



## The Battle of Mosul Portends the Future of Iraq

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The long-awaited battle to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is underway. Months prior, the Iraqi army and police, with crucial assistance from the American-led international coalition against ISIS, achieved great gains in other parts held by the organization since mid-2014, thus heralding its eventual defeat along the Euphrates Valley and the northwestern part of Iraq. The fact that the engagement with ISIS is finally succeeding in ending the group's apocalyptic hold on one-third of the country could augur well for the other leg of the battle against ISIS in northeastern neighboring Syria and for the liberation of its de-facto capital Raqqa.

However, retaking Mosul and militarily liberating Iraq from ISIS is only one step on the path to restoration of normal political, constitutional, economic, and social life in the country. Indeed, the prospects for sustained peace in Iraq and for preventing an ISIS-like creature from rearing its head in the future lie in the judicious application of state power and political skills by all Iraqi parties concerned. Moreover, and most importantly, the battle for Mosul and its subsequent rehabilitation and reconstruction contain necessary elements for the future trajectory of Iraqi politics and the country's relations with its regional environment. Whether it is the embattled Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), or the panoply of Shiite and Sunni political formations vying for pieces of the Iraqi pie, great care needs to be exercised lest botching post-conflict Mosul cause a continuation of dystopian conditions in Mesopotamia.

### Conditions for Success in Mosul

What needs to be on everyone's mind is how to make the current and future battle for Mosul effective. Estimates differ, but close to one and a half million civilians reside in the greater Mosul area, subjugated as they were for two and a half years to a brutal dictatorship which was almost as criminal in its treatment of its Sunni cohorts as it was of other communities, most notably the minority Yazidis. ISIS treated Yazidi women as chattel to be bartered and sold in a repeat of the abhorrent practice of yore, and confiscated or destroyed properties belonging to minority groups. It forced young women of all sects into marriage and confined them as prisoners. Like in other areas, it recruited young men into its fighting formations and killed or exiled others. It indoctrinated children to kill in the name of a God concocted out of the delusionary musings of social misfits, religious rejects, and would-be tyrants. It ravaged Mosul's economy and traded its natural resources with criminal gangs thriving on chaos and the absence of state institutions.

After its liberation, Mosul thus requires a major multi-pronged local and international post-conflict effort to rehabilitate and reconstruct the city. First, the Iraqi government must deploy trained and non-sectarian Iraqi forces to a) keep the communal peace, b) prevent reprisals against former collaborators, c) provide a semblance of legitimate authority, and d) allow for a return to normalcy for a traumatized population. Importantly, the government must prevent the participation or deployment of the

Shiite-affiliated Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the Kurdish *Peshmerga* inside the overwhelmingly-Sunni Arab city. Previous experiences in Mosul itself and in Ramadi, Fallujah, Diyala Province and others have made Sunni Arabs wary of both.

Second, humanitarian provisions of supplies must commence as soon as operations end, to a population that has endured repression, deprivation, and war. Besides ISIS's holding of Mosul's population as hostages and human shields, there is no doubt that food and medicine are in short supply or are exorbitantly expensive. A refugee flow is sure to occur and the provision for dealing with it must begin before the guns go silent. Third, an immediate start of a reconstruction program to build, rebuild, and repair infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and housing should commence with the help of regional and international donors. Importantly, the rehabilitation of Mosul would most assuredly be successful if it were coupled with a similar effort in other areas where ISIS held sway after 2014. In reality, the areas in which al-Qaeda (and later ISIS) in Iraq had few willing supporters were left to fend for themselves in post-2003 Iraq as the country experienced the short-sighted revenge meted out on them by sectarian politicians in Baghdad, most notably former PM Nouri al-Maliki.

### Important Domestic Requirements

Whatever the effort for, and dedication to, the Mosul rehabilitation operation, a major prerequisite must be satisfied: the presence of a functional Iraqi government committed to walking the country back from acute sectarian tensions, divisions, and potential partition. While outside factors figure prominently in this endeavor, the node of the intricacies of future governance in Iraq hinges on Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi. However, since he came to office in the latter part of 2014 after the shameful performance and ultimate humiliation of his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki, Abadi has been hobbled by his tendency to steer a centrist course in Iraqi politics. By doing so, he has unwittingly deprived himself of the full support of his Da'wa Party and other sectarian forces dedicated to the propagation of Shiite interests, themselves an extension of Iranian diktat.

Maliki's machinations to assure Abadi's failure in preparation for his own return have also been at the heart of the efforts to discredit the Prime Minister. Having governed for eight years, Maliki commands patronage loyalties in different segments of the government and its bureaucracy. His network of supporters spans the Iraqi landscape and includes beneficiaries from all sects who, while providing him with a semblance of cross-sectarian representation, have allowed him to become an authoritarian ruler, who many likened to Saddam Hussein. He is thus awaiting domestic and regional conditions that can permit his usurpation of power as soon as support for Abadi runs out.

Moreover, the militias making up the PMU – most prominently *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* under the leadership of Qais al-Khazali, the *Badr Brigade* commanded by Hadi al-Amiri, and *Kataib Hezbollah* under Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, all Iran-supported – are not necessarily beholden to Abadi's office or to the Ministry of Interior, as they should and as they are officially designated. In fact, Abadi was never able to fully bring them under his control, which is a problem in the current battle for Mosul: they can claim to be sanctioned by the government to participate in it, yet they will do their sectarian bidding and undermine the Prime Minister's reputation. Moreover, the Commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, General Qassem Suleimani in Iran, is in

actual control of these militias that act as para-military organizations akin to Lebanon's *Hezbollah* and Yemen's *Ansar Allah* (the Houthi-led Zaydi insurgents).

Another party to the Mosul campaign, whose cooperation and military assistance is essential to its success, is the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its *Peshmerga*. Not only is the Erbil government concerned about the fate of Mosul and its Kurds, but it also has ambitions and may be seen to nurse a yearning for a much bigger role in the future of the entire Iraqi north outside of its borders. Since the certification of the Iraqi Constitution in 2005 and the codification of the Kurdish role and interests in Article 140 and others, relations between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad have been described as a marriage of convenience at best. Both sides see what they want in the constitution, to the detriment of overall national interest. Meanwhile, the KRG has made Iraqi Kurdistan a functioning territorial entity awaiting conducive regional conditions to declare its independence. Mosul thus represents an opportunity for renegotiating the Iraqi national accord in the service of a unified state, but also a challenge as laying claim to geographic areas by the *Peshmerga* may lead to future discord. Once again, leadership and political skills will have to play an important role to make the battle for Mosul the success it must be.

### The Role of External Parties

Buffeted as it is by sectarian and strategic rivalries, Iraq cannot escape its regional environment and impact. While its domestic political forces have to find the necessary compromises for success in post-conflict Mosul, Iraq must contend with the calculations and machinations of important outside actors, some more active than others, but all determined to at least partially impact its future direction.

Having succeeded in cultivating Shiite friends and surrogates in Iraq, even prior to the ouster of Saddam Hussein, Iran plays a definitively powerful role in Iraqi politics. Iran and its associates thus have a large stake in the recapture of Mosul in addition to the goal of fighting ISIS. First, the city represents a center of power for Iraq's Sunni Arabs and may act as a challenger to Shiite-controlled Baghdad, akin to Kurdish Erbil and the KRG. Second, as a center of economic power in the north of the country, Mosul could with proper care and governance constitute a seat of Sunni economic power independent of Baghdad. Third, Mosul as a metropolis of Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Christians can in the future be used by Turkey as a stepping stone into Iraqi politics. Therefore, the participation of Iranian-supported PMU fighters is calibrated to exploit present opportunities to appear working on behalf of non-Shiite constituencies but to also hedge against future challenges to pro-Iranian forces.

Turkey also has a large stake in the battle for Mosul, aside from fighting ISIS. First, it seeks to protect the minority Turkmen across northern Iraq both as a minority and as a potential asset within the Iraqi body politic. Second, Mosul can serve its economic and trade interests in oil-rich northern Iraq and as a conduit into future Iraqi economic development. Third, and as was apparent in Ankara's stance regarding Kirkuk after the invasion of 2003, Mosul is essential for challenging the territorial ambitions of the KRG despite cordial relations with Erbil's Massoud al-Barazani, the KRG's president. Fourth, Mosul is too strategically-located to be left as a 'low hanging fruit' for Iran to pick.

Then there is Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council. While lacking the wherewithal to play a decisive role in Iraqi politics – due to shallow relations with

Iraq during Baathist days and bad dealings with the post-2003 order – the kingdom now seeks to play a supportive role to Iraqi Sunnis but to also orchestrate a holding action against hostile Iranian-supported Shiite factions. Whatever the circumstances, Riyadh and other Gulf capitals are hard-pressed to have much influence on developments in the Mosul battle. Instead, they will be instrumental as donors for the city's reconstruction; an advantage that will most assuredly give them commensurate influence in the future Iraq, Iran's friends there notwithstanding.

Finally, the United States' important role in Mosul's liberation will not necessarily extend into the post-Mosul era of Iraqi politics. Unfortunate as this may seem, it is the result of both the hands-off approach of the Obama Administration's post-2011 strategy and the reality of the transition to a new president. By trusting Iraqi politicians to 'mind the store' in Baghdad while Iran worked to solidify its influence, the Obama White House lost leverage over important political developments, although its policy vis-à-vis ISIS has largely been successful. Moreover, it is likely that the new administration will be too busy to devote the requisite time to manage Mosul's transition after the battle or to get involved in helping political factions fashion new arrangements in Baghdad. In fact, it is likely that the new administration will opt to continue President Obama's strategy of leaving it to the local forces to work things out amongst themselves.

## Conclusion

The battle for Mosul is indeed shaping up to be a bellwether for the future of Iraqi politics and of the country. The military side of the battle is hardly the decisive determinant as ISIS is not likely to survive the onslaught on the city or, for that matter, survive in the Levant. What truly matters is the post-battle process of reconstruction and rehabilitation, which requires at least three inter-connected requisites. First, strong and decisive political leadership on the part of the central government that understands the stakes. Second, political compromise among Iraqi factions and a realization that zero-sum games are never successful in a country of multiple sectarian and ethnic forces. Third, a coalescing of regional actors who must realize that Iraq's stability, unity, and neutrality are essential elements for ensuring their own collective interests.

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