

MUSINGS ON IRAQ

(Joel Wing –Ed.)

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Plight Of Civilians In The Battle For Mosul, Interview With Amnesty International's Donatella Rovera

As the battle for Mosul enters its sixth month there are growing concerns about the damage and casualties it is causing. The Jadida incident where a Coalition air strike was blamed for over two hundred civilian deaths highlighted the rising costs incurred from the fighting. To help describe the situation is Amnesty International's Donatella Rovera who has been interviewing people in Mosul and Ninewa during the campaign. She can be followed on Twitter [@DRovera](#).

1. I interviewed some reporters who were in east Mosul at the end of 2016 when the Iraqi forces first entered the city. They said that there were some buildings that had been destroyed, but most of the city seemed in tact. How does west Mosul compare to east Mosul in terms of damage from the fighting?

Destruction in East Mosul is indeed limited, certainly more limited than in West Mosul, though ongoing fighting does not for now permit a comprehensive assessment of the situation and damage in the west of the city.

2. From the start of the Mosul campaign in October 2016 the Islamic State has been using human shields, but how they have used these people seems to have changed. At first, the insurgents were just using civilians to cover their retreat, but now they are forcing people into houses they are using as fire positions. Is that an accurate assessment of IS's tactics? Have you interviewed any people that have been used by the Islamic State for this role, and what was their experience like?

The modus operandi of IS and its heinous crimes have long been known, so nothing surprises us from them. I have not personally met people who had been forced into houses or other locations by IS, but some residents have told me that IS did not permit them to leave their homes. In other cases by the time IS started to use their rooftops as sniping positions, the residents could not leave because of intensive fighting around, or because they did not know where to go. Others still did not leave because they thought that, in the circumstances, they would be safe if

they stayed in their homes. Some did leave their homes and went to shelter with relatives and neighbors

3. The Islamic State has been manipulating the population, but the Iraqi government also told the people of Mosul to stay in the city during the fighting. Do you think that was a wrong move?

Residents whose relatives were killed in their homes by coalition air strikes certainly think so, and many question – rightly - the decision to bomb and destroy whole houses with entire families inside instead of targeting individual IS operatives on the roofs. We have been seeing a much greater number of residents fleeing West Mosul than was the case in the east of the city, perhaps in part because residents have realized that heeding the government advice to remain in their homes is not necessarily the safest option.

4. Both the Iraqis and Coalition said they wanted to increase the use of airstrikes, mortars, and artillery to retake west Mosul. At the same time neither wants to harm civilians. Have they been able to balance out these two desires so far?

The military campaign to recapture West Mosul is still ongoing and the situation remains fluid – for example it seems that since reports surfaced of a large number of civilian casualties resulting from a coalition air strike on 17 March, there have been fewer air strikes. As for artillery and mortars, their margin of error and wide blast radius make them unsuitable for combat in densely populated residential area because of the risk for civilians. Though civilian casualties are an unfortunate part of urban warfare, the warring parties have obligations under international law to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians. Have all feasible precautions been taken so far? No. Can more be done to protect civilians? Yes, a lot more can and must be done.
