

# THE CHALLENGES OF THE BATTLE FOR MOSUL

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As the operation to re-take Mosul seems to be on the horizon, a detailed investigation of the dynamics on the field proves more important than ever. Even though there is a wide consensus on the necessity of the operation, the way it will be carried out might restrain the capability of the coalition. Therefore, this policy brief takes a closer look at the actors that would most possibly take part in the operation, difficulties stemming from the rifts between these parties, regional powers' position, and the US efforts. How, for instance the coalition would address the question of whether the Hashd would participate in the operation or how its conflict with the peshmerga and the Kurdish discontent with the central government would affect the coalition are some major concerns regarding the coalition itself. Turkey's position, due to Turkmen presence in Mosul as well as how successful the US would be in terms of encouraging its partners on the field and coordinating the operation are important questions to be addressed. All in all, in order the Battle for Mosul to be a success, a thorough effort to solve all possible points of tension beforehand seems to be the key.

**A**lthough the Iraqi forces, assisted by the US-led coalition in the war against ISIS are eventually likely to overwhelm Mosul, as they did in Ramadi and Fallujah, the battle for Mosul would need to address some insurmountable challenges. It appears that the lack of political cohesion and conflicting agendas among the forces which intend to recapture Mosul from the IS will be the main challenges in this battle. Moreover, the government forces has to dislodge 10,000 fierce and determined IS fighters from well-trenched positions in the midst of a city with at least one million residents who can be used as human shield by the ISIS. Regardless of how long it will take for the coalition and the Iraqi forces to expel the IS from Mosul and how it will be done, the post-Mosul battle Iraq will have to face a host of uncertainties which have not been addressed by

the government and US-led coalition so far.

On March, 24, the government in Baghdad announced the beginning of operations to retake the city of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, which has been under the ISIS control since mid-2014. The first phase demonstrated that Iraqi forces were still not up to the task. A force of about 5,000 quickly overran several villages. But within a few days, progress stalled and the attack proved to be faulty.

According to one line of thinking, the timing of the operation is about US political calculations. Mark Perry claimed that "the American public could be treated to a major U.S.-led military victory in Iraq this fall, just as voters are deciding who will be the nation's next president—but U.S. military officials insist the timing of the operation has nothing to do with politics."<sup>1</sup> It is

therefore speculated that the attack was postponed.

The Iraqi government and the US-led coalition expect to expel the ISIS from Mosul by the end of the year. It has the momentum on its side and the ISIS-held territories in Iraq have been reduced from around 40 percent to less than 10 percent. The Iraqi security forces (ISF) are becoming battle-hardened, they gradually gain confidence, and receive air support from the international coalition. Nonetheless, Abadi's fractious government has to battle the ISF's weak image and desperately needs a victory in Mosul.

The success in this battle depends on the extent and scope of the US role and the ability of the central government to enlist Kurds and Sunni Arabs to participate in this battle.

In contrast to its earlier isolationist and "no boot on the ground" policy in the

Middle East, Obama administration appears determined to free Iraq of ISIS, as its policy legacy. For this reason, Obama has recently started a proactive policy in Iraq to end ISIS terrorism there. During the last few months, there has been a heavy traffic of visits by the top US military and political officials to Iraq. The US government has suddenly decided to send 560 more American servicemen to Iraq, including commandos from ETF (elite Delta Force), more Apache Helicopters, and established a US base in Qayyara, 30 km. south of Mosul, to provide the needed firepower for the Iraqi forces which will attack Mosul.

Moreover, the US officials have been heavily involved in enlisting the support of Kurdish peshmarga forces for the battle. On July 12, the US signed a Military Understanding protocol with the KRG to

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ensure the Kurds' cooperation in the battle. Moreover in a manner very similar to the 2006 recruitment of Sunni Arab tribes in Anbar against Al-Qaeda, US military officers have initiated the channeling of funds to Sunni Arab tribal chieftains in and around Mosul. In a recent visit to Iraq, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, said "everyone knows the fight of Iraq is the fight for Mosul." Carter added that victory in Mosul will result in "the end game in Iraq."<sup>2</sup>

American military officials have drawn the plan for the battle. According to a senior U.S. Central

Command officer, the plan seeks to "isolate Mosul, cut it off, and kill it."<sup>3</sup> Mosul will be encircled in a complex pincer movement by the Iraqi forces fighting their way into the city from the southeast and the Kurdish units storming the city from the northwest.<sup>4</sup>

In order to fully besiege Mosul, Iraqi troops need to secure the Syrian border and seize other cities to which ISIS could retreat or from which ISIS could receive reinforcements. In June, an Iraqi operation, backed by American troops, to block the border from the Syrian side has



failed, and the ISIS militants are still in control of al-Qaim to the southeast, al-Baj and Tal Afar to the west, and Hawija the southeast. Securing these borders is still needed to complete the siege of Mosul. On the other hand, ISIS militants will do their best to blend into the people of Mosul in the civilian neighborhoods, in order to be safe from the airstrikes and hide from the eyes of the intelligence services.

Based on the prior experience of recapturing Tikrit and Ramadi, the liberation of Mosul is likely to see a prolonged urban campaign, characterized by protracted urban warfare with the use of IEDs and booby traps as well as the use of tunnels to strike unexpectedly at the rear of advancing Iraqi troops. The campaign will likely be long and difficult. Patrick Martin of the Institute for the Study of War claims that “IS knows that the fall of Mosul will signal,

in effect, its defeat in Iraq; so it is determined to delay that moment for as long as it can.”<sup>5</sup>

### **US Stance Regarding Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd)**

Although, the Shi’ite-dominated Baghdad army and Kurdish peshmerga, which will form the major ingredients of this battle, fear ISIS, they equally hate and distrust each other. This will make it extremely difficult to form a joint command. In addition, both pro-Iranian Hashd forces and the US want to exclude one other, and vowed to do their best in this regard. Abadi has been told in very unequivocal terms by both the American and the Sunni leaders in Mosul that Hashd militias who are not controlled by the central government are not welcome in Mosul and their inclusion will only help to prolong the war. In this context, it is very illustrative

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that a local leader from Mosul said “there are a lot of people who will fight hard to defend Mosul out of fear of coming once again under Shiite controlled state security apparatus, which had given them bitter experience during Maliki era.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the Shiite groups have already threatened to target American military officials in Iraq. For instance, Muqtada Sadr, a prominent Shiite cleric, stated that “Americans in Iraq will be our legitimate target.”<sup>7</sup> Hadi Amiri, head of the Shiite Badr Organization, told that they “are going to take part in the battle for Mosul and nobody can

prevent them from doing so.”<sup>8</sup>

Initially, Abadi has resisted to offer a prominent role for the Hashd, fearing rekindling sectarian violence that took place following the liberation of Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah. However, he came under enormous pressure from the Shiite clergy and pro-Iranian State of Law bloc. Thus, he stated that Hashd will have a role in “this national duty and nobody has a right to exclude them from the battle of Mosul.”<sup>9</sup>

Under the current conditions, it is plausible to argue that both Abadi and US will allow Hashd to play a

role in this battle due to this force's much needed experience. The past experiences in the Sunni areas fallen to Hashd show that Abadi and the Americans will prefer to overlook Hashd's violations of human rights. Mosul will be one more scene in which the undeclared *de facto* partnership between Iran and the US in the context of the war against ISIS will be played out.

### **Kurdish-Shiite Bickering**

As the battle for Mosul approaches, the tension between the KRG and Baghdad seems to be rising, too. The Kurds claim that they are being marginalized by Abadi government, whereas the latter argues that the KRG leaders, especially Masud Barzani, are trying to use the battle to grab more land in the disputed areas and they are making unreasonable demands.

Kurds claim that after the capture of Qayyara air base, Iraqi government feels that they do not need the KRG territories to wage war on Mosul. The central government excluded the KRG from a meeting of the anti-ISIS coalition in Washington. Then, on the first day of the coalition meeting in Washington, Iraqi Defense Minister Khalid Ubaidi told a group of journalists that they "will not even let Kurdish forces take part in the battle of Mosul."<sup>10</sup> In a controversial statement by Ali Bedeeri, a law-maker from Shiite National Alliance, argued that "If Kurdish peshmerga hinder our operations in Mosul, we will consider them as terrorist illegal groups and deal with them accordingly."<sup>11</sup>

The core issue of discontent in the conflict between the KRG and Baghdad is the price which the central government has to pay in return for Kurds' support in the

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battle. Barzani wants some assurances about the future of Mosul that in the post-ISIS era, the city would have an inclusive government. In this, he is being supported by Turkey and other Sunni countries, as well as Usama al-Nujaifi, the leader of Sunni al-Mutahidoun political group in Mosul. In addition, Barzani has suggested that central government agrees to allow the Christian, Yezi-di, Shabak, and Kakai religious minorities who live in Mosul plain adjacent to the KRG region to form a separate province of their own and join the KRG if they wish. KRG officials

consider the plain of Mosul a part of the disputed region to be incorporated into Kurdistan.<sup>12</sup> Such demands cause discontent on the part of the Iraqi officials.

At the same time, Iraqi officials were also angered when the KRG refused to follow the orders of the joint command, which was formed for the battle of Mosul. They asked Kurds to withdraw from the areas which Kurdish peshmerga occupied. Iraqi government totally rejected Kurdish demands and consider them expansionist and ask the KRG to withdraw from





13 sub districts of Mosul, which peshmerga already recaptured from the ISIS militants<sup>13</sup>.

Behind the scenes, the American officials, including Joseph Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have worked out a compromise between Barzani and the central government. This will include peshmarga's participation in the battle in a supportive capacity. On July 30, having met with the American Officials, Masoud Barzani stated that "liberating Mosul is impossible without peshmerga and they will take part in the operation but they won't enter the city of Mosul."<sup>14</sup> According to Jabbar Yawer, the Chief of Staff of the Kurdish forces, Kurds will participate with 50,000-strong peshmerga force into the Mosul operation.<sup>15</sup> This means the KRG will try to expand on the plain of Mosul, and it will seek to keep the plain under its control in

the post-ISIS era. It is also possible that the KRG forces may try to grab all parts of Mosul city on the east side of Tigris, based on a historical claim by some Kurds in this region.

### **Turkish Factor**

The central government's conflict with Barzani is partly due to the latter's close ties with Turkey. As a key regional power with predominantly Sunni Muslim population and with historic ties to Mosul province and its people, Turkey has many stakes in the Mosul battle. It is supporting the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces, which see themselves vital in any battle for the city. Turkey has also been training a Sunni militia composed of the people of Mosul, called as Hashd al-Watani, which is expected to help retake the city. Turkey's perspective on Mosul conflict was summarized by its consul general in Erbil, Mehmet Akif Inam:

Although, the Shi'ite-dominated Baghdad army and Kurdish peshmerga, which will form the major ingredients of this battle, fear ISIS, they equally hate and distrust each other.

“People of Mosul should take part in the operation not one certain ethnic or sect.” Inam added that “Mosul is very unique in Iraq, it is very diverse with ethnicities, sects and cultures. The locals should liberate Mosul, not outsiders”.<sup>16</sup> Recently, the Mosul provincial council made a decision that Hashd Al-Shaabi should not take part in the Mosul operation and Turkey seems to be supportive of that decision.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey maintains several hundred troops in Bashiqa, a small town to the south east of Mosul, to train the Sunni militia of Mosul and to prevent the PKK’s efforts to

build new bases in the territories, which will be retaken from the ISIS, as the PKK did in Sinjar.<sup>18</sup> The Turkish strategy also aims to confront the Iranian influence which might increase after the Iraqi forces eventually retake Mosul from the ISIS. Furthermore, in terms of demographics of Mosul province, at least more than 27 per cent is Turkmen. Therefore, Turkey regards itself bound to protect them during the conflict.

### **Post-Mosul Battle Iraq**

In the post-Mosul conflict, neither this province nor



Iraq is expected to enjoy peace and tranquility to the fullest extent in a short span of time. If the history is any guide, the central government will exclude a significant portion of the people of Mosul, except for some Shiite Turkmen who have joined Hashd and pro-Iranian parties, from taking an active role in terms of governing the province and decision-making processes related to it. In that context, the following quote by Jan Kubis, the U.N. special envoy to Iraq, is very relevant: “The people in the country must understand that something was wrong when Daesh (ISIS) was able to sweep through the country in almost no time and capture Mosul ...These are issues that must be addressed.”<sup>19</sup>

Gen. David H. Petraeus, the former top American commander in Iraq, has expressed a similar opinion. Referring to the deadly terrorist attacks carried out in

Baghdad and elsewhere, Petraeus claimed that “when ISIS’s army is defeated in Mosul and elsewhere in Iraq, there will still be ISIS terrorist cells that will attempt to continue to carry out the kind of terrorist attacks we have seen in Baghdad and elsewhere in recent months.”<sup>20</sup> Denise Natali draws an equally grim picture of the post-Mosul Iraq: “Given the significant political shifts underway, disabling IS and stabilizing the region will demand preparations for a post-ISIS Iraq that will regrettably be marked by sub-national battles over borders, territories and resources, with or without Baghdad.”<sup>21</sup>

To sum up, although there are numerous challenges regarding the battle of Mosul, many parties have a common interest to see the ISIS being expelled from Mosul. However, religious extremism in Iraq has found a fertile ground, to a

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considerable extent, which was largely a reaction to the US occupation and marginalization. Religious extremism in Iraq has expressed itself first in al-Qaeda, then in the ISIS, and it has the potential to manifest itself in the post-ISIS Iraq again in different and possibly even more deadly forms. The world needs to address the roots of the problem of

the fertile ground extremism find in Iraq. It needs to do so with a comprehensive and long-term solution instead of siding with the very forces which perpetuate oppression and marginalization in Iraq. The battle for Mosul will prove to be a major test of whether such a comprehensive and long-lasting approach can be adopted.

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