

Mosul offensive stirs a cauldron of conflicts

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Iraqi Army units and troops of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), backed by US and allied air power, special forces and “advisors,” continue to push toward the Islamic State (ISIS)-held northern city of Mosul and the estimated 1.5 million civilians trapped within its confines. In the past 24 hours, Kurdish forces claimed to have captured villages and towns to the city’s north and east, while Iraqi Army units advanced from the south.

The assault is unfolding amid uncritical media coverage, with embedded journalists filing reports that in general laud the success of Kurdish and Iraqi forces in the face of supposed fanatical resistance and suicide attacks by ISIS defenders. Vast columns of black smoke rising over the battle zones are universally attributed to ISIS igniting oil wells and mounds of tyres to obscure their movements from aerial detection and attack.

No official estimates of Kurdish or Iraqi government casualties have been released, nor figures on ISIS losses. The US military confirmed yesterday that one of its special forces soldiers was killed by a roadside bomb to the north of Mosul.

Next to nothing is being reported about the devastation and casualties caused by US and allied air strikes on targets within the urban reaches of the city itself. Instead, the media is full of accusations that ISIS is using people as “human shields”—justifying civilian deaths in advance. American, British, Australian, French, Canadian and Jordanian bombers, jet fighters, helicopter gunships, drones and surveillance aircraft are involved in the air assault.

One indication of the destruction being inflicted was an October 19 report by the British Broadcasting Corporation that the University of Mosul, once one of the best equipped in the Middle East, is in ruin. A source stated: “The university is completely inoperative and air strikes have made it a difficult place to go. Most

of the buildings have been brought down, it’s virtually gone.”

US and allied military commanders project that operations to recapture Mosul will last as long as three months. This suggests that much of the city will be reduced to rubble and the predominantly Sunni Arab civilian population will suffer horrific casualties from the bombing, starvation and disease.

Just five days into the Mosul offensive, however, it is stirring a cauldron of inter-state and ethno-sectarian conflicts that are the legacy of 25 years of US imperialist violence, intrigue and destabilisation in Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East. Before the city even falls, savage fighting threatens to break out between nominal allies in the operations against ISIS.

The Syrian regime, with the assistance of Russian air power and Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite militias, claims it is on the verge of recapturing the eastern sectors of the city of Aleppo from Sunni Islamist militias that have received overt support from the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to try to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The fall of Aleppo would largely end the US-backed rebellion in the coastal regions of Syria and enable Assad’s military to shift focus to the ISIS-held areas in the interior and east of the country, particularly the city of Raqqa.

Both the Syrian regime and Russia are accusing US-backed Iraqi and Kurdish forces of deliberately allowing ISIS fighters in Mosul to escape the city to the west and cross into ISIS-controlled areas of Syria. Hundreds have allegedly successfully made their way to Raqqa to join the fighting against the Syrian government.

Iraqi Shiite militias, known as the Popular Mobilisation Units, are rushing to the west of Mosul to cut off such escape routes for ISIS and declared yesterday they will launch an assault on the ISIS-held city of Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq. The Shiite

militias had been blocked from taking part in the attack on Mosul due to the sectarian killings and abuse of Sunnis they committed during earlier battles to recapture the western Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.

A militia attack on Tal Afar raises the prospect of Turkish military intervention, as it has a predominantly ethnic Turkmen population, factions among which are calling for their own autonomous province. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made shrill vows to protect the Turkish diaspora—which includes Iraq's Turkmen—from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, to Central Asia and Afghanistan (see: "Amid Mosul offensive, Turkey denounces US policy, stakes claims in Balkans").

Erdogan has also expressed alarm that US backing is strengthening the position of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The openly-stated intention of the KRG is to incorporate the areas it has taken from ISIS into its autonomous zone, not return them to the jurisdiction of the Shiite Arab-dominated government in Baghdad. A spokesman for one of the largest Shiite militias said in September they would fight against KRG annexations.

The Turkish establishment bitterly opposes any further expansion of the Kurdish region, fearing it will lead to the declaration of a Kurdish nation-state and fuel separatist agitation among the substantial Kurdish population in the east of Turkey, bordering Syria and Iraq.

Unable to act in Mosul itself at this point, Turkey responded yesterday with its most intense air attacks on the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria, which recently seized a number of villages from ISIS and expanded the areas of the country under their control. The Turkish military claimed to have killed up to 200 fighters of the YPG—which it alleges is a front for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) that advocates the separation of the Kurdish region of Turkey. This operation may well sharply escalate ethnic conflict inside Turkey itself, or attacks by Kurdish forces on the small number of Turkish troops that are in Iraq to the northeast of Mosul.

In a statement, the Syrian government said it viewed the Turkish air strikes as an attack on its sovereignty and vowed to engage any future incursions.

Anthony Cordesman, a leading US analyst for the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS),

expressed the perplexity among US imperialist strategists. On October 17 he commented: "[T]he most critical aspect of the battle may not be whether ISIS is defeated. It may be whether Iraq's deeply divided factions can find some way to cooperate if they win. The alternative could be worse than ISIS: Sunni versus Shiite, Arab versus Kurd, and Turkey, Iran, outside Arab states, and Russia all competing to serve their own ends. 'Winning' could all too easily divide Iraq on a lasting basis and/or turn into new forms of civil conflict."

The victims will be the long-suffering masses of Iraq and the Middle East. In recent days, some 5,000 people have made their way from Mosul to a squalid tent city in northeastern Syria, while several thousand have reached the overcrowded refugee camp of Dibaga in Iraqi Kurdistan. Hundreds of thousands more are predicted to follow, overwhelming unprepared relief agencies.

Disturbing video footage has already emerged of Iraqi government troops beating, with a hammer, a young boy who fled Mosul. All males over 14 who escape the city are being detained and interrogated on suspicion of ISIS loyalties.



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