

MERIA

MOSUL: THE ORIGINS AND FUTURE OF COMPETING AGENDAS OVER RETAKEING THE CITY FROM ISIS

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Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, has been a center for Islamic State since its conquest by the group in 2014. The Iraqi government, the United States-led coalition and the Kurdish Regional Government all seek to play a role in its re-conquest and see it as a key to future stability in a post-ISIS country. This article argues that the slow, dispute-ridden operation to retake the city has its roots in more than 100 years of Iraqi and regional history. Based on interviews with key players and field visits to northern Iraq, it is unlikely that all of the players involved, with their multiplicity of agendas, will be able to set aside their differences by the time the city is retaken.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-August of 2016, a war of words erupted between Erbil, seat of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Iraq's capital, Baghdad. On Wednesday, August 17, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi said that the Peshmerga, the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government, should "stay where they are now and not expand their presence."¹ Deputy US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner responded that the Peshmerga should listen to Baghdad. "I think it's absolutely important, and we've emphasized this all along, that the Peshmerga and all the various fighting groups in Iraq need to be under the command and control of the Iraqi government."² The KRG's Peshmerga Ministry responded that according to the Iraqi constitution the Peshmerga are not under the command and control of Baghdad.³

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) spokesperson Safeen Dizayee noted on August 21 that areas the Peshmerga had liberated would remain in Kurdish hands after ISIS was defeated.⁴ Mohammed Saihoud, a Shi'i member of Parliament from the State of Law Coalition, allied with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, responded that Kurds would be seen as "occupiers" in areas they were liberating, including the ISIS-held

city of Mosul. On August 21, Bashar Kiki, head of the Nineveh Provincial Council, told media that the Peshmerga "has five options to enter the city, the Iraqi army only has one in the southeast of Mosul through the Kurdish region."⁵ The office of Kurdish President Masoud Barzani put the issue to rest on August 20 saying that the KRG would stand by previous agreements signed between the Kurds, Baghdad and the US-led coalition.⁶

This back and forth between the three major players in the war on ISIS in Iraq—the Kurds, the Iraqi army and the coalition—is part of a cycle that has repeated numerous times since ISIS captured swaths of northern and central Iraq in 2014. In some ways they mirror disputes that pre-dated ISIS but which have become more concrete during the war. As the Iraqi government has defeated ISIS in the Sunni triangle, taking Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, the gate to Mosul lies open to its forces.

The coalition knows that it can only move as fast as the Iraqi army is willing to progress, even as it adds resources to the conflict.⁷ The Kurds play a slow waiting game as their 1,000 kilometers of frontlines inch closer to Mosul. The August 2016 dispute with Baghdad was likely set in motion by a small offensive near Gwer in which Kurds took 12 villages with 5,000 Peshmerga on August 14 and 15,

bringing them closer to the Christian town of Qaraqosh.

Decisions made prior to retaking Mosul will have long-term repercussions for the future of the Kurdish region, Baghdad and the Sunni areas. Most of the sides involved know this but they cannot agree on which outcome they want. Much of this is rooted in history.

MOSUL—A COMPETITION BETWEEN KURDS, TURKEY, IRAQ

Mosul sits on the Tigris river at the heart of the Nineveh plains which were the location of ancient cities such as Nineveh, Hatra and Nimrud. It was a center of trade connecting Anatolia and the Gulf of Syria with Baghdad and what is now Iran.⁸ A regional center⁹, Mosul lost some of its regional power as an Ottoman vilayet to Baghdad after 1910.¹⁰ The treaty of Sevres anticipated that a plebiscite would be held concerning Mosul, which was considered for inclusion in an autonomous Kurdish state, however, this idea was almost immediately abandoned by the British in 1920.¹¹

The first shots of the 1920 Iraq rebellion were fired against the British in Tal Afar, just down the road from Mosul, and the region was plunged into low-level insurgency for several years. In a foreshadowing of today's competing agendas, the Turks coveted the area of Mosul and rejected the idea of an "unruly Kurdish state," while the "Iraqis did not want to single out areas for any form of special treatment which would limit authority of the government."¹² King Faisal wanted Mosul and the Kurdish areas in Iraq to bolster Sunni demographics. By 1926, when the Permanent Court of International Justice at the Hague¹³ ruled that Mosul would remain part of Iraq, the British had succeeded in pacifying it.

Under Saddam Hussein the city was a target of his Arabization campaign that saw populations such as Yazidis, Assyrians, Turkmen and Kurds removed and their villages destroyed or collectivized in new areas. Arabs from tribes south of Mosul were encouraged to move into the city.¹⁴ The city eventually became the second largest in Iraq¹⁵,

with a university (founded 1967) and a major dam supplying it with electricity (1981). Mosul was intensely loyal to Saddam, suffering the highest casualty rate among young officers in the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988.¹⁶

During the 1991 Gulf War a Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq took over a similar geographical area to that which the KRG controls today. Jalal Talabani's suggestion that Kurds might also attack Mosul¹⁷ was prevented in late March of 1991 when Iraqi forces retaliated against the Kurdish advance.¹⁸

The 1990s were a complex time in northern Iraq, with infighting between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) along with Turkish incursions in 1992 and 1995 that resulted in several small Turkish bases being established near the border.¹⁹ The Iraqi government expressed displeasure at this Turkish influence, ordering the closure of the Turkish consulate in Mosul in retaliation in 1995²⁰ and demanding that the bases be removed in 2008.²¹ Baghdad's concerns about Turkish influence would be revisited in 2015 with its complaints about the presence of a Turkish base aiding the war against ISIS in the KRG.²²

This Turkish presence became an issue during the lead-up to the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. Journalist Charles Glass recalls that KDP politician and then-Foreign Minister of Iraq Hoshiyar Zebari told him in 2003, before the invasion, that the Turks were concerned the Kurds would march on Mosul and Kirkuk. The Turks indicated their interest in Mosul by saying Kurdish meddling could trigger a Turkish invasion and that Turkey still coveted Mosul despite the 1926 International Court of Justice decision.²³ Thus, on the eve of the invasion, Kurdish forces, who claimed there were 500,000 Kurds in Mosul²⁴, the Turks, and the central government, all saw the city as a key to the north.

THE ROOTS OF ISIS IN MOSUL

Mosul was once the “pearl of the north,” recalled Michael Goldfarb in 2014, saying it was once the “most diverse region in Iraq.”²⁵ But this diversity was destroyed after 2003. The origins of the ISIS conquest of Mosul can be found in that period after 2003. Mosul fell on April 10, 2003 as Saddam’s army disintegrated, much as Maliki’s would in August of 2014.²⁶ Kurds under the command of General Babakir Zebari and United States special forces were handed the city. The disintegration of Saddam’s forces created a chaotic breathing space in which the Iraqi insurgency put down roots.²⁷ Some insurgents were former Ba’athist officers, of which there were thousands, who felt let down by the Coalition Provisional Authority. Mosul became a haven for former regime elements. Saddam Hussein’s sons Uday and Qusay Hussein were killed in a shootout in the city with United States forces in July of 2003. Another told a reporter, “we are the fighters for the freedom of Iraq, the sons of Mosul, the mujahidin who will halt the US Crusaders.” They were also anti-Kurdish, saying, “We saw the Kurds becoming bosses in our home and the American infidels stealing our oil.”²⁸ They expressed resentment against Kurds and Shi’a who they saw as allying against them, as they had against Saddam.²⁹

As the insurgency against the United States borrowed from Ba’athist former regime elements and Islamist extremists, it was able to rely on Mosul’s history as a base of support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Iraqi Islamic Party in the 1960s. Both the Islamists and the Ba’athists opposed the US presence and rising Shi’i power in Baghdad. Groups such as Ansar al-Sunnah attacked nuns, liquor stores and intellectuals.³⁰ Mosul Governor Osama Kashmoula was assassinated on July 14, 2004.³¹ When the insurgents overran part of the city in 2004, it suffered a “descent into chaos and barbarity,” wrote Ahmed Hashim.³²

In mid-November of 2004 the United States and the Kurds fought a large battle against insurgents to retake the city. Increasingly, Kurds were targeted by the insurgents. Minorities were also hit hard. 12,000 Assyrian Christians fled in 2008 as

well as many Catholic Chaldeans after their archbishop was kidnapped and killed.³³ Around 2,400 Kurds were killed in the city between 2003 and 2009, according to one estimate.³⁴ A campaign in 2008 backed by the United States and Iraqi army sought to pacify the city. However, it failed to stem the tide of low-level extremism. Dozens of Shabak people, a minority religious group, were killed in 2013, allegedly by al-Qaeda.³⁵ This ethnic cleansing devastated the city, writes Goldfarb: “The west bank of the Tigris became almost exclusively Sunni Arab. Kurds and other minorities moved to the east bank.”³⁶

THE FALL OF MOSUL AND PLANS FOR LIBERATION

ISIS captured Mosul with as few as 1,500 fighters on June 10, 2014 and sent 500,000 refugees fleeing the city.³⁷ Nineveh provincial governor Atheel al-Nujaifi appealed on TV for residents to “stand and fight” before he also fled. His brother Osama, the speaker of Iraq’s parliament, asked the Peshmerga to take back the city.³⁸

In the initial attack on Mosul and disintegration of the Iraqi army, around 50,000 soldiers were overrun and tossed away their weapons, setting in motion the strategic paradigm in Iraq that still existed as of August 2016. On June 10, 2016, Barzani ordered the Peshmerga to “fill the vacuum” left by the retreating Iraqi army in Kirkuk and other areas.³⁹ Maliki had told the Kurds before ISIS attacked that he didn’t need their help in Mosul.⁴⁰ “In the past two years we tried our best to cooperate for the defense of Mosul but the response from Baghdad wasn’t such that could help us cooperate,” Barzani said on June 10, 2014.⁴¹ The Peshmerga would not deploy to the city, even to the east bank. This stymied KRG efforts to help with security in Mosul.

Kiki, head of the provincial council of Mosul, later said he thought that Maliki allowed Mosul to fall in order to gain support against the Sunnis. Nujaifi, the leader in Nineveh province, claimed that his warnings were ignored. Maliki later asserted that the fall

of the city was a Kurdish “conspiracy” that was “planned in Ankara and then the conspiracy moved to Erbil,” laying the blame on the KDP.⁴² In this way, he set up the coming battle for Mosul as a competition between the Iranian-backed government in Baghdad and the KRG.

The Kurdish decision to not attack ISIS in June of 2014 was part of a pragmatic approach to consolidate power in disputed areas such as Sinjar and Kirkuk as Iraq’s power disintegrated. There were oil disputes that the ISIS advance postponed, creating opportunities for more economic and political autonomy for the Kurds.⁴³ Barzani had cold relations with Maliki and had grown closer to Sunni leaders in Iraq such as Nujaiifi.⁴⁴ In 2009 Barzani told United States officials that while he saw Mosul as a “center of Arab chauvinism,” he had a favorable impression of Nujaiifi, which increased after 2014.⁴⁵

ISIS solidified its hold on power through systematic cleansing of the city of minorities, destroying churches and monasteries in the process.⁴⁶ The Kurdish leadership was taken by surprise by the actions of ISIS. Some thought ISIS victory would be like the insurgents in 2004 or merely an outgrowth of al-Qaeda; others saw Ba’athist influence and hoped ISIS would move towards Baghdad. PUK politicians claimed that they had urged a more forward policy against ISIS and warned that ISIS would attack the KRG.⁴⁷

When ISIS attacked the Kurds on August 3, 2014, the Peshmerga were overrun on numerous fronts. Weaknesses were exposed in the Peshmerga forces.⁴⁸ However, by the end of August many areas had been re-taken, including Mosul dam. With the threat to Erbil neutralized, more than 1,000 kilometers of frontline now lay between the KRG and ISIS. At the same time, the threat of ISIS invited greater Iranian support and involvement in Iraq, not only through Shi’i militias, but also in the Kurdish region.⁴⁹

By February 2015 the Peshmerga were already discussing re-taking Mosul. A PUK statement noted that “Peshmerga are now surrounding the northern city of Mosul.”⁵⁰ It quoted Lt. Gen. Jamal Mohammed of the

Peshmerga Ministry as saying they were within six to nine miles of the city.

But the Iraqi army was far south, fighting for Fallujah, Ramadi, Biaji and Tikrit, all of which would not be retaken until June of 2016⁵¹. Many Kurdish Peshmerga expressed a disinterest with sacrificing lives “for Arabs” in Mosul.⁵² As Aziz Ahmad, a member of the Kurdistan Regional Security Council wrote, “we—the Kurds in Iraq—believe the road to Mosul begins in Baghdad.”⁵³ Iraq’s Abadi and the KRG’s Barzani met in early April 2015 and agreed to coordinate efforts to liberate Mosul. Adabi said “all the Iraqi people” would participate in the operation.⁵⁴ More than a year later, as Iraqi soldiers inched closer, that coordination was fraught with difficulties.⁵⁵ In a sense, the continued presence of ISIS in Mosul served as a way to put off a crisis in Erbil-Baghdad relations. The KRG’s desire for a referendum on independence and its dispute over oil exports were temporarily put aside as both were distracted by the existential threat from ISIS.. For the Kurds, the Mosul operation is more about having influence over the city and its governing institutions, and making sure it is not a security threat, than it is about conquering the whole city.

In addition, voices within the KRG such as that of Lahur Talabani⁵⁶, along with KRG allies such as Nujaiifi, increasingly noted that Sunnis must play a role in the liberation and that Shi’i militias would be unwelcome in Mosul.⁵⁷ Nujaiifi was busy training his own Sunni militia, al-Hashd al-Watani, with aid from the Turkish government, at a base near Bashiqa. To assuage fears that Abadi had promised a “decentralized” government to Mosul after its re-conquest⁵⁸, Nujaiifi said that the various militias (Hashd) should be united rather than divided along sectarian, tribal, or party lines, invoking Mosul’s traditional diversity. It was not clear if he meant to incorporate the al-Hashd al-Watani into the the main Shi’i force, al-Hashd al-Sha’abi, but that seemed unlikely and impossible.

The conquest of Qayarra airbase 60 kilometers south of Mosul in July 2016 by the Iraqi army seemed to open the door to the final

phase in the operation to take the city. The United States announced that it would deploy 560 troops to the base, often called Q-West by the almost 6,000 American soldiers in Iraq, as part of the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve.⁵⁹ Connected to Erbil via a bridge over the Tigris, equipment and men were flowing to the frontline in mid-July, but little progress had been made by mid-August 2016.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the United States was continuing with training to outfit two Kurdish brigades and 15 Iraqi brigades.⁶¹ The Americans signed an agreement to directly pay the Peshmerga via Erbil in July 2016, but they also excluded Kurds from a 30-country meeting of the American-led Global Coalition against ISIS on July 21, 2016, in Washington, D.C.⁶²

COMPETING FORCES AND AGENDAS

As of late summer 2016, Iraq was more fractured than ever before in its history. Mosul, once a regional center in Northern Iraq, and projecting power when Saddam was strong, has been spreading chaos since 2003. Influence over it is the key to power in the north of the country. Iran, which once sought to undermine stability in Iraq, now speaks about the need for “unity.”⁶³ Commentators have been claiming that Iran’s role in Iraq combats “chaos and disintegration.”⁶⁴ In that context the Iraqi central government sees the re-conquest of Mosul as its job, reintegrating Mosul into the Iraqi state. Baghdad, however, resists KRG involvement, knowing that Erbil has vowed to keep for itself any areas liberated by Peshmerga where Kurdish lives have been lost.

The Sunni Arabs and Kurds see things very differently than Baghdad. Increasingly disenfranchised since 2003, the Sunnis want more autonomy. Accusations of Shi’i militia abuses make Sunnis reticent to see the Shi’i role expand in Mosul. They also don’t want Mosul destroyed, the way eighty percent of Ramadi was in taking it back from ISIS in 2015 and 2016. They tend to see a positive role for the Kurds to play, at least in taking back the east bank, where there are Kurdish

and minority residences, as a counterweight to Baghdad’s policies. This would prop up weakened and fractured Sunni politicians, such as Nujaifi, and tribes seeking influence in Mosul. It would also reverse the hostility between Sunni Mosul and the Kurds, while largely serving as a pragmatic alliance against Iran and Baghdad’s power. It can succeed only if Nujaifi, or another Kurdish ally, receives widespread support in Mosul and among the internally displaced people (IDPs).

The ISIS threat has aided Kurdish unity, especially among the Peshmerga forces, whose combat effectiveness has greatly increased. With their combined strength of more than 200,000 men, they could have taken Mosul a year ago.⁶⁵ The PUK and KDP Peshmerga serve alongside one another. They are bolstered by contingents from minority Yazidi, Kakei, Shabaks and Assyrian Christians as well as Kurds from Syria and Iran. There are also Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) affiliated forces such as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS).

These groups have different views on Mosul, and the PKK was accused in November of 2015 of maintaining close ties with Baghdad. The PUK has tended, historically, to be closer to Baghdad as well as to have closer relations with Iran than the PKK. Maliki visited the PUK-run city of Sulimaniyeh in late July, and the PKK have expressed interest in joining a Mosul operation alongside the Iraqi army.⁶⁶ Christian units also want to play a larger role in retaking Mosul in order to strengthen their return after the operation. There were once 35,000 Christians in the city, and Christians made up a large percentage of the population of Nineveh province. Both Christians and Sunnis have expressed interest in creating autonomous regions following victory over ISIS in the area.⁶⁷ The latter demand dovetails with calls within the KRG for a “Sunnistan” and partitioning of Iraq, an idea former United States Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton articulated in a November 2015 op-ed in the *New York Times*⁶⁸ and one that Kemal Kirkuki, a former speaker of the KRG

parliament and politburo member of the KDP, has long supported.⁶⁹

The KRG also want the two million mostly Arab IDPs currently in the KRG to return to Nineveh. These IDPs have changed the demographics of Kurdistan, succeeding in “Arabizing” the region even more than took place under Saddam. This controversial problem suits Baghdad’s interests of undermining Kurdish territorial integrity and demographic cohesiveness. It is also a major financial burden on the KRG.

The Turkish role in the KRG is a unique extension of its historic interest in Mosul. Its success at building up the al-Hashd al-Watani represents a major break in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has not previously been involved in training or advising a militia in Iraq, making this a muscular step forward from its policy of using small bases in Iraq to combat the PKK. It seeks to use this several thousand-strong militia as leverage once the Iraqi government closes in, and it has based that militia in one of the closest frontlines to the city. The militia is led by officers from the pre-2003 army⁷⁰, making their alliance with the KRG historically anomalous, but no more so than the Baghdad-Tehran alliance. In the new Iraq the Kurds are closer with Sunni Arabs and Turkish policy, while Baghdad is connected to Iran. The old Kurdish working alliance with the Shi’a, meanwhile, has become less influential.

The Kurds, especially the KDP, see the conquest of Mosul as setting into motion disputes with Shi’i militias and Iran, as well as renewing disputes over budgets and oil with Baghdad. This may set back demands for a referendum and Kurdish independence. The ISIS conquest of Mosul served to empower Erbil by cutting it off from Baghdad, while the intended destruction of ISIS has set in motion the post-ISIS question, to which the KRG hopes the answer will be a stable Sunni-led Mosul that counterbalances Baghdad and protects minorities, including Kurdish property.

While the United States-led coalition has paid lip-service⁷¹ to keeping Iranian-backed militias out of Iraq and encouraging the

Peshmerga to take cues from Baghdad, the coalition’s own separate training of Iraqis and Kurds has demonstrated its pragmatic understanding of the division. The defeat of ISIS may be the goal, but former commander David Petraeus has written that planning for an inclusive post-ISIS Mosul is essential.⁷² Additionally, upcoming US elections in November 2016, and its overall fatigue at involvement in the Middle East have pointed to minimal United States involvement post-Mosul. This will undoubtedly leave the local players to deal with the city themselves.

Mosul is the key to stability in northern Iraq, but it is also closely tied to the future of the KRG, Sunni Arab interests, Iranian and Turkish foreign policy, and the Shi’a-led Iraqi central government’s policies. This complex puzzle means the defeat of ISIS is only tangential to the goal of controlling and influencing Mosul, the outcome of which will have serious and lasting repercussions throughout Iraq and the entire region.

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NOTES

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

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