

Civilian toll mounts as Mosul offensive enters second week

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With the US-led offensive to retake Mosul from the Islamic State (ISIS), there are increasing reports of death and suffering on the part of Iraqi civilians caught up in the fighting and facing retribution from both ISIS and troops and militias loyal to Baghdad.

Abdul-Ghani Asadi, the commander of the Iraqi army's anti-terrorism contingent, reported Monday that Iraqi artillery has advanced close enough to Mosul to begin systematically shelling the city, which was once Iraq's second largest metropolis and still has a population of over 1 million. It fell to ISIS in 2014, when a far superior force of US-trained Iraqi government troops fled in the face of the Sunni Islamist fighters.

If the brutal and reactionary Islamist militia has been able to hold the city for so long, it is in no small part because of the overwhelming hostility within Mosul's population toward the central government in Baghdad, whose Shia-dominated security forces systematically suppressed and abused Sunnis throughout Iraq.

These sectarian fissures, the product of the wholesale destruction of the US war of aggression begun in 2003 and the subsequent divide-and-rule methods of the eight-year American occupation, are now being deepened by the Mosul offensive, with the city's civilians paying the price.

There are already reports of Sunni civilians fleeing Mosul at the risk of being killed by ISIS, only to be imprisoned and brutalized at the hands of Iraqi security forces once they escape.

The *Washington Post* Tuesday profiled one woman who with her six children fled Mosul to the south and into the oncoming Iraqi security forces.

"... as the woman spoke in a camp for newly displaced people south of Mosul—watched by men with guns, with no electricity or food in her tent and her

children playing in dirt—her escape seemed like the prelude to another miserable ordeal."

In the same camp, a group of shepherds said "they had been beaten by soldiers after they escaped from the Islamic State."

In another camp to the east of Mosul, the *Post* reported, "dozens of young men who had fled areas in and around the city were kept behind a padlocked gate, sequestered from families who moved freely in other parts of the camp. Some had been there for 40 days without any indication of when they would be allowed to leave, they said.

'We fled a prison for another prison,' said Mohamed Asad, who sat with a group of young men in a tent."

In earlier offensives to drive ISIS out of the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, hundreds of Sunni men were massacred and many faced torture at the hands of Iraqi government troops and Shia militias.

Meanwhile, in Kirkuk, the oil-rich city to the south of Mosul, efforts by the Kurdish Peshmerga militia to defeat ISIS fighters who launched attacks there last week to draw forces away from Mosul have reportedly led to acts of collective punishment against Kirkuk's large Sunni Arab population.

The *New York Times* cited UN officials and local residents as reporting that Kurdish officials in Kirkuk "responded by forcing out hundreds of Arab families who had sought safety there."

"Arab residents of Kirkuk who were interviewed on Tuesday reported that armed Kurdish security agents had removed families from homes and forced them to move to camps," the *Times* reported. "They said several homes were also destroyed, in what appeared to be a methodical attempt to force out as many Arabs as possible."

In Kirkuk, as in Mosul itself, the US-backed

offensive is sowing the seeds for subsequent sectarian warfare with the potential of drawing in regional powers, including Turkey and Iran.

Reports have also begun to filter out of Mosul of brutal reprisals by ISIS against those suspected of opposing its rule.

UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville told a UN meeting Geneva that Iraqi security forces had discovered the bullet-riddled bodies of 70 civilians in the village of Tuloul Naser, near Mosul, on October 20. It was also reported that 50 former police officers being held outside the city had also been killed.

In another incident reported in the village of Safina, 15 civilians were massacred and their bodies were thrown into the river, while six men were tied to a vehicle and dragged through the village in an attempt to terrorize the local population.

Colville also recounted a report that ISIS fighters had shot to death three women and three girls, while wounding four other children, after they lagged behind during a forced relocation.

Given the record of ISIS, these reports are highly credible, as are claims that the Islamist militia intends to use the civilian population as “human shields.” What is striking about the ample reporting of these facts in the Western media is the contrast to their total silence over similar atrocities carried out by the US-backed “rebels,” Al Qaeda-linked militias similar to ISIS, across the border in Syria.

This blatant double standard has a long history. ISIS was not seen as a problem by Washington until it stormed across the border into Iraq and overran a large swathe of Iraqi territory, while exposing the utter rot within the Iraqi state and its US-trained security forces.

With the present offensive against Mosul, there are reports that one aim of the US intervention is to send the ISIS fighters back across the border into Syria to fight another day, rather than destroy them.

CNN cited Sheikh Abdullah Alyawer, a tribal leader in the town of Rabia, on Iraq’s border with Syria, as saying that hundreds of ISIS fighters and their families have been pouring across the border at an ISIS-controlled crossing point at Ba’aaj, south of Sinjar.

The report appeared to confirm earlier charges from both the Syrian government and Moscow that the US and its allies had intentionally left open a corridor to the west of Mosul, a rat line to facilitate the transfer of

the Islamist fighters into Syria in order to strengthen the flagging war for “regime change” initiated by Washington over five years ago.

Speaking to a meeting of defense ministers from 13 countries in Paris, French President Francois Hollande warned of the transfer of ISIS fighters from besieged Mosul to Raqqa in Syria. “In these columns of people leaving Mosul will be hiding terrorists who will try to go further, to Raqqa in particular,” he said.

Russia’s military command issued a statement on Tuesday that it was monitoring the Iraqi-Syrian border and had warplanes prepared to carry out airstrikes against ISIS forces attempting to escape. Such an intervention would cut across US objectives and again heighten the danger of a military confrontation between the two major nuclear powers.

In an editorial on the Mosul offensive, the *Wall Street Journal* Tuesday pointed to one of the principal objectives Washington is pursuing with its deployment of thousands of US troops in support of the campaign.

“Defeating Islamic State in Mosul is a vital U.S. interest, but the only way the next Administration will be able to prevent an Islamic State resurgence or Iranian domination of the region is a long-term U.S. deployment in Iraq of several thousand troops, both for political leverage with Iraq and other regional players and as a regional rapid-reaction force,” the editorial states. In other words, the battle for Mosul is only part of the preparations for far wider US wars in the Middle East and beyond.



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