

US-backed Iraqi forces tighten noose around Mosul

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The first 24 hours of the US-directed assault on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-held city of Mosul in Iraq has shed further light on the calculated and murderous character of the operation. Tens of thousands of Kurdish and Iraqi Army forces have begun a slow advance on the city, tightening a noose around the estimated 5,000 ISIS fighters and up to 1.5 million civilians, including 600,000 children, who are trapped inside.

American Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, the commander of US and allied forces in Iraq and the de-facto commander of the entire operation, stated yesterday that the siege of Mosul “will likely continue for weeks, possibly longer.” A time frame as long as three months has been raised by Kurdish military commanders. The increasingly clear intent is to use air strikes, starvation and desperation to weaken what remains of ISIS’s fighting strength. The consequences for civilians—deprived of safe water supplies and adequate food, unable to access medical services, and enduring continuous bombardment—will be catastrophic. Thousands will most likely die.

More accurate details have begun to emerge of the full extent of the military forces that have been arrayed against Mosul.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has up to 10,000 of its Peshmerga militia deployed in an arc to the north and east of the city, with some 4,000 involved in initial offensive operations yesterday. Anti-ISIS Christian and Yazidi militias are fighting alongside them. In the first day, the Peshmerga seized nine villages some 30 kilometres from the centre of Mosul and about 200 square kilometres of territory. ISIS offered some resistance, with suicide bombers attacking the Kurdish forces with explosive-rigged vehicles. Oil wells were set ablaze by ISIS to cover their retreat.

The Iraqi Army has deployed over 50,000 troops. One

large force is pushing toward Mosul from the south, but is still well over 30 kilometres from the city. Other units have been dispatched to join Kurdish troops and advance from the north. Some 9,000 anti-ISIS local police and Sunni tribal militia are being kept in the wings, to be sent into the city to establish “order” once it falls.

Shiite militiamen, the so-called Popular Mobilisation Units which stand accused of sectarian massacres of Sunnis after the western city of Fallujah was retaken from ISIS, are being kept out of the actual offensive. They have been deployed to the west of Mosul, to block escape routes toward Syria.

Turkish Army units, with tanks and heavy artillery, are occupying the heights of Mount Bashiqa to the north-east of Mosul in defiance of Iraqi government demands to leave. Turkey has armed and trained a 1,500-strong ethnic Turkmen militia to assist its military forces.

Both Iraqi Army and Kurdish units are being accompanied by special forces and advisors from the imperialist powers. General Townsend acknowledged yesterday that hundreds of American personnel are on the frontlines acting as “Joint Terminal Air Controllers” to help target air strikes. British and Australian advisors are also with Iraqi units. Canadian, German and Italian troops are reportedly operating with the Kurdish militia. US Marine and French artillery batteries are taking part in the assault.

At least 100 aircraft—including American, British, French, Australian, Canadian, Jordanian and Iraqi—are providing air cover. The US has made available B1 heavy bombers, F-18 fighter-bombers, A-10 ground attack aircraft and Predator drones. The “Combined Task Force” claimed yesterday that recent air strikes in Mosul have destroyed tunnel entrances, radio repeater towers and antennas, solar electricity generators, vehicles, ISIS mortar positions and a bridge over the Tigris River connecting the western and eastern suburbs of the city.

Seventeen air strikes were carried out yesterday in support of the Kurdish advance.

For weeks the Obama administration, its European allies and virtually the entire western media have accused Russia and the Syrian government of war crimes for the desperate conditions that face civilians in Aleppo, due to the offensive being waged against Islamist rebels who control the east of the city.

What has begun in Mosul is a war crime of even greater dimensions. The US-directed Iraqi government assaults on the western cities of Fallujah and Ramadi left them in ruins by the time they were recaptured from ISIS. Mosul, a far larger city, whose history goes back over 3,500 years to the Assyrian Empire, now faces the same fate. The United Nations and aid agencies are continuing to make alarmed warnings about the plight of civilians trapped in the city and for greater action to prepare for the predicted exodus of hundreds of thousands of starving and sick people.

UN humanitarian affairs and emergency relief official Stephen O'Brien issued a press release on October 16, calling on "all parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians and ensure they have access to the assistance they are entitled and deserve." After warning that "as many as one million people may be forced to flee their homes in a worst-case scenario," O'Brien noted that shelter is currently available for only 60,000, with camps to house an additional 250,000 still being erected and supplied. "Funding," he declared, "has been insufficient to prepare fully for the worst-case scenario."

The same media outlets that have devoted enormous coverage to indicting Russia and Syria—such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, and the major British, French, German, Canadian and Australian broadcasters and newspapers—are reporting only US and Iraqi government propaganda about Mosul. The prospect of large-scale casualties is being almost universally ascribed, including by the UN relief agencies, to ISIS using people as "human shields," covering the city with explosives and minefields, and being prepared to wage a fanatical "fight to the death."

No attempt is being made in the pro-imperialist media to assess how ISIS came to take control of Iraq's second largest city in the first place. It is the direct outcome of the brutal repression of the Sunni minority in the country, first at the hands of the US military occupation forces and then by the forces of the Shiite-dominated government that rules in Baghdad. ISIS, which gained its initial

strength in Syria from the CIA-sponsored campaign to arm Islamist militias to fight the Russian-backed Assad regime, was able to cross into Iraq in 2014 and portray itself as the liberator of Sunni communities.

ISIS—until then a de-facto US proxy in Syria—only came to be viewed as an obstacle to American strategic interests because of the threat it posed to both the Iraqi government and the pro-US Kurdish region. In June 2014, barely 1,000 ISIS fighters were able to rout as many as 30,000 Iraqi government troops, take over Mosul and capture vast quantities of vehicles, weapons and ammunition, as well as some \$500 million in cash and gold.

The reality that now faces the civilian population of Mosul, as US imperialism directs the recapture of the city by its puppet government, is that no escape routes have been negotiated with ISIS and every male aged 14 or over who leaves the city will be detained and questioned on suspicion of ISIS affiliation or sympathies. In Fallujah, as is well known in Mosul, hundreds of men were massacred or subjected to savage abuse by militias or troops of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. Of some significance, Kurdish Regional Government reported that no "internally displaced persons" arrived at refugee camps from the villages its forces seized yesterday. Civilians appear to have fled into the city, not away from it into Kurdish lines.

The contrast between the portrayal of the siege of Aleppo and the assault on Mosul has entered into the annals of imperialist hypocrisy and deceit. One of final legacies of the eight-year Obama administration—elected in November 2008 in large part due to the anti-war sentiment among the American people but which has presided over continuous war since taking office—is shaping up to be a bloodbath in northern Iraq.



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