

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1094
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	The Iraq Gazette
Titel:	Iraqi forces begin house-by-house fight for last Islamic State holdout at Tal Afar
Udgivet:	6. september 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. november 2017



Iraqi forces begin house-by-house fight for last Islamic State holdout at Tal Afar



Members of Iraqi army are seen during the war between Iraqi army and Shi'ite Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) against the Islamic State militants in al-Ayadiya, northwest of Tal Afar, Iraq August 28, 2017. REUTERS/Thaier Al-Sudani

By Ahmed Rasheed, Reuters

Sep 6, 2017 at 8:12 am | [Print View](#)

BAGHDAD — Iraqi forces backed by Shi'ite paramilitaries began fighting house-by-house in the one town left to take from Islamic State before they can declare complete victory over the group's former stronghold of Tal Afar, military commanders said.

Hundreds of battle-hardened IS militants are defending al-Ayadiya, a small town outside Tal Afar which itself is about 80 km (50 miles) west of Mosul, the former de facto IS capital in northern Iraq that was recaptured in July, army officers said.

"Our soldiers now are engaging in a street fight with the militant group in al-Ayadiya," Lieutenant General Qasim Nazzal told state television, adding that fighters in groups of three were barricaded inside "every single house and building".

The terrain does not allow tanks to enter, so infantry soldiers have been using light weapons and grenades, Colonel Salah Kareem told Reuters.

The fighting in al-Ayadiya, 11 km (7 miles) northwest of Tal Afar, has been described by some Iraqi troops as “multiple times worse” than the battle for Mosul, which was flattened by nine months of grinding urban warfare.

Colonel Kareem al-Lami said breaching the militants’ first line of defense in al-Ayadiya was like opening “the gates of hell”.

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Tal Afar had a pre-war population of more than 200,000. Several thousand are believed to have fled in the weeks before the battle started. According to the United Nations, more than 30,000 had fled since April.

Tal Afar became the next target of the U.S.-backed war on Islamic State following the recapture of Mosul the city where the group had declared its “caliphate” over parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014.

(Reporting by Ahmed Rasheed; Writing by Raya Jalabi; Editing by Robin Pomeroy)

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