

The Mosul Operation: The Challenges of post-ISIL Iraq

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Abstract: The campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIL began on October 17. Although it is generally believed that this operation will be a success, there remain some questions about the duration of the operation and the future of the city. It is generally accepted that the operation will take place at huge humanitarian cost, since there has only been limited time to prepare for this challenge. The biggest concern stems from the socio-political fault lines of the province given past examples from other parts of Iraq. After ISIL are defeated in Mosul, it is probable that they will continue to perpetrate terrorist attacks. In order to counter these attacks, security measures and a counter narrative will be needed. We are likely to see the relationship between Arabs and Kurds over political and territorial differences become more tense. Besides this, many observers worry about increasing sectarian violence. Taking all of these challenges into account, the defeat of ISIL in Mosul may close a chapter in Iraq's history, but will lead to other significantly big challenges to deal with.

THE MUCH ANTICIPATED OPERATION TO LIBERATE MOSUL from ISIL started in the early hours of October 17. Before the start of the operation, local and international actors came to an understanding, but not complete consensus, about their respective roles. Despite some lack of agreement due to various domestic and international factors, the operation began anyway with Prime Minister Abadi's announcement. There have been several arguments about the timing of the operation. Prime Minister Abadi faces domestic challenges at present, especially in the parliament, where two members of his cabinet have lost their positions. It is generally believed that former Prime Minister Maliki is using every opportunity to weaken Abadi and replace him as the Prime Minister.¹ On the other hand, it seems that the U.S. is after a success story against ISIL in advance of presidential elections in early November. For these reasons, the decision over the timing of the operation is likely related to political issues in Iraq and the U.S. Having said that, we are still in the early stages of the operation and we do not know how long it will take to liberate Mosul, and we should not forget challenges that lie ahead of Iraq and the region.

It seems there has been a general consensus reached by the actors taking part in the operation and their roles before and after the capture of the city. The coordination among these groups; namely the Iraqi army units, Peshmerga forces, Nineweh guards (local Sunni forces), Hasd al Shabi and international advisors will be crucial for the success of the operation. Small signs of coordination problems have already emerged in the early days of operation, with the Iraqi army units facing severe resistance from some fronts. Some arguments have been aired about ill-preparation and coordination problems. Any mistrust that grows among these actors or deliberate deception will damage the chances of success for the operation and

its aftermath. However, sectarian sensitivities still loom over future of the city and Iraq itself.

There is a common understanding among local and international actors about the likely success of the operation but also some common concerns about the duration of the operation and post-ISIL Mosul. It is worth also dealing with possible post-liberation challenges.

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The humanitarian cost of the operation

The first likely challenge is humanitarian fallout from the operation. Depending on the success of the attack and the tactics employed by ISIL, there are estimates of the displacement of up to 1 million people. According to the latest news, international humanitarian agencies are ready to deal with up to 200,000 people. If the number of displaced Mosul residents outnumbers this figure, this will mean a humanitarian disaster just before the onset of winter. The KRG are better prepared for this than other parts of Iraq. The capacity there, however, might be inadequate if the operation drags on and the repatriation of local Mosul people is delayed. It is estimated that some of the escaping people will move towards Syria. There are no camps or any other sorts of facilities to shelter these refugees in Hasekah or nearby cities. This may lead to humanitarian disaster there. Past examples of ill-treatment and torture in Fellujah and Ramadi are also a source of concern for the escaping male population. The duration of the operation and the tactics to be employed

by ISIL will determine the degree to which these challenges will be met.

In connection with the humanitarian burden, the future of the infrastructure of the Mosul after the operation will also be crucial. In some cities liberated from ISIL, only a handful of habitable houses remain. The destruction of the cities have prevented local people from returning to their homes and the efforts of Baghdad government and the international community have not met these people's needs. If this is the case in Mosul, then this spells the start of a long lasting humanitarian catastrophe there. Given the size of the population of the city, such a scenario would only weaken the bonds between the population of Iraq and play into the hands of ISIL in terms of propaganda and recruitment. There have also been reports that, in some villages recently taken from ISIL, all of the local people have been forced to evacuate their homes and to go to camps on the unproven basis that they have provided ISIL with logistical support. If this type of action becomes common, it can be easily interpreted as an attempt at demographic engineering.

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Socio-political fault lines and the necessity of a new narrative

In post-ISIL Mosul, we have to face the emergence of old tensions between Arabs and Kurds and also among different Sunni groups inside Nineweh province. There are



a sizeable number of Kurds in the province and there are disagreements between the Baghdad administration and Erbil regarding the fate of some of the territories there. This tension will add to existing tensions between Baghdad and Erbil. In addition, there might be problems between Sunni Arabs and Kurds over the control of some of the territories in the province which have been liberated by the Peshmerga but are populated mainly by Arabs. In addition, some Kurdish figures hope to legitimize their seizure of the houses and lands of Arabs, arguing that the owners of these lands supported ISIL in the past while Kurdish forces have sacrificed a lot in the fight against ISIL, or else that the policy of Arabization during the Saddam era must be reversed after the defeat of ISIL in Mosul.²

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The problem of leadership among the Sunni Arabs will be one of the key questions after the defeat of ISIL. When we look at the reasons behind the emergence of ISIL as an important actor in Iraq, we see a leadership vacuum after the 2003 invasion. Suicides, threats, and legal and military measures against prominent Sunni figures forced them to leave their posts in Baghdad and take refuge in their hometowns. Other Sunni political figures were forced to leave the country altogether. Such developments created fertile ground for ISIL to claim to represent the interests of a disillusioned Sunni population in Iraq. In the post-ISIL era, not only political leadership but also a new political narrative is needed in order to defeat ISIL propaganda and help rehabilitate Sunni groups. The democratic political representation of Sunni groups in Iraq after the defeat of ISIL will be very important for the success of post-ISIL Iraq.

Is there a threat of splinter groups?

With the retreat of ISIL in terms of propaganda, recruitment, territorial control and economic power, there are reports that some groups presently under ISIL have sought other alternatives. The emergence of splinter groups is another possible danger after the defeat of ISIL. There is a common understanding that, with territorial losses, ISIL will resort to terrorist attacks either in the region or in different parts of the world. This might be especially true if international terrorist fighters go back to their home countries. There has to be a strategy to deal with the terrorist threat of ISIL, especially if it seeks revenge for its losses both in Iraq and in other countries.

The Role and Interests of Regional and International Actors

Besides domestic actors, regional and international actors have also been very active in preparing the Mosul operation. The political, security and humanitarian outcomes of the operation will have direct effect on these countries as well. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have become arenas of regional and international power struggle, making every actor into a stakeholder. Therefore, we have seen a plethora of diplomatic and military efforts from abroad in advance of the Mosul operation.

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From the American perspective, Iraq became one of the main foreign policy priorities after the invasion in 2003. The current state of Iraq is very much connected to the policies of successive U.S. administrations and policies regarding the Iraqi issue have been heated topics at the presidential debates. Some commentators believe the timing of the current operation against ISIL in Mosul is



connected to the U.S. presidential elections in November. After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, the failure of the Iraqi government to provide security for every part of the country, not to mention the emergence of ISIL, have mostly been blamed on the Obama administration. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has blamed the Democratic Party government and also Hillary Clinton for enabling ISIL to emerge in Iraq and control a large swathe of land in both Iraq and Syria. A success against ISIL in Mosul will be a positive boost to the Democratic campaign and will create foreign policy momentum for the incoming US President. From an American point of view, defeating ISIL in Iraq is more important than defeating it in Syria. Moreover, some argue that the road to Syria has been left open to enable some people to escape to Syria.

Since Syria became an arena where Russia has competed against the U.S. for status, Moscow has been suspicious about the American intentions

From the Russian perspective, they are very much interested in the implications of the Mosul operation to the conflict in Syria. Although there is ongoing cooperation between the Iraqi government and Russia in terms of intelligence and planning, Moscow's main concern is related to the repercussions for Syria. Although the fighting between ISIL and the Syrian regime has been limited in the past, Russian foreign minister Lavrov has said that there is a possibility that ISIL members may escape from Mosul to Syria and that they will decide on possible military action in a scenario.³ Since Syria became an arena where Russia has competed against the U.S. for status, Moscow has been suspicious about the American intentions.

From the Iranian point of view, the defeat of ISIL in Mosul will mean a victory in terms

of eliminating a military and ideological adversary. At the same time, it will also have psychological effects on the Shia and Sunni populations in Iraq. After the invasion in 2003, Shia groups in Iraq gained very advantageous positions due to the de-Baathification of the state system. Shias soon filled a large percentage of bureaucratic and military posts. They experienced the trial and execution of Saddam as a moment of relief. This development, on the other hand, was very negatively interpreted by some segments of the Sunni population, and played into the hands of Al Qaida. Despite Shia control of most of the state institutions with the help of Iran, the civil war in the country made these gains very fragile. The takeover of Mosul by ISIL in June 2014 and their advance towards Baghdad was a big shock for Shia groups in Iraq. They fear that their gains in post-2003 Iraq are in danger. The same is also true for Iran. Benefiting from this environment, Iran has legitimized its influence and presence in Iraq in the fight against ISIL. Responding to calls for popular mobilization, the Hasd al Shabi units have increasingly played an important role in providing security. This alternative power structure within Iraq has been legitimized in the many people's eyes due to the ISIL threat. Iran has played an important role in the training and armament of these groups, and members of these groups carry pictures of the Iranian supreme leaders in their processions in different cities around Iraq.⁴

Iran took advantage of Iraq's need for security forces to arm and train some of these groups. At the same time, several Iranian military officers took part in operations as 'advisors'. In some of the areas liberated from ISIL, like Diyala province, there was a widespread uprooting of the Sunni populations and demographic engineering. Changes in demographic structure and the political environment in Diyala has been seen as an important indicator of Iran's intentions



in Iraq. The land connection between Iran and Baghdad has now been cleared of any potential problems for them. Similar examples have also taken place in Fallujah. After witnessing these events and hearing the comments of some of the leaders of Hasd al Shabi, such as Qais al Khazaali, the leader of the Asaib Ahl al Haq militia, a widespread suspicion that a similar scenario may take place in Mosul has emerged.⁵

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From the point of Turkey, the Mosul operation must be followed closely for its implications both in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the population of Mosul and Sunni groups expect Turkey to play a role in protecting their interests and counterbalancing the influence of Iran. When we look to the nature of the influence of Iran and Turkey in Iraq, however, they are very different and the role that Turkey will play will differ from expectations. The defeat of ISIL and the emergence of stable, representative government in Iraq is crucial for Turkish security and economic interests. The protection of the ethnic and sectarian balance in Mosul is crucial for the integrity of Iraq and the Turkish priority is the prevention of such cleansing. Turkey fears that this operation will end up like Diyala and Fallujah, creating a large flow of refugees. Just after the defeat of ISIL in

Fallujah, around 600 men were abducted by Shia militias and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights asked the Iraqi authorities to take action to free these people.⁶ Turkey is currently hosting thousands of Iraqis and does not want an increase in this number.

Besides Mosul city itself, Telafer city to the west of Mosul is a particular concern for Turkey because of its Turkmen population. The Turkmen population of Telafer is divided between Sunni and Shia, and ISIL's control of Telafer and the role of some Sunnis there is a serious source of concern for post-ISIL Telafer. In a scenario where ISIL members leave Mosul and take refuge in Telafer, the city could be plunged into chaos. Some fear revenge attacks by members of Hasd al Shabi originally from the city should it be liberated from ISIL.

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The security risks for Turkey

Beside the humanitarian outcomes, there are important security implications of the Mosul operations for Turkey as well. The presence of PKK members in Sinjar, west of Mosul, and their possible role in the region in the post-ISIL scenario is a concern for Turkey. The PKK may try to increase the amount of territory they control in this part of Iraq thanks to the Mosul operation. This is a mountainous area and closer to the Turkish border than Qandil. The territorial contiguity between this region and PKK-controlled areas in Syria represents an increasing security threat for Turkey. In order to eliminate this threat, Turkey is supporting the Peshmerga, but at the same time is training locals from Mosul in Bashiqa. Here, the aim is to support the



local Mosul people in their fight against ISIL and to create a deterrent against the PKK on the other. Although the camp in Bashiqa has contributed to these aims, it has also created a diplomatic problem between the Ankara and Baghdad governments. It is believed that pressure from Iran and the USA have led Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi to voice his objections to a Turkish presence there, despite his earlier demands for support against ISIL. The attitude of the Iraqi Prime Minister is also influenced by power struggles within his own party and in the Iraqi parliament, as former Prime Minister Maliki is also raising his voice within the Iraqi political realm.

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The long-awaited Mosul operation has started. There is a consensus about a coming victory against ISIL. The duration of the operation and post-ISIL Mosul, however, are issues of debate among the many actors who have a stake there. Despite some challenges, Mosul will almost certainly be liberated from ISIL. A lack of understanding about the post-ISIL settlement among Iraqi actors and differences of opinions between regional and international actors tell us that there will not be any quick solution to the problems of Iraq. With the elimination of a common enemy, old questions will reemerge, and we will begin looking for answers again in the near future. Without a consensus among local Iraqi actors and regional players, instability in Iraq will not come to an end.



Endnotes:

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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