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## **IRAQ IS PREPARING TO TAKE TAL AFAR, HERE'S WHY IT MATTERS**

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16.08.2017

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Jerusalem Post, 16 August 2017

On Tuesday morning, the Iraqi Air Force began bombing the city of Tal Afar in north Iraq.

The city once held around 200,000 residents and is strategically located on the road from Mosul to Sinjar and the Syrian border. The battle for Tal Afar will deprive Islamic State of one of its last major strongholds and is symbolically important for Iraq.

Tal Afar was one of the first major cities in Iraq to fall to ISIS in 2014. It was also where ISIS laid the groundwork for its campaigns of genocide and ethnic-cleansing against minorities. According to a study by REACH Initiative, an organization that collects information for aid coordination, around 500,000 people fled the areas in and around Tal Afar in the first two weeks of June 2014. Some of those who fled were Shia Turkmen and Shia Shabak, two ethnic minorities in Iraq whom the Sunni jihadists targeted for extermination.

According to Human Rights Watch, ISIS also blew up four Shia shrines in late June 2014 after massacring thousands at other locations in Iraq.

Tal Afar was a breeding ground for jihadists as well as a microcosm of Iraq's problems after 2003. It was the site of a famous profile in The New Yorker in 2006 called The lessons of Tal Afar, which examined then-Col. H.R. McMaster's role in pacifying Tal Afar when he commanded the US Army's 3rd Armored Cavalry regiment there in 2005. The real lesson is that the victory of 2005-2006 didn't work.

Less than 10 years later it fell to ISIS easily. Tal Afar was a conduit for jihadists from Syria because it lies on a strategic road.

In 2016 the Iraqi Army set its sights on cutting the road and surrounding Tal Afar so ISIS could not escape from Mosul. On November 23, 2016, the Shia militias known as Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Unit) made a 40-km. dash across the desert west of Mosul and linked up with Kurdish Peshmerga forces near Tal Afar. Since then many senior PMU leaders such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Hadi al-Amri have reconnoitered the outskirts of the city in preparation for the battle. There are concerns that the Shia militias will take revenge and last year Turkey warned about the use of Shia militias in the operation. It was a very sensitive issue, the president's office said last October.

The Turkish narrative was clear from a headline in the Daily Sabah on Sunday. The United States is fully behind the Iranian-backed Shiite paramilitary group Hashd al-Shaabi in its quest to take full control of the Turkmen-populated Iraqi town of Tal Afar in defiance of staunch opposition by the

Turkish government.

This creates a combustible situation on the ground. North of Tal Afar are Kurdish Peshmerga positions.

Beyond them is the Turkish border, about 45 km. away. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has stood by his decision to include the PMU in the battle, as recently as a July 29 statement. From Baghdads point of view the PMU is an official paramilitary force, not a militia.

The US-led coalition will also support Iraqs operations in Tal Afar.

On Monday the US announced the death of two soldiers from a field artillery regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, killed in a mishap while firing on ISIS positions. It did not provide details or whether the accident was related to firing on positions in Tal Afar.

For Yazidis there is still hope that hundreds of loved ones sold into slavery by ISIS in 2014 will be found in Tal Afar. Estimates range from several hundred to a thousand.

There are thought to be several thousand ISIS fighters in Tal Afar, which will make the city a tough battle, similar to the difficulties encountered in Raqqa in Syria, which is about the same size as Tal Afar and has seen months of heavy fighting already.

When the ground combat truly begins in Raqqa, it will be watched closely by Turkey. There is a chance that civilians will flee, especially as they fear that the Shia militias will be looking for perpetrators of the 2014 massacres and ethnic-cleansing.

Although there are many Shia members from Tal Afar among the Iraqi forces, including in former police units and the 92nd Brigade, it is not clear if they will participate in the operation.

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Kaynak/Source: