

Iraqi Military Pushes Back Into Tal Afar

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Insurgents still hold Mosul and other key Sunni towns.

After Islamic militants captured Tal Afar to the west of Mosul on June 16, the Iraqi military regrouped and rearmed and has since taken back about a quarter of this Shia-majority city, a security officer told IWPR.

Insurgents of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) moved on Tal Afar, 50 kilometres west of Mosul, after capturing the latter city last week and pushing south and east towards the capital Baghdad.

IWPR's source, who did not want to be named, said troops commanded by General Mohammed al-Quraishi, who is also known as Abu al-Walid, held out and gathered his forces for a counterattack.

"Abu al-Walid and his troops kept fighting the ISIS insurgents from their base in the military airport, but they were suffering from a lack of support and ammunition," the officer said

He described police units and allied tribal militias pulling out of Tal Afar as arms and supplies ran short. The insurgents then shelled the city with artillery and mortar shells, and captured most of it in a morning assault.

The remaining defending troops put up a fight, and the attack cost ISIS dear, according to a Tal Afar resident who spoke to IWPR by phone.

"On Monday morning, 25 vehicles full of ISIS fighters were torched when they first tried to enter in the city," he said.

He added that the police and tribal forces who had left Tal Afar went to the town of Sinjar to wait for resupplies. Sinjar, like Tal Afar and Mosul, is in Nineveh governorate but is currently controlled by Kurdish forces.

Tal Afar residents, who are overwhelmingly Shia, fled in large numbers in fear of what the Sunni extremists might do. ISIS proceeded to destroy Shia mosques and a shrine.

ISIS's grip on the city began to loosen by the end of the day. General Quraishi's troops were resupplied by air, and many of the police and tribal units came back to join the fight on the evening of June 16.

"The security forces have regained control of 25 per cent of Tal Afar and captured some ISIS insurgents, including fighters of [non-Iraqi] Arab nationality," the officer said, speaking on June 17. He added that some Saudis were among the detainees.

The insurgents remain in control of other parts of Nineveh province, above all Mosul itself.

Reports coming out of Mosul speak of fighting among insurgent factions after ISIS executed members of other groups including the Naqshbandi militia led by Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a vice-president under the late Saddam Hussein.

In Anbar province, the Iraqi security forces and allied tribal units are battling insurgents in the town of Ramadi.

Fallujah is fully under the control of insurgents, although a local resident who gave his first name as Ali said they belonged to the Islamic State of Iraq, a faction he said was "a branch of al-Qaeda and unrelated to ISIS".

Ali said 80 per cent of Fallujah's residents had fled because of shelling by Iraqi government troops.

"Frankly, people hate the army more and more because of its random bombardment of the town, which has caused civilian casualties," he said.

Laith Hammoudi is IWPR's editor in Iraq.

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