

Beating ISIS in Mosul Won't Heal Deep Iraq Divisions

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Contents

- [Political divisions](#)
- [Humanitarian Hazard](#)
- [Persistent political problems](#)
- [Western forces want to stay in](#)

*** Fighting ISIS is a coalition stretching from U.S. soldiers to Kurdish militias

*** Iraq government is dominated by Shia sectarians

*** No alternatives to unfair Iraqi government are on the horizon

*** ISIS will fall, but another version will arise if injustices remain

The offensive to retake Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, has been going on since mid-October. It is led by the official Iraqi armed forces, but many more military units are involved. There are militias of the Hashd al-Shaabi ("popular mobilization"), which are basically made up of Shi'a Islamic fundamental movements linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), on one side and on the other side the Kurdish Peshmerga forces of Barzani assisted by the Turkish government, which backs 3,000 Sunni Arabs officially led by the former Governor of Mosul Atheel al-Nujayfi.

Other actors involved in the offensive are Christian militias supported by Barzani forces and the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party). A total of about 100,000 fighters are involved in this offensive. These various actors are however seeking divergent goals, while the absence of any agreements between Kurdish dominated Erbil and Baghdad regarding the post-IS territorial settlement will probably create new political tensions and problems, with a risk of more division in Iraq.

This military offensive also receives air support from the international coalition under the leadership of the United States, which bombarded positions of the IS in Syria and Iraq since August 2014. This coalition is guilty of causing the death of more than 2000 Civilians in both countries since the beginning of the strikes [1]. The French and American governments also provide logistical support on the ground to the Iraqi armed forces since the beginning of the campaign for the reconquest of Mosul. More than 5,000 American service members are also currently deployed in Iraq as part of the international coalition that is advising local forces. Iraqi armed forces have also been guilty of crimes in these offensive. In December, air strikes by the Iraqi military aviation on a market of the border city with Syria, Qaim, in the province of Anbar, occupied by the Islamic state, killed about 60 people, the vast majority civilians, including 19 children. This information was denied by the joint military command of the Iraqi army, which criticized the media and politicians for disseminating this information. At the same time, Turkey is also present militarily in Iraq. It has troops stationed the Bashiqa camp northeast of Mosul, where Sunni Muslim groups and Kurdish peshmerga units participating in the campaign received training from by Turkish forces. Turkey's military presence in

northern Iraq since well before the Mosul campaign has angered Baghdad, and the two countries traded barbs over the issue shortly before it started on October 17.

The jihadists of the IS have been however opposing a fierce resistance: suicide attacks, trucks trapped, snipers, concealment of explosives in houses and buildings. Almost 2000 fighters participating in the offensive on Mosul died in November: members of the Iraqi armed forces, police killed in action, Kurdish fighters (peshmergas), forces of the Ministry of the Interior and pro-government paramilitary militias. At the same time, some 926 civilians were also killed in Iraq in November, bringing to 2885 the total number of Iraqis killed in attacks, violence and armed conflicts in the same month, according to the UN. Of these civilians, 332 were killed in the province of Nineveh (north), of which Mosul is the capital.

Most of the 125,000 civilians who have fled Mosul since Iraqi forces launched their campaign to recapture IS's biggest stronghold came from the eastern half of the city, where government troops have gradually gained ground, around 70 percent of eastern Mosul was liberated on January 5, while more than one million people still live in these areas most of the city's residents, either having chosen to stay or have been unable to escape. At the military level, the IS had to withdraw from the cities of Tikrit, Ramadi and Falluja. Jihadi fighters continue to occupy large areas of land, but sparsely populated, near the Syrian border, in addition to Mosul. Iraqi elite forces have so far retaken a quarter of the city of Mossul.

Political divisions

The battle of Mosul is above all a competition to occupy the territory recaptured from IS, to control the local population, and to make new political gains at the national level. In addition to this, this rivalry between the different actors has been aggravated by the fact that it is a continuation of preexisting tensions between Baghdad and Erbil regarding the political status of part of Mosul governorate. Following the US and British led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Nineweh Plain and Sinjar, north and west respectively of Mosul city, were under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government but de facto under the control of Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). As explained by researcher Arthur Quesnay *"The unresolved status of these territories prompted parallel institutions to develop alongside Iraqi state institutions—and contradictory modes of governance. Baghdad kept in place its administrative institutions and a police force, and paid civil servant salaries, without this signifying clear sovereignty over these territories. Erbil could deploy armed forces to control the Kurdish population and part of the informal economy. The stake of this dual control was, however, less armed confrontation than it was a political football with which Baghdad and Erbil pressured one another"* [2].

The IS's conquest of these Disputed Territories in the summer 2014, and the subsequent withdrawal of its forces in November 2015 opened new opportunities and ambitions for other forces. The PKK forces for example, tacitly backed by Shia fundamentalist militias and Baghdad, have increasingly been present in the Disputed Territories, notably the the town of Sinjar liberated by the combined forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The central Iraqi government dominated by Shi'a fundamentalist force actually saw an opportunity to counter the PDK's re-establishment within the Disputed Territories by allowing PKK forces to expand and to anger the Turkish government as well. The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), Yezidi militias established by the PKK, actually receive their salaries from the Iraqi Defense Ministry and are officially registered in Baghdad legalizing their presence. The PKK took advantage of IS withdrawal in some Kurdish areas to develop its own civil institutions and governance model. Training camps allow it to increase its numbers in case of rapid advances. Its establishment in Sinjar may allow PKK

forces to possibly expand its influence in the future in the Kurdish and Yezidi neighbourhoods of Mosul. The PKK attempts to use these areas as a basis to build a popular basis in Iraqi Kurdistan dominated by PDK's forces.

The tacit acceptance and support of the Iraqi government of the PKK is however not strategic and may be jeopardized by the last talks between Baghdad and Ankara officials. A joint communique was issued following a meeting by the two prime ministers few days ago declaring that both countries had agreed to respect each other's territorial integrity, and noted that Bashiqa was "an Iraqi camp". The Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim also welcomed recent remarks of the Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi that Iraq would not allow the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to harm Turkey from Iraqi territory.

At the same time, in many territories disputed between Baghdad and Erbil, inter-partisan and inter-community conflicts have been resurgent. The town of Touzkhurmatu [3], whose population is 55% Kurdish, 35% Shia Turkmen and 10% Sunni Arab. has for example been the scene of such increased clashes, in the context of an institutional vacuum left by the weakening of the Iraqi state. Some 40 kilometers south of Kirkuk, the town has since October 2015 witnessed clashes between the Kurdish forces and Shi'a paramilitary militias that both claim its control. The Kurds consider the town a strategic rampart against the advance of the Shi'a fundamentalist militias. The latter, led by the Badr Brigades, consider control of Touzkhurmatu a first step towards recovering the oil-rich province of Kirkuk.

These problems are still persistent. Iraq's former prime minister and now leader of Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist party al-Dawa Nouri al-Maliki has actually attacked the Kurdistan Region accusing it of land grabbing in the beginning of January. He declared that the Peshmerga forces must retreat to the borders agreed on in the transitional government of 2003 and all liberated areas must be dealt with constitutionally, Maliki, and other Shi'a leaders, as well have called on the Kurds to pull out of areas retaken from IS by the Peshmerga. The five main Kurdish parties have separately rejected al-Maliki's call for Kurds to retreat from areas they have liberated from ISIS in the last two years, saying they defended these lands from the radical group and can keep them until the issue is resolved constitutionally [4].

In the current military offensive in Mosul, the coordination of on one side Iraqi armed forces and pro-government paramilitary militias, and on the other side Kurdish led Barzani forces is very loose and only operates on vague agreements. The Kurdish peshmerga are for example to stay outside of Mosul and deploy only in the Disputed Territories (the Nineweh Plain and Sinjar) that were under Kurdish influence before 2014. The Iraqi Army is permitted to deploy from these territories, but under Kurdish supervision—and only temporarily.

Humanitarian Hazard

The political divisions are not only the problems with this offensive. With the winter and the city completely encircled by the Iraqi army and its allies, humanitarian problems intensified in Mosul. The United Nations agencies that first distributed aid on December 8, 2016 in the eastern areas of the city, which had just been freed from the IS forces, were almost overwhelmed by the residents suffering from an acute shortage of food, fuel and water and often trapped for days in their homes as a result of the fighting.

Residents within the areas of the city still occupied by the IS face a growing shortage of fuel, water and food. Food prices have also increased and the cost of fuel has tripled. Civilians who were able to leave western areas under control of IS said their militants had announced they would soon distribute food and break the siege in an attempt to placate their increasingly desperate subjects

and convince them to stay.

Persistent political problems

The offensive to recapture Mosul from the IS nevertheless does not remove the structural problems in Iraq, on the contrary. Moreover, leaders of Sunni tribes gathered on November 30, 2016, in Shayyalah al-Imam, a village near Mosul, whose men took part in the offensive on Mosul in the brigades of the “Lions of the Tiger Unity” expressed the need to reform the Iraqi political system once the IS is defeated and move towards a form of federalism. During the meeting, they also reiterated their distrust of the current Iraqi government and the Iraqi political class in general. At the end of November, a law voted by the majority of the Iraqi parliament, dominated by Shi’a Islamic fundamentalist political forces, legalized the paramilitary militias of Hashd al-Shaabi as a military body of the state, separated from the army. Sunni members of the parliament boycotted this session by opposing the existence of armed groups outside the army and the police. They were also concerned that the law would strengthen the domination of “Shi’a governing forces” and “Iran’s regional influence on Iraq”. These groups are guilty of violations of Human Rights against Sunni populations, while they have some autonomy from the central government, despite attempts by Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi to bring them under the control of the state. These paramilitary forces control dozens of prisons, and they even in June 2016 took control of a military base of the Iraqi army in the town of Balad, north of Baghdad, for a few days against the orders of the central government.

Iraq’s prominent Sunni politician and Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi raised new criticisms in January 2017 against the government accusing it of having violated many agreements with Sunni political forces [5]. He also accused the Shi’a fundamentalist led government to have been running the country by themselves and the initiative of reconciliation by the Shi’a national alliance to normalize relations with the Sunnis was doomed to fail. He also declared his willingness to see a federal system implemented in Iraq to give more autonomy to regions to be able to govern themselves.

These demands are rooted in political, social and economic marginalization for the majority of the Arab Sunni population in Iraq by the central government, in addition to suffering of repressive and discriminatory actions against them. These feelings have been strengthened in these past two years, where Sunni Arab population in Iraq have been blamed collectively for IS’s crimes and were the targets of coercive measures and violent actions both from Shi’a fundamentalist militias, operating with the complicity of Baghdad central government, and the Kurdistan Regional Government’s forces. Numerous abuses were committed: killings or disappearance of Sunni men, individually or in groups, Sunni villages recaptured from the IS were destroyed, Sunni residents were banished or prevented from returning to their villages in the “disputed territories”, which the KRG has long tried to appropriate.

Western forces want to stay in Iraq, even after Mosul

“The offensive against the IS in Mosul could take another two months, and even if the group is defeated there, it will always pose a threat to Iraq and the western states,” said a commander of the international coalition led by the United States. The United States has already announced that the countries of the international coalition should maintain a military presence in Iraq even after the end of the Mosul offensive. A French officer in Iraq, Olivier Lebas, made similar statements “It is really important to stay as long as necessary to guarantee we eradicate the IS”. The military presence of the western states in Iraq is again there to last.

Moreover, Iraq has continued to suffer attacks, mostly suicide bombings, from IS, despite the offensive on Mosul. At the beginning of November, two suicide bombings killed at least 18 people and 30 in two towns north of Baghdad, respectively Tikrit and Samara. At the end of the same month, a suicide bombing by the IS murdered more than 100 people, mostly Iranian pilgrims returning from the Shi'a holy city of Karbala, in the town of Hilla, south of Baghdad. In December, eight people were killed in two car bomb attacks in the city of Fallujah, which was taken up at the EI in Iraq. Since the beginning of the year 2017, a series of attacks in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities have killed more than 80 people in just over a week.

As I wrote in last year [6], the military strategies of regional and international states are doomed to failure in the medium and long term. The IS will most likely be defeated in Mosul, although with much difficulties, destructions and human casualties. We must remember that the IS was formed from the remains of al-Qaeda fighters whose group had almost disappeared in late 2010 in Iraq. Without addressing the political and socio-economic conditions that allowed and enabled the development of the IS, its capacity of nuisance or that of other similar groups will remain. A placard, among others, brandished by Iraqi protesters during the popular demonstrations in the summer of 2015 challenging the country's sectarian and bourgeois political system had correctly put this dilemma forward "The parliament and the Islamic State (or Daech) are the two sides of the same coin "... In other words, the solution is of course to oppose the jihadist reactionary forces of ISIS, but also to oppose the sectarian, racist, authoritarian policies of other reactionary bourgeois forces in Iraq. These actors feed each other and have to be overthrown and defeated in order of hoping to build a social and progressive popular movement opposing sectarianism and racism enabling Iraq to end a nightmare that has lasted too long, just as international and regional powers seeking their own political interests in Iraq at the detriment of local populations must be defeated.

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P.S.

* Posted on January 10, 2017:

<http://peacenews.org/2017/01/09/beating-isis-mosul-wont-heal-deep-iraq-divisions/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://airwars.org>

[2] ESSF (article 40013), [Dynamics of Power in Iraq: The Political Stakes of the Battle for Mosul](#).

[3] ESSF (article 40016), [Report: Iraq from the ground - Two years after the fall of Mosul](#).

[4] ESSF (article 40017), [Iraq: Kurdish parties unanimously reject Maliki's call to retreat from liberated areas](#).

[5] <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/03012017>

[6] ESSF (article 38474), [The "War" against Daech: a military strategy doomed to political failure](#).