

Is the US military preparing another massacre in Tal Afar?

Largest US military offensive on an urban area since attack on Fallujah

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The largest US military offensive on an urban area since the attack on Fallujah last year has been underway since September 2 in the city of Tal Afar, an ancient metropolis with a predominantly Sunni Muslim, ethnic Turkish population of some 300,000.

Situated in the north of Iraq along the Euphrates River and just 40 kilometres from the Syrian border, Tal Afar has been largely outside the control of the occupation forces since the 2003 invasion. In September 2004, the US military carried out a major operation to impose its authority over Tal Afar, but was forced to withdraw by November in order to redeploy troops to the heavy fighting in Fallujah and Mosul. In the 10 months since, Tal Afar has become one of the centres for the anti-occupation guerilla struggle in the north.

A US officer told the Washington Post: “The September operation basically made people angry, which the insurgents were able to take advantage of. [It] had the opposite effect than was intended. We created a power vacuum and they filled it.”

The details of what is taking place in Tal Afar since last Friday are shrouded in secrecy. The few available reports indicate, however, that at least 5,000 US and Iraqi government troops have sealed off the old centre of the city—an area known as Sarai—and are preparing for an assault against an estimated 400 to 500 resistance fighters who are said to be entrenched in the narrow streets of the district.

The US push into the city was preceded by airstrikes and artillery shelling, and spearheaded by Abram battle tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. The Al Jazeera website reported on Monday that at least four mosques have been bombed. F-16s destroyed alleged “insurgent safe-houses” with 500 and 1,000-pound bombs. The Iraqi newspaper Azzaman reported: “Eyewitnesses, refusing to be named, spoke of ‘scores of casualties’ due to indiscriminate bombing.”

The numbers of dead and wounded are unknown. Colonel H.R. McMaster, the commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment that is leading the operation, told the Washington Post on the weekend that as many as 200 “insurgents” had been killed in the first three days of fighting.

The events unfolding in Tal Afar have all the makings of another horrific crime against the Iraqi masses, paralleling the atrocities committed in Fallujah last year. In just nine days, thousands of Fallujans were killed and their bodies left to rot in the streets or to be consumed by dogs. US snipers murdered desperate civilians trying to get water for their

families.

More than 60 percent of the city was reduced to rubble and over half its famous mosques bombed out. Nearly one year later, less than half of Fallujah's 250,000 residents have been able to return, with most still living in ruined buildings and squalor.

As was the case in Fallujah, a significant proportion of the people included in the body count in Tal Afar will actually be civilians killed by bombing, gunned down by the occupation forces or caught in crossfire. As US and Iraqi troops passed through suburban areas this week, they smashed into houses with sledge hammers or explosives, searching for guerillas. Buildings where Iraqis fired back were laid waste by heavy machine-gun and tank fire.

Thousands of civilians have fled from the city and nearby towns and villages into the desert toward Mosul, 70 kilometres to the east. Sunni political parties are erecting camps to house the refugees, whose numbers may exceed 100,000.

Thousands more Tal Afar residents, however, are trapped inside Sarai by the cordon of tanks and barbed wire that has been flung up around the district to prevent resistance fighters escaping. On the outskirts of the city, US forces have constructed an 80-mile network of earth barriers, or berms, to stop vehicles getting out across country. Colonel McMaster told the Washington Post: "The idea is to trap them in Sarai or force them toward our checkpoints to the south. We don't want them to slip out."

The operation against the city is part of the broader offensive that has been waged by the US military since the formation of the Iraqi government in April. Far from the armed resistance to the occupation subsiding following the formation of a US puppet regime, millions of Iraqis remain bitterly opposed to the American presence in the country and are sympathetic to the insurgency.

The US response has been indiscriminate violence. Hundreds of civilians have been killed or maimed in bombing raids or sweep-and-search operations through cities, towns and villages over the past several months. Thousands of men have been rounded up and thrown into US-run prison camps. In advance of the October 15 referendum on a draft constitution that has been rejected by Sunni, ethnic Turkomen and major Shiite organisations, the political repression against areas under their influence is being stepped up.

All indications are that the US military is preparing a full-scale assault on Tal Afar in the next few days, regardless of how many civilians are killed as a result. On Sunday night, helicopters dropped leaflets over the area, giving all noncombatants until Tuesday afternoon to flee the area via southern roads that lead into areas that are under the clear control of the occupation forces. US troops are physically preventing any civilians leaving via the north toward Mosul, where the majority of the population is opposed to the Baghdad government.

In one of the few on-the-spot accounts coming out of the area, the Washington Post reported yesterday that many civilians have refused to leave to south due to fear of what the Iraqi government forces will do to them. Many of the government troops in the area are former militiamen for the Shiite fundamentalist parties and Kurdish nationalist parties that dominate the Baghdad regime. Sunni- and Turkomen-based political and religious organisations have accused the US-backed security forces of sectarian killings, arbitrary detentions and torture in cities such as Baghdad, Basra and Mosul.

An elderly man declared: "I would rather die from American bombs in my home with my family than walk south. People are saying the Shiites will kill you or kidnap you. That is a disgrace."

The Washington Post recounted that about 1,000 men, women and children who had assembled at a US checkpoint turned around and went back into Sarai on Tuesday rather than risk getting on American trucks that might deliver them into the hands of the government forces.

The chilling conclusion of the article read: "About 3 p.m., Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Hickey, the squadron commander, arrived to make a final plea. 'I am trying to help you to get out of a very dangerous situation. You are going to be in danger if you stay here, I am telling you. Please, this is your last chance.' As he turned away from the crowd, one family emerged, with nine adults carrying baggage and eight children in tow. 'Anyone else?', Hickey asked, beckoning. 'Okay, then we will save these people', he said, and walked away."

Significant parts of Tal Afar are already reported to be in ruin. Electricity and phone services have been cut off and hospitals are breaking down. The Iraqi Human Rights Centre has issued an urgent appeal to the Iraqi government to stop the assault and allow rescue teams to access the area to deliver food, water and medical supplies and evacuate the wounded.

As well as inflaming northern Iraq, the attack on Tal Afar risks further destabilising the surrounding region. Last September, the Turkish government, under pressure from mass domestic opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, threatened to break off all cooperation with the occupation of Iraq unless the attack on ethnic Turks in Tal Afar was ended. This week, a Turkish government spokesman declared that Ankara had "reiterated our sensitivity about the operation" and "asked US authorities to pay the maximum attention to avoid civilian casualties".

Instead, with US and Iraqi troops poised to storm into the old city, a massacre appears to be looming.

At the same time, the American military is intensifying its aerial bombardment of Qaim, a city south of Tal Afar and also on the Euphrates River and close to the Syrian border. Airstrikes last week, which killed at least 56 people, have been justified with claims that the area has fallen under the control of Islamic extremists linked to Al Qaeda. The organisation Doctors for Iraq announced that a medical clinic was bombed and that electricity had been cut to the main hospital.

US marine aircraft have carried out more strikes over the past three days, bombing two main bridges over the Euphrates and destroying houses allegedly occupied by insurgents. With as many as 7,000 American and Iraqi government troops reported to be in the vicinity, a bloodbath in Tal Afar may be followed quickly by an offensive against Qaim.

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