

US commander predicts weeks more of fighting in “liberated” Mosul

By Bill Van Auken
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Gun battles continued to rage and air strikes sent plumes of smoke rising over Iraq’s devastated second largest city Wednesday, more than 36 hours after the country’s prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, proclaimed victory in the nine-month US-backed siege of Mosul.

The top US commander in the US interventions in Iraq and Syria, Gen. Stephen Townsend, told Pentagon reporters via a video call from Baghdad that fighting in the city could go on for weeks.

“Make no mistake, this victory alone does not eliminate ISIS, and there’s still tough fighting ahead,” Townsend said. “There are still pockets of resistance in Mosul, holdouts, and hidden IEDs that will take weeks to clear.”

He added that there remained “a lot of mopping up and back-clearing to be done.”

These terms are military euphemisms for a continuation of the killing and destruction that has left tens of thousands of civilians in Mosul either dead or wounded and driven over 900,000 from their homes.

There are growing indications that the “mopping up” being carried out by Iraqi security forces and sectarian militias operating with the aid and guidance of US Special Forces “advisers” involves a campaign of revenge assassinations and terror against anyone believed to have collaborated with ISIS during the three years it controlled Mosul, as well as against the families of suspected ISIS members and supporters.

Iraqi security forces have been dragging away men and boys seeking to escape the city. The *Washington Post* described a “screening station” set up in an old fairground on the eastern bank of the Tigris River where “dozens of men sat in rows last week and waited for judgment.” The article continued: “Military intelligence officers in balaclavas sporadically moved among them to pull out an evacuee accused of working

with the militants.” Videos have surfaced of the brutal torture of such suspects, who have been beaten with hammers and run over with tanks.

The dumping of burnt corpses “near villages in the Tigris valley south of Mosul is now commonplace,” according to a report in the *London Times*, which described how assassination teams are using ambulances to abduct their victims.

“Vengeance killings of suspected Islamic State (Isis) members and collaborators, together with evictions of families accused of Isis affiliation, threaten to inflame sectarian and tribal tensions even before Iraqi forces consolidate their victory in Mosul,” the newspaper reported, adding that “the trend of abduction, murder and displacement of anyone suspected of having a family member in ISIS, or serving the caliphate in even the most banal administrative capacity, is fast gaining pace.” It cited estimates that up to 15 percent of Mosul’s population, hundreds of thousands of people, were connected to ISIS, either through family ties or employment.

In another sign of the growing sectarian carnage, Reuters reported Wednesday that 28 Sunni Muslim civilians were abducted in the Iskandariya district south of Baghdad this week, with 20 of them later found murdered. The suspects in the killings belong to a Shi’ite militia whose fighters are participating in the siege of Mosul.

The wave of killings led the UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, to issue a statement Tuesday declaring: “Horrific though the crimes of Isis are, there is no place for vengeance. Such punishments are an act of vengeance that works against national reconciliation and social cohesion.”

The US invasion of Iraq and the utilization by American occupation authorities of divide-and-rule

tactics triggered sharp sectarian conflicts that erupted into a massive bloodletting. Continued bitterness within the Sunni population of Mosul and Anbar Province against discrimination and abuse from the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad and its security forces created the conditions in which ISIS was able to capture Mosul and up to a third of Iraqi territory in 2014.

These conflicts threaten to intensify after the retaking of Mosul. The Abadi government has put forward no plans for restoring government or security to the shattered city, which the United Nations estimates will need at least \$1 billion just to restore essential infrastructure such as water and electricity.

In his Pentagon press conference Tuesday, General Townsend took umbrage over an Amnesty International report issued the same day accusing the US-led “coalition” of creating a “civilian catastrophe” in Mosul, with estimates of some 6,000 civilians killed in the western part of the city alone. The report accused the US military of having subjected the civilian population “to a terrifying barrage of fire from weapons that should never be used in densely populated civilian areas.”

Townsend said he rejected “any notion that coalition fires were any—in any way imprecise, unlawful or excessively targeted civilians.” He described the siege of Mosul, which included bombardment with heavy artillery and continuous air strikes, as well as use of white phosphorous, a chemical weapon banned for use in populated areas, as “the most precise campaign in the history of warfare.”

In the same breath, the general added that “civilians will get caught in the crossfire.” He continued: “Civilians will get hurt. Civilians will get killed. And that’s sad and it’s an unavoidable part of war. And commanders have to press on despite that.”

The US commander also stressed that the defeat of ISIS would by no means signal a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

“I would anticipate that there will be a coalition presence here after the defeat of ISIS,” General Townsend told reporters. “All of us can look back to the end of 2011 when the US and coalition forces left Iraq the last time, and saw what played out in the intervening three years. I don’t think we want to replay that.”

There are currently more than 5,000 US troops deployed in Iraq, together with thousands of military contractors and other units that are rotated in and out of the country. The Pentagon has requested nearly \$1.3 billion in the 2018 budget to fund its support for Iraqi security forces.

Washington aims to maintain a permanent military presence in both Iraq and neighboring Syria, where US proxy forces backed by American Special Forces “advisers” are conducting an equally bloody siege of the ISIS-held city of Raqqa.

In an editorial celebrating the “liberation” of Mosul, the *New York Times* Wednesday pointed to a principal motivation for the US setting up permanent bases in the country, citing the importance of “preventing Iran from expanding its influence in Iraq and in Syria, where with Russia it is a major ally of the Assad regime.”

The hollow victory celebrated by Washington and the Iraqi regime in Mosul is only bringing the US closer to a direct clash with Iranian and even Russian forces, setting the stage for a far wider and potentially world catastrophic war.

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