

Iraqi government claims fall of ISIS as war goes on

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Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi Thursday hailed the retaking by government security forces of the site of Mosul's demolished al-Nuri mosque as a decisive victory in the battle to wrest control of Iraq's second-largest city from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which swept across one-third of the country's territory three years ago.

It was a pyrrhic victory at best for Baghdad and the US forces that have supported the nine-month siege of Mosul with devastating air strikes and barrages of artillery fire.

The bulk of the al-Nuri mosque, where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi first proclaimed his "caliphate" in 2014, was demolished a week before, with its iconic leaning Al-Hadba (hunchback) minaret toppled. ISIS claimed that the destruction was the work of US bombs, but it appears the Islamist militia itself blew up the structure to deny the government a symbolic triumph.

While the regime in Baghdad celebrated the retaking of the demolished mosque, Iraqi commanders on the ground in Mosul admitted that many weeks of fighting remain before they can claim control of all of Mosul. And, even as they advance on the last strongholds of ISIS in western Mosul, there have been repeated attacks by the Islamist fighters on positions supposedly secured by the army and the police months ago. In one, ISIS members disguised as police were reported to have wiped out an entire Federal Police unit, up to 90 men.

Iraqi security forces were reportedly only 150 feet away from the mosque when it was blown up on June 21. It has taken them a full week to advance that short distance in fighting that has left many civilians as well as many government troops and ISIS fighters dead.

"There are hundreds of bodies under the rubble," an Iraqi special forces major, Dhia Thamir, deployed

inside the Old City of western Mosul told the *Guardian*. "Of course there is collateral damage, it is always this way in war," he said. "The houses are very old, so any bombardment causes them to collapse completely."

The number of civilian victims since the siege of the northern Iraqi city began is no doubt in the tens of thousands of dead and wounded. Up to 860,000 people have been driven from their homes by the fighting, many of them forced into crowded refugee tent camps. Those who have returned have found their homes and neighborhoods either demolished or badly damaged.

Somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 civilians remain trapped in the last area still controlled by ISIS.

A similar slaughter has been inflicted upon the population of Raqqa, the so-called ISIS "capital" in Syria. US air strikes, artillery bombardment and close-air support from Apache attack helicopters have been used to further the advance of the Kurdish YPG militia, which serves as the Pentagon's main proxy force in northern Syria.

The UN human rights chief issued a statement confirming the deaths of at least 173 civilians in Raqqa so far this month, while acknowledging that the figure was a very "conservative" estimate.

"Civilians must not be sacrificed for the sake of rapid military advances," Zeid al-Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in the statement, which came out as activists in Syria reported another 15 civilians killed by US cluster bombs dropped on the village of Dablan in eastern Syria. The attack came only two days after a US air strike killed up to 70 people when bombs demolished an ISIS-run prison holding many civilians near the town of Mayadin.

The activist group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered

Silently, formed originally to denounce ISIS abuses in the city, but focused now more directly on the mass killing inflicted by the US air war, reports that Raqqa is now facing some 200 air strikes a day. Both water and electricity supplies have been cut off by the bombing, and the group reported that many of the recent dead are being referred to as “water martyrs,” because their cars have been attacked from the air as they have tried to reach the Euphrates river to get drinking water for their families.

“It is certainly fair to say that we are seeing numbers of civilians reported killed and numbers of incidents comparable to the worst period of the Aleppo siege last year, when east Aleppo was under bombardment by both Russian and Syrian forces,” Chris Wood, the director of the monitoring group Airwars, told ABC News in Australia.

But, unlike Aleppo, when the US media churned out continuous reports denouncing alleged human rights abuses, the mass killing in Mosul and Iraq has been passed over in near total silence. The supposed moral outrage of the press and the television networks is highly selective, determined entirely by the propaganda needs of the Pentagon and the CIA.

Even once the US-backed forces complete their conquest of Mosul and Raqqa, the American intervention in both Iraq and Syria will only continue and escalate. Given the sectarian divisions stoked by more than 14 years of US wars in the region—and intensified by Washington’s reliance on sectarian militias in both countries—it is by no means clear how either city will be governed once ISIS is suppressed.

Speaking to CBS News Wednesday, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of the so-called anti-ISIS “coalition,” said that after the conquest of Mosul and Raqqa, US forces would be engaged in the suppression of a continuing insurgency in both countries. “We call that ISIS 2.0—an insurgency, rural,” he said. “So I think we’ll still be here dealing with that problem set for a while.”

Washington has no intention of abandoning either country. It intends to establish permanent bases in both Iraq and Syria and to engage in continuous warfare aimed at asserting US hegemony over the Middle East and confronting its principal rivals for control of the region, Iran and Russia.



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