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## Iraqi Forces Begin Bitter Battle for Mosul in Effort to Destroy Isis

Patrick Cockburn

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Iraqi government forces have started their offensive aimed at capturing the western half of Mosul, Isis's last big urban stronghold in the country. There are an estimated 4,000 jihadi fighters defending the close-packed houses and narrow alleyways in the half of the city west of the Tigris River, which is inhabited by some 650,000 civilians.

Iraqi paramilitary federal police and interior ministry units are advancing from the south of Mosul with the initial aim of seizing the city airport. But the heaviest fighting is likely to come when the soldiers get into built up areas where the militant group has been digging tunnels and holes cut through the walls of houses so they can conduct a mobile defence away from artillery fire and airstrikes.

The fighting could be as fierce as anything seen in the Iraq war, which has been ongoing since the US invasion of 2003 overthrew Saddam Hussein. The operation is being largely planned by the US, which has 6,000 soldiers in Iraq and which leads a coalition that has carried out more than 10,000 airstrikes and trained and equipped 70,000 Iraqi soldiers. "Mosul would be a tough fight for any army in the world," said Lt Gen Stephen Townsend, the commander of the coalition, in a statement.

The struggle for Mosul is the climactic battle in the bid by the Iraqi government and its foreign allies to destroy Isis, which established its self-declared caliphate in June 2014 when a few

thousand fighters unexpectedly captured Mosul from a 60,000-strong government garrison. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Isis leader and self-appointed caliph, is in west Mosul according to Hoshiyar Zebari, the former Iraqi finance and foreign minister, speaking to The Independent in an interview last week. This gives Isis an extra reason to hold the city to the last man.

The Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi announced the start of the operation early on Sunday morning, but intense fighting has yet to start as Iraqi forces advance through empty outlying villages. Going by the well-planned resistance put up by Isis in east Mosul over the last three months since the first offensive began on 17 October, casualties on all sides are likely to be heavy.

Isis depended on mobile squads of snipers, booby traps and over 600 suicide bombers driving vehicles packed with explosives to slow the advance of the counter terrorism service and other elite formation, some of which suffered 50 per cent casualties during a snail's pace advance. By the end of 2016, the Iraqi Kurdish health ministry was complaining that its hospitals were full of overflowing with 13,500 wounded soldiers and civilians from the fighting in Mosul.

Though Baghdad announced that it had seized all of east Mosul, its grip on captured districts appears shaky as Isis sleeper cells carry out assassinations and bombings. Two suicide bombers, who emerged today, blew themselves up, killing three soldiers and two civilians and injuring many more. Last week a restaurant owner in east Mosul, who had reopened his business and was serving soldiers, was killed by another bomber. The Iraqi army is short of well-trained troops and their dispatch to the front line means that districts already taken are vulnerable to infiltration by Isis.

While Mr Abadi called on the Iraqi forces to be careful of the human rights of civilians in Mosul, videos are emerging of young men being beaten and summarily executed in places already taken by Iraqi troops. Despite frequent claims that it is liberating Mosul, the Shia-dominated Iraqi government is effectively assaulting the last great Sunni Arab city in Iraq. Away from the television cameras Iraqi soldiers often suspect civilians in Mosul of having been much more cooperative with Isis since 2014 than they now claim.

Civilians in Mosul have no alternative but to cooperate with warring armies that are destroying their city. Iraqi planes have dropped millions of leaflets on west Mosul telling Isis fighters to surrender, and people to stay in their houses and to display white sheets to show they are not resisting. But since Isis kills anybody who shows signs of surrendering, this tactic is unlikely to be very effective.

Government military commanders say they have learned from their experiences in east Mosul and will try to advance on west Mosul from all sides in order to spread out the Isis defenders. They will also be strongly supported by US artillery and airstrikes seeking to eliminate Isis strongpoints. The government says that it is seeking to minimise civilian casualties, but it is impossible to know from a distance how many families have taken refuge in the interior of buildings or in cellars. If, as seems inevitable, government forces use greater firepower than before to capture west Mosul, then civilian loss of life and material destruction will be greater than in the east.