

The Road to Mosul: Reports from the Field

by [William F. Mullen \(/experts/william-f-mullen\)](/experts/william-f-mullen), [Daniel Green \(/experts/daniel-green\)](/experts/daniel-green)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[William F. Mullen \(/experts/william-f-mullen\)](/experts/william-f-mullen)

Brig. Gen. William F. Mullen III, USMC, is a twenty-seven-year Marine infantry officer based in Quantico, Virginia, who served in Fallujah from 2005-2007.



[Daniel Green \(/experts/daniel-green\)](/experts/daniel-green)

Daniel Green is deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, a position he began in March 2019 after serving as Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Two longtime veterans of American military operations in Iraq share their assessments of the campaign against the Islamic State as Iraqi forces prepare to liberate the city of Mosul.

On September 22, Brig. Gen. William F. Mullen III, USMC, and Daniel Green addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mullen, the commanding general of Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command at Twenty-Nine Palms, California, has led U.S. forces on multiple fronts, including the Fallujah area of Iraq. Green is a defense fellow at the Institute and recently served in Iraq as a Sunni tribal analyst for the U.S. Navy. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

WILLIAM MULLEN

U.S. involvement in Iraq today faces constraints that were previously absent. The biggest difference now is the dramatically reduced U.S. footprint and control over operations. Coalition forces, especially the American component, often struggle with impatience because their preferred timeline for operations does not match that of the Iraqis. Moreover, the initial stagnancy of the Iraqi ground forces made it difficult to independently verify Iraqi intelligence regarding enemy targets, though the coalition was able to spot and strike them once Baghdad began conducting offensives into Islamic State-controlled areas.

The opponent has evolved as well. While the Islamic State's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, faced constraints on its brutality due to the influence of al-Qaeda Central, IS today behaves in ways that are brutal beyond belief.

In the current situation, measuring progress depends on perspective. Despite Western impatience, political and military imperatives dictate that the upcoming offensive to retake Mosul be an indigenous Iraqi effort, which means that it will happen on an Iraqi timeline. From an Iraqi perspective, the campaign is progressing well, as forces are currently engaged in setting the stage for the Mosul offensive.

Looking to the future, the success of the current campaign will depend on the Iraqi government's ability to capitalize on the coalition air campaign, regain sovereign control, and push IS underground. The hope is that as Iraqi forces push toward Mosul, IS will flee, as they did in Fallujah previously.

Still, brute force will not achieve coalition aims in the absence of political progress. The Iraqi government must attempt to reconcile with Sunni tribes and populations in order to undermine the insurgency that will likely follow an IS defeat. Religious leaders have a vital role to play in this war by discrediting the radical interpretation of Islam that underlies the IS caliphate. Iraqis must also resolve the question of Kurdish autonomy, reestablish a monopoly on the legitimate use of force by bringing all Shiite militias under government control, and gradually push out Iranian influence now that IS no longer threatens Baghdad. Moreover, the Iraqi military still faces enormous challenges due to a widely ingrained culture of corruption that is likely to endure for some time.

Despite the importance of political progress, the reality is that the military aspect of the Mosul offensive will occupy the attention of Iraqi forces for the time being. Given that the United States lacks the influence over the Iraqi government that it once had, this war will be fought on Iraqi terms. Political progress will come, but it remains secondary to the military imperative of retaking Mosul -- especially since the campaign is a significant burden on the Iraqi economy. Western players may not approve of this strategy, but they may not have a choice as the Iraqi government chooses to confront its challenges one at a time.

DANIEL GREEN

Sunni Arab tribes play a vital role in the Iraqi political landscape and the ongoing conflict. Today's war is not as amenable to quick technological or monetary solutions as past conflicts seemed to be. It requires in-depth knowledge of the human terrain outside Baghdad, including the cultural and social dimensions that underlie the fighting.

Unfortunately, U.S. institutional knowledge of the Iraqi tribal landscape has diminished since the troop surge of 2007. Although the Marine Corps and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad institutionalized such knowledge to some extent, tribal relations today face new obstacles. Chief among them is the U.S. military's rotational system, which develops well-rounded officers but often hinders the development of expertise on certain issues. The small size of the U.S. footprint also hampers tribal engagement, while embassy control over tribal relations complicates military coordination, potentially obstructing outreach. Moreover, the fact that many tribes now cooperate with IS or live under its control makes it difficult to arrange meetings in Baghdad. Moving forward, the United States should consider developing a long-term rotation schedule in order to entrench the military's understanding of Iraq's human terrain and tribal history.

Regarding the current campaign, one must consider the conflict's political dimensions. The air war has degraded IS to the point where it is beginning to behave less like a state and more like an insurgent group, but there are limits to what can be achieved with airpower alone. Once IS has been defeated militarily, it will likely transform into a low-level insurgency, but the persistence of that insurgency will depend on the post-IS political landscape. To undermine the coming insurgency, the Iraqi government must build a legitimate and inclusive government, reconcile with Sunni tribal organizations, and rebuild trust between the population and rulers in newly liberated areas.

Despite these daunting tasks, there is some reason for optimism. Reconciliation involves both bottom-up and top-down arrangements; by that standard, the reconciliation process is already occurring as government forces and Shiite militias work with local partners to liberate certain areas from IS. Additionally, the group's brutality against the population has caused it to lose legitimacy in some areas. Meanwhile, many local tribal leaders have been stepping up and filling security gaps, using their own resources to provide humanitarian assistance and fighting capabilities.

The long-term focus should remain on restoring Iraqi sovereignty and building a legitimate government free of interference by outside players like Iran. This process starts with demobilization of the various Shiite militias that are outside government control, even though many of them are militarily stronger than Iraqi forces. And it should culminate with reconciliation between the Shiite-led government and the Sunni population, since this relationship will be key to curbing the Islamic State's appeal moving forward.

This summary was prepared by Kendall Bianchi. ❖

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