

Tel Afar District Update, 27 August

Muhallabiya - Twaym - Majarin

The offensive in Tel Afar is coming to a close far faster than expected. The city and the majority of its surrounding villages have been retaken from IS. Accordingly, the southern muster point of Tel Majan has been closed by the ISF. Bwer and Tel Majan remain open until operations in Tel Afar's outlying villages are concluded. Most of the civilian population of the city fled prior to the operation. This was corroborated on 27 August during assessments Rise conducted in the villages of Twaym (36.364722, 42.693889) and Majarin (36.360763, 42.715916), south east of Tel Afar city. Both these villages have small stayee and returnee populations. Residents of Twaym claimed that IDPs from Tel Afar city passed through Twaym and often spent a night in the village before fleeing on towards the ISF frontline.

Rise also conducted a brief assessment of the town of Muhallabiyah (36.266585, 42.702902). The town is empty of civilians and is being occupied by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). The town suffered relatively light damage during the fighting though some structures have been destroyed and others have been burnt from the inside. It was reported by an ISF member that these houses were burnt by IS during their retreat from the area to create smoke cover. A local PMF militia, comprised of residents from the town, has also reportedly helped the ISF and PMF identify and search the houses that belonged to IS members. The town reportedly has some form of water project or pump but the ISF were unclear on its functionality as they stated their priority is clearing IEDs before considering the rehabilitation of services.



The route to Twaym via Musaid muster point. Rise can provide GPS route files for the journey.

Access

The most direct route to the villages of Twaym and Majarin from Mosul is via a road running south west from Bwer. Reportedly another NGO has used this route to provide aid to the villages (see below). However, both the NGO and ISF in Bwer claimed that the road was extremely dangerous due to IED contamination. The ISF blocked access via the route. Other roads in the area are being rapidly cleared by the ISF and the route may soon be accessible.

Therefore instead of accessing Twaym from the north west, Rise gained access after the assessment in Muhallabiyah from the south. Muhallabiyah is reached by driving directly west from Musaid. There is a junction at 36.276131, 42.735888 between Musaid and Muhallabiyah that turns north and leads directly to the villages. The main entrance of Twaym was still blocked by IED contamination, a side road was required to access the village properly.

Population

The village of Twaym currently has a population of between five and 16 families. Though an assessment was only possible in Twaym, it was reported that the population in Majarin is slightly larger, but the situation is likely similar. Estimates varied between the two locals and ISF officers spoken to. Many of the villages' residents fled in the months and weeks before the fighting. It was estimated that there had originally been 1500 families in the village. Several of these families had recently returned while others had not left during the fighting at all. Locals suggested other families would be likely to return soon but were unable to suggest how many or how rapidly this might be. The village has a Sheikh and locals have access to phones that they are using to communicate with families that have fled. Stayees have remained primarily due to their livestock and a desire to avoid camps, especially as there was limited fighting in the village and it has remained habitable.

Security

Twaym was liberated on 20 August, and both Twaym and Majarin remain highly contaminated with IEDs. After houses were emptied when residents fled, IS would commonly rig them with explosives. Accordingly, in some cases locals are able to advise the ISF on the location of IEDs, but often don't know. Despite the risks of residents returning to booby trapped houses, as was a major concern in Mosul, the ISF are not currently blocking returns. It is unclear which route returnees are taking and if they're using the more dangerous northern road. Contact details of the ISF officer in charge of the village's security can be provided by Rise bilaterally.

Screening

The ISF reported that screening of residents in the village had been done by the National Security Service (NSS) from their database. Any residents wishing to return must coordinate with ISF and provide evidence of prior screening.

Needs

Residents in the village have small amounts of stored food that are running low. They also have some livestock. They are using a borehole for drinking water, the water quality is poor and is likely causing health issues. The ISF have been able to provide limited amounts of food and water from their own supplies. Residents in the village are also suffering from a variety of common chronic illnesses and have no access to primary health care.

An NGO working in Bwer suggested that they had provided food and water to residents of the villages on 26 August. However, the staff were unclear where they had distributed the aid. Residents in the village claimed not to have received any NGO support as of yet.

There appeared to be limited damage to structures in the village. However, given reports of ISF detonating booby trapped houses in Mosul and damaging or destroying the houses, there is a speculative concern that such practices may be repeated in the villages.



A borehole in Twaym

Other Populations

The NGO also claimed that there was a nearby village called Al Khan and that 700 residents were living in tents and vehicles just outside of it due to ISF displacing them from the village as they occupied it. Again, it was not possible to identify the location of the village or confirm this. Another NGO identified a small stayee population near to Abu Maria on the Syria Road. The people had remained due to their livestock.

Whilst initial reports from outlying villages such as these had suggested that almost all were empty after their recapture, it is possible that other villages have small stayee populations or are already receiving returns.