

Thousands flee as US artillery and air strikes intensify in Mosul offensive

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As Iraqi government forces press further into the densely populated areas of western Mosul, the key role being played in the advance by US-led air strikes and artillery barrages is becoming clear. The brutal offensive on Iraq's second-largest city has already displaced upwards of 200,000 civilians, including 8,000 over the past week.

Reporting on the "thunderous booms from howitzers" fired by American troops, the *New York Times* stated that US artillery was "essential" in "softening the opposition from Islamic State." A platoon commander responsible for firing rockets into the city told the *Times* that her unit had been called into action between 10 and 20 times over the past week, while another commander informed the newspaper, "It's considerably more than we thought we were going to shoot when we left Fort Hood."

As the fighting intensifies in the most heavily populated areas of Mosul, tens of thousands of residents are being forced to flee their homes. At least 1,000 civilians turned up at Iraqi army checkpoints on Monday morning alone.

The stepped-up use of American firepower has enabled Iraqi forces to capture the city's international airport and a military base, as well as several districts on the southern edge of Mosul. This leaves the vast majority of western Mosul, where an estimated 750,000 people live, still to be captured.

While precise numbers of civilian casualties are hard to come by, reports indicate that more than half of all casualties in the fighting are civilians. They are being used by ISIS fighters as human shields and those trying to escape ISIS-held areas have come under fire.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated Tuesday that an additional 250,000 civilians could flee the fighting in the days ahead. The UN described those fleeing as "exhausted and often dehydrated," and noted that conditions for residents remaining in Mosul were "desperate." Supply routes,

including the highway leading to Syria, have been cut.

Food, water, gas, heating oil and medical supplies are all running out. Prices for basic necessities like sugar and potatoes have risen sharply.

The disregard for the civilian population is an inevitable product of the predatory aims of US imperialism in Iraq and the broader Middle East region. When ISIS first emerged in Syria, Washington was prepared to tolerate it as a fighting force in opposition to the government of Bashar al Assad in Damascus, which the Obama administration had been seeking to remove since 2011. ISIS only became a problem for the United States when it gained substantial territory in Iraq, threatening to undermine Washington's puppet regime in Baghdad.

In its efforts to oust ISIS from Mosul while at the same time expanding its intervention into neighboring Syria to bring about regime change in Damascus, the United States is seeking to secure its geostrategic dominance over the energy-rich Middle East, while simultaneously weakening the positions of its geopolitical rivals, above all Iran, Russia and China.

The Trump administration will soon vastly expand US military engagement in Iraq and Syria. Recommendations prepared by the Pentagon were sent to the White House Monday, where Defense Secretary James Mattis led a meeting to discuss them with the president.

While the details are yet to be made officially public, it has been widely reported that options under consideration are a significant increase in the number of military personnel to be deployed to the region and a further loosening of the rules of engagement for US troops allowing them to operate on the front line.

A *Daily Beast* report underscored the continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations on the issue of the Mideast war, noting that many of the proposals contained in the Pentagon plan appeared "familiar."

Officials speaking on condition of anonymity revealed that among the options being discussed were the establishment of so-called “safe zones” in Syria, which would necessitate a vast increase in American military power, financial sanctions against ISIS and affiliated groups, and a possible abandonment of US support for some of the Islamist fighters in Syria backed under the Obama administration.

In a sign of what is to come, the Iraqi air force struck ISIS positions in Syria for the first time over the weekend, using intelligence provided by the US.

US-backed Iraqi government efforts to retake ISIS-held territory have repeatedly left devastation in their wake. In the process of recapturing Ramadi in the west of the country, advancing forces virtually laid waste to the city, forcing its largely Sunni population to flee.

The sectarian tensions deliberately fostered by the United States following its illegal 2003 invasion are becoming increasingly bitter in Mosul and the surrounding region. Iraqi government forces are Shia-dominated and were supported in the initial stages of their advance on Mosul by Kurdish Peshmerga militia. The predominantly Sunni population in Mosul is often assumed to be ISIS collaborators by government forces, who have been accused of human rights abuses over recent months.

In a report published in October, Amnesty International accused government forces and allied paramilitaries of torture, arbitrary detention, disappearances and extrajudicial killings of thousands of civilians fleeing ISIS-held areas. It described these events as a “terrifying backlash” against civilians and warned of “mass violations” as the military offensive continued.

In November, a separate Amnesty report criticized Iraqi federal police units for torturing and unlawfully killing villagers during the Mosul offensive. Researchers visited the areas of al-Shura and al-Qayyarah and found evidence of six extrajudicial killings in late October. “Men in Federal Police uniform have carried out multiple unlawful killings, apprehending and then deliberately killing in cold blood residents in villages south of Mosul. In some cases the residents were tortured before they were shot dead execution-style,” deputy director of research in Amnesty’s Beirut office Lynn Maalouf said.

Members of the Iranian-aligned Shia Popular Mobilization Units are making their way into units of the Iraqi federal police, which is now being tasked with security in the areas of Mosul under government control. They view the majority Sunni population with

undisguised hostility.

A report in *Maclean’s* magazine underscored the brutality of the operation. After Iraqi efforts to retake the eastern part of the city became bogged down in early December, a two-week pause was announced in the fighting to enable federal police units to be redeployed. But even more significant was the decision to drastically intensify the number of air strikes launched on the city. According to figures from the US-led coalition, the Iraqi air force conducted 95 air strikes in Mosul during January, an increase of 40 percent compared to previous months.

The impact was devastating. *Maclean’s* reported on one incident where 18 members of one family were killed when three homes were leveled by bombs dropped January 6. It also reported widespread destruction of infrastructure caused by the bombardments.

The hypocrisy in the media and political establishment in the face of the war crimes being committed in Mosul is staggering. Only weeks ago, the press was full of denunciations of Syria and Russia for their assault on Aleppo as they sought to drive US-backed Islamist extremists from the city. Leading US and allied politicians, including former American UN ambassador Samantha Power and British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, called on investigations into war crimes to be launched over the hundreds of civilians killed in the fighting.

Now, with an urban center more than three times the size of eastern Aleppo under siege, and as civilians are either killed or maimed by air strikes and artillery fire, or rounded up by Iraqi forces and treated with suspicion and outright hostility, hardly a word of protest is forthcoming.



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