

'WE WILL NEVER LET ARABS CONTROL THESE AREAS AGAIN'

Kurdish forces may soon take Iraq's second city, Mosul, back from Isis. But many fear they may never give it back

KURDISH FORCES launched a barrage of Grad missiles against Islamic State (Isis) positions inside Mosul last week, for the first time since Isis overran Iraq's second-largest city in June last year, marking a dramatic shift in the Kurds' battle against the terrorist group.

The bombardment was preceded by a large-scale Kurdish operation against Isis in northern Iraq, which saw 5,000 Kurdish fighters, supported by US-led coalition airstrikes, sweep around Mosul to recapture an area larger than the size of Andorra, Liechtenstein and San Marino combined.

In the offensive, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters killed over 200 Isis militants, ousting the group from almost 300 square miles of territory, capturing a number of areas contested with Baghdad. As they advanced, encircling Mosul on three sides and cutting vital Isis supply lines to the nearby towns of Tal Afar and Sinjar, the Kurdish forces began a counter-offensive that analysts worry may be the start of a territory war between the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and Baghdad.

The Kurdish forces captured Makhmour, to the east of the city; the towns of Zimar and Wannah, and several Arab villages located in the Sinjar Mountains, west of Mosul; and the area around Mosul Dam, in what amounts to a Kurdish land-grab backed by Western airstrikes.

Iraqi Kurds believe that the recaptured territory around the city is rightfully theirs while the Iraqi government "fears that the Kurds will use territory as leverage during political negotiations", according to Ranj Alaaldin, a visiting scholar at Columbia University.

A senior Kurdish federal official, who declined to be named, said that Peshmerga forces would never hand back areas captured after Isis's march across northern Iraq, which brought the group to within miles of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. "All the current military operations that involve the Peshmerga are implemented in coordination with the international military coalition and the central government is aware of it, but, in the Kurdish areas, we will never ever let Arabs control them again," the official warned. "We are not ready to fight, terrify our fighters' souls to liberate these areas and hand them to a traitor who would sell it to the killers. We will not allow this scenario to take place again in these areas."

While the Kurds argue that they have taken control of this territory to defend against Isis, many Iraqis believe that the Kurds will never give up what they have captured because of their ambitions for an independent state.

Despite the death of 700 Peshmerga fighters in the conflict with Isis, Dr Nussaibah Younis, Iraq expert and senior research associate at the

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