

Civilians escaping Mosul

Bashiqa

8 July 2016.

Civilians have been escaping from Mosul through different means and via different corridors since ISIS took control of the city over two years ago. What start as routes of necessity or self-made passages often become established corridors from ISIS territory into the KRI or disputed territories through the development of coordination measures between the military (KSF or ISF) and accompanying security procedures. These passages, once established are highly indicative of what can be expected when military campaigns gain momentum and forward movement progresses.

Rise Foundation has been assessing numerous routes of passage at varying levels of establishment, speaking with families within, and those that have fled ISIS territory and liaising with security forces in an effort to understand where we can expect to see spikes in patterns of displacement once the Mosul campaign moves forwards.



Rise Foundation is shown civilian escape routes from ISIS territory in Bashiqa.

Prior to 2014, Bashiqa was a mixed town consisting of Yezidi, Shabak, Christian and Muslim inhabitants. Located approximately 18km North-East of Mosul, Bashiqa fell to ISIS in June 2014, at which point those that were able to, fled. The town is now empty of civilians and ISIS maintains a strong garrison force.

The Peshmerga hold a defensive frontline along the top of the high ground to the North-East that overlooks the entire Ninewa plains all the way to Mosul itself. Coalition airpower is highly active in the area and ISIS fighters have extremely limited movement capabilities as a result. The 19km of high ground frontline is made up of dozens of outposts and known collectively as the Bashiqa Front, commanded by General Bahram.

Being one of the closest points to Mosul and home to Peshmerga, PAK, Hashd Al-Watani, Turkish troops and Western Special Forces, civilians have been attempting to flee here since the arrival of ISIS. In recent months,

however, the number of civilians has been increasing exponentially and with the anticipation of a Mosul offensive, is like to continue to do so.

Over the past twenty day a reported 350 civilians have escaped from Mosul via the Bashiqa passage which involves a 10-20 km hike North-East of Mosul depending on the point of departure.



Mosul by night on from the Pehsemrga front line.

The process

Families attempting to escape ISIS territory call friends or relatives already in the KRI. These interlockers then make contact with the Peshemrga forces on the Bashiqa Front who advise that they are able or unable to receive a specific number of civilians at a given time. If approved, descriptions of the fleeing civilians are given and a reception force is prepared.

Civilians move in the cover of darkness from a secure area within ISIS territory to the foot of the hill, just below the Peshemrga frontline. Often exhausted or dehydrated, it was reported that olive groves are used as cover or as a resting area. Once in sight the Peshemrga halts their movements two hundred meters from their positions. Men are stripped down to expose any concealed weapons. One Peshemrga soldier advances and civilians are brought forward one at a time where they are searched. They are then brought back to the Peshemrga line.

On occasion, as on 05/07/16, extremely young and elderly are unable to make the climb unassisted so Peshemrga move down from the high ground and physical assist those that need help. Once behind Peshemrga lines, civilians are provided with simple food and water and those that require medical assistance are treated on site or taken to Bardarash hospital. They are then handed over to the Asayesh for further security screening then taken to an IDP camp.

The entire process is extremely risky given ISIS hostility to civilians fleeing and the abundance of IEDs, but when such access corridors become somewhat established, these factors are increasingly mitigated through ground knowledge, coordination and the support of the security forces.

Recommendations

The development of such access routes is an indicator of where and how future, greater numbers of civilians will move out of ISIS territory. The resident security forces are highly aware of this and expecting a dramatic increase in numbers but lack the capacity to properly care for those that make it through. At present, the Peshmerga, who are already hugely under resourced are providing immediate assistance in the form of food, water, medical support and transport. Through dialogue with civilians inside ISIS territory and with those that have escaped, we are aware of thousands of civilians just waiting for their opportunity to flee.

The following steps should be taken:

- Humanitarian agencies must begin closer coordination with the government and security forces in relation to specific access routes prior to larger scale civilian movements. This can be undertaken directly or through interlockers, but the goal must be to access information and coordinate possible support mechanisms.
- Treatment facilities and the provision of critical first line assistance should be provided separate to but in support of the efforts of the security forces. This is especially important given their current lack of capacity. It also allows for the support for basic protection standards to be met by protection through presence.
- More attention must be paid to strategic locations where we already see the existence of access corridors in order to understand the likelihood of future mass influxes and the effective positioning of humanitarian support.



Civilians fleeing Hajj Ali on the Makhmour Front.