

# Avoiding a Second Fallujah in Mosul

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April 17, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

*The victory in Mosul requires a comprehensive strategy that includes addressing the looming danger of civilian deaths, winning the hearts and minds of Sunni locals, negotiating the future of Shia militias, and crafting a serious political road map.*

At present, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians are caught between the Iraqi army and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Mosul. They present the United States with a grave humanitarian crisis. The notorious airstrike of the coalition forces on March 17, which took about 300 civilian lives and was recorded as among the deadliest in decades of modern warfare, has sparked a debate within Washington circles and beyond. As ISIL militants now hide in homes, mosques, and hospitals, the airstrikes become too costly. Human Rights Watch and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights expressed concerns about the coalition forces' new rules of engagement since December 2016, calling for better policies "to ensure that the impact on civilians is reduced to an absolute minimum."

The increasing number of airstrikes is not only the result of the Iraqi forces' inability to wage an urban war with ISIL but also the Trump Administration's eagerness to reach a quick victory. The road to victory in Mosul, however, requires a comprehensive strategy that contains at least four elements.

First, framing the looming danger of extensive civilian deaths as a major hostage crisis would initiate a paradigm shift from the idea of "collateral damage" to an "Iraqis First" approach, thus prioritizing the safety of local people and winning their hearts and minds. Second, given the fact that ISIL now plans to go underground, the United States may consider reviving some useful policies that were introduced by General Petraeus a decade ago,

especially those of trust building with Sunni Arab tribes. Third, the future of Shia militias, especially the Hashd al-Shaabi (People's Mobilization Forces, PMF), will be an important issue to negotiate seriously with the Iraqi government. Finally, drawing lessons from hard-won experiences in Iraq in the past decade, Washington will now be able to craft a serious political road map that ensures local representation of divergent ethnic groups and post-conflict stabilization in Mosul's surroundings in Nineveh region.

### **1. A Paradigm Shift to Spare Civilians**

The US strategy in the Mosul offensive has been to support the Iraqi army with a smaller American footprint on the ground and a minimal visible presence. The Iraqi army's mistakes on sectarian fault lines, however, may compromise the United States' overarching plan to unify the Iraqi nation once again.

The deaths of civilians are a perfect case in point. Although an increasing number of civilian deaths provides a major support for ISIL's recruitment strategy, Iraqi forces appear not to understand such potential consequences. Regarding the massive civilian casualties of the notorious March 17 airstrike, for example, General Maan al-Saadi, an Iraqi special forces commander, accepted their deaths as part of the consequences of war, saying, "in return for liberating the entire city of Mosul—I think it is a normal thing." The Iraqi army's inability to wage a strong combat role in "irregular" urban warfare invites heavy dependence on airstrikes and artillery—a pattern that looks unlikely to change as long as Iraqi generals perceive civilian deaths as "normal."

Civilian deaths, however, are not simply a result of Iraqi army ineffectiveness. The Trump

Administration's ambition to declare a quick victory over ISIL has led to a remarkable increase in aerial bombings. Although Pentagon officials deny that there are changes in the rules of engagement that put civilians under more risk, accounts from the field suggest a notable change in interpretation of the rules. Consider the statements of General Ali Jamil, an intelligence officer with the Iraqi special forces, about their request for an American airstrike on March 17: "I have not seen such a quick response with high coordination from the coalition as I am seeing now...there used to be a delay, or no response sometimes, on the excuse of checking the location or looking for civilians."

It is clear that a permanent victory over ISIL requires a paradigm shift. If the current challenge in Mosul is framed as a major hostage crisis, the death of Iraqi civilians will no longer be perceived as an inevitable casualty. Such an "Iraqis First" approach will be difficult to implement as each day passes, however, because of growing mistrust between the predominantly Shia Iraqi army and the Sunni locals. What feeds further distrust, as the analyst Kirk Sowell acutely observes, is that the army's inept performance has boosted the Ministry of Interior and its special forces—which may have more fissures in sectarian lines than the Iraqi army—and weakened the army's ability to counterbalance the PMF.

Such sectarian challenges in Iraq are major obstacles to a US victory over ISIL. Thus, a true paradigm shift would be required in Washington—and not in Iraq—to win over the frustrated Sunni local tribes.

## 2. Winning the Hearts and Minds of Sunni Locals

As ISIL loses its power in Syria and Iraq, the group is likely to go underground. In order to prevent Mosul from becoming a second Fallujah, where Al-Qaeda in Iraq was revived as a potent insurgent force in post-2003 Iraq, Washington would do well to capitalize on the field experience of American officers. In 2004, urban warfare in Fallujah was extremely bloody, leading not only to great damage to America's image but also to an insurgency that spread throughout the country. Aware of the problem, Generals David Petraeus and James Amos prepared the Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006) in which they characterized the local population as a "passive majority"; thus, the goal of the two "active minorities"—insurgent and counterinsurgent forces—would be to compete to win over the majority.

In fact, one of the early proponents of the "winning local hearts" perspective is current National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. In his service in Tal Afar—63 km west of Mosul—a decade ago, McMaster described "the lessons" he learned in Iraq, speaking to a journalist at a time when his troops were fighting an urban warfare battle in an al-Qaeda stronghold, the Sarai neighborhood. To him, Iraq's lessons included 1) ensuring the security of liberated areas, 2) preventing retribution against civilians, 3) developing relationships with the locals and addressing grievances, 4) being present on the street to gain local trust, and 5) minimizing the physical destruction of civilian properties with a view of bringing cities "back to life."

Although the number of American ground soldiers is quite limited today, the lessons learned may be valuable in planning for a post-

ISIL Mosul. The fear of retribution from the Iraqi government, for example, remains real. A recent Human Rights Watch report explains how the Iraqi Interior Ministry holds almost 1,300 detainees, including youth as young as 13, in horrendous conditions without charge at three makeshift prisons near Mosul. In the absence of due process and dubious allegations that civilians are associated with ISIL, Sunni Arabs are frightened. According to Amnesty International, in October 2016 Interior Ministry forces extrajudicially tortured and killed villagers in Mosul in “cold blood” because of their alleged ties to ISIL.

Thus, winning over Sunni locals would entail a careful understanding of sectarian dynamics. Whether Iraq remains unified or fragmented, the frayed social fabric must be repaired for a long-term victory over violent extremists.

### 3. Negotiating the Future of Shia Militias

In light of the points above, shaping the future of Shia militias—especially the PMF—is imperative for national reconciliation in Iraq. Estimated at around 100,000 soldiers, the PMF has evolved to include a variety of groups including pro-Iran militias, Iraqi nationalists, Yazidi militias, and even Turkey-backed Sunni Arab forces. A large proportion still has direct links to Iran. The US army started to provide air support to PMF units that are not Iranian-backed starting in mid-2015.

Although the Iraqi government passed legislation in November 2016 to incorporate the PMF into Iraq’s official security apparatus—whether as an independent reservist force or as fully integrated into the national army—major questions remain primarily because the senior PMF leadership is under strong Iranian influence. PMF leaders perceive their forces as

independent from the Iraqi army and have strong objections to full integration plans. Ahmed Alasabi, a PMF spokesperson, interpreted the current legislation as an official recognition of the PMF’s independence when he stated that the conditions for creating the militias were different from those for the army and that they have distinctive components and functions.

The PMF leaders’ ambitious vision of remaining an independent armed force is reminiscent of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Indeed, the PMF flag is designed in the mold of Hezbollah’s flag. Considering the atrocities of the PMF’s Iran-backed units against Sunni civilians, such a vision is especially worrisome for Iraqi national reconciliation. Human Rights Watch carefully recorded crimes of such units—namely the Badr organization, Ali Akbar Brigades, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Saraya al-Khorasani—ranging from the destruction of property to extrajudicial killings. PMF symbolism also inflames Sunni Arab fears. After the liberation of Tal Afar, a predominantly Sunni town, the PMF provocatively renamed Tal Afar Airport after Jassim Shibir, a commander in Jund al-Imam Brigades backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Such divisive campaigns by the PMF may potentially provoke Turkey-backed Sunni militias as well as Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-linked Peshmerga forces in the Nineveh region. It would behoove the United States to negotiate the future of Shia militias with the Iraqi government before it is too late.

### 4. Crafting a Serious Political Road Map

Many experts have reiterated the need for a serious political agenda that emphasizes reconstruction, reconciliation, and

representative local governance in Iraq. It is especially significant for Mosul's surroundings, where tensions have heightened between Kurds and Arabs as well as Sunnis and Shia. Moreover, Mosul and the surrounding Nineveh region have remarkably diverse populations including Turkmen (both Sunni and Shia), Yazidi, Shabak, and Christian Arabs. Destroying the social fabric and playing on inter-group fears have been staple ISIL strategies. That is why a political road map could increase battlefield gains over extremists.

In view of the lack of a clear political map and Washington's reluctance to lead, regional actors are seeking to expand influence in Nineveh's contested territories. In Sinjar, for example, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has established a stronghold, which led to intra-Kurdish armed clashes between the KDP and PKK. Turkey recently declared its upcoming military intervention in Sinjar against the PKK. Such power struggles may further complicate local dynamics, and thus, threaten reconciliation efforts.

Negotiating a political road map with the Iraqi government is only feasible through trust building and stabilization. As Harding Lang of the Center for American Progress rightly points out in a recent congressional testimony, the return of displaced people is a good metric of success for stabilization, and the current coalition stabilization efforts "lag dangerously behind the military campaign." While ISIL has lost most of its territory in Iraq, only one-third of three million displaced people have returned. The Iraqi government's failure to provide

adequate assistance to internally displaced persons has drawn criticism, especially after allegations of mismanaging humanitarian funds. Moreover, government corruption and systemic dysfunctions hamper reconstruction of wrecked Sunni towns, which were liberated from ISIL but still suffer tremendously.

Washington may benefit from insights of policy analyst Nadia Schadlow, who has recently joined the staff of McMaster's team in charge of writing the Trump Administration's national security strategy. In her new book, *War and the Art of Governance*, she examines numerous cases—starting from the Mexican-American war to the Iraq war—to show how the United States repeatedly failed in translating battlefield victories into durable and beneficial political outcomes. For Schadlow, failures in post-conflict governance led to a frustrated and alienated local populace whose resentment undid American military gains.

As the Trump Administration takes ownership of Iraq and of American foreign policy toward the country, it seems that the White House's task for the foreseeable future is both to clarify its objectives there and help the Iraqi government steer the affairs of state. Anything short of addressing the challenges that Mosul presents may not be successful. Thus it is incumbent on Washington not to repeat the same mistakes of previous wars so that Mosul does not become the second Fallujah of post-2003 Iraq. The White House would benefit from listening to what Schadlow has to say.

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