

US-backed Iraqi assault on Mosul enters third week

By James Cogan
10 November 2016

Three weeks after a disparate US-backed force of Iraqi Army troops, Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) militia, Sunni tribal groupings and Shiite militias launched an offensive to retake Mosul from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), reports are beginning to emerge that provide a glimpse of the impact on the hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped inside the city.

Earlier this month, Kurdish militiamen who had captured the village of Fadhiliya to the north-east of Mosul told the *Guardian* that US air strikes in support of their attack had killed a family of eight, including three children. The report is one of the few in the western media that has referred to civilian casualties as a result of the hundreds of air strikes and relentless artillery bombardment being unleashed on buildings suspected of being used by ISIS fighters. It is suspected, however, that anywhere up to 1.5 million people, including some 600,000 children, are still in the city and its surrounds.

According to the United Nations, barely 20,000 civilians have escaped from Mosul since the start of the offensive on October 17. The primary reason being given for the low number is that ISIS has forced people to retreat with its fighters before government forces capture outlying towns and villages. Numerous reports claim that ISIS is using civilians as “human shields” at locations such as Mosul airport and strategic points throughout the city. The Islamist extremists have also allegedly murdered hundreds of people who raised opposition.

There is little doubt that ISIS terror is a major factor in preventing people fleeing from the city, as are the minefields, improvised explosive devices and other booby traps that the extremists have set to block or slow the advance of the government forces.

A no less significant factor, however, is the fear within the civilian population of bloody reprisals against them by government forces and pro-government militias who view the predominantly Sunni Arab citizens of Mosul as accomplices of the Islamist movement. During the US-directed assaults on the western Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, hundreds of men and boys were murdered or brutally treated by both Iraqi Army personnel and militias known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU).

There are already allegations of atrocities against civilians by anti-ISIS Sunni tribal militias who are taking part in the government operations around Mosul. On November 2, the British *Telegraph* reported that in the village of Makuk, a Sunni-based PMU militia had brutally beaten young men, put them inside chicken cages and strapped some to the front of vehicles. The report did not indicate whether any of the victims of abuse had been killed.

Lynn Maalouf, a research officer for Amnesty International, told the *Telegraph*: “The Iraqi authorities have repeatedly failed to stop revenge attacks or investigate crimes by militias from the Popular Mobilisation Units, who are also participating in the Mosul offensive. This has fostered a dangerous culture of impunity in which perpetrators of such attacks feel they have free rein to commit crimes and go unpunished.”

Accounts as to the nature of the fighting taking place in the residential suburbs of Mosul provide every reason to suspect that large casualties are being inflicted on civilians who are either unable or unwilling to leave their homes.

An October 31 article by the *Guardian*, describing “Iraqi soldiers backed by airstrikes and artillery... advancing into the eastern-most neighbourhoods,”

stated that its source told them “at least two families were reported to have been killed in the bombardment.”

A CNN camera crew accompanying a government Army convoy were caught up in an ISIS ambush that lasted for some 24 hours. CNN reported that the crew had to “shelter at times in people’s homes—many with children who cared for the CNNers while mortars exploded outside.”

A November 6 report by Al Jazeera described bloody street-to-street combat on both the eastern and southern edges of the city. Counter-attacks by ISIS included suicide bombers driving explosive-laden vehicles into government forces, who answered with artillery and air strikes against suspected extremist positions in houses and other buildings.

Air strikes are being carried out by aircraft from the US, Britain, France, Australia and Lebanon, as well as the air force of the Iraqi government. On the ground, Iraqi and Kurdish forces are accompanied by military personnel from the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, Germany and Italy, who are serving as so-called “advisors” or the “observers” who direct aerial or artillery bombardments. American Marine and French Army artillery units are taking part in the assault.

Iraqi government sources have made conflicting claims that anywhere between 750 ISIS and 2,000 militants—out of an estimated 5,000 in the city—have been killed since the offensive was begun on October 17. No figures have been released concerning the casualties suffered by the government and KRG forces. American military publication *Stars & Stripes* reported on November 7 that “local news reports estimate hundreds of anti-Islamic State troops have been killed or injured.”

Over the coming weeks, intense urban fighting will be taking place as the Iraqi forces move ever deeper into the actual city districts of Mosul. At a media briefing on November 7, Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook flatly declared that the decision as to whether American Special Forces troops would fight alongside them would be taken by US commander in Iraq, General Stephen Townsend.

The US military is also playing the lead role in the offensive that was announced on November 6 against ISIS’s so-called “capital,” the Syrian city of Raqqa. At least 300 American Special Forces personnel are on the

ground with the predominantly Kurdish militia of the US-backed and armed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is the main US-funded and armed faction seeking to overthrow the Russian-backed Syrian government that joined the operations the US launched against ISIS after it captured Mosul in June 2014.

A US air strike on Tuesday on the village of al-Heesha, some 45 kilometres north of Raqqa, reportedly killed at least 23 civilians.

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