

Mosul offensive threatens to inflame sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria

Jordan Shilton
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The offensive by the US-led coalition to retake Mosul continued Tuesday, as leading participants acknowledged the fighting could take months, and aid organizations issued dire warnings of the impact on the more than 1 million civilians living in Iraq's second largest city.

Since ground operations were launched at dawn on Monday by the Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and various ethnic-based irregular militias, advancing troops have captured 20 villages from Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Peshmerga forces captured part of the road connecting Irbil, the KRG capital, to Mosul Tuesday.

The US-led military operation is preparing the ground for a war crime of enormous proportions. An assault is to be waged on a city with an estimated population of 1.3 million, including 600,000 children, by some 30,000 ground force, backed up by aircraft from the US and other imperialist powers, among them France, Britain, Germany and Canada. For those lucky enough to survive the initial onslaught, virtually no plans have been made to deal with the 1 million expected to be turned into refugees, let alone how Mosul and its ethnically diverse surroundings will be governed following its recapture from ISIS.

US President Barack Obama made his first public comments on the Mosul offensive yesterday, acknowledging at a joint press conference with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi that "Mosul will be a difficult fight and there will be advances and setbacks." Ignoring the destruction wrought by previous anti-ISIS operations, such as the sieges of Ramadi and Fallujah, which left both cities largely in ruins, he remarked blandly on the impact on civilians, "Executing will be difficult and no doubt there will be instances where we see some heartbreaking circumstances. ... It's hard when you leave your home."

The wall-to-wall coverage in the Western media about

ISIS's use of civilians as human shields conceals the fact that the humanitarian catastrophe developing in Mosul is of the imperialist powers' own making. The US-led invasion of 2003 and Washington's subsequent fomenting of ethnic divisions between Shia and Sunni cost the lives of hundreds of thousands and created the conditions in which ISIS could flourish and claim to be liberating Sunni areas of western Iraq. The US and its coalition allies are now dropping leaflets on Mosul urging civilians to flee under conditions where the Iraqi government is said to be suspecting any male aged 14 or over leaving the city as a potential ISIS supporter.

Beyond Iraq, the US-led intervention in Syria and the Saudi-led military operations Washington has backed in Yemen have deepened regional conflicts and plunged the Middle East into a bloodbath that threatens to draw in the major powers in a wider war.

These conflicts are being exacerbated by the Mosul offensive. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Syrian army sources charged the US-led coalition with planning to enable thousands of ISIS fighters based in Mosul to flee across the border into Syria. Noting that the west of the city remained unguarded, Lavrov warned that Russia would be forced to adopt "political and military" measures if this eventuality came to pass. "As far as I know, the city is not fully encircled," Lavrov said. "I hope it's because they simply couldn't do it, not because they wouldn't do it. But this corridor poses a risk that Islamic State fighters could flee from Mosul and go to Syria."

While other sources have reported that Shia militias kept out of the offensive due to the fear of sectarian reprisals have been deployed to the west of Mosul to cut off the escape route, it can by no means be excluded that the US has reached such an arrangement. Washington worked closely with Islamist extremists in 2011 to topple the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and many of these elements

were later transported to Syria with the help of the CIA before going on to form ISIS. Moreover, the Obama administration has shown its readiness to collaborate with Jihadi forces in the five-year civil war to oust the Assad regime in Damascus.

As well as potentially inflaming the war in Syria, the retaking of Mosul threatens to deepen already bitter ethnic, regional and religious divisions within Iraq itself.

Many of the ethnically based militias that have been armed and trained by Western powers engaged in bloody sectarian fighting in the wake of the 2003 US invasion and are pursuing antagonistic interests that could well result in the ethnic partition of Iraq, which would have devastating consequences for the already desperate population.

Even commentators in the bourgeois media have been compelled to note that the retaking of Mosul will resolve none of the problems that have led to Iraq's essential partition into Kurdish, Shia and Sunni enclaves and could in fact prepare a new wave of bloodletting.

David Gardner writing in the *Financial Times* observed that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's hope that Iraqis would unite around the capture of Mosul was "optimistic." He described the various militias involved in the offensive as being "at each others' throats" and warned that the battle for control of the region, which is rich in energy reserves and is home to an ethnically diverse population including Sunnis, Shia, Kurds and Christians, could be "explosive."

The Peshmerga fighters, who have previously been accused of atrocities against Sunni villagers, are to be kept outside of Mosul in a bid to avoid ethnic violence, but the KRG is determined to use their involvement in the offensive to strengthen its position with the central government in Baghdad. This was the message contained in an interview published Tuesday by al-Jazeera with KRG Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir. "We have a stake in Mosul," he stated when asked about the role of the KRG after its recapture. "Mosul is important and has a direct impact on Irbil and Dohuk, and the KRG as a whole, in terms of security, the economy, a social impact. Therefore, we need to be there."

He also left no doubt that the KRG would give little quarter to civilians fleeing the fighting because everyone would be suspected of carrying ISIS sympathies. "Having talked about IDPs [internally displaced persons] coming in, we have a security concern," Bakir told al-Jazeera. "Those who have lived under ISIL come with baggage. Some have been recruited, therefore we have to be able to

distinguish between real and genuine IDPs and those who come in disguised as IDPs."

Sharp divisions also exist between Baghdad and Ankara. The Turkish government has deployed roughly 700 troops to the northeast of Mosul and also trained a local Turkmen militia to support it. The Shia-dominated Iraqi government has denounced Ankara's presence, and a demonstration of several thousand supporters of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was held in front of the Turkish embassy in Baghdad yesterday. Some of the Shia militias, which are heavily backed by Iran, have vowed to fight a Turkish intervention.

Turkey has refused to back down, insisting that it has a right to participate in the Mosul operations and subsequent talks over its final status. In so doing, it is aiming to restrict the activities of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq and extend Ankara's influence in Sunni areas. Noting Turkey's 350-kilometer border with Iraq, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Monday, "We will not be responsible for the negative consequences that will emerge from any operation that doesn't include Turkey. We will be involved both in the operation and at the [negotiating] table afterward. It is not possible for us to stay excluded."

Primary responsibility for the disastrous state of affairs in Iraq lies with American imperialism, which laid waste to the country in its reckless pursuit of regional and global hegemony.

But the involvement of all of the major imperialist powers in the region will only exacerbate the sectarian conflicts and increase inter-imperialist rivalries. Alongside approximately 5,000 US special forces involved in the onslaught on Mosul, troops from Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany and Italy are also deployed to Iraq. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, who has been at the forefront in charging Russia with war crimes over its involvement in Aleppo over the past month, announced a planned meeting jointly hosted with the Iraqi government October 20 to discuss plans for Mosul's future.



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