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ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Battle for Mosul: What Happens Next?

Policy Analysis Unit | November 2016

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Introduction

The announcement of the launch of military operations to recapture the Iraqi city of Mosul came on October 17, 2015, only three weeks prior to the upcoming presidential elections in the United States. Clearly, the timing of the new offensive is meant not only to bolster Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's political power, at a time when his rule is heavily strained, but also to allow outgoing President Obama a chance to atone for the loss of Mosul under his watch. Washington's military preparations for this latest offensive began in July, with the deployment of more military advisors and equipment to help boost Iraqi central government forces, as well as the Kurdish Peshmerga militia¹. The military re-conquest of the city and the expulsion of ISIL forces, difficult as it would be, might not, however be the most complicated task ahead. The delicate ethnic and sectarian balances across Mosul, coupled with the fragility of the anti-ISIL coalition portend serious problems ahead.

Mosul may be a city which has historically been home to Sunni Muslim Arabs, but it also includes communities reflecting the wider ethnic and confessional diversity of the Nineveh Governorate in which it sits: large numbers of Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims and Turcoman groups all share the city. This makes it more complicated for the diverse group of actors who are part of the anti-ISIL coalition –consisting of Shia and Kurdish factions, as well as a smaller group of predominantly Sunni Muslim Arabs backed by Turkey – to carry out their task without causing friction between the various constituent communities of Mosul. The challenges entailed and the lack of a political roadmap for the period following the liberation of Mosul could hinder American strategy in Iraq and the wider region.

The Liberation of Mosul: Why Now?

Today, Mosul remains the largest city under ISIL control in Iraq, and the fifth largest overall (by area) of any city under control of the extremist group. The liberation of Mosul and the expulsion of ISIL fighters present in the city will cut the group off from other urban centers in Iraq. The battle is expected to be one of the most intense battles

¹ Warren Strobel, Yara Bayoumy and Jonathan Landay, "For US and Obama, Mosul campaign is calculated risk", *Reuters*, October 18, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-usa-idUSKCN12I0AO>

since the US invasion of 2003². Driving ISIL out of the town from which it first announced the Caliphate, and from which it fanned out across the Fertile Crescent, would also be a heavily symbolic blow to the group³.

The US also hopes that the defeat of ISIL in Mosul could be the prelude to the vanquishing of the group in Syria. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has called for an attack on the ISIL-held Syrian city of Raqqa—the group’s “capital city”—to coincide with the attack on Mosul⁴.

Finally, the Obama Administration hopes that a decisive victory in Mosul will serve to enhance the credibility of its military strategy based on the avoidance of direct confrontation and the strengthening of local allies, not just against ISIL but across the Middle East. That strategy had suffered a serious setback when tens of thousands of Iraqi forces, trained and equipped by American forces, disappeared from the battlefield in the face of an ISIL onslaught in June, 2014—thus giving the group control of Mosul in the first place, and putting it in a position to threaten Baghdad itself, precipitating direct American aerial involvement in August of the same year.

The US Role

The Pentagon continues to insist that its forces on the ground in Mosul are restricted to an advisory role, assisting Iraqi forces in and around the city but not directly engaged in combat. At the time of writing, the US Department of Defense reports 4,815 soldiers in the country, compared to a maximum of 5,262 set by the White House. Neither of these figures takes into account, however, an estimated 1,500 US soldiers who are in Iraq under the terms of “temporary duty” contracts⁵. Most of these troops are based in the

² Stephen Kalin and Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Mosul offensive going faster than planned, Iraqi PM says”, *Reuters*, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-idUSKCN12K0G6>

³ Nick Robins-Early, “Why the Massive US-Backed Mosul Offensive Matters”, *Huffington Post*, October 18, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mosul-offensive-iraq_us_5804d917e4b06e047595b9cb

⁴ Nadia Massih, “Let’s attack Raqqa and Mosul at same time, says US defence chief”, *The Telegraph*, October 23, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/23/us-defence-chief-calls-for-simultaneous-attack-to-retake-isils-d/>

⁵ Vivian Salama, “A look at US role against IS as Mosul offensive takes off”, *Associated Press*, October 19, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/46cce53bd80a43a6b09d512781aa36d0/look-us-role-against-mosul-offensive-takes>

Iraqi cities of Baghdad, Erbil, Taji and Habbaniya, with a few hundred stationed at the Qayyara Airfield to the south of Mosul, and the majority of these are engaged in providing training and other forms of support to both Iraqi military forces and the Peshmerga. In the Battle for Mosul itself, an estimated 100 US Special Forces personnel are working alongside Iraqi central government forces and the Peshmerga. Pentagon officials insist that they do not fight on the front lines, and that their contributions are mostly limited to aerial reconnaissance⁶.

American military experts continue to insist that the presence of US forces within Iraqi combat units is essential to the victory of the operation, given the contribution by American personnel in ensuring that aerial strikes are accurate and effective, in addition to their role assisting Baghdad's forces and the Peshmerga in de-mining efforts in the villages in the environs of Mosul⁷. On top of these auxiliary roles, however, American forces provide more essential support to the effort to regain Mosul, including:

- 1) Aerial support: United States aircraft have carried out more than 10,200 air strikes on ISIL targets in Iraq since August, 2014, thus deploying American advanced weapons arsenal which includes F-22 fighter planes and the strategic B-52 bomber as well as Apache helicopters and various missile-equipped drones in addition to reconnaissance aircraft.
- 2) Artillery and rockets: the United States has been able to make use of advanced Howitzer handheld missile launchers which can be used for nimble attacks on ISIL positions.

Fears of Ethnic and Sectarian Fighting

Among American officials, the current view is that the fundamental dilemma hanging over the operations in Mosul is rooted in the lack of a plan to deal with the aftermath of the battle, which itself is raising fears that the events of the 2003 US invasion will repeat themselves. Back then, the United States may have won a rapid military victory

⁶ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How US and Western troops will help in the battle for Mosul", *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/10/17/how-u-s-and-western-troops-will-help-in-the-battle-for-mosul/>

⁷ Spencer Ackerman, "Mosul offensive: officials confirm US troops are on the ground", *The Guardian*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/17/us-military-troops-on-ground-mosul-iraq-isis-obama>

but had underestimated the severity of the political and sectarian complexities which awaited them ahead. The decision by the Washington-installed Coalition Provisional Authority to disband the Iraqi army and other state institutions led to utter chaos.

American planners are aware that there is no clear plan in place for how to govern the ethnically and religiously diverse city of Mosul in the aftermath of an ISIL defeat. Nonetheless, they defend the decision to launch the present offensive on the city arguing that, since all of the military preparations for it are in place, any delay would have an adverse effect on the morale of the Baghdad military and the Kurdish Peshmerga. In other words, American military officials prefer to defer questions of how best to govern Mosul until the liberation of the city is complete⁸.

For other onlookers, however, the main worries are focused on the actions of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Militia (PMM), a group formed by a former Iraqi prime minister and which is associated with a number of sectarian crimes. The PMM stands accused of engaging in wide-scale ethnic cleansing in towns such as Diyala and Tikrit last year. Although Washington officials have strenuously asserted that their country extends support only to the official Iraqi Army and the Peshmerga, previous experience suggests that Iranian-backed armed groups pull the real strings. Assurances by the PMM and similar groups that they would not enter the city of Mosul cannot be taken at face value.

A separate fear is grounded in the territorial ambitions of the Kurdistan Regional Government, which could lead to an even wider conflict taking place in Iraq⁹. Here again, the Peshmerga have vowed not to enter residential quarters of the city, but that too cannot be accepted outright given the Kurdish-Arab dispute over the fate of Kirkuk, an ethnically divided enclave in northern Iraq. One eventuality sees the northern governorates of Iraq becoming the site of a proxy war between Turkey – which has already begun voicing its opposition to any demographic alteration to Mosul once ISIL is flushed out – and Iran, which is looking for an opportunity to spread its power across all of Iraq.

⁸ Strobel et al.

⁹ Tom Rogan, "Why the US Role in Mosul is Crucial", *The National Review*, October 19, 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/441196/retaking-mosul-us-role-crucial>

In an effort to minimize the possible sectarian clashes consequent to the defeat of ISIL, Washington has pressured the al-Abadi government in Baghdad to ensure that the front lines moving into Mosul are made up of Iraq's Anti-Terrorism Force (ATF). This American trained and equipped group, with its composition drawn from a variety of ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, is regarded by its handlers in Washington to be more professional and less sectarian than other units. Despite this perceived religious tolerance on the part of the ATF, its forces marched into the liberated Iraqi Christian town of Bartala with religious banners—and not the Iraqi flag—draped on their Humvees.

The US is today forced to consider a wide range of, as yet tentative, options to administer Mosul once ISIL is driven out. One suggestion being for the former Governor of the Nineveh Governorate, Noufal Al Akoub, to be reinstated, alongside deputies appointed by the Baghdad and the *de facto* Kurdish government in Erbil. A further proposal being touted is for the metropolitan district which comprises Mosul to be divided into 12 separate administrative districts each run by local mayors¹⁰. Finally, another proposal envisages the creation of a force of 45,000 police officers and tribal fighters to help maintain the peace of Mosul once ISIL is driven out.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the huge human toll and the cost of materiel, given the massive firepower amassed by ISIL, the outcome of the Battle for Mosul appears today to be a certainty. Victory for the anti-ISIL coalition, however, will not bring about the end of human suffering there. Just as the central government in Baghdad, supported by Iran, is looking to expand the reach of its sectarian policies to the city of Mosul, the KRG in Erbil is likely to want to grab as much of the territory Nineveh Governorate as possible before it can finally push towards outright independence. The combined result of all of this is that Sunni Muslim Arabs feel increasingly frustrated and marginalized by the political machinations in their own country. The vast majority of these Sunni Arabs, who were never ISIL supporters to start with and who were in fact its first victims, now feel the full weight of political oppression in their country. The Obama Administration is no stranger to this state of affairs. Cognizant of how Baghdad's sectarian policies helped create ISIL, the White House had insisted back in August of 2014 on the stepping down of Nouri Al Maliki—accused of the worst excesses of sectarianism—before it would

¹⁰ Strobel et al.

approve military aid to the Iraqi government. Today, however, the White House seems set on repeating the exact same mistake of the George W. Bush White House, marching blindfolded into an invasion without an exit strategy and a plan for the day after.