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MOSUL OPERATION MAY LAST LONGER THAN PLANNED

Bilgay Duman



He was born in 1983 in Ankara. He has been carrying on his doctoral study at Abant İzzet Baysal University, Department of International Relations Ph.D Program since 2011. He wrote his postgraduate thesis on "The Turkmen and Kirkuk in post-Saddam Period". His articles and interviews have been published in various media agencies and organizations, on national and international press. He has attended to national and international conferences, panels, semposiums and workshops as speaker. He has frequently carried out field studies in the Middle East. He took part in international observer teams and served as UN electoral observer during the elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. He continues to serve as a Middle East Specialist in ORSAM.

What do you think about the timing of the Mosul operation? Is it just a coincidence that the operation began on the eve of the U.S. presidential elections?

We already knew that the U.S. planned to launch this operation immediately before the presidential election in November 2016. Previous statements by U.S. officials about the operation pointed to October 2016. So, it's difficult to talk about mere coincidence. U.S. President Barack Obama wants to end his term after fulfilling his promises. At the same time, this would also play into the hands of Democrats during elections. Polls suggest that Hillary Clinton, candidate of the Democratic Party, holds a solid lead over her rival. The launch of the Mosul operation also provides Clinton an advantage. For all countries including the U.S. itself know well that the operation cannot be completed in a short time. Again, it's difficult to say that the necessary preparations were completed before the operation. Besides, though Irbil and Baghdad are said to have agreed on operation plans, it's impossible to talk about full coordination on the ground. This, in turn, creates unease in Iraq over the future of the Mosul operation. But Iraqis also know that the operation is unlikely to succeed without

U.S. support. In short, the timing of the operation was decided primarily by the U.S. And Irbil and Baghdad have complied with that decision.

Nearly a week has passed since the operation to retake Mosul from Daesh began. How do you evaluate the progress of the operation so far?

Actually, as Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi also said, the first week of the operation saw progress that was quicker than expected. The peshmerga forces, especially, have made great headway up to this point. According to the plan operations, the peshmerga will not go beyond areas known in Iraq as "disputed territories" and are referring to the expired Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. This is the plan that has been conceived thus far. Only forces of the Iraqi central government will enter the center of Mosul. Since the operation began, the Peshmerga forces have opened a new front extending from Mahmur, a town situated west of the Tigris River south of Mosul, towards north of the city. Peshmerga forces are not advancing on a south-north axis, rather they move from east to west across this axis. In other words, several fronts have been opened from Irbil to Mosul, forming a line outside of

the city's perimeters which are populated mainly by Kurds and minorities. However, this area is virtually depopulated. After the capture of Mosul in 2014 by Daesh, the majority of those living in these area were forced to leave their homes. That's why the peshmerga forces could easily advance on the battleground. In some of these areas, the Iraqi army conducts joint operations with the peshmerga in accordance with an agreement between Irbil and Baghdad. As a result of these operations, around 20 settlements have been liberated of Daesh. On the other hand, Iraqi army units moved towards Mosul from Qayyarah in the south, which is to the west of the Tigris River. At the same time, the airbase in Qayyarah serves as the operations center for the U.S.-led coalition. The Iraqi army and security forces advance from there on a south-north axis. They have already opened an important corridor stretching from the banks of the Tigris to the north. Iraqi security forces face a serious challenge there. Indeed, areas to the west and east of the corridor opened by Iraqi security forces are controlled by Daesh. That is to say, security forces have to consider the western and eastern fronts too, while expanding the operation towards the north. Comparing to them, the peshmerga are in a more favorable position as

they enjoy a safe zone in their rear towards Irbil. However, the Iraqi army can be attacked from all sides and has to watch out. This may create problems for Iraqi security forces in the upcoming stage. Additionally, Daesh is reportedly preparing to put up a major fight not in the surroundings of Mosul but in the city's center. So, clashes are expected to intensify and the advance of the troops should slow down as they approach the center. Furthermore, Daesh may even retake some areas from time to time. The estimated 1.5 to 2 million civilians who currently live in Mosul should also be taken into consideration. Airstrikes are of critical importance for making advances against Daesh. Hence, problems regarding airstrikes could emerge as troops come closer to the city center since more careful planning is needed to prevent civilian casualties during airstrikes on civilian-populated areas. Otherwise, mass civilian casualties and a humanitarian crises could result from such attacks. Still, Daesh's presence on the western side of Mosul will be also a problem even if the city center is captured. Particularly, the Tal Afar region is important. Tal Afar, one of the main towns of Iraqi Turkmens, is totally under the control of Daesh now. Tal Afar serves as a transit base for Daesh between the territories

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it holds in Syria and Iraq. So, we can say that the battle for Tal Afar will be also difficult.

Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi army form the backbone of the land forces in the operation. Considering the resistance shown by Daesh so far, do you think these land forces are sufficient?

I think it is too early now to assess the sufficiency of forces fighting Daesh. Although Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi talks about a quicker progress, I believe that this remark has been made prematurely. The real points of conflict with Daesh have not been seen yet. An estimated 15,000 Peshmerga fighters and 30,000 Iraqi security forces are said to be involved in the operation. While the Iraqi

army forms the bulk of these security forces, there are also federal and local police forces, and tribal fighters. And there are also the Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi forces. But it is stated that Hashd al-Shaabi forces will not enter the city center. Nevertheless, beyond numerical superiority, military capabilities of the forces fighting against Daesh would also determine the course of the battle. There are criticisms that Iraqi security forces participating in the Mosul operation are under-trained and inexperienced. This is a noteworthy criticism since Daesh employs unusual tactics. It uses many non-standard combat tactics. For example, Daesh militants occasionally launch sudden, surprise attacks on security forces in Mosul using tunnels. So, conven-

tional war per se is not enough when fighting Daesh. There is also a need to anticipate its tactics. Daesh can always surprise its enemy. Iraqi security forces that are trained by international coalition also take part in the operation. The Mosul operation will be a test for these forces. In the final analysis, it's impossible to know for sure whether the existing forces will be sufficient or not. Mosul is Iraq's second largest city and everyone wants the operation to be concluded with the least civilian casualties. But it is a matter of debate how much can this be achieved by those fighting against Daesh. Of course, not only the recapture of Mosul from Daesh but protecting it and preventing possible conflicts would be also important.

How long do you think the operation will last? Recently a peshmerga commander said they can liberate Mosul from Daesh in two months. Do you believe this is a realistic assessment?

The Mosul operation shouldn't be evaluated independently of the city's vicinity. Capturing the city center would not mean the end of the operation. What matters most is ensuring stability in Mosul. But I think a mistake was made as to the timing of the operation. It seems unli-

kely that the operation, which was launched without cleaning the periphery of Mosul and cutting the support and logistics lines, would succeed in the short run. There is still a significant Daesh presence in Tal Afar, Hawija, and Qa'im. Hence, what happened in Mosul over the weekend is the most important indicator of this. The operation was launched without clearing Kirkuk's Hawija district, a much smaller settlement than Mosul, in terms of Daesh presence. And Daesh began to launch attacks in Kirkuk while the Mosul operation was going on. These attacks couldn't be repelled in a short time yet. Daesh can activate its sleeper cells in other areas as well. So, unexpected developments may arise. Hence, it is unlikely that the operation will be completed soon. It may last longer than planned.

Before the start of the operation, there were worries about attempts to change Mosul's demographic structure and the involvement of Shiite militias in the operation. Judging by the developments so far, do you think coalition forces pay attention to these concerns?

Mosul's demographic structure has already changed. Daesh's presence in the region is a problem in itself.

Daesh is reportedly preparing to put up a major fight not in the surroundings of Mosul but in the city's center. So, clashes are expected to intensify and the advance of the troops should slow down as they approach the center.

After all, it is known that a lot of people have migrated to Mosul from regions like Anbar, Tikrit, Baiji, Shirqat, and Fallujah, where operations against Daesh had been previously conducted. Some of these immigrants will not return to their old towns even if Mosul is liberated. Again, when Daesh seized Mosul in 2014, there was a mass exodus from the city. Particularly Turkmens and almost all of the minorities have migrated. These people have made new lives in the places they settled. There are doubts about the future of Mosul. So, some of those migrants would hesitate to return. It's safe to say that we will not see the pre-Daesh Mosul even if it is liberated. Nevertheless, we will observe in the later stages of the operation how much the coalition forces pay attention to the civilians. Current operation areas are either depopulated or sparsely populated. There are only Daesh militants in these areas. As a result, forces fighting Daesh enjoy greater flexibility for the moment. But this flexibility will diminish as they approach the city center. More careful and elaborate planning will be needed. For this reason, I think humanitarian concerns will come to the fore when the city center is targeted. On the other hand, there is no report yet of Shiite groups

joining the operation. It is rumored, however, that Shiite militias will be asked for assistance if the Iraqi army fails to advance. We will see the coalition's attitude in the event of such a development.

There was much speculation about a regional or sectarian conflict breaking out in the event of mishandling this operation. Do you foresee such a threat after the first week of the operation when you look at the current situation?

Mosul contains a lot of conflicting dynamics within itself. Sectarian conflict is not the only problem here. We can say that involvement of Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi militias in the operation will not only create sectarian tensions; problems between Shiite groups and the peshmerga may also arise. We have witnessed similar examples previously in the regions of Tuzhurmatu, Khanaqin, and Jalawla. Though there is an agreement between the Iraqi army and the peshmerga forces about the operation, Shiite groups may not adhere to it. Or the Iraqi army may fail to maintain effective control over these groups.

So, what would happen if Shiite groups get involved in the Mosul operation

and refuse to abide by the plan?

That would affect the future of the Mosul operation as well. Besides, the peshmerga said they would not leave the areas they had recaptured. However, Iraqi government announced that the borders of Mosul province would not be changed and no other force would enter the city of Mosul. That issue may also cause problems after the liberation of Mosul. Additionally, we know that the terrorist organization PKK puts pressure on Mosul as well. PKK wants to be involved in the operation. We know that it wants to enter Tal Afar, if not Mosul. Again, PKK's presence in Sinjar is another problem. It seeks to establish a de facto administration in Sinjar. But Sinjar has been under the control of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) since 2003. Administratively, Sinjar is part of Iraq's Nineveh province, whose capital is Mosul, and hence under the central Iraqi government's authority. Problems may also arise here. Again, there are local issues, too. For example, Yazidis blame the Sunni Turkmens of Tal Afar for the persecution they suffered at the hands of Daesh. If Sunni Turkmens return to Tal Afar, revenge attacks may begin. And this can create the dynamics of sectari-

an conflict along with ethnic and other conflicts.

While Turkey expresses on every occasion that it will get involved in the operation, Iraq and the U.S. make contradictory remarks on this issue. To what degree do you think Turkey will get involved in this operation?

This issue seems to have become clearer after the U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's visit to Ankara. U.S. resistance was broken and Carter said Turkey should have a role in the operation. It appears that an agreement with the central Iraqi government on the issue was reached. Turkey may participate in airstrikes against Daesh. Additionally, it may also provide intelligence, logistical and military assistance. Turkey's stance is quite clear. Turkey wants Iraq and Syria to be cleared of terrorist organizations. Turkish policy toward Iraq has not changed at all. Turkey is still sensitive about maintaining the territorial integrity and ensuring the political unity of Iraq. Hence, Turkey's military presence in Bashiqa should be seen only as a support for Iraq's fight against terrorism. For Turkish presence in Bashiqa is fully compatible with the anti-Daesh strategy announced by U.S. President Barack

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Obama in September 2014. In addition to fighting against Daesh, Turkish troops in Bashiqa also train groups that fight this terrorist organization. Indeed, groups trained by Turkey are currently involved in the operation. And the Iraqi government itself has approved the participation of these groups in the operation. In a sense, this can be interpreted as the acceptance of Turkey's presence in Bashiqa. Turkey has no plans whatsoever neither in Iraq nor any other country about territorial gains and imperial targets. This should be known well. Iraq says it doesn't oppose Turkey providing training but is uncomfortable with its military presence in Bashiqa. However, protection of the troops that provide this training is in question here.

So who was supposed to protect this training camp while Turkey was training anti-Daesh groups?

Iraqi security forces cannot even approach this region. There are Daesh positions around. So, Turkey had to protect the camp on its own. In fact, Turkey has even lost several soldiers during Daesh attacks on the Bashiqa camp. Around 700 Daesh militants have been reportedly killed in Turkish counterattacks around the camp. I

think both the coalition and the Iraqi government began to understand Turkey as it makes such a contribution.

Similarly, it was stated that Turkey would consider different plans for the Mosul operation. What do you think these B, C and D plans contain? Under what circumstances do you think Turkey will have to activate these plans?

I believe Turkey and Iraq will agree on participation in the operation, because both local forces and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) support Turkey's presence in the region. At least they don't oppose it. It seems that a compromise was reached with the U.S. and the coalition forces. But there are some important issues here from the point of Turkey. First of all, Turkey is worried that the terrorist PKK will create a new entity and a second Qandil (a sanctuary and a central command center). Turkey will take the initiative if Iraq and the coalition forces do not take steps regarding the issue during and after the Mosul operation. Again, a possible refugee influx from the region is another cause for concern for Turkey. This process should be managed properly. If Iraq and the international com-

munity fail to do this, Turkey will take its own measures again.

Also, the plight of Turkmens in the region is important for Turkey. Especially sensitivity about Tal Afar is at the highest level. Returning of local people to their homes after the liberation of Tal Afar and preventing ethnic and sectarian conflict are among the priority issues for Turkey. I think Turkey will take the initiative when such a threat emerges.

Turkey has worries that the PKK will be included into the operation to provide legitimacy to it and will enter the Turkmen city of Tal Afar. Do you think current developments justify these worries?

Recently, the PKK has been trying to establish itself around not only Tal Afar but also other Turkmen territories in Iraq. We already know that it has maintained control of Sinjar. Having established a de facto administration in Sinjar, the PKK seeks to create a new canton there. Using local Yazidis as partners, PKK further strengthens its position in the region with this support. Again, we know that it conducts a series of activities in and around Kirkuk. For Turkey, PKK has gone beyond being a terrorist or-

ganization only. It threatens the Turkmens, too. Further, it infringes on Iraq's sovereignty as well. It capitalizes on the weakness of Iraqi government and the power vacuum in the region to increase its presence and leverage. For this reason, we can assert that the PKK threat is a growing ever stronger.

On Oct. 25, a meeting of the defense ministers of around 20 anti-Daesh coalition countries will be held in Paris to discuss the Mosul operation. What do you think the agenda of the meeting will be and what arguments will Turkey bring up?

Turkey's priorities regarding Iraq and Mosul are known. Turkey attaches priority to maintaining the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq, eliminating the threat posed by the terrorist organizations PKK and Daesh, ensuring social and political balance in Mosul, preventing a sectarian conflict, managing the refugee crisis, administration of Mosul by local people, and to protecting Turkmens in general and those in Tal Afar in particular. I think these issues will be brought to the table again.

So, how will the Mosul operation affect Turkey's relations with the U.S., Iraq and Iran? Do you think

Nevertheless, beyond numerical superiority, military capabilities of the forces fighting against Daesh would also determine the course of the battle.



Turkey's divergence with these states will continue?

Turkish-American relations have gone through ups and downs since the very beginning of the anti-Daesh struggle. We have witnessed this clearly in Syria. The U.S. has chosen to ignore Turkey's sensitivities. It has provided overt support to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), PKK's Syrian offshoot. Again, it opposed the creation of a safe zone in Syria, which Turkey has demanded since the beginning of the process. And finally, relations have further soured when Turkey launched the Operation Euphrates Shield to seize Jarabulus. As Turkey has made significant headway against Daesh on the ground, the U.S. had to step back. So much so that

the U.S. has come to provide aerial support to the operation. We observe the same ups and downs regarding the Mosul operation. Relations with the U.S. may be strained as Turkey makes countermoves to neutralize potential threats from Mosul. On the other hand, Turkey tries to avoid a confrontation with Iran over Iraq. Both countries follow their own policies. Though occasional policy conflicts arise between Turkey and Iran, they do not seriously affect their bilateral relations. We can say that Turkey and Iran distinguish bilateral relations from regional issues. Turkey's relations with the central Iraqi government have not been going well since 2010. Although steps are taken at times toward improving bila-

teral relations, their continuity cannot be ensured. As is known, the Bashiqa issue has made bilateral relations tenser than ever. But both countries are seeking a compromise. However, Iraq should understand it well that Turkey wants

stability in the region. It is ready to do everything it can to make Iraq stable again. Hence, it would be fitting for Iraq to benefit from Turkey's offer of help. Straining of relations would not bring any good to either party.

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Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr