

# Iraqi push on western Mosul triggers mass exodus

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Nearly 100,000 Iraqis have fled the battle to retake western Mosul from the Islamic State (ISIS), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said.

Iraqi forces launched a major push in February to recapture western Mosul, which is the most populated urban area held by ISIS. There were an estimated 750,000 residents in Mosul when the battle began.

Between February 25th and March 15th, more than 97,000 people were displaced from western Mosul, IOM said on its official Twitter account.

Iraqi forces began the operation to recapture Mosul in October, first retaking the east and then setting their sights on the smaller but more densely populated western area.

More than 238,000 people have been displaced by fighting in the Mosul area, the IOM said, and more have returned to their homes after fleeing.

**More than 97,000 people have been displaced from western Mosul.**

Many of the residents who streamed out of western neighbourhoods recaptured by the government were desperately hungry and traumatised from having lived under ISIS rule.

Amid the conflict, a steady stream of refugees trudged out of the western districts carrying suitcases, bottles of water and other possessions. Some pushed children and sick, elderly relatives in handcarts and wheelbarrows, witnesses said.

Those who remain trapped in western Mosul are left with dwindling supplies of food and fuel. Prices

have skyrocketed: A kilogram of sugar has leaped from \$1 to more than \$20.

Iraqi Sunni politician Khamis Khanjar warned that the military campaign's escalation was causing a surge in civilian casualties that could undermine the effort to crush ISIS.

■ Neither the Iraqi government nor the US-led coalition has announced civilian casualties.

Khanjar said at least 3,500 civilians have been killed since the push into the western side of the city began.

"There were heavy casualties due to speeding up of military operations and we see this as a big mistake and residents who we are in touch with have much more fear than in the past of the ongoing military operations," Khanjar told Reuters in an interview in Amman.

"We hope the US-led coalition doesn't hurry up in this way without taking into consideration the human lives," he added.

Airwars, an independent group that tracks casualties from the campaign, said several hundred civilians had been killed in March. Neither the Iraqi government nor the US-led coalition has announced civilian casualties.

Khanjar said the mounting casualties have mainly come from air strikes and indiscriminate shelling of heavily crowded neighbourhoods.

Mainstream Sunnis say the Shia-led administration has discriminated against them and that Iran is gaining influence within security forces and paramilitary groups.

"The Americans are mistaken if they think that a speedy decisive military solution is the best approach in this battle," Khanjar said.

"This will have dangerous repercussions on the post-Mosul phase... There will be anger by residents and Daesh will benefit from the large human losses," he added, using an Arabic acronym for ISIS.

"Unless there is a political process



Another displacement. Mosul residents from Mosul evacuate the city, on March 14th.

(AFP)

that restores confidence of Sunnis in the state... in a post-Daesh phase, there may emerge more organisations of terrorists that are even more extreme than Daesh."

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi warned ISIS that its fighters must surrender or be killed, although he also pledged to treat the militants' families fairly.

"Let me be very clear, we will preserve families of Daesh who are civilians but we will punish the terrorists and bring them to justice if they surrender," he said. "They are cornered and if they will not surrender, they will definitely get killed."

Human Rights Watch (HRW), in a new report, said Iraq's Interior Ministry "is holding at least 1,269 detainees, including boys as young

as 13, without charge in horrendous conditions and with limited access to medical care at three makeshift prisons" south of Mosul.

"At least four prisoners have died, in cases that appear to be linked to lack of proper medical care and poor conditions and two prisoners' legs have been amputated, apparently because of lack of treatment for treatable wounds," HRW said.

The Interior Ministry's spokesman said he could not comment on the report until it had been reviewed by the minister.

While changes do seem to have been made, HRW's allegations indicate that significant problems remain with screening procedures – problems likely to breed anger and resentment and drive more people

into the arms of militants.

On the battlefield, Iraqi forces moved towards Mosul's Grand Mosque after taking control of the bridge leading to the ISIS-held Old City.

Staff Brigadier Falah al-Obeidi of the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) told Reuters his troops had taken control of the Dor al-Sikak and al-Nafut areas, site of the militants' main weapons stores in Mosul just west of the Old City.

"Resistance was very strong in that area. It's where their stores are and the people living there, both men and women, are with them (supporters or members)," he said.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

## Who is winning: General Soleimani or General Martin?

### Viewpoint



Khairuldeen al-Makhzumi

Nalia Radio and Television, a Kurdish television network in Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq, reported that Major-General Joseph Martin, commander of the 1st Infantry Division of the US Army, had been seen in the eastern side of Mosul. The US commander walked around neighbourhoods accompanied by Iraqi troops led by Lieutenant-General Riyadh Jalal, who is in charge of Iraqi security forces in Mosul.

Iraqis likely have not seen an American general walking the streets in a Sunni-majority area since 2011, when the United States pulled its forces from Iraq. It is surprising that a US general would be strolling freely around eastern Mosul; the area had been recaptured from Islamic State (ISIS) control only recently, after months of intense fighting.

Iraqi security forces had received direct support from US-led coalition air strikes as well as from some of the 5,000 American ground troops stationed around Mosul in preparation for an assault on the city. Since December 29th, US forces have been involved in front-line combat, including

against ISIS fighters in the neighbourhood of al-Tayaran in the western side of Mosul.

The appearance of an American general in Mosul spurred much debate among Iraqis over the visit's significance. Iraqis are more used to seeing Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani, leader of al-Quds Force, a unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, responsible for extraterritorial operations in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Al-Quds Force reports directly to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Iraqis have been familiar with Soleimani since 2014, when he started visiting Iraqi cities to meet with militia fighters and generals stationed there. Many of these fighters are members of the Badr Organisation, an Iraqi political party with its own military wing. Many Badr members are Iraqis who fought alongside the Iranian Army – that is, against their home country of Iraq – during the 8-year Iraq-Iran War.

Since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, some of the group's fighters have joined the officially sanctioned Iraqi army and police force. Members of the Badr Organisation also make up some of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), an Iraqi state-sponsored paramilitary organisation composed of about 40 militias, mainly Shia, fighting against ISIS in western Mosul.

Soleimani took an office close to

the US embassy in the Green Zone in Baghdad in 2015 and from there led the PMU against ISIS in the Diyala and Saladin governorates, as well as in the cities of Falluja and Ramadi.

Human Rights Watch reported that the PMU wrought large-scale destruction in those areas and committed human rights violations, even though the American leadership had asked the Iraqi government to stop the PMU from participating in future battles.

It is worth noting that PMU forces did not directly participate in the liberation of eastern Mosul, after being tasked by the Iraqi government with surrounding the city of Tal Afar, near the Syrian border – on the periphery of the battlefield.

Soleimani's leadership position within the PMU has been acknowledged by the Iraqi government, which has said that Iranian generals and other fighters are retained via a contract between the two governments. However, not much information has been released regarding the contents of the contract or how much Iranian generals and other fighters are being paid by Iraq.

Most PMUs are under the command of Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organisation, as well as PMU Deputy Chief Abu Mahdi Mohandes. Mohandes is wanted by Interpol for a deadly 1983 car bomb attack in Kuwait,

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the attempted hijacking of a Kuwaiti Airways aircraft in 1984 and the attempted assassination of Kuwaiti Emir Sabah Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah in 1985.

The question is why Martin appeared inside Mosul and why Soleimani did not. The presence of an American general in an Iraqi city interacting with Iraqi civilians might be a message to the people of Iraq that US forces will never abandon them to deal with the Iranians' threats again. Iraqis' memories of this go back to the 2003 invasion in which the United States was accused by many analysts of allowing Iran to interfere in Iraq's political, economic and military affairs and of essentially delivering Iraq to Iran on a golden plate.

US President Donald Trump during his campaign said America "gave Iraq to Iran", a point he reaffirmed last month in a tweet: "Iran is rapidly taking over more and more of Iraq even after the US has squandered three trillion dollars there. Obvious long ago!"

Such statements are encouraging to Iraqis who do not like Iran's continued interference in their country and who want to believe that, under Trump's US leadership, the Iranian influence in Iraq will be more limited.

Khairuldeen al-Makhzumi is a researcher at the Near Eastern Department of the University of California, Berkeley.

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