

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1092
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	The New York Times
Titel:	ISIS Loses Another City to U.S.- Backed Iraqi Forces
Udgivet:	31. august 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. november 2017

ASIA PACIFIC

ISIS Loses Another City to U.S.-Backed Iraqi Forces

By TIM ARANGO AUG. 31, 2017

ISTANBUL — Another city in Iraq has slipped the grasp of the Islamic State, the extremist group that three years ago controlled a vast caliphate straddling Iraq and Syria that threatened to rewrite Middle Eastern borders drawn after World War I.

Now the group is on its back foot with its latest loss, the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, which Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq declared liberated on Thursday.

The relatively quick victory in Tal Afar, after an 11-day battle by Iraqi forces backed by American air power, comes on the heels of the grueling and bloody nine-month fight for Mosul, the largest Iraqi city the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ever controlled.

The mounting losses sustained by the group suggest that its days of administering territory are waning. Iraqi forces continue to push west, toward the Syrian border, while in Syria, American-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters press their assault on Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital.

Still, the fight is likely to go on for months. The Islamic State still controls large parts of Syria and Iraq and has proved resilient despite previous reports of its decline. The Iraqi military's next target, the city of Hawija, is likely to be more complicated.

Even as Iraq's national television station broadcast the announcement of the liberation of Tal Afar, the plume of smoke from an airstrike could be seen in the area. And in Ayadiya, a nearby village where some Islamic State fighters put up a last stand, fighting continued into the night on Thursday.

With each military victory against the Islamic State comes the realization that Iraq is far from being at peace. As Iraqi security forces were mopping up in Tal Afar on Monday, an Islamic State car bomb struck a vegetable market in Baghdad, killing a dozen people and underscoring the group's power as an insurgency, even with its territorial claims diminishing.

Tal Afar, while smaller than other cities the terrorist group had seized, had taken on outsized importance. The hometown of many Islamic State leaders, it has long been a stronghold of extremist views, and it was among the first Iraqi cities to fall to the rebels when they began their sweep across northern Iraq in 2014.

Iraqi troops approached from the south, along highways of fine sand that turned into clouds of red dust under the weight of speeding Humvees. Along the way were ghostlike villages with doors left flung open. A water tank painted with the ISIS flag was pitched forward, shredded by an airstrike.

But the speed of the fall of Tal Afar may be a singular event rather than a harbinger of future battles.

Lt. Gen. Sami al-Aridhi, a top commander in Iraq's counterterrorism forces, said that the victory had come quickly largely because, in contrast to Mosul, there were few civilians left in Tal Afar, allowing the Iraqi security forces to bring more destructive firepower to bear.

The city had also been cut off for months and surrounded by pro-government militias, whose fighters moved on the city last fall as the campaign for Mosul began.

"Tal Afar was trapped for months, and all of the supplies coming from ISIS in Syria toward Tal Afar were cut off," said Gen. Yahya Rasool, an Iraqi military spokesman.

There were also reports that the military struck a deal allowing Islamic State fighters to flee, another possible reason for the quick victory. General Aridhi said

that many Islamic State fighters had escaped, but not because of any pact with the security forces.

There were also reports that Kurdish forces stationed to the north of the city had struck a deal allowing Islamic State fighters to turn themselves in, another possible reason for the quick victory. General Aridhi said that many Islamic State fighters had escaped, but not because of any pact with the security forces.

But Maj. Gen. Najim al-Jobori, the Iraqi commander officer who oversaw the battle, said, "There was an agreement" between the militant group and the pesh merga, the Kurdish force that is holding the front line to the north of the liberated city.

He did not elaborate on the details but said that significant numbers of fighters were able to slip through a security cordon. Many turned themselves in to Kurdish forces, choosing imprisonment rather than certain death at the hands of the Iraqis, while others fled to Turkey and Syria, he said.

A senior Kurdish commander said that 500 Islamic State fighters turned themselves in to the Kurdish pesh merga militia over three days this week.

Whether or not there was a formal agreement, it appeared that the Islamic State had chosen to make a tactical retreat rather than defend Tal Afar to the death.

The military's next stop, Hawija, could prove more difficult. Hawija borders Kurdish-controlled territory, making cooperation between Iraqi and Kurdish forces essential. But the Kurds are planning to hold a referendum this month on independence, aimed at converting the semiautonomous Kurdish region in Iraq into a separate state.

Baghdad opposes the referendum, and officials have said that the military planning for Hawija could be delayed because of talks about the involvement of Kurdish forces in the battle.

Beyond Hawija, the Islamic State still controls the western deserts of Anbar Province, including the town of Qaim, near the Syrian border; and half of the city of Shirqat, in Salahuddin Province, as well as a large amount of territory in eastern Syria.

The fight for Tal Afar involved a constellation of Iraqi forces, including elite special forces, the Iraqi Army, federal police officers and Shiite militias with ties to Iran, backed by American air power.

Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the top American military commander in Iraq, said in a statement on Thursday that with the “historic liberation of Mosul and now a swift and decisive victory in Tal Afar,” the Iraqi security forces had “shown, once again, they are an increasingly capable force that can protect the Iraqi people, defeat ISIS within Iraq and secure the country’s borders.”

“This is yet another significant achievement for the Iraqi security forces and the government and the people of Iraq,” he added.

Correction: September 2, 2017

Because of an editing error, an article on Friday about an operation to retake the Iraqi city of Tal Afar referred incorrectly to a deal involving Islamic State fighters. The deal was reached with the Kurdish pesh merga forces, not the Iraqi military.

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Rukmini Callimachi and Alaa Mohammed contributed reporting from the outskirts of Tal Afar, Iraq, and Falih Hassan from Baghdad.

A version of this article appears in print on September 1, 2017, on Page A6 of the New York edition with the headline: ISIS Loses Another City To Iraqi Military Forces With Backing From U.S.