offensives are exacerbating the recent escalation of tensions between Washington and the Baghdad government.

In a symbolic humiliation for Washington, the Iraqi government has welcomed the establishment of a joint military planning center in Baghdad staffed by Russian officers.

Even as the US-backed Kurds overran final sections of Sinjar on Friday, Iraqi diplomats visited Moscow for discussions over an enhanced Russian military presence in Iraq.

“The Iraqi side underlined its intention to further strengthen coordination and cooperation between Moscow and Baghdad on counterterrorism. The importance of continued Russian support to the Iraqi government was noted,” a Russian foreign ministry statement on the discussions read.

The timing of the offensives strongly indicates that they have been authorized by the Obama administration to strengthen the US hand at the Syria negotiations in Vienna.

Kerry traveled to the Austrian capital on Friday. He will negotiate with representatives of 19 governments over the fate of Syria, with initial discussions with his Turkish and Saudi counterparts beginning Friday evening.

The US secretary of state outlined his agenda for the talks and the broader US strategy in Syria during the speech at the US Institute of Peace on the previous day. There were two significant components to his remarks, besides the now-standard denunciations of ISIS as the greatest security threat to the United States in a

generation.

Kerry emphasized the degree to which all the powers meeting in Vienna, including Iran and Russia, had agreed to a common agenda in Syria, including the destruction of ISIS, and the restructuring of the country's government under UN auspices.

Kerry also reiterated Washington's determination to remove Assad. "Asking the opposition to trust Assad or to accept Assad's leadership is simply not a reasonable request, and it is literally, therefore, a non-starter," he said. These groups—that is, the paid-for hirelings of American imperialism—saw the removal of Assad "as the critical component of the transition. That's why we are pushing so hard for a real transition. Because without a real transition, no matter how much we want it, the fighting will continue and the war will never end."

US and Western diplomats retain "limited expectations for this round" of talks, an unnamed senior official told the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday. Indeed, the reality on the ground is one of intensifying violence and civil strife, across a broad region stretching from the Mediterranean to the Tigris.

Dozens were killed and some 250 wounded on Friday as massive suicide bombings ripped through residential neighborhoods in Beirut on Friday. ISIS members have claimed responsibility for the attacks, which struck areas known as strongholds of Shia militias aligned with Hezbollah.

The spread of war is fundamentally driven by the drive of US imperialism to subjugate the entire region. Under the fraudulent cover of a "war against ISIS," Washington is spearheading yet another military escalation of the new imperialist scramble to redivide the Middle East that erupted in response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.



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