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# Iraq's Challenge of Securing Mosul

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Iraqi army forces taking up position west of Mosul, Northern Iraq, March 2017 © Omar Alhayali / EPA



## Arab Reform Initiative

Nearly six months after the beginning of the battle for Mosul, considered by many Western military experts as one of the bloodiest since the Second World War, the city is on the verge of falling into the hands of the Iraqi armed forces supported by the US-led coalition. Following a rather inconclusive first phase, the eastern side of the Tigris River was taken over by the security forces in January 2017. Now, regaining control of the city's western part seems a matter of a few weeks, if not days, almost three years after the Islamic State's lightning assault. The hopes are immense among the civilian population, who have suffered greatly and been displaced by the hundreds of thousands since 2014.

Optimists expect that this victory (already named "the mother of all battles") will close more than a decade of violence and eventually allow the country to rebuild itself as both a state and a society. Yet the uncertainties surrounding the post-Islamic State era have been vivid since the announcement of the first military operations by Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi in the fall of 2016: how can sustainable security be restored in a liberated but devastated Mosul? Under what formula and by which forces would this occur? And how can the military success be translated into lasting security and institutional progress?

Without securing Mosul, no local governance can ever take shape and no stabilization can occur. Similarly, no reconstruction can happen as no institutional order can re-establish itself where it has collapsed. From this point of view, Baghdad has never had any plan regarding the post-Islamic State phase in Mosul and elsewhere. It is through this latest battle that arrangements have emerged, over the months, between the different mobilized forces. Among them are the Iraqi army and its Counter Terrorism Service (ICTS) whose first brigade, armed and trained by the USA, has been at the forefront of the fight against the jihadist group. Comprising 10,000 soldiers from all communities, this famous "Golden Division" embodies for many Iraqis the hope of a national re-foundation, and its members have been welcomed as genuine liberators. Its tenacity, professionalism, and integrity have allowed the central government to regain its legitimacy among part of the Sunni population, previously alienated by federal armed forces perceived as sectarian, corrupt, and incompetent. The army's ability to pacify an otherwise hyper-fragmented country, nevertheless, stumbles over obstacles at least at two levels.



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The first is military. If Iraq's security forces have become hardened due to their fierce struggle for Mosul and, before it, in places like Ramadi, Hit, or Fallujah, the Islamic State has not had its last word and multiplies retaliatory attacks (such as suicide bombings and targeted assassinations) in Sunni areas, as well as in Baghdad. In this sense, the concept of "liberation" is somewhat tricky if not coupled with a clear and negotiated security strategy. Beyond a common cause, the dividing lines that marked the country before the Islamic State tend to resurface or new fractures appear. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) remains engaged with the Iraqi army and continues to deploy its peshmerga forces on the northern and north-eastern fronts without entering Mosul itself. For their part, the Kurds have never made a mystery of their intention to unilaterally incorporate the captured areas into their autonomous zone, including territories disputed with the Iraqi central government where Kurds and minorities have long lived together with Arabs.

The other player that competes with the regular forces, when it has not infiltrated them, is the "Popular Mobilization" (Hashd Sha'bi) in which thousands of men mainly affiliated with Shia militias are supposed to take their orders from al-Abadi. However, their uncontrollable character and ties with Tehran have led to reprisals targeting Sunni communities. As it stands, the Iraqi army has little room for manoeuvre to prevent the advent of a new civil war. Moreover, no one knows exactly how the government will control other armed factions, namely Anbar's Sunni Arab tribes and the "National Mobilization" (Hashd Watani) of former Nineveh governor Athil al-Nujaifi, supported by the Turkish army, and Christian and Yezidi militias that enjoy the backing of the KRG.

The second level is political. None of the involved protagonists see post-Islamic State Mosul in the same way. For Baghdad, it has been a question of warding off the humiliation of 2014 when the armed forces in Mosul disbanded and fled, surrendering the city to the Islamic State. Mosul is also a political tool for al-Abadi to consolidate his position in the face of the KRG, militia leaders (such as Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Organization, among other very influential players) and regional powers like Iran and Turkey, as well as Saudi Arabia to a lesser extent. In November 2016, Iraq's federal parliament legalized the "Popular Mobilization" as an official entity, alongside the army.



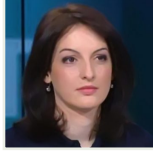
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On the Sunni side, these developments have raised fears of a return to the *status quo ante* and increased impunity for Shia militias. Loathed by the government, which has persistently accused him of being responsible for the loss of Mosul in 2014, al-Nujaifi claims the formation of an autonomous Sunni region. He is supported in this by Ankara, whose forces are currently fighting in Iraq against the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and planning a ground offensive, the "Tigris Shield." Clearly, pre-existing or new tensions and conflicts around the control of liberated territories, political power, and resources are far from settled.



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## About the author



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