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THE MAYHEM IN MOSUL: POLITICAL INTERESTS AND THE BATTLE AGAINST ISIS

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In what has been called the biggest battle against the Islamic State (IS), the combined forces of the Iraqi military (backed by American guidance and support), and the Kurdish Peshmerga launched a massive attack on the IS controlled city of Mosul on October 17 2016.¹ This offensive, if successful, will serve as a defining loss for the IS, because it was with the capture of Mosul that the terrorist group had so ambitiously declared the establishment of the Caliphate with the IS Chief Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the new Caliph.

Analytically speaking, the attack to retake Mosul from the IS would most likely be successful because of a number of reasons – First, the sheer volume of the offensive is overwhelmingly disproportionate to the number of fighters that the IS commands in Mosul. An estimated strength of over 80,000 soldiers have been reported to be participating in the offensive.² Compared to the previous military campaigns against the IS, these soldiers are well trained and equipped – thanks to the Americans. Second, the morale of the Iraqi Army is high after their recent successes against the group in Fallujah, Tikrit, and Ramadi. The high confidence is boosted further by a contracting IS that has lost more than half its territory in Iraq. All but two of IS' 44 founding ideologues have been killed, and Baghdadi himself would have most likely been evacuated to a safer location.³ It has been previously argued by this author that the group could be using its large foreign cadre to relocate itself in Tunisia and Libya, which makes one think how serious would the IS be in its attempt to maintain its control over Mosul, or would they just mount enough defence till any remaining leadership and assets are moved out of the area.⁴

IS, on its part, has been playing craftily and slowly, resorting to tactics that will slow down the oncoming onslaught. They are placing obstacles such as burning tyres, vehicles laden with explosives,



and are resorting to crude tactics to slow the attacking forces.⁵ They are burning the oil fields around Mosul, resulting in the release of dense sulphur smoke that is further impeding the movement of the allied forces.⁶ However, these are just measures to buy time, and delay the inevitable loss. In a rather ugly strategy, the IS has been reported to have kidnapped over 550 families from the neighbouring city of Kirkuk, who would be used as a human shield against the allied forces.⁷ There have also been reports of IS digging up a network of tunnels in Mosul, which can be used as shelters, and also to launch surprise attacks, as well as to facilitate escape.⁸

To summarise the situation on ground, the group seems to be very well aware that they will lose Mosul to the security forces, and they are acting accordingly. Reports estimate that IS commands around 4,000⁹ men in Mosul, and it is expected that the group would put up a brave face, as it would be of use to them, because stories of brave “martyrs” who fought the apostate armies of Iraq and the West never fail to draw new supporters – something that the dying group needs. Eventually though, as IS loses the areas its controls, its members would shed their uniforms and merge back with the rest of the population, only to regroup again when needed.

Is this then the end of IS?

In a tactical sense, may be yes, but not strategically. The enemy here is not the group as much as it's idea. IS was itself the metamorphosis of the convoluted idea of al Qaeda's *jihad*. It grew feeding on the statelessness that engulfed Iraq post the American invasion of 2003. The problem is that once Mosul is recovered from the grasps of the IS, active efforts have to be placed to set up law and order, lest Mosul erupt as the flash point for the next fire that may consume Iraq and turn the nation into a pile of ash. This is not just because the region is prone to sectarian strife, but also because the seeds of potential future conflict might just have been sowed in this battle of Mosul.

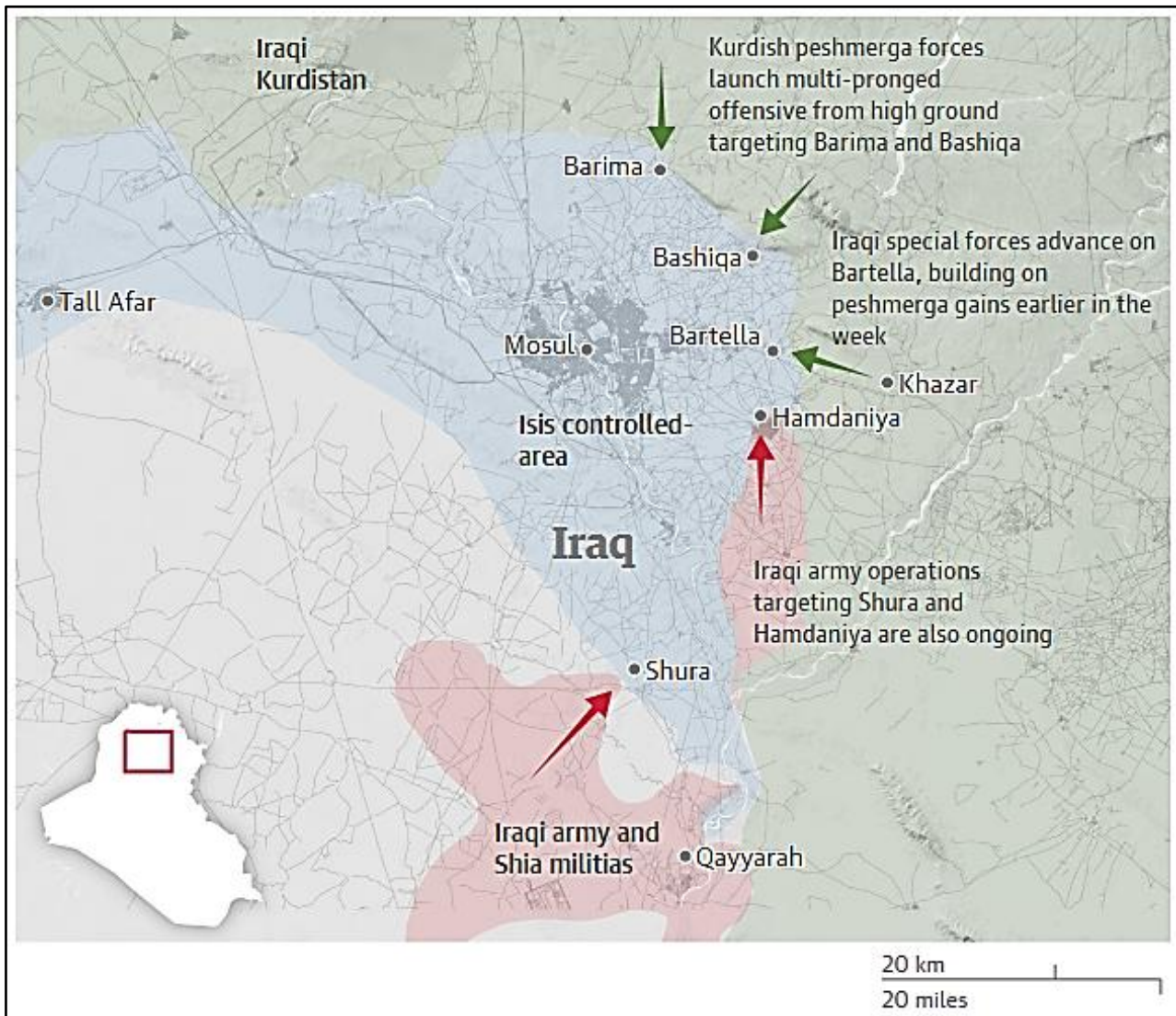


Image 1: Map showing the forces advancing over Mosul

Source: The Guardian, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/20/mosul-attack-kurdish-forces-launch-large-scale-operation-against-isis-in-iraq>

To Fight, or not to fight, and Why Fight?

The players involved in the fight have brought with them the baggage of their own political interests – some domestic, while others are interstate. The political drama that is being played in Mosul (but is getting side-lined in the bigger fight against the IS) has a plethora of characters that would probably put a Shakespearean tragedy to shame. Also, just like a Shakespearean tragic hero, every character is veiled in layers – of what they are actually fighting for, and what they are actually seeking to gains out of this fight?

The battle for Mosul is not just being played out between the Iraqi forces and the IS. There is a distasteful mix of assorted players, who are wrought in a rather unwilling alliance. While Iraqi forces are being backed by the Kurdish Peshmerga in this fight, the Kurds are a part of this campaign for

their own gains. Mosul is the capital of the Nineveh Province, which lies south of the Iraqi Kurdistan (governed by the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government or the KRG), and the Kurds have successfully kept the IS away from their region. However, Nineveh is part of what the Kurds call greater Kurdistan, and they have been eyeing the area for a while, with intentions to integrate it into the existing Kurdistan. Thus, the participation in the battle against the IS is also an attempt to create their own influence in Nineveh, for their own political gains.

The key characters in the politics of Nineveh include the Nujaifi brothers – Osman al Nujaifi (former speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, and currently, one of the three serving Vice President of Iraq), and Athel al Nujaifi, the former governor of Nineveh, who was dismissed by the Iraqi parliament, because he was considered to have failed his duty in protecting Mosul from the IS.¹⁰ The Nujaifi family has ruled the areas since the times of the Ottoman Empire, and it goes without saying that the brothers, especially Athel is looking to regain power in Nineveh. Their party, al Habda propounds Sunni nationalism, and has been arguing for the removal of the Peshmerga and Kurds from Nineveh. The Nujaifi brothers have also argued for Nineveh to be declared an autonomous region within Iraq, like the Kurdistan. The brothers also command a militia of almost 5,000 soldiers who have been fighting the IS.¹¹ Athel Nujaifi would like to portray himself as the saviour of Nineveh, a move that could help him gain victory in the upcoming elections.

Baghdad is watchful

Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al Abadi fears that once the IS is driven out of the area, Nujaifi's people would take control of the region before Baghdad can establish its presence there. His policy of appeasement seems to be working well for now, and Abadi made a clever move by appointing Osman al Nujaifi as the Vice president of Iraq, but the brothers' ambitions are hardly in the shadows.

Abadi's fears also stem from the staunch Arab nationalistic beliefs that the Nujaifi brothers propound. It was this fear of Sunni nationalism that had driven Abadi's predecessor Nouri al Maliki to take the decisions that broke Iraq on sectarian lines. In his fear of a coup, Maliki had dismantled the Sunni militias, and greatly empowered the Shias – a move that sowed the seeds of the socio-political-religious chaos that the IS used to gain support. So far, Abadi's has not taken any extreme step, but his fears remain.

Abadi's worries are also much more grounded than Maliki's. He is wary of deep bonhomie that has set in between the Nujafis and Turkey. The brothers have defended Turkey's decision to send in

troops to fight the IS in Mosul. Abadi, for his part has vocally lambasted Erdogan's move to send in the Turkish army, which has set up a base in Bashiqa, a small town on the outskirts of Mosul. Although Turkey has not participated actively in the campaign, it has been training Sunni militias in the region, a move that Abadi calls Turkey's attempt to "stir up trouble and delay the offensive."¹² He fears that either Turkey or its proxies would take over Mosul once the IS is pushed out of the area. Turkey has openly declared its interest in Mosul with Erdogan stating that, "We will be in the operation and we will be at the table... it is out of question that we are not involved."¹³

Alliance of Convenience

The Nujafis are not the only ally Turkey has in Iraq. Erdogan has strengthened ties with Masoud Barzani, and his nephew Necherivan Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which governs the Iraqi Kurdistan. It is ironical how Turkey considers the Kurdish People's Party (KPP) as a terrorist group¹⁴, but has allied with the Iraqi Kurdish party to suit its own needs. The KDP has engaged in the oil trade with Turkey from the oil fields in the Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani's and his party have maintained a strong hold over the Iraqi Kurdistan, and they are political rivals of the Nujafis, thus directly contesting Athel al Nujafi in the elections.

The recent electoral trends reveal that both Barzanis' and Nujafis' parties and their coalition are losing numbers, and hence regaining Mosul is critical for both the parties to gain the vote banks.¹⁵ While Abadi can breathe a sigh of relief with the two political rivals competing to gain Turkish favours, it is still a loss for him in the long run, because Turkey has played its cards well by ensuring that the major political factions are under its influence. The only saving grace would be if these pro-Turkish parties fail to achieve the desired majority in the elections, which is also quite probable. Abadi's political career will take a lurch if he loses Mosul to Turkish influence. He is a Shia and Shia political parties are strongly against the growing influence of Turkey in Iraq. The staunchest of views come from some Shia groups whose militias have threatened to attack Turkish forces directly.¹⁶

Marching on Electoral Beats

The political interplay of the campaign against the IS is not just limited to regional players. The Americans have been accused of synchronising the campaign to benefit the Democrats in the forthcoming US Presidential Election. President Obama is trying to make this his legacy, and especially so because he came to power with a campaign promise of ending the war in Iraq. The Democrats would like to use this campaign to portray an image of a government that successfully fought al Qaeda

(referring to killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011), and now the IS. The interests of American oil companies such as Exxon Mobil – a company whose influence on American foreign policy has always been a matter of controversy – also play a role in this campaign.¹⁷

The region surrounding Mosul has some of Iraq's richest oil reserves. This oil has been the source of the Kurdish wealth, which the Kurds have always used to bargain with Baghdad. Mosul is a key transit points for the oil pipelines, and thus the fight to gain political control over Mosul is further convoluted by the desire to gain access to the oil. Bashiqa has the largest oil deposits in Nineveh and the exploration contracts were been given to Exxon.¹⁸Incidentally, as mentioned above, Bashiqa is also where the Turkish military base has been set up.

To conclude – Yes, there is an alliance of the unwilling, and one of convenience, that has gathered to fight the IS. However, the biggest fight would not be this battle, but the one that comes after this battle has ended. With multiple parties, each with their own interest, a delicate balance is currently in place, one that can topple anytime to wield disastrous consequences.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Babak Dehghanpisheh and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq launches Mosul offensive to drive out Islamic State", *Reuters*, October 17, 2016, see <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-mosul-idUSKBN12G0Z1>.

² Kirk H. Sowell, "The Regional and Domestic Political Context of the Mosul Offensive"; *Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International peace*, October 18, 2016, see <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64885>.

³ Julian Borger, Fazel Hawramy, and Kareem Shaheen, "Islamic State leaders are fleeing Mosul, says US general", *Guardian*, October 19, 2016, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/19/mosul-thousands-flee-syrian-refugee-camps-iraqi-forces-close-city>.

⁴ Aersh Danish, "How the Foreign fighters will Sustain the Islamic state", *In Focus, Centre for Air Power Studies*, April 26, 2016, see http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_AD_02.pdf.

⁵ Kareem Fahim and Loveday Morris, "Evidence of a 'difficult fight' ahead as forces move toward ISIS-held Mosul", *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2016, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/tough-resistance-from-islamic-state-slows-iraqi-advance-on-mosul/2016/10/18/09ad029c-9505-11e6-bb29-bf2701dbe0a3_story.html.

⁶ Charlie Bayliss, "Cowardly ISIS militants burn oil reserves in bid to halt forces just like Saddam in 1991", *Express*, October 19, 2016, see <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/722753/Mosul-ISIS-burning-oil-reserves-halt-iraqi-advance-peshmerga-bodycam-kurdish>.

⁷ "ISIS Attacks Iraqi City of Kirkuk, Kidnaps 550 Families in Mosul to Use as Human Shields", *Haaretz*, October 21, 2016, see <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.748577>.

⁸ Richard Galpin, "Mosul battle: Four ways IS is fighting back", *BBC*, October 25, 2016, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37761254>.

⁹ Babak Dehghanpisheh and Maher Chmaytelli, "Iraq launches Mosul offensive to drive out Islamic State", Reuters, October 17, 2016, see <http://in.reuters.com/article/iraq-mosul-islamicstate-offensive-idINKBN12H04Y>.

¹⁰ Hamza Mustafa, "Iraq: Nineveh governor sacked following ISIS advances", *Asharq al-awsat*, May 29, 2015, see <http://english.aawsat.com/2015/05/article55343707/iraq-nineveh-governor-sacked-following-isis-advances>.

¹¹ "The battle for Mosul", *The Economist*, October 8, 2016, see <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21708246-imminent-offensive-hopes-end-jihadists-reign-terror-iraqs-second>.

¹² n. 02

¹³ Ishaan Tharoor, "How almost everyone wants a piece of Mosul", *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2016, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/18/the-battle-for-mosul-how-almost-everyone-wants-a-piece-of-the-crucial-iraqi-city/>.

¹⁴ "Profile: Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)", *BBC*, July 27, 2015, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>.

¹⁵ n. 02

¹⁶ Bill Roggio and Amir Toumaj, "The siege of Mosul begins October", *The Long War Journal*, October 16, 2016, see <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/the-siege-of-mosul-draws-close.php>.

¹⁷ Iam Thomson, "Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power by Steve Coll", *The Telegraph*, July 30, 2012, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9429215/Private-Empire-ExxonMobil-and-American-Power-by-Steve-Coll.html>.

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