

The Liberation of the Historic Iraqi City of Tal Afar, Occupied by the Islamic State Group

The first images of the liberated Iraqi city of Tal Afar have been heartbreaking, showing the partial destruction of its magnificent citadel, writes Nermeen Al-Mufti in Tal Afar

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The citadel of the Iraqi city of Tal Afar (Talafer) dating back to the Assyrian period of 700 BCE dominated the city and could be seen from every side, yet this historical structure was destroyed by the Islamic State (IS) group that occupied the city in January 2015.

Tal Afar is located in the Nineveh governorate in the north of Iraq near the Syrian and Turkish borders 63 km west of Mosul and about 360 km north-west of the capital Baghdad. Its population before the IS occupation was almost 450,000, more than 90 per cent of them Turkmen.

When it was taken over by IS in June 2014, about 70 per cent of the population was internally displaced, being forced into camps in different cities in Iraq. Some of the city's population went to Sinjar, 50 km east of Tal Afar, but in August 2014 Sinjar was also attacked by IS, forcing many to begin another painful journey.

More than 500 Turkmen women and children were kidnapped and hundreds were killed by IS. Many others died, among them children, during the long trek to the camps.

On 20 August, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi announced the beginning of the battle for Tal Afar in a televised statement, warning the IS fighters occupying the city that "we are coming to Tal Afar" – the name of the military operation – and that "either you surrender, or you die."

The Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), Special Operations Forces (ISOF), Federal Police and Hashd (Popular Mobilisation Forces) all took part in the battle for Tal Afar, the Hashd forces being supported by Division 16 of the Turkmen Forces, the Iraqi Air Force and Coalition warplanes.

During the days before Al-Abadi's announcement, thousands of leaflets were dropped on the city asking people to prepare for the battle, and safe passage was guaranteed to civilians wanting to leave. Some 32,000 civilians were still in the city before the fighting began, including some 2,000 IS fighters and their families.

Many analysts said that the military operations would likely last for months and could be as hard as those in the nearby city of Mosul that had also been occupied by IS. The surrounding landscape would make taking the city more difficult, it was said, and IS had announced that

Tal Afar was its temporary capital after the loss of Mosul.

However, on 21 August, Abdel-Amir Yarallah, commander of the Tal Afar operation, said the CTS had seized five villages south-west of the city and had cut roads leading into it. Federal Police and Hashd forces deployed in the village of Tal Al-Housan advanced 19 km west of Tal Afar, where hundreds of militants were killed and tunnels and ammunition discovered.

Abu Ridha, the commander of the Turkmen forces, announced that car bombs had been used by IS forces.

On the third day of the battle, the different Iraqi forces were edging their way towards the Tal Afar Citadel. High-ranking officers announced that IS had lost control of its fighters, and that hundreds had been killed with others fleeing the scene of battle.

On 25 August, the Iraqi flag was raised over the citadel, and on 27 August Tal Afar was declared liberated. The forces then began to make their way to the Al-Eyadhiya township 11 km north-west of Tal Afar, and on 31 August Al-Abadi announced the liberation of the whole of the Nineveh governorate.

Spokesman of the Turkmen Forces Ali Al-Hussaini told Al-Ahram Weekly that Tal Afar and the townships related to it had been liberated rapidly because of the siege of the city, cutting support and provisions for the IS forces. The siege had begun during the Mosul operations, he added, and civilians had begun leaving the area with guaranteed safe passage, meaning that the Iraqi forces had been able to use heavy artillery and air strikes.

According to Yarallah, the Iraqi forces killed about 2,000 militants and more than 50 suicide bombers during the campaign, while destroying 77 car bombs, 71 bobby-trapped buildings and 990 roadside bombs. He said that 115 Iraqi soldiers had been killed and 679 wounded in the battle.

Spokesman for the local Turkmen Rescue Foundation Mahdi Sadoun said in a statement that the historic name of Tal Afar would not be changed to Tal Al-Dhafar (hill of victory) as some had demanded. There are many explanations behind the city's historic name, among them its literal meaning of "hill of soil" because of the citadel's dusty colour.

Tal Afar is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world with a history going back 6,000 years. Its character was changed in the last century because of the demographic and Arabisation policies of the former Saddam Hussein regime.

Tal Afar has been the birthplace of many brilliant army officers, among them Said Hammou, assistant Iraqi chief of staff in the 1970s, and it has given the Turkmens many poets and artists, among them poet Felak Oglu and musician Yassin Yahya Oglu.

Images of the destroyed citadel of the city were devastating for all who saw them, and the people of Tal Afar also had other reasons to mourn. Ali Hassan, a policeman who participated in the battle for the city, stopped silently in front of his demolished house and told the Weekly that

"I have not been able to cry even though all my memories of my wife and three children are related to the house."

Hassan found the main door still standing, but when he opened it he found the interior of the house had been demolished.

“I dreamed that my beloved wife would open the door,” he added, saying that his whole family was now living in the southern Iraqi city of Kerbala.

He said that the people of Tal Afar would come back to rebuild their city and with it their community. Meanwhile, there has been destruction and massive graves have been found of civilians executed by IS.

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