

Shiite Militias Are Crashing the Mosul Offensive

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Articles & Testimony

Pro-Iranian brigades are looking to settle old grudges in a notorious town near the Islamic State's Iraqi stronghold.

One of the mysteries about the ongoing offensive in Mosul, where Iraqi security forces are now pressing into the northern, eastern, and southern edges of the city, has been the apparent decision to leave unattended the desert between the battlefield and Syria. Unless this was a baffling oversight, the 20-mile-wide corridor of desert seemed intended to give Islamic State fighters an escape route to the group's strongholds in Syria, perhaps to limit the destruction in Mosul.

All that changed when the Shiite militias fighting under the umbrella of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) [opened a new front \(http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/shia-militias-open-front-battle-mosul-161029083620389.html\)](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/shia-militias-open-front-battle-mosul-161029083620389.html) in the desert to close the gap. They have already reached the outskirts of Tal Afar, a Turkmen-majority city 35 miles west of Mosul.

Shiite PMF units were explicitly excluded from the liberation of Mosul itself in an effort to reassure the city's predominately Sunni population. But Shiite militias' side mission in Tal Afar should hardly be a surprise. The city is closely associated with the rise of the Islamic State and its forerunner, al Qaeda in Iraq, and has become infamous as a nest of Sunni terrorists. In 2014, the city's Shiite residents were expelled during the Islamic State takeover of northern Iraq.

Now the Shiite fighters want to take Tal Afar back -- and, some suspect, to exact revenge. In April, Hadi al-Amiri, the

head of the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, began staking out the movement's claim to dispense justice on the city. At the time, he told one of us: "Only the Popular Mobilization Forces can go to Tal Afar."

TAL AFAR'S DARK HISTORY

Since 2003, Tal Afar has played an outsized role in Iraq's violent politics. The city, which is just six square miles across, grew up around a 100-foot-high citadel. Its pre-2003 population of around 200,000 was mostly ethnically Turkmen and approximately [three-quarters Sunni \(http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/\)](http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/) and one-quarter Shiite. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein rewarded loyal Turkmen officers with property grants in the town's newer northern districts, including Saad, Bouri, and Qadisiyah.

After Saddam's fall, these policies left a [legacy of division \(http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/patriquin.pdf\)](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/patriquin.pdf) between the mostly Sunni, ex-Baathist residents of northern Tal Afar and the town's less-developed, poorer, and primarily Shiite southern areas. Shiite militias like the Badr Organization used their newfound power after 2003 to control the police force and local government in Tal Afar, placing the majority Sunni city under control of the Shiite minority and driving local people into the arms of Sunni terrorist groups. The area thus became a [powerful beacon for recruitment \(http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/10/the-lesson-of-tal-afar\)](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/10/the-lesson-of-tal-afar) for al Qaeda in Iraq and a safe haven for terrorists just an hour's drive outside Mosul.

Even as Mosul was falling to the Islamic State in June 2014, a new chapter of sectarian strife was being written in Tal Afar. The Sunni neighborhoods of Saad and Qadisiyah rose up against the Iraqi Army, and within days of seizing the town on June 16, Islamic State fighters [destroyed \(https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/27/iraq-isis-kidnaps-shia-turkmen-destroys-shrines\)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/27/iraq-isis-kidnaps-shia-turkmen-destroys-shrines) seven Shiite mosques and executed 40 men. In the nearby Turkmen villages of Guba and Shireekhan, the Islamic State ordered 950 families to leave, ransacked Shiite homes, burned agricultural land, and dynamited three Shiite places of worship. Displaced residents noted that local boys and men in black masks [helped the Islamic State \(http://minorityrights.org/minorities/turkomans/\)](http://minorityrights.org/minorities/turkomans/) identify Shiite families and property. By June 20, nearly all of Tal Afar's Shiite population had been killed or fled after door-to-door searches for Shiite residents.

RETURN OF THE SHIITE AFARIS

The Shiite exodus from Tal Afar has transformed the liberation of the town into a profoundly personal battle for thousands of Iraqis. During June 2014, most of Tal Afar's Shiite residents fled west into nearby Sinjar, then under the control of the Kurdish Peshmerga -- only to be displaced again when the Islamic State overran the Kurdish front lines in Sinjar in early August 2014. The Shiite Turkmen were then either flown from the Kurdistan region to Baghdad or were bused south, [finding refuge \(http://www.reach-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/REACH_IRQ_InternalDisplacement_Briefing_August2014_ShiaMinorities.pdf\)](http://www.reach-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/REACH_IRQ_InternalDisplacement_Briefing_August2014_ShiaMinorities.pdf) in camps near the southern Iraqi shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf. By the end of 2015, 1,250 Turkmen families (approximately 7,500 people) had [found refuge \(http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/\)](http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/) in Karbala's Imam Ali shrine itself.

Many of the Shiite men purged from Tal Afar have found their way back into the liberation struggle. Nearly 12,000 Turkmen from all over northern Iraq [have joined \(http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/\)](http://www.epic-usa.org/fractured-peace/) the PMF since 2014, many signing up with the militias that receive funding and weapons from Tehran, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah. A large group of Shiite Turkmen from Tal Afar joined the new 92nd brigade of the Iraqi Army, which was recruited directly from former Tal Afar residents living in the southern refugee camps. For Tal Afar emigres, and the broader Badr Organization and PMF that they are often a part of, the desire to wipe out the Islamic State presence in the city is intense -- and sometimes entirely unrestrained. In October 2014 in Jurf al-Sakhar, a

town just south of Baghdad, Shiite militias addressed the persistent problem of the Islamic State by **entirely depopulating** (<http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2015/01/the-clearing-of-iraqs-jurf-al-sakhr.html>) the area.

Whatever their motivations or intentions, these are the people who could soon be in a position to determine Tal Afar's fate. On Oct. 24, Asaib Ahl al-Haq spokesman Jawad al-Tleibawi **announced** (<http://www.alalam.ir/news/1876952>) the PMF's intention to liberate Tal Afar. The operation started on Oct. 29, and in the first week, the Shiite units reached the Tal Afar air base just six miles from the town.

The PMF's exact route is significant, as it is aimed directly at the belt of notorious desert villages that provided al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State with safe houses for suicide bombers and weapons since 2003. The PMF has already **captured** (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-iran-idUSKBN12U0UI>) several desert towns infamous for facilitating the entry of suicide bombers from Syria to Mosul. The Shiite coalition is now fighting for a swath of villages that will send a shiver down the spine of any U.S. soldier who served in Nineveh province in years past -- Tal Zalata, Sahaji, Muhallabiyah, and Tal Abta, the latter including the Islamic State's **mass shooting and body-dumping site** (<http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/3619/>) in the valley of Khafsa.

THE FATE OF TAL AFAR

Neither Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government nor the Iraqi Kurds nor the U.S.-led international coalition is happy that the PMF has struck out toward Tal Afar. Though they are all too overstretched to do much about it, they are concerned that the presence and actions of Shiite PMF near Mosul could sour their plans to pacify the city after its liberation.

On Oct. 30, Amiri, the Badr Organization leader, attempted to assuage such concerns by **declaring** (<http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-idINKBN12U0J5>) that the city of Tal Afar would not be immediately assaulted. Instead, he portrayed the military operation there as an exercise to finish the encirclement of Mosul from the west.

Based on our conversations with Mosul residents over the last decade, the Moslawis have no special warmth or pan-Sunni sympathy for Tal Afar. In fact, Mosul has **suffered many depredations** (<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/al-qaeda-in-iraq-announces-the-harvests-in-al-mosul-and-south-baghdad-and-claims-responsibility-of-attacks-targeting-iraqi-national-guards-in-tal-afar-and-iraqi-police-station-in-al.html>) from Tal Afar-based terrorists. Nevertheless, Moslawis would be deeply unsettled if the PMF were to wreak vengeance on next-door Tal Afar and drive out its Sunni population.

Tensions between Turkey and the PMF also risk breaking into open conflict in Tal Afar. Ankara **did nothing** (<http://www.turkomania.org/en/iraqi-turkmens-call-for-help/>) whatsoever to help Tal Afar's ethnic Turkmens during their exodus in 2014, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has belatedly discovered an urgent interest in the area now that Iranian-backed Shiite militias are streaming toward the city. In the midst of a speech downplaying the risk of a Turkish military intervention in Iraq, Erdogan **added** (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tal-afar-a-sensitive-target-amid-reports-of-shiite-offensive-erdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=105525&NewsCatID=352>): "If [the PMF] terrorizes Tal Afar, our response would be different."

Turkey may simply be protecting a **strategic zone** (<https://postwarwatch.com/2016/10/10/proxy-war-in-post-isil-iraq/>) in the tri-border area where Turkey, Syria, and Iraqi Kurdistan meet, or it may harbor broader fears about a **Shiite-controlled corridor** (<http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-conveys-reservations-over-mosul-operation-to-us-/658979>) between Iran and Syria. Whichever is the case, Erdogan **announced** (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tal-afar-a-sensitive-target-amid-reports-of-shiite-offensive-erdogan.aspx?PageID=238&NID=105525&NewsCatID=352>) on Oct. 29 that he would reinforce the Turkish military presence in the Turkish town of Silopi, near the tri-border area, in anticipation of future developments.

The actions of the PMF will now speak for themselves. PMF leaders like Amiri have plenty of incentive to hold the group to military discipline, treat detainees and civilians with respect, and minimize destruction and displacement. If Amiri hopes to pursue mainstream political ambitions, including in Iraq's national elections scheduled for 2018, it will be important that he now demonstrate his political, and not just military, skills.

One encouraging sign is that more moderate PMF and Shiite Turkmen elements are now heading to Tal Afar to balance out unsavory sectarian militias like Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Around 3,000 PMF fighters loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, paid for by the religious shrines and under the operational control of Iraq's Ministry of Defense, have joined the operation, and the 92nd brigade of the Iraqi Army is preparing to join the fight.

That could bring the operation back under the command and control of Iraq's national political and military system once again. But if the opposite scenario unfolds, with widespread extrajudicial killings and mass displacement of Tal Afar's Sunni population, the PMF will damage its own political future at the same time as it complicates the Mosul offensive and risks provoking an overreaction from the increasingly erratic Erdogan government. With Ankara's forces massing just over the border, it may ultimately be the thorny issue of Tal Afar -- not Mosul -- that decides whether this effort to evict the Islamic State from Nineveh succeeds or simply lays the seeds for an immediate conflict between the liberating factions.

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