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IRAN'S INFLUENCE OVER IRAQ AND THE MOSUL OPERATION

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There are numerous indications that Iranian government is eager either to dictate the course of the military operations against ISIL in Mosul, or not allow al-Abadi government, the US-led coalition, and the Iraqi Kurds to have a clean and easy victory over the forces of the ISIL. In this piece, it is argued that Iran is trying to manipulate the Iraqi government to impose the particular exclusionist regime for the post-ISIL Mosul, which had in fact contributed to the rise of ISIL in the first place. In addition, it is argued that Iran is behind the on-going diplomatic row between Iraq and Turkey over the latter's participation in the military operations in Mosul.

According to a source close to the London-based al-Rawabit think-tank, on September 24, as a part of preparation for the Mosul operation, President Obama, who was then attending a UN General Assembly meeting in New York, met a high level Iraqi delegation led by Prime Minister al-Abadi. Obama agreed to give his full support to the operation provided that Iraqi government will exclude Shiite militias from participating in the battle, and the Iraqi Sunni Arabs in Mosul will not face the marginalization, which they experienced during the al-Maliki administration.¹ Once the Iranian policy-makers were informed about this meeting and

Obama's conditions, they began to play their cards against al-Abadi. Since then, al-Maliki has formed *Islah* (Reform) bloc to exert pressure on al-Abadi, Kurds, and Sunni Arabs. In addition, Iranian-backed militias have made numerous threats against US involvement in the Mosul operation. Qais Khazali, the leader of Asaeb Ahlul Haq and Muqtada Sadr, the head of Sarayah Selam militias, stated that US troops in Iraq are their legitimate targets.² Militia commanders, including Hadi al-Ameri, who is the leader of the powerful Badr group, issued many statements openly defying the views shared by al-Abadi and US on the anticipated participation of the Hashd al-Shaabi in Mosul operation.



Iran might well be planning to turn Iraq into a larger version of Lebanon. With its large petroleum and gas reserves and human resource, a friendly administration in Iraq could serve the Iranian ambitions in the region much more effectively than Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Al-Abadi has eventually surrendered to the Iranian pressures and, contrary to his deal with Obama, had to agree to allow thousands of Shiite militias to participate in the operation. Six-thousand-strong militia have already taken positions near-Hawijah town, to the west of Kirkuk,³ and another several thousands of them are stationed to the west of Mosul to prevent the escape of ISIL from Mosul to Syria.⁴ Moreover, these militias in the west of Mosul are also widely regarded to be an important part of the Iranian plan to have a land access to Syria. These forces are also argued to be used in a future plan in collaboration with the militias of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against Masud Barzani's forces in Sinjar.⁵ At the same time, several thousands

of Hashd al-Shaabi militia forces are gathering near the town of Talafar which has currently 20,000, mostly Sunni Turkmen, inhabitants. Political observers warn about an impending massacre there, if the military operation is not handled carefully. The Shiite inhabitants of Talafar have been forced by ISIL to leave the town. During the last two years, they have been mostly recruited by Iraqi Shiite militias, and they are waiting for the orders to march on the town, which may evolve into revenge acts against the civilian population.⁶ Turkey views this development with utmost concern. Turkish president Erdoğan stated that "Tal Afar is a totally Turkmen city, with half Shia and half Sunni Muslims. We do not judge people by their religious affiliation, we regard them as Muslims." He also added "but if Hashd al-Shaabi terrorizes the region, our response would be different."⁷

Mosul is a very important part of Iraq, which Iran seeks to expand its influence. Its land size is about 37-38 thousand

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square kilometers, and its population used to be more than 3 million people. The pro-Iranian Islah bloc has already used its majority in Parliament to pass a resolution on September 26, which foresees that the pre-2014 regime of government in Mosul will be re-introduced after the expulsion of ISIL. Thus the Sunni Arabs of Mosul have been prevented in advance from turning their province from “governorate” into a “region” which would have provided this new region and its population with much more leverage and power. Consequently al-Abadi has failed to deliver his second promise, which he has made in New York to Obama.

Turkey and KDP's Position

The only two obstacles to re-establish former Maliki regime in Mosul were the Kurdish peshmerga and Turkey's military presence in Bashiqa, and the latter's influence via the Sunni Hashd al-Watani. As for the peshmarga, the Baghdad government has managed to confine their role to the northern and eastern outskirts of Mosul and both sides agreed upon the plan that peshmarga will not enter the city. Hashd al-Watani will have an insignificant presence in the city, due to their small size and their lack of advanced heavy weaponry. Consequently, the city of Mosul city in the post-ISIL era will be controlled and



manned by the federal Police (*Shurta-al-ittihadya*) and anti-terrorism force. Both of these forces are comprised of mainly Shiite security personnel and many of their members are ex-Shiite militias who are claimed to have received training drills in Iran.

Therefore, the presence of Turkish military presence, though small, has according to Iranian and the Baghdad government, a potential to grow and embolden Sunni Arabs to ask for a real say in the administration of Mosul. Al-Abadi government had begun an aggressive propaganda war against Turkey, which it accused of “invading” Iraq and threatened a “regional war” between the two sides.⁸ Hashd al-Shaabi militias allied with Iran have called Turkish troops “occupiers” and threatened to attack them, although Turkish forces were invited into the territory by the central government and Iraqi Kurds. The Turkish military presence will also deter the Baghdad government to wage a war against Masud Barzani’s forces in cooperation with the

PKK and Iran. Barzani’s forces are widely regarded as the only formidable Iraqi group, left to oppose Iran’s design to have full hegemony over Iraq.

As Iraqi forces are pushing their way towards Mosul, al-Maliki and other pro-Iranian groups have recently escalated their aggressive attitude towards Turkey and Barzani. The pro-Maliki Islah members in the parliament have openly called for severing all ties with Ankara, and giving PKK right to open offices throughout Iraq.⁹ In addition, on 23 October, al-Maliki stated that “Barzani and his peshmerga have turned northern Iraq into a forward base for US and Israel.” He adds that Barzani’s power in the region needs to be trimmed, because he enjoys controlling a strategic location with billions worth of oil and gas reserves.¹⁰

Having given an initial and implicit support to al-Abadi in the recent crisis between Turkey and Iraq, the US seems to have recently reversed this policy. Currently, it is pressuring Iraq to offer some role for

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Turkey in the operation. This was evident in the latest shuttle diplomacy, which U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter conducted in Ankara and Baghdad. The U.S. role, Carter added, “is to work with our partners in the coalition and the Iraqi government to try to resolve issues like this and make sure that we’re all focused” on fighting the Islamic State.¹¹ This was futile attempt, because al-Abadi cannot afford to stand against the powerful pro-Iranian groups in Baghdad, which oppose any Turkish presence in Iraq. Haider al-Abadi said that “I know that the Turks want to participate, we tell them thank you, this is something the Iraqis will handle and the Iraqis will liberate Mosul and the rest of

the territories.” Al-Abadi’s indifference to these US efforts to settle the crisis puts Iraq’s rationale for opposing Turkish participation in Mosul to a real test. Iraqi government alleges that Turkey did not have the consent of the government to have its troops in Bashiqa. However, at the same time, it refused to give this presence any legitimacy, by working out a compromise deal which will grant the Turks a status similar to that of the other 26 nations participating in the operation.

Iran is not at pain to make its outright opposition to Turkish military presence in Mosul clear. Several Iranian statements were already issued recently from Tehran, which was echoed by Baghdad with

regard to Turkish stand on Mosul.¹² But the US officials seem to have some confidence that they will eventually manage Baghdad and Ankara to reach a compromise on the issue. An anonymous U.S. official argued that “I think that we’re hopeful there is a way to build them into the process, but that’s something we really need to feel out with the Iraqis.”¹³

The US seems to have come to a conclusion that some sort of Turkish participation is necessary and needs to exert some pressure on al-Abadi to get some compromise on the issue. The recent reports from Iraq confirm that the US-led coalition against ISIL has suddenly scaled down 70% of its aerial activities in support of Iraqi troops in Mosul operation. Aseel Nujaifi, the leader of Hashd-al Watani, has attributed this to the lack of willingness on the part of Iraqi government to settle the crisis with Turkey.

Conclusion

The Iranian government has in the past encouraged the

sectarian policies of al-Maliki which has brought Iraq into a ruinous civil war and contributed to the emergence of ISIL. It seems to be pressuring al-Abadi to pursue a similar path. This is evident from the Iraqi government’s unwillingness to accommodate the demands of the Sunni population of Mosul to have a say in the administration of their province, and from the unnecessary confrontation with Turkey over a modest Turkish military presence in Iraq. Turkey could not afford to see the people of Mosul being subjugated to a destiny similar to that of the other Sunni Arab towns in Iraq. The problems which have been created by al-Abadi on the behest of the Iranian government will only harm the goals set for the Mosul operation. Should the US ignore these provocative acts on the part of al-Abadi government for a short-term tactical gain, it could very well end with a long-term strategic disaster: the re-emergence of a more fatal extremist Sunni group in the region.

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Endnotes

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