

US-backed forces on verge of recapturing Iraqi city of Mosul

By James Cogan
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Iraqi government army and police have reportedly forced the last surviving Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters into a small area of Mosul's "Old City" district. The city—or what is left of it—is expected to be fully under government control within a matter of weeks, or even days.

The offensive to recapture Mosul from ISIS began last October. For nine months, it has been the scene of some of the most intense street-to-street urban warfare since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iraqi government troops and police have slowly advanced through its suburbs, supported by the US military and a coalition that includes Australian, British, French and Canadian aircraft and special forces "advisors."

The destruction yesterday of the 900-year-old minaret of the historic Al Nuri mosque symbolises the devastation that has been inflicted on Mosul and its population. The combination of airstrikes and murderous fighting on the ground has reduced large areas of the city to half-standing buildings and left its streets littered with burnt-out vehicles and rubble. Electricity, gas, water and sewerage networks have been shattered.

According to the Baghdad government, the minaret was blown up by ISIS to prevent elite Iraqi "counter-terrorism" police from capturing it intact. The Al Nuri mosque had significant propaganda value for the government forces, as it was where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared the establishment of a "caliphate" in June 2014, after the Islamist movement seized control of Mosul.

ISIS, in its own online propaganda, has claimed the minaret was destroyed by a US airstrike. This has been denied by the US military and a video does suggest that it was demolished by controlled internal explosions.

The Iraqi government refuses to release any figures

on the losses that its forces have suffered. It may well be as high as 10,000 dead and wounded. Reports earlier in the year indicated that some army and police units suffered 50 percent casualties during the fierce battles to completely push ISIS out of the eastern sector of the city.

Civilians, however, have paid the greatest price. Prior to June 2014, Mosul had a population of close to 2 million. While hundreds of thousands fled when ISIS captured the city, displacement and casualties have increased exponentially since the beginning of the US-backed assault.

It is currently estimated that some 860,000 Mosul residents have been turned into refugees, with large numbers sheltering in overcrowded tent camps or with family elsewhere in the country. Another 500,000 are living in various degrees of squalor and hardship in the government-controlled eastern suburbs of the city. It is believed about 100,000 are still trapped in the ISIS-held areas.

There is no accurate count of overall civilian casualties. It almost certainly numbers in the tens of thousands killed or injured, however, inflicted by both the US-backed forces and the ISIS extremists.

Just one US airstrike on March 17 slaughtered at least 105 men, women and children. The US military has revealed that between October 2016 and June 3, its coalition had bombarded the city with some 24,464 missiles and bombs.

When the offensive began nine months ago, the US-led coalition generally estimated that there were no more than 5,000 and at most 10,000 ISIS fighters in the city. In early May, the Iraqi commanders claimed to have killed well over 16,000. In the weeks since, they have claimed to have killed hundreds more.

The inflated number of ISIS deaths suggests that

people are being falsely classified as combatants to conceal the true extent of civilian deaths.

A June 22 article by freelance British journalist Tom Westcott, who is reporting from Mosul, detailed disturbing aspects of the treatment of men and boys who manage to get through the battle lines from ISIS-held areas to those under government control.

A French medic spoke to Westcott about several men whose injuries from shrapnel had been treated. “Of course,” the medic stated, “these operations were done by IS medics and we know they only look after their own, so these men were probably with IS.” He noted that government troops would put them through at least two “screenings.”

Westcott also recounted how a man was suspected of being ISIS because he had bruises on his shoulder—which could possibly have been caused by the recoil of a rifle.

Throughout the operation, any male aged over 15 who is accused of being a supporter of ISIS has been taken away for interrogation and detention. Evidence has emerged since October that alleged ISIS fighters in Mosul have been subjected to hideous torture or summarily executed by government forces.

As the last areas of the city fall to the government, thousands of men and teenagers face an uncertain future. An Iraqi Army officer told Westcott: “Most of the young men still inside now are with Daesh [ISIS]. We’re 100 percent sure they are Daesh.”

US Defense Secretary James Mattis had labelled the US policy in Iraq as “annihilation tactics.” He has implicitly endorsed the extra-judicial execution of non-Iraqis who are captured in Mosul who are alleged to be ISIS fighters. He declared last month in an interview: “Our intention is that the foreign fighters do not survive to return home to North Africa, to Europe, to America, to Asia, to Africa. We’re not going to allow them to do so.”

The remarks of Mattis serve only to underscore that every atrocity committed by Iraqi government forces takes place with the full knowledge and complicity of the US and the other imperialist states contributing troops to the anti-ISIS operations.