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Issue Brief

The Last Battlefield: Reclaiming Western Mosul

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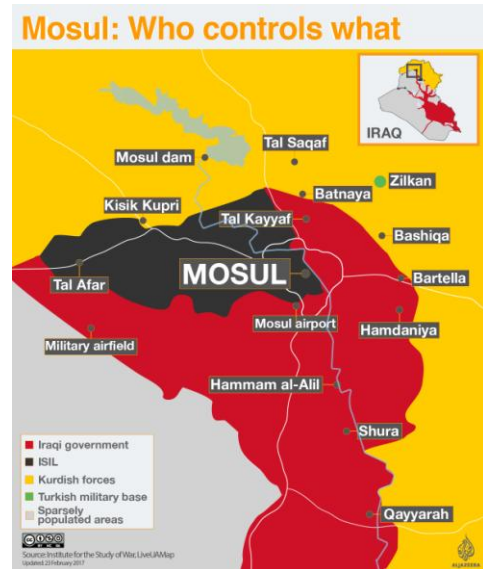
After months of conflict the Iraqi military and its allies have begun a major ground offensive to drive the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) out of Western Mosul. In June 2014, ISIL forces captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. Over two years later, it is become the group's last stronghold in the country.

On February 19, 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi announced the start of the operation on state television. He described the aggressive new operation as twofold: first to liberate civilians and later to reclaim territory from the Islamic State. "Our first priority is to free human beings before freeing the land"¹ he said.

Using the Arabic acronym for ISIS, he stated that government forces were moving to "liberate the people of Mosul from Daesh oppression and terrorism forever."²

Mosul is symbolic to ISIL whose leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed his so-called caliphate across Iraq and Syria from here in June 2014. The operation to free Mosul began in October 2016, and by January 2017, the Iraqi government had declared Eastern Mosul liberated. All bridges linking the east and west of the city, across the Tigris River, have already been destroyed by strikes in an effort to contain the militants in the west.³

Western Mosul is where the old city center is located- a more difficult landscape to take militarily. Although slightly smaller than the east, western Mosul is more densely populated and includes districts seen as pro-ISIL. The narrow and winding streets around the historic centre will be impassable for many military vehicles and will force government fighters to take on ISIL in direct fighting. Much of the fighting will need to be done by Iraqi troops fighting house to house in a section of the city that is still home to



¹ <http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/english/middleeast/iraq/19022017>

² <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2017/02/19/terrain-daunting-as-iraqi-forces-push-into-daesh-held-western-mosul.html>

³ <http://www.crossroadstoday.com/story/34592524/battle-for-mosul-iraqi-forces-advance-near-key-area-in-city-west>

an estimated 750,000 civilians.⁴

Coalition officers say that the Iraqis are using a new three-pronged strategy⁵ to take the densely populated western half of Mosul in an attempt to confuse the defenders and deny them the ability to concentrate on any one front. Several groups are involved in a complex assault on ISIL positions. Following the seizure of seventeen⁶ nearby villages by the Iraqi army on the first day of the offensive, the ISIL contingent in Mosul is now surrounded on all sides by government security forces. Iraqi forces seized most of Mosul's airport on February 23, an important milestone in the broader offensive.⁷ The resistance has been stiff - the operations are continuously being disrupted by ISIL drones and suicide car bombs.⁸ Moreover, as the terrain shifts from desert to urban, the pace of the operation has slowed and the casualties have mounted, suggesting the militants will not be routed from the city without a fierce fight.

Indeed, the toughest fighting lies ahead, once the government troops begin to make their way through the tight, winding streets in what is expected to be weeks of house-to-house combat. Some officials estimate that somewhere between 4000 to 6000 Islamic State fighters remain in the city,⁹ with the foreign militants likely to fight to the death. Coalition and Iraqi officials believe the Islamic State has spiked the city with booby traps and hidden bombs, and traversed Mosul with a latticework of underground tunnels to evade air attacks and to out-manoeuvre the advancing forces.

According to the United Nations, the battle for Mosul has the potential to become one of the largest humanitarian disasters in history.¹⁰ A researcher for Human Rights Watch states, "When it comes to the old city, which is densely populated, people are very worried about residents being used as human shields."¹¹ The government and humanitarian agencies are already constructing emergency sites south of the city and stockpiling key supplies.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/battle-for-mosul-iraq-isis-fighting>

⁵ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/23/iraqi-army-ahead-of-schedule-in-fight-for-west-mosul-u-s-officials-say/amp/>

⁶ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/20/middleeast/iraq-west-mosul-operation/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/23/iraqi-forces-storm-mosul-airport-seize-isis>

⁸ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-drones-disrupt-us-iraqis-fight-mosul/>

⁹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/23/iraqi-army-ahead-of-schedule-in-fight-for-west-mosul-u-s-officials-say/amp/>

¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/10/battle-mosul-controls-map-161023134534524.html>

¹¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/20/middleeast/iraq-west-mosul-operation/>

Food and fuel supplies are dwindling in the west, markets and shops have closed, running water is scarce and electricity in many neighbourhoods is either irregular or completely cut off. Aid organisations are racing against the clock to prepare for what is expected to be a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of civilians. "The greatest concern is the fact that we might have a massive surge of civilians being displaced," a spokesperson for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) states.¹² Civilians have already started to flee. Hundreds have escaped into the surrounding desert, but an estimated 700,000 remained trapped inside their homes.

The Battle for Mosul has been going for over a 100 days now. Seven days into the third phase of the offensive to reclaim Mosul, the army is in control of almost half of al-Tayyaran and Maamun districts in the southernmost parts of the western side of the city. 150,000 civilians have been displaced, hundreds have been killed and hospitals are overwhelmed. In many ways, the urban fighting for Iraq's second largest city resembles an operation that a different Iraqi army undertook almost four decades ago. The battle of Muhammara in Iraq was eventually successful, but the bloody street-to-street fighting almost destroyed the Iraqi special forces and took them years to recover.

Statements from the locals reflect the dismal conditions; "Western Mosul is a ghost town now"¹³- Samer, a former teacher claims.

Baghdad needs to be aware that there will be an absence of order in the newly liberated areas - not to mention the psychological impacts of drone attacks, something which cannot be discounted. Many blame a dysfunctional government for the ease with which ISIL captured Mosul in the first place. Hence, all parties involved in the battle need to move beyond their internal differences and be on the same page because it is impertinent that a proper rehabilitation process take place. Unless politics can be got right, the liberation of Mosul could mark the end of one horror and the beginning of something almost as bad.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has described the operation as a "new dawn"¹⁴ in the liberation of Mosul.

For the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, which is under fire from rivals who lambasted

¹² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/aid-agencies-additional-funds-mosul-170220093032968.html>

¹³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39068851>

¹⁴ <http://ktla.com/2017/02/19/iraq-starts-operation-to-drive-isis-out-of-mosul/>

weak security and continued terror bombings in the capital, as well as corruption, the fight for the city is by far Baghdad's highest priority. Squeezing ISIL out of west Mosul will perhaps be the most defining battle in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003. Retaking Mosul would deprive the Islamic State of its last urban stronghold in Iraq, and would be a major victory for Abadi's embattled government.