US defense chief arrives in Iraq amid renewed assault on Mosul

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Secretary of Defense James Mattis arrived in Baghdad for an unannounced visit Monday, just 24 hours after government forces launched a renewed push to capture the western parts of Mosul from Islamic State. The country's second largest city has been under ISIS control since 2014, when the US-trained Iraqi army capitulated and fled in the face of the jihadis' advance.

Mattis held meetings with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the country's defense minister. Prior to his arrival, he told reporters, "We're not in Iraq to seize anybody's oil," effectively disavowing President Trump's remark last month that Washington should have seized Iraq's oil in the wake of the 2003 invasion, and could still do so.

Mattis's remark was a dishonest attempt to cover up US imperialism's real objectives in the country and the broader Middle East region. Every military attack by Washington on Iraq over the past quarter century has been motivated by the country's vast oil reserves.

The Bush administration initiated the illegal Iraq war in 2003 with bogus claims about Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" with the aim of installing a puppet regime in Baghdad so as to consolidate Washington's strategic and economic interests in the energy-rich Middle East region. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis paid with their lives and millions more were forced to flee from their homes due to the death and destruction wrought by the US-led war machine on Iraqi society.

Mattis played a key role in some of the war's most brutal episodes. As a Marine Corps general, Mattis commanded the vicious assault on the city of Fallujah in 2004, which saw the slaughter of civilians and the use of weapons outlawed under international law, including white phosphorus.

The current US-led intervention against ISIS is no less predatory. The Obama administration began air strikes in the fall of 2014 only after Islamic State, a group Washington had been prepared to build up and tolerate in Syria as a fighting force against the Assad regime, had seized wide swathes of western Iraq and threatened to destabilize the US client regime in Baghdad.

Mattis himself acknowledged that the US troops operating in Iraq were there for the long haul and would function in effect as an occupation force for years after ISIS is cleared from Mosul. "I imagine we'll be in this fight for a while and we'll stand by each other," he said.

The offensive launched by Abadi on the eve of Mattis' arrival has made some gains in its first three days. On Tuesday, government troops captured the town of Abu Saif, giving them a direct line of advance to Mosul's airport and densely populated western half. Iraqi forces have also closed in from the southwest and made use of heavy artillery and relying on coalition air strikes to target ISIS positions.

An estimated 750,000 civilians remain in the west side of the city and the offensive by Iraqi forces will prove deadly for many. Other urban centers recaptured from ISIS over the past two years, including Ramadi, were virtually destroyed in the process.

The streets in the ISIS-held part of the city are narrower and virtually all routes for escape have been closed off. Bridges linking the east and west sides of Mosul across the Tigris River were destroyed by air strikes, and Shiite and Kurdish militias have surrounded the city to the north and west.

According to the United Nations, more than half of all casualties thus far in the battle for Mosul have been civilians. At least 1,096 civilians have died and a

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further 694 have been injured since the government's offensive was launched last October.

The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that "available food and fuel supplies continue to dwindle, with residents resorting to burning furniture and rubbish to keep warm. Food and fuel supplies are dwindling, markets and shops have closed, running water is scarce and electricity in many neighborhoods is either intermittent or cut off."

It added that spaces at refugee camps could provide shelter to only 60,000 civilians.

Even when the city is eventually retaken from ISIS, which commanders estimate could still take several months, a major question mark remains over the stability of the entire region. Various players are involved in the Mosul offensive, each with their own competing goals.

Iraqi government forces are Shia-dominated and viewed with suspicion or outright hostility by the predominantly Sunni population around Mosul. Kurdish Peshmerga militia, which have been accused of ethnically cleansing Arab villages, also played a major role in the initial offensive but were prevented from entering the city so as to avoid sectarian clashes. Kurdish politicians have indicated they expect to receive expanded control over parts of northern Iraq currently outside of the Kurdish Regional Government's territory in exchange for the Peshmerga's role.

Wider regional rivalries are also at play. Iranian-funded Shia militias are operating to the west of Mosul, while Turkey has a military base to the northeast where it has been training allied fighters. In a sign of the tensions between the two regional powers, which extend into neighboring Syria, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu attacked Tehran at last weekend's Munich Security Conference, declaring, "Iran wants to make Syria and Iraq Shiite."

These tensions will only be exacerbated with the imminent prospect of a vast escalation of US military engagement in both Iraq and Syria. Trump ordered the Pentagon at the end of January to prepare plans for a new strategy he claimed would be aimed at defeating ISIS. Mattis is expected to present the proposals at the end of the month, but reports already indicate thousands more ground troops will be sent to Syria under the pretext of establishing so-called "safe zones" for refugees, and the current level of air strikes will be increased.

US-led air strikes have already killed civilians and struck infrastructure, most notably in December when hospitals in Mosul were bombed on two separate occasions.

On the ground in Iraq, the escalation has already begun. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, commander of US forces in Iraq, noted in comments this week that US troops embedded with Iraqi forces began playing a more aggressive role when the Mosul offensive was first initiated last October. The Obama administration gave authorization for US soldiers to operate closer to the front line. "We adjusted our posture during the east Mosul fight and we embedded advisers a bit further down into the formation," Townsend told a news conference, noting that the so-called "advisers" were now close enough to the front line to be able to direct air strikes.

Mattis went even further, noting that the new plan for operations in Syria and Iraq due February 27 could see a further loosening of the restrictions on where US military personnel can operate, as well as a recommendation to deploy more troops to Iraq, although he declined to be more specific. "We owe some degree of confidentiality so we don't expose to the enemy what we have in mind as to the timing of operations," he said.

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