

Tel Afar Update, 23 - 24 August

By the morning of the fifth day of military operations to retake Tel Afar and its surrounding villages, the number of civilians displaced by the fighting remains extremely low. On 23 and 24 August Rise conducted assessments of the Tel Afar muster points as well as the western most Tel Afar neighbourhood of Kifah Al Janubiya.

Currently fighting in Tel Afar has progressed faster than expected with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) attacking on three fronts. Islamic State (IS) has ceded many outlying villages and neighbourhoods of the city with little resistance. However, these villages remain contaminated with IEDs and mines. Medical teams have so far reported very few casualties from the city, and no civilians casualties as yet. It is very possible that civilians within IS territory are being killed or injured by the use of airstrikes and indirect fire, but are not able to make it out for medical care.

As well as other factors, the lack of displacement from Tel Afar has consequently limited information regarding the number and condition of the remaining civilian population inside Tel Afar. Accordingly, the number of civilians inside the city is currently unknown. There are various rumours that IS is withdrawing towards the high ground at the centre of the city where the streets are narrow and where they would have the greatest strategic advantage. Reportedly IS are bringing civilians with them as they withdraw from other neighbourhoods, but details on these movements are currently unknown. However if these reports are correct, then it is possible that the liberation of the city centre may suddenly greatly increase displacement numbers as well as civilian casualties. Other rumours have suggested that prior to the offensive a number of both national and international IS fighters, and their families, have been smuggled out of the city to the north.

It is still planned that all civilians displaced from Tel Afar city will be taken south to the Tel Majan muster point. Transport to the site will be coordinated between ISF at the site and the force responsible for retaking the sector people were displaced from. Accordingly, given the variety of forces fighting in Tel Afar, there may be discrepancies over how rapidly people are taken to the site. It is also currently expected that Tel Abta may be used as a transit site where IDPs are transferred to different buses, they would then be transported to Tel Majan and on to Badoush.

The remaining IS held villages to the east of the city are also likely to be empty of civilians, though the town of Muhallabiya to the south east is expected to contain a few dozen people. At time of writing on the morning of 25 August, clashes began in Muhallabiya.

Bwer (Al Zanazil) and Musaid muster points

On the morning of 23 August no IDPs were present at Bwer or were expected to arrive later that day. Final displacement numbers at the site for 23 and 24 August are unavailable at the time of writing. Access to retaken villages west of Bwer was blocked by the ISF due to ongoing military operations. Reportedly all the retaken villages west of the Bwer muster point are empty of civilians.

Rise then moved to the Musaid muster point. Again, there were no IDPs at the site. A PMF mawkib (mawkibs are an Islamic institution ran by volunteers that usually support worshippers on pilgrimages) has been established to help feed the ISF and IDPs at the site. Whilst Rise were present at the site, at approximately 14:00, the ISF officer in charge was told that approximately 2000 people had just been displaced from Tel Afar and were en route to Musaid. The story appeared to be corroborated by another NGO and an ISF source, though details varied on where the IDPs were coming from and when they were moving. Reportedly a shortage of buses at Tel Afar airport was delaying their transportation. However, another NGO that went to the airport to assess the situation did not see any IDPs and were told that none had been displaced.

At Musaid the IDPs were still expected by ISF but their arrival time was continually delayed until midnight when the ISF officers claimed that the IDPs were going to be brought in the morning, though they did not know where they were being kept overnight. There was still no clear news of the IDP arrivals on the morning of 24 August, so Rise continued to Tel Afar via Tel Abta.

Kifah Al Janubiya

Rise conducted a brief assessment in the neighbourhood of Kifah Al Janubiya (36.369658, 42.390012) on 24 August. It had previously been suggested that the 2000 IDPs had been displaced from this area during the prior day's fighting. However, international medics in the area had not seen the displacement and no ISF interviewed in the neighbourhood had encountered any civilians during the fighting. It is highly likely that 2000 IDPs were not displaced and that the confusion was due to various miscommunications. The neighbourhood of Kifah Al Janubiya itself appears to have suffered only light destruction, given the limited fighting to retake it.