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From Raqqa To Marawi, Military Campaigns Against ISIS Take A Devastating Toll

Though ISIS continues to lose urban territory, airstrikes and fierce urban fighting have left cities of rubble.

By Nick Robins-Early
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After a four-month military offensive, U.S.-backed forces this week drove militants from the self-described Islamic State out of what was once their de facto capital of Raqqa, Syria. But the city Kurdish-led fighters entered bears hardly any resemblance to what extremists captured in 2014.

Years under ISIS rule and a destructive campaign to retake Raqqa has left the city in shambles. Hollowed out buildings loom over piles of rubble in the street, while ISIS has left behind booby traps and improvised explosive devices. Citizens have been without access to power, clean water and medical care for months.

The U.S.-led coalition has launched thousands of airstrikes on Raqqa since it came under ISIS control, and international monitors estimate the bombings have killed at least 1,000 civilians and destroyed key parts of the city's infrastructure. The aid group Save the Children estimates that 270,000 people have fled the city since April because of conflict there.

The destruction in Raqqa mirrors other urban areas that have recently been recaptured from ISIS. In Iraq, Syria and the Philippines, aerial bombing campaigns and harsh urban warfare have irreparably scarred cities this year and exposed the high humanitarian and military cost of such operations.

The level of damage left in the wake of these major anti-ISIS operations has necessitated rebuilding processes that could take years and cost billions. Media reports from inside Raqqa this week, for instance, have detailed near ubiquitous destruction and desolation, meaning that if those who fled the city return, they may find that their homes no longer exist.

Much of the destruction in urban areas witnessing anti-ISIS campaigns is attributable to airstrikes, which offer a key advantage for anti-ISIS forces on the ground and have become a favored means of rooting out the militants. But in response to the threat from the air, ISIS fighters have often dug into tunnels and entrenched themselves in dense urban areas — leading to protracted campaigns that demolish entire neighborhoods.

ISIS has also continuously launched attacks on cities after being driven out of them, especially as the group has shifted to become more of a traditional insurgency as it has increasingly lost urban territory in Iraq and Syria. Such ISIS counter-attacks are likely to make rebuilding and stabilizing cities even more difficult, as well as keeping the massive displaced populations from returning home.

The same week that Raqqa was retaken, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced that government forces had driven the ISIS-linked Maute group out of Marawi. But as in Raqqa, daily airstrikes and artillery shelling have ripped apart buildings and roads in the city. Bullet holes riddle the landscape, and martial law persists over Marawi and its surrounding region.

Philippine military officials told the country's media that the battle to take back the city was complicated by extremists taking hostages and looting homes for more supplies. They also found tunnels built to withstand the powerful airstrikes targeting the group.

The nearly five-month-long fight for Marawi, which was aided by U.S. and Australian aircraft, displaced 400,000 people from the area around the city. The Philippine military says that at least 824 militants have died in the fighting, as well as 60 government troops and dozens of civilians.
It will likely take years to rebuild Marawi, and the Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana claims that there is around $1.1 billon in damages as a result of the fighting.

The fight for Iraq's second-largest city of Mosul earlier this year saw <u>a similar pattern</u> of devastation, as Iraqi forces backed by U.S. air power recaptured the city in July.
Rights groups alleged that during the offensive to take back Mosul, U.S.-led coalition airstrikes began killing <u>an increasing number of civilians</u> as jets dropped larger bombs with less careful oversight. Basic city infrastructure like roads, bridges and power lines were all destroyed in the blasts and fighting.

Simply restoring Mosul back to a functioning metropolis with access to power and water is expected to take a year and cost $1 billion, <u>according to U.N estimates</u>. Long-term stability and rebuilding projects will cost even more.
Much like in Raqqa, when ISIS left Mosul it <u>rigged the city</u> with improvised explosive devices that could take as long as a decade to fully clear out.
Mosul also saw a mass exodus as a result of the fighting and ISIS occupation. Around 900,000 people were displaced from the city, a depletion of about half of the city's population.

Mosul and Marawi both face huge challenges in order to return to being functioning cities, and Raqqa has an even more convoluted and daunting path ahead. The conflict in Syria has divided the country along shifting battle lines, and there's no comprehensive coordinated international effort in place to secure Raqqa in the long term.

Efforts to immediately restore order to Raqqa are likely going to fall to the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, a U.S-backed coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters that were in charge of taking back the city from ISIS.

But there are questions over how the SDF will be able to maintain security, as well as what role local forces and councils will play in the city's future. Outstanding concerns include how the majority Sunni local populace will view the Kurdish-led forces. The influential Syrian activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently has already begun to portray these forces as new occupiers.