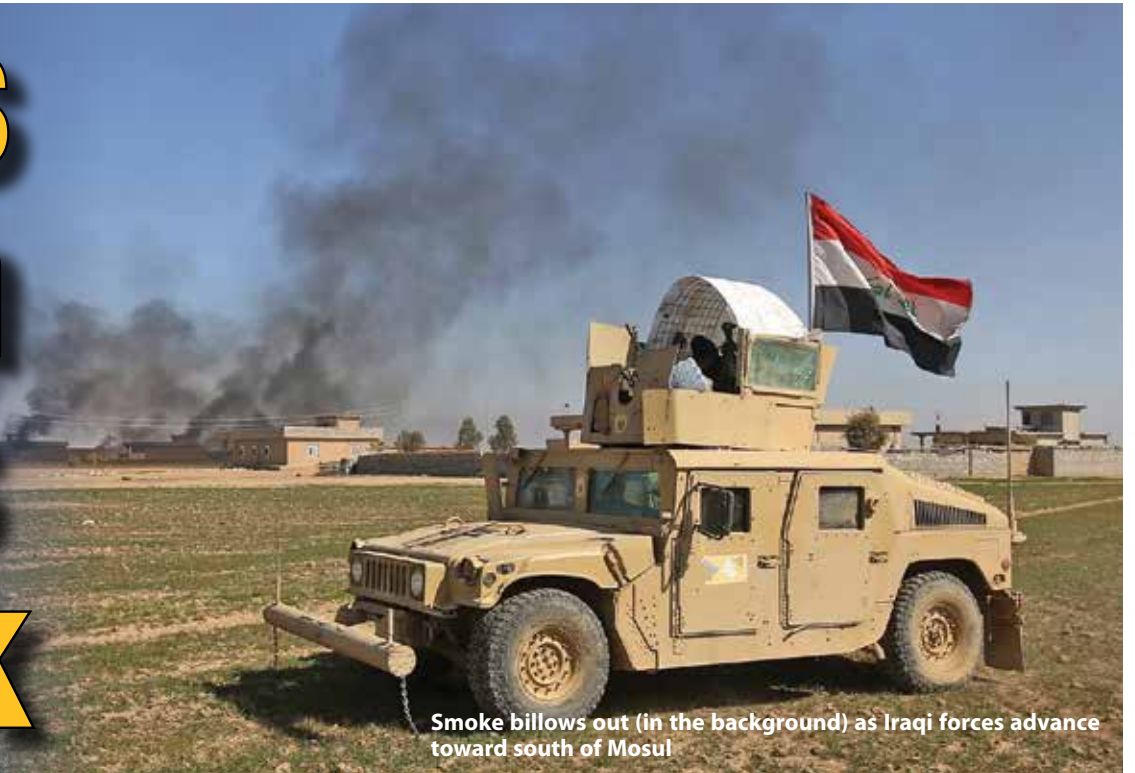


Iraq forces to take on Mosul's west bank



Smoke billows out (in the background) as Iraqi forces advance toward south of Mosul

Aqrab Checkpoint

Iraqi forces backed by jets and helicopters battled their way towards southern Mosul yesterday and prepared to take on the Islamic State group's stronghold in the city's west bank.

The fresh push in the four-month-old operation to retake Mosul has sparked fears for 650,000 trapped civilians who risk being killed if they try to flee and starvation if they stay.

Federal police forces reached the Aqrab checkpoint on the highway from Baghdad, a spot that marks the southern entrance to Mosul.

"Today we are standing in Aqrab. It is very important because it is considered to be Mosul's southern gate," said Lieutenant General Haider al-Mtoury, of the federal police.

He said his forces faced many IS car bombs and suicide bombers as they advanced to within barely two kilometres (just over a mile) of the city limits.

Iraqi forces also secured a strategic area known as the Al-Buseif hills near Mosul airport, which lies on the southern approach to the city.

The assault launched on Sunday marks a new phase in the broad operation that began on October 17 to retake Mosul, Iraq's second city and the jihadists' last major stronghold in the country.

Its recapture would deal a death blow to the "caliphate" IS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed in the city in June 2014 but has been shrinking steadily for two years as anti-IS forces advanced. - (AFP)

US-led coalition expects to stay in Iraq after Mosul

Baghdad

The commander of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group said yesterday he expected its forces would be allowed to stay in Iraq after Mosul is recaptured.

"I don't anticipate that we will be asked to leave by the government of Iraq immediately after Mosul," Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend said.

The US commander was speaking at a press conference in Baghdad wrapping up a brief visit by the new Pentagon chief, Jim Mattis.

"I think Iraq realises it's a very complex fight and they need the assistance of the coalition even beyond Mosul," said Townsend.

The coalition has more than 9,000 personnel in Iraq, more than half of them Americans. They are deployed in an advisory capacity but have sometimes been drawn into combat.

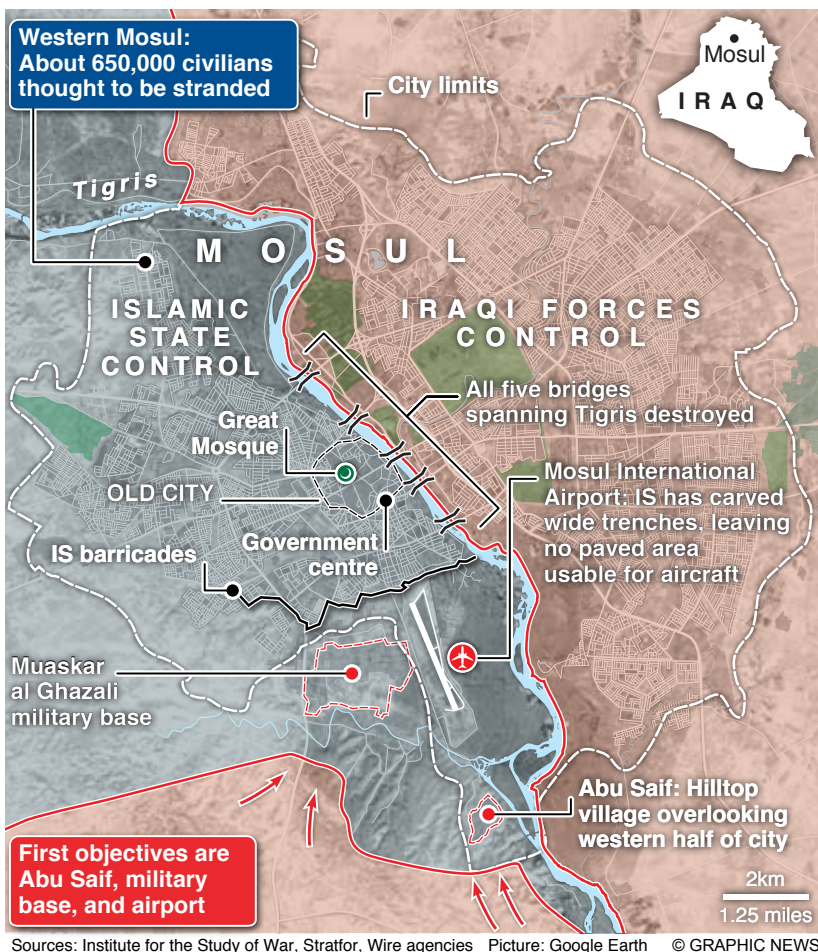
"This is a partnership," said Mattis, a retired Marine general who commanded troops during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"There's been a lot of rocky times out here but there is no

doubt from my discussions today the Iraqi people, the Iraqi military, the Iraqi political leadership recognise what they are up against and the value of the coalition," he said. - (AFP)



James Mattis (L) and Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend



Experts to preserve heritage sites

London

As Iraqi forces fight to take back Mosul from the Islamic State group, archaeologists trained by the British Museum are preparing for another battle -- trying to save what they can of the city's heritage.

One of the world's leading institutions for the study of ancient Iraq, the London museum has been training Iraqi experts for the past year in high-tech methods to preserve and document their history.

"Once the city is liberated, there will be an enormous plan of reconstruction of the Museum of Mosul," said Sebastien Rey, a

lead archaeologist from the Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme.

"One of the participants of our scheme will be the first archaeologist to enter the museum and do an



Archaeological site of Nimrud

assessment of the destruction inside."

The programme is designed to "get people ready for the day" archaeological sites are taken back from IS control, said its director, Jonathan Tubb.

"We wanted to do something positive and constructive in the face of the most appalling destruction that had been going on."

Islamist militants in Iraq, Syria and Mali have targeted priceless cultural heritage sites.

The Mosul area, home to several archaeological sites including the ancient cities of Nineveh and Nimrud, is of special importance.