

Fighting intensifies in Mosul and northern Iraq

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The US-directed offensive to recapture the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and surrounding towns and villages from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has entered its fifth week.

The assault involves an increasingly antagonistic collection of armed forces, including some 30,000 Iraqi Army troops, 15,000 peshmerga soldiers of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), thousands of anti-ISIS Sunni Arab and Christian fighters, Turkish Army-backed Turkomen militias, and as many as 20,000 to 30,000 Shiite militia members loyal to the fundamentalist political parties that dominate the US-backed government in Baghdad.

The Shiite militias, known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), are seeking to capture the predominantly ethnic Turkomen city of Tal Afar, 60 kilometres to the west of Mosul, near the border with Syria, and cut off escape routes for ISIS forces to its Syrian capital of Raqqa. The PMF captured Tal Afar airport on November 16. In the past 24 hours, it has claimed that its fighters are on the verge of fully surrounding the city.

The Turkish government, which proclaims itself the defender of Turkomen Iraqis, has repeated its threats to invade Iraq and attack the largely Arab Shiite militias if they “cause terror” in Tal Afar. In operations against ISIS in the western Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, the PMF were accused of sectarian killings and abuses against Sunni civilians. To try to placate Turkey, Iraqi Army units have been dispatched to ostensibly lead any assault on Tal Afar.

In Mosul, Iraqi government special forces claim they are slowly “clearing” ISIS fighters from the eastern suburbs, in the face of fierce resistance, and are eight kilometres from the city centre. Northern Mosul is sealed off by Kurdish peshmerga. To the south, the

Iraqi Army has advanced to within 20 kilometres. The vast bulk of the city, however, is still firmly under ISIS control.

The US military has admitted that hundreds of American personnel are on the ground and involved in the combat. British and Australian troops are also reported to be fighting alongside Iraqi units.

US Army spokesperson Colonel John Dorrian told journalists last week that US Green Berets and other special forces personnel were “in the thick of a very tough battle.” Dorrian stated: “There’s no question that US advisors are in harms’ way... It’s not our role to take terrain or close with the enemy, but as the Iraqis move, if they need us, we’ll go where they need us.”

ISIS, which seized Mosul in June 2014, is relying on a range of defensive measures to slow the assault and inflict casualties. It has constructed a network of tunnels under the city, rigged buildings and vehicles with explosives and laid mine fields. ISIS claimed in a propaganda bulletin that it had carried out 124 suicide bomb attacks on Army tanks, armoured vehicles and positions. The same bulletin claimed that ISIS fighters had killed some 2,700 Army and Kurdish troops.

US, British, French, Australian, Canadian and Iraqi aircraft are conducting continuous air strikes on alleged ISIS fighting positions, command and control sites and supply depots. With anywhere between one million and 1.5 million civilians trapped in Mosul, including up to 600,000 children, large-scale casualties are inevitable.

The US military and the Iraqi government continue to accuse ISIS of using civilians as “human shields” and murdering hundreds of its own fighters and numbers of civilians for opposing its orders.

The various factions of the anti-ISIS coalition have not released any casualty estimates, either for their own forces or for civilians. The only estimate has been given

by ISIS, which made the unverified claim that at least 340 non-combatants have been killed by air strikes and another 1,190 wounded.

The latest UN estimate is that barely 60,000 civilians have escaped from the combat zones so far, mainly from communities on the outskirts of the city. Adrian Edwards, a UNHCR refugee relief agency representative, told a press briefing on November 18: “There has been a marked increase over the past week in the number of people fleeing after fighting intensified in the more densely-populated urban areas of Mosul.”

Commenting on the conditions inside the city, Edwards stated: “In some areas, civilian infrastructure like water, power, schools and hospitals is damaged and medical services are often unavailable. Many people are going hungry due to lost livelihoods, curtailed food production and increased prices. Supplies of water for drinking and agriculture have been disrupted.”

With temperatures plummeting as winter sets in, relief agencies are continuing to appeal for greater resources to cope with the expected flood of displaced persons if and when the offensive pushes deep into Mosul. According to the UNHCR briefing, if all available capacity was utilised, 700,000 people could be provided with short-term emergency shelter and assistance. A humanitarian disaster will result if far more than those numbers are forced to leave the city.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, in Berlin for talks with the German government, told journalists yesterday that Iraq “expected” a US administration headed by Donald Trump to continue the same level of support for the offensive once it takes office. Jaafari stated: “These strategies don’t change with the presidents. Agreements are signed and then they are binding for all involved.” Once Mosul was recaptured, he declared, Iraq would expect a Trump presidency to provide substantial financial assistance for “reconstruction.” Most of the city is likely to be reduced to rubble.

Among its first foreign policy issues, the Trump administration will also confront the rising tensions between the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous region, over the fate of northern Iraq.

Last week, KRG president Massoud Barzani asserted

that his Kurdish administration had “US support” not to give back a swathe of territory that its military forces have occupied during the fighting against ISIS. Among the most significant areas that the KRG controls, and claims should be brought under its permanent rule, are dozens of villages to the west and north of Mosul and the entire oil-rich province and city of Kirkuk. A Human Rights Watch report this month alleges that over the past two years, Kurdish peshmerga fighters have destroyed hundreds of homes and even entire villages in order to force the ethnic Arab population to leave.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi flatly rejected Barzani’s assertion of jurisdiction over territory outside the official borders of the KRG. Abadi declared that the agreement on military cooperation against ISIS stipulated “the withdrawal of the peshmerga from the liberated areas after the liberation of Mosul.”

Baqir Jabir Solaq, a leader of the Iranian-backed Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, one of the largest Shiite political parties, responded to Barzani yesterday. Underscoring the potential for open conflict and armed clashes, Solaq made social media threats that the Shiite militias would drive the Kurdish forces out of the territory they were occupying.



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