

Battle for Mosul, Defeat of the ISIS Caliphate, A Year of Brutal War, Crimes against Humanity

Iraq's fight to liberate Mosul from IS was one of the biggest stories of 2017. Here is the best reporting on the conflict from Middle East Eye

By [Middle East Eye](#)

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The Islamic State (IS) group shocked the world when, in 2014, it walked a few hundred men into Iraq's second city and took it from 30,000 fleeing Iraqi troops. Days later, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate from the city's historic Nouri mosque.

Almost three years on, in October 2016, the Iraqi government launched operations to retake the city. What followed was one of the most intense and brutal urban conflicts for generations.

Middle East Eye special correspondents witnessed events unfold, and documented the violence, exhaustion, hardship, fear and celebration as the city was slowly liberated during 2017. Here is the pick of their reports on one of the biggest stories of the year. Click on the pictures below to read the articles in full.

By January of 2017 Iraqi forces had stuck several blows against Islamic State. Eastern outlying villages had been cleared of militants, and many of the urban areas east of the Tigris river were under tentative Iraqi control. By mid-January commanders were declaring the [full liberation](#) of the east of the city.

But the hardest fighting was yet to come, and Islamic State was not finished in the east.

As Tom Westcott reported on 29 January, the Jungle, the sprawling leafy eastern banks of the Tigris river, where roads ran alongside deserted fairgrounds and hotels – perfect for ambushes – became the last eastern strongpoint for IS and final advances made under constant risk of sniper fire, was the only option for Iraqi troops from the elite Golden Division. Click on the pictures to read in full.

Advancing through the 'Mosul Jungle' with Iraqi special forces

#IraqatWar

Amid ruined fairground rides and deadly tree-lined roadways, Iraq's elite fighters seek to regain city step by step



Soldiers view a ferris wheel in an abandoned Mosul fairground (MEE/Tom Westcott)

By February, Iraqi forces had pushed Islamic State back to the western bank of the Tigris. But the group refused to concede the ground, sending frogmen across the river to harass and disrupt troops stationed along the banks.

Westcott, reporting from an Iraqi forward position along the river, told on 1 February how the Iraqi forces stopped their enemies dead in the water.

Dead in the water: IS launches doomed raids across Mosul river

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Islamic State militants use boats, swimmers in attempted raids on Iraqi forces on eastern bank of Tigris. But elite Iraqi troops await them



Golden Division troops scan western bank of Tigris for IS attack boats (MEE/Tom Westcott)

By the end of the month, Iraqi forces had consolidated their hold on eastern Mosul – but it was far from safe. Westcott, this time reporting from behind the front lines in liberated areas, detailed on 22 February how IS was using small drones to drop bombs on anything that moved.

The drones were used without warning and often with deadly precision. “You can’t leave the house without checking the sky every single second and, even if you hear one of the drones, you don’t have time to run because they are so fast,” said one civilian, who recounted how his neighbour had been seriously injured by a grenade dropped from the sky.

Hospitals said they were treating up to 10 people a day for injuries suffered in the drone attacks.

Death from above: IS drones strike terror in 'safe' areas of Mosul

#DroneWar

Streets of east Mosul are liberated but skies remain deadly - IS has stepped up use of drone IEDs, leaving civilians fearful



Iraqi golden division soldiers fire in air at Islamic State drone in Mosul (AFP)

Iraqi advances into the city would not have been so decisive had it not been for the air power of the US-led coalition. But that trump card came with a heavy price, especially as fighting reached a crescendo as forces moved into western Mosul.

Airwars, a monitoring group, analysed the civilian cost of fighting in urban areas – something the US coalition itself was unable to do in as much detail.

On 8 March, Alessandro Accorsi reported US coalition bombs may have already killed hundreds of Mosul civilians, including up to 130 in a single assault on the district of Dawassa only days before.

A US military spokesman told Middle East Eye the coalition would “fully assess this allegation to assess its validity”. In October, the US military [stated](#) the Airwars report “contains insufficient information of the time, location and details to assess its credibility”.

US coalition 'kills hundreds' of Mosul civilians in one week: Report

#IraqatWar

Between 250 and 370 civilians killed by US-led air strikes in seven days of fighting, says monitor Airwars



Smoke billows as Iraqi forces clash with IS group fighters in Mosul on 5 March, 2017 (AFP)

By mid-March, as Iraqi forces pushed into the west of the city, the true scale of destruction by Islamic State became apparent.

The ancient history of Mosul had been desecrated by IS militants, who viewed many non-Islamic artefacts and architecture as forbidden.

Their answer was to smash it to pieces – and Mosul's once-proud museum lay in ruins on its liberation. Tom Westcott reported from the remains of the museum on 14 March.

Mosul's desecrated museum: 'IS smashed up our history'

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Iraqi forces recently took control of museum IS destroyed and looted. The rubble of thousands of years of history is all that remains



An Iraqi soldier gathers up smashed fragments of ancient inscribed tablets in the museum (MEE/Tom Westcott)

In one interview in the remains of a block of homes hit by air strikes Abu Ahmed, a civilian, recounted the overwhelming use of force: "This block was hit by 14 air strikes targeting two Daesh fighters. Now we have nothing left."

Another civilian confirmed the tactic: "The aircraft see one Daesh guy on the roof and drop a bomb. In the basement below, a family of 10 are sheltering and they get killed too."

Battle of Mosul: Countless dead and no help as US air war exacts heavy toll

#IraqatWar

Hundreds of civilians are believed dead in US coalition raids. Iraqis report use of overwhelming firepower, and scores of bodies lying under rubble



Abu Ahmed walks past the remnants of his home in Mosul (MEE/Tom Westcott)

With the battle moving in Iraq's favour, reports began to turn to the increasingly desperate tactics employed by Islamic State. Their use of children – so-called “young lions of the caliphate” – as frontline soldiers was in full swing.

Francesca Manocchi, on 25 March, reported how IS over three years had snatched children from their families, trained them to kill, and turned them loose on their home city.

The report began with the harrowing account of one Iraqi soldier, Hasan, who faced a horrific life-or-death choice: kill, or be killed, by a 10-year-old suicide bomber.

Turning kids into killers: Mosul's lost generation of Islamic State fighters

#IraqatWar

Iraqi soldiers have fought boys as young as 10 in Mosul. But being used by IS to kill is only one of many grim fates awaiting city's youth



An IS video of children from its 'young lions' division (screengrab)

Increasing numbers of IS militants began to melt into the civilian population as more territory was lost to Iraqi forces. For the army, the answer was to round up all men of fighting age and "process" them at temporary sites dotted around the city.

But the task was huge, laborious, fraught with danger, and exacted a terrible toll on many innocents caught in the system. Tom Westcott, reporting on 27 March from Akrab, recounted how the Iraqi army rooted out suspects from the masses of tired, scared and hungry men.

As yet another man, who had handed himself in as an Islamic State emir, disappeared for interrogation, an Iraqi soldier offered a chillingly frank confession as to his fate:

Battle for Mosul: 'We'll probably kill him later. The prisons are full'

#IraqatWar

Akrab centre near Mosul screens hundreds of men for IS links every day. Many are cleared - but those flagged as collaborators face a different fate



A disguised IS suspect searches for collaborators at Akrab screening centre (MEE/Tom Westcott)

The fate of captured IS fighters was not always the same. Just behind the front lines in western Mosul, with suicide bombs exploding and the rattle of gunfire all around, one group of volunteer medics from the US sheltered in a makeshift hospital and did their best to treat anyone who came through their doors.

Jannie Schipper, on 13 April, reported how not everyone in the emergency room agreed with the policy.

"He is 100 percent IS," a translator claimed, as an 18-year-old was dragged in with terrible injuries. "He killed many people himself. He had already been judged and condemned to death."

The medics continued their work.

'We treat people, we don't judge them': US medics care for all in Mosul

#IraqatWar

American volunteers save the lives of anyone brought to their trauma clinic in west Mosul, be they civilian, soldier - or IS suspects



Hamid is treated by American medics in Mosul (MEE/Marielle van Uiter)

Despite the ongoing destruction and death, resolute Mosul residents began picking up the pieces of their pre-Islamic State lives.

An 18 April report by Sam Kimball showed how the [Shabak minority](#) returned to what was left in their homes to begin again.

In May, Quentin Muller reported how music, banned by Islamic State, once again filled the streets of the city, while Laurene Daycard met a Mosul woman who had run an “illegal” beauty salon during IS occupation, paying militants off before her husband was finally arrested and beaten.

She was now free to run her business and customers were slowly starting to return. “But they are still afraid that IS may come back. I am still afraid,” she said.

I ran an illegal beauty salon: The secret lives of women under Islamic State

#IraqatWar

Mosul became a full-scale experiment in IS ideology - and women were among some of those worst affected



Hairdresser Anwar in her beauty salon in the eastern neighbourhood of Mosul (Sebastian Castelier/MEE)

By July, the fighting had all but ended, but not without terrible losses in the Iraqi army and further destruction of the city.

The Nouri mosque, the 800-year-old monument where IS leader Baghdadi had declared his so-called caliphate, lay in ruins, destroyed by retreating IS as a last insult to the city and Iraq.

As the historic Old City was bombarded with air strikes, the civilian population of western Mosul either covered in their basements or had fled for refugee camps outside the city.

Rumours had surfaced of blanket shoot-to-kill tactics of Iraqi soldiers exhausted by months of street-to-street fighting and still facing fanatical suicide attackers, and allegations of cruelty to civilians from both sides.

After the Old City was declared liberated, a special MEE correspondent gained access to what was left. On 26 July their report laid bare in terrible detail a graveyard of human remains, filth and rubble where exhausted soldiers relayed stories of the last unforgiving days of fighting, as bulldozers made short work of covering over what many have described as war crimes.

The Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, promised to investigate the reports. The results of that investigation are pending.

Mosul's bloodbath: 'We killed everyone - IS, men, women, children'

#IraqatWar

Iraqi soldiers receive brutal, final order in last days of battle with IS: kill anything that moves. The results can be found crushed into the rubble



An Iraqi soldier walks through the ruins of Mosul (Reuters)

By August, two weeks after the horror of the Old City was laid bare, Mosul was still picking through the rubble for those who had not survived.

Tom Westcott gained access to the aftermath, and followed a family to their crumpled former home as they looked for the remains of their relatives. "My whole family was here when the air strikes hit and only five of us got out alive," Omar Zwar, 25, told Middle East Eye. "It killed eight of my family. Most of them were under the rubble, and I tried to cover the other bodies as best as I could with stones before we fled."

Bringing out the dead: The grim aftermath of the battle for Mosul

#IraqatWar

Omar escaped an air strike that killed eight of his family. Now he has gone home for a horrific task: retrieving their bodies



Despite the dust and smell, volunteers discard their gas masks due to the heat (Tom Westcott/MEE)

In other areas of west Mosul, spared the carnage of Islamic State's last stand, life began to normalise. In one district, a young local entrepreneur saw his opportunity to bring back all that had been banned by the group – playing cards, dominoes, mobile phone accessories. But the shopkeeper had one stand-out line for sale: shisha pipes and tobacco.

For Mosulis who had endured three years of occupation and months of bitter fighting, once-forbidden pleasures gave some comfort.

Westcott met 16-year-old Abdel Halek in his tiny shop in al-Jadida.

Forbidden pleasures: Inside the Mosul shop selling everything IS banned

#IraqatWar

Islamic State banned dominoes, playing cards, shisha pipes and even prayer beads. Mosul's shops now give the people what they want



Abdel Halek's little shop in al-Jadida, which sells everything IS banned (MEE/Tom Westcott)

With fighting ended and Iraqi soldiers mopping up IS resistance elsewhere, the focus fell once again in October on the actions of coalition aircraft in the battle for Mosul.

An analysis of Britain's role in the campaign against Islamic State by Jamie Merrill discovered the RAF had dropped 3,400 bombs on targets in Syria and Iraq, the vast majority falling around Mosul.

Civilians were being ruthlessly exploited by IS, which had moved them into conflict zones, used them as human shields, and prevented escape.

The British government maintained that there was "no evidence" their bombs had killed a single civilian.

EXCLUSIVE: Britain drops 3,400 bombs in Syria and Iraq - and says no civilians killed

#IslamicState

MEE analysis reveals extent of RAF attacks on IS, while British government maintains there is 'no evidence' a single civilian has died



Iraqis flee coalition air strike in Mosul last November (Reuters)

As the dust settled on Mosul, one man above all was lauded as its saviour – Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Abadi had been sworn in only weeks after IS had taken the city, to wide expectation of failure. He now stands as the strong leader Iraqis needed, defeating not only IS but also an attempted breakaway by the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan in September.

But, as Suadad al-Sahly reported in November, the recapture of Mosul was only one problem solved, and Iraq faces many more in the coming years.

Haider al-Abadi, the 'weak and sluggish' man who rose to tower over Iraq

#IraqatWar

Iraq's PM took over a country in tatters. Three years later IS is defeated, and Kurdish separatism has faded. But his challenges are far from over



Abadi in Tikrit after Iraq security forces regained control from Islamist State militants in 2015 (Reuters)

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