

Iraqi civilian death toll mounts as fighting intensifies in Mosul

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Fighting has intensified in Mosul over the past two weeks as Iraqi government forces, backed by US-led air strikes, have pushed forward to the Tigris River in their efforts to recapture the country's second-largest city from Islamic State.

The US-backed offensive is having a devastating impact on the civilian population, which numbered over 1 million when operations began in October. On Saturday, reports emerged that a suspected coalition air strike killed up to 30 civilians in the west of the city. Two missiles struck the home of a senior ISIS commander who was not at home.

One Iraqi commander described the fighting in the city as "guerrilla warfare" last week. In operations to retake the Mosul University campus over the weekend, led by elite Counter-Terrorism Service special forces, several buildings were completely destroyed by advancing forces. Further gains were made Sunday as government troops reportedly killed over 120 ISIS fighters.

According to estimates by the United Nations, over 800 civilians were injured in Mosul during the last week of December and a further 670 in the first week of the new year. Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, gave an indication of the heavy price civilians are paying in the fighting, telling reporters last week, "You would expect in a conflict like this that the number of civilian casualties would be around 15 percent, a high of 20 percent. What we're seeing in Mosul is that nearly 50 percent of all casualties are in fact civilians."

There have been reports of family members unable to bury their dead relatives for several weeks due to the intensity of the fighting in local neighborhoods.

While many civilians are being deliberately targeted by ISIS terrorists as they seek to flee, Iraqi forces have increasingly resorted to heavy weaponry in built-up areas, and coalition air strikes are driving up casualties.

The latest figures from the International Organization

for Migration (IOM) confirm that over 144,500 civilians have fled their homes since the beginning of the Mosul offensive, a dramatic rise over the past month given that the total in December stood at 98,000.

The lack of medical care for those injured in the fighting is leading to further health problems. Doctors at a hospital in the Kurdish capital of Irbil report that casualties brought in from Mosul after several days with treatable injuries have frequently picked up infections.

The widespread disruption of the lives of hundreds of thousands of local residents has occurred before government forces even enter the most densely populated areas of the city. The UN estimates that some 750,000 civilians remain trapped in siege-like conditions on the west side of the Tigris. Early on in the offensive, the US bombed five bridges crossing the Tigris to prevent ISIS supplying its fighters in the east of the city.

The air strike killing 30 civilians marked the third time in little more than five weeks that US warplanes have carried out bombing raids with civilian casualties. On December 7, an air strike called in by Iraqi government forces targeted the Al Salem hospital in eastern Mosul, the district's largest medical facility. The Pentagon avoided acknowledging any civilian casualties in the incident. Three weeks later, on December 29, a bomb dropped on the Ibn-Al-Athir hospital compound claimed the lives of seven civilians and prompted a rare statement from the Pentagon acknowledging the attack, which amounts to a war crime.

While government forces in the CTS, backed by Shia militias with ties to Iran and the Kurdish Peshmerga, initially advanced rapidly to the outskirts of Mosul, the offensive became bogged down in November and early December. ISIS fighters launched counterattacks, including the use of car bombs, and inflicted significant casualties on Iraqi forces. Federal police and other security forces were called up to support the offensive,

and the government troops began using heavy artillery on heavily-populated residential areas. Government officials first optimistically predicted the retaking of Mosul by the end of 2016, but it is now acknowledged that the operation will last at least several more months.

In an estimate published last week, Iraq Body Count, a project run by academics and peace activists that has counted civilian deaths in the country since 2003, reported that more than 16,000 civilians died in the country in 2016. In western Anbar province, health officials have issued a warning of a potential epidemic of diseases, including plague, caused by the decomposition of dead bodies left unburied following fighting in the area last year.

The high number of civilian deaths in Mosul, and the terrible conditions under which residents are being forced to suffer, thoroughly expose the double standards of the US political establishment and pliant corporate media, which incessantly accused Russia and Syria of war crimes during its offensive in Aleppo for its bombardment of residential areas as they sought to dislodge Jihadi forces led by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front. Under conditions of an all-out assault on a much larger population center just a few hundred miles further east, the Iraqi army, Shia militia, Kurdish Peshmerga forces and their allies in the US-led coalition are being hailed as liberators even as they lay waste to large sections of one of the Middle East's oldest cities.

The glaring hypocrisy is bound up with the fact that Washington relied on an alliance with Al Qaeda-linked Islamist extremists in Syria to achieve its goal of overthrowing the Russian-backed Assad regime.

Media reports on the Mosul offensive focus persistently on the use by ISIS of civilians as human shields, blaming this for the overwhelming majority of casualties. The truth is that real responsibility for the disastrous conditions facing Mosul's population, and Iraqis across the country, lies with the imperialist powers, above all the United States, which laid waste to Iraqi society during the 2003 invasion, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and forcing millions from their homes.

The bitter sectarian conflict that threatens to explode in the current Mosul offensive is directly linked to Washington's criminal policy of divide and rule pursued in the years following the Iraq war. Support for the extremist ISIS emerged under conditions where the Sunni population was sidelined and suffered sectarian violence at the hands of the Shia-dominated Baghdad government.

While Iraqi government troops, Iranian-aligned Shia

militias and Kurdish Peshmerga forces are ostensibly part of an alliance against ISIS, each is pursuing their own goals, and there are even sharp divisions within each camp.

On January 3, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi accused the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of illegally exporting large quantities of oil via Turkey to raise finances. Under the Iraqi constitution, the national government is solely responsible for the country's oil wealth. Abadi alleged that the KRG sent over 500,000 barrels of oil to Turkey during December, resulting in Baghdad missing its OPEC target by 200,000 barrels. An unnamed KRG minister reportedly offered to sell oilfields to Turkey for \$5 billion.

The Iraqi government is moving to curtail the KRG's control over oil supplies. Iranian oil minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh is to visit Baghdad this month to discuss a planned pipeline from the province of Sulaimaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan to Iran. This would put an end to the monopoly currently enjoyed by the KRG on the region's oil reserves.

Disputes over control of Iraq's lucrative oil wealth are also linked to territorial conflicts in the region. Kurdish officials have previously expressed the desire to gain territory in the areas surrounding Mosul because of the role played by the Peshmerga in the advance on the city, a suggestion rejected out of hand by Baghdad. The Peshmerga have been accused by international organizations of carrying out sectarian reprisals against Arab populations.



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