

Sectarian tensions rise in Iraq as Mosul offensive enters third week

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Iraqi government troops entered the eastern outskirts of Mosul Monday, as the US-backed offensive launched October 17 to recapture the country's second largest city from the Islamic State began its third week.

But the advances of Iraqi government soldiers, Peshmerga fighters and Sunni and Shia militias could not conceal the fact that growing sectarian tensions are threatening to vastly intensify the bloody conflict in Iraq and Syria and draw the major powers into a direct military clash.

Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) special forces captured Bazwaya, the last village outside of Mosul, in a dawn raid Monday. Although there were no reports of civilian casualties, the Associated Press noted burning houses and buildings with collapsed roofs in the village, where hundreds of families are believed to be.

Later, it was confirmed that Iraqi troops had entered the Karama neighborhood in Mosul's east. Another section of the Iraqi army advancing on Mosul from the south remains approximately 10 miles away.

The US-led coalition also reported that it conducted nine air strikes in support of the Iraqi offensive Sunday, including three in Mosul and one near Tal Afar.

On Saturday, the Shia militias organized in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) announced a major offensive to the west of Mosul with the goal of capturing the ISIS-held town of Tal Afar and cutting off escape routes from Mosul to Syria. Widespread reports have emerged since the beginning of the Mosul offensive that significant numbers of ISIS fighters were retreating via this route to Raqqa, prompting Russian and Syrian officials to accuse the US of having deliberately intended this to occur.

The PMU has promised it will remain outside of Mosul. They were previously accused of committing atrocities against Sunni residents following the capture of Ramadi and Fallujah.

In apparent retaliation for the PMU offensive, five

bomb attacks attributed to ISIS took place in several Shia neighborhoods of Baghdad Sunday, killing at least 17 and injuring many more. Further attacks near Baghdad on Monday claimed an additional 16 lives.

The PMU offensive came a day after US-backed Islamist extremists launched a counterattack on Syrian government troops and aligned Shia militias in Aleppo. The indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas by the former al Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front, which claimed the lives of dozens over the weekend, did not prevent US media outlets from broadly hailing the mission.

This demonstrates once again the utterly reactionary character of US imperialist policy in the region. Its explicit backing for Islamist extremists in Syria has further inflamed the Shia-Sunni divide in both Iraq and Syria and poses the immediate danger of a further escalation of the conflict in both countries. The bitter sectarian tensions were sharply exacerbated by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, when Washington ruthlessly exploited Sunni and Shia animosities to install a puppet regime in Baghdad.

The Shia PMU militias, which are nominally under Iraqi government control but receive support from Iran, vowed Saturday to retake what they deemed to be Shia territory in Iraq, before joining the conflict in Syria on the side of the Assad regime. "After clearing all our land from these terrorist gangs, we are fully ready to go to any place that contains a threat to Iraqi national security," said PMU spokesman Ahmed al-Asadi in Baghdad.

The intervention of the Iranian-backed Shia militias into Syria would cut across Washington's strategy of bringing about regime change in Damascus, as well as raising the prospect of clashes between the US and its NATO allies on one side and Iran and Russia on the other.

At a meeting of the Russian, Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers in Moscow Friday to discuss the Syrian conflict, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said that his

Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov had agreed to take measures to prevent ISIS fighters from crossing the border from Iraq. "I'm happy to hear from Mr. Lavrov the confirmation that we'll prevent ISIL from reaching Raqqa," he said. Whether or not this meeting discussed the imminent PMU offensive, it is clear that any attempt by Russia or Iran to intervene to cut off the flow of ISIS fighters back into Syria would only further escalate the potential for military clashes with the US.

Turkey reacted with concern to the PMU's intervention, warning that if the significant Turkmen population in Tal Afar was threatened, it could take military measures to defend them. Turkey has deployed several hundred troops to a military base in Bashiqa, northeast of Mosul, where they have been training Sunni Turkmen militias and lending some military support to the Peshmerga advance on ISIS territory.

As well as opposing the PMU consolidating a Shia-dominated region around Tal Afar, Ankara is also troubled by the increasing influence of Iran. It is already in dispute with the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, which claims that Turkey's Bashiqa deployment is illegal. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has indicated in a series of belligerent speeches over recent weeks that Turkey is determined to stake a claim to a much greater role in Iraq and throughout the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.

Last Wednesday, US President Barack Obama held an hour-long telephone call with Erdogan to discuss the US-Turkish strategy in Iraq and Syria. He welcomed Turkish involvement in northern Syria, where Turkish forces intervened to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish-controlled region on its border, while both leaders reaffirmed their formal commitment to maintaining Iraq's borders.

In reality, the various forces currently aligned against ISIS are pursuing conflicting and even mutually antagonistic goals that threaten to tear Iraq apart. There are reports that advancing Iraqi government troops have raised Shia banners and flags in areas they have taken, including the Christian town of Bartilla. "The Iraqi military is blocking our people from getting inside Bartilla," head of the Christian Bet-Nehrain Democratic Party Romeo Hakari told Voice of America.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani told an interviewer from German daily *Bild* on Friday that the conclusion of the Mosul mission would be followed by a renewed push for Kurdish independence. After Mosul's recapture, he declared,

Kurdish officials will meet with "partners in Baghdad and talk about our independence." "We are not Arabs, we are our own Kurdish nation. At some point there will be a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan," he added.

The expanding conflict over Mosul has already forced more than 17,000 civilians to flee their homes. The US media and political establishment has sought to prepare public opinion for high civilian casualties by repeating reports that ISIS are using local residents as human shields. The deaths of civilians as a result of US-led air strikes or operations by the Iraqi government forces are largely being buried, including the call by Human Rights Watch for an investigation into an alleged air strike last week that killed between 15 and 20 civilians at a funeral near Kirkuk.

The UN estimates that upwards of 1 million people will be forced to flee, but places in camps, including those not yet constructed, are expected to amount to just 500,000. Aid workers also fear the impact on civilians fleeing with no personal belongings as the cold winter weather sets in.

The deepening sectarian divisions spreading throughout the region since the unleashing of the US-backed Mosul offensive only underscores that none of the powers involved offer a way out of the bloodbath engulfing the population of the Middle East. While chief responsibility for the death and destruction in Iraq and Syria rests with US imperialism, which has been waging virtually uninterrupted wars in the region for a quarter of a century, the attempts by Russia and regional powers like Turkey and Iran to defend their own interests only add fuel to the fire.



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