The Liberation of Mosul Has Begun

by **Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

If the coalition-backed Iraqi and Kurdish governments make the right deals and send the right messages, the nascent campaign to retake the city could be very different from the military slogs in Tikrit and Ramadi.

"No one talks about liberating Mosul anymore," I wrote for *Foreign Policy* in August (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/no-one-talks-about-liberating-mosul-anymore) , as Iraq's war against the Islamic State grinded on inconclusively. But seven months later, with a win in the city of Ramadi under the anti-Islamic State coalition's belt, they're doing more than talking about Mosul: The first phase of the Fatah, or "Conquest," operation to liberate Mosul has begun.

Admittedly, the Iraqi government's announcement this week of its effort to push the line forward near the town of Makhmour, 40 miles southeast of Mosul, is a bit of a red herring. This is just a tidying up of the front line, to push Islamic State rocket teams farther back from Iraqi and U.S. bases, including Forward Operating Base Bell, where U.S. Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Louis Cardin was killed by indirect fire on March 19.

But though Mosul will not be liberated next week, or next month, real progress is being made in the war against the Islamic State. Returning from a week in Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan, I found that a lot of interesting things are happening below the surface to pave the way for the real offensive to relieve the city.

It has always been clear that there will be no defeating the Islamic State in Iraq without liberating and stabilizing Mosul. Iraq's second-largest city, home to over 1 million people, Mosul is a major source of funding and manpower for the terrorist group. Positioned just 60 miles west of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, it is a major source of terrorist threats to the Kurds as well.

The new coalition-built 15th Iraqi Army division, which is concentrated in Makhmour, is entering the battle and will be crucial in weakening the Islamic State's grasp on Mosul. I visited this unit at the Taji military base near Baghdad

last autumn as its officers were being trained. The U.S.-trained divisional headquarters staff was mainly from Mosul, and they were itching to get back in the fight for their home province. Many were from the units that collapsed in Mosul during the Islamic State's capture of the city in June 2014, and they clearly felt a degree of shame about how the Iraqi security forces had given way.

I also saw one of the main combat units of the 15th division, the 71st brigade, as it was trained by Australian and New Zealand troops. In the summer of 2015, the Islamic State had battered this unit, after it was twice thrown into battle near Samarra and Fallujah before it had been completely trained and equipped. In one particularly devastating attack, the unit lost its commanding officer to a massive armored suicide truck bomb.

After an extended 10-week retraining, focused on incorporating anti-tank and artillery weapons to defeat the suicide bombs, the 71st brigade is fighting alongside two other 15th division brigades and supporting artillery in the Makhmour peninsula, a corner of Iraqi Kurdistan that is home to many of the Mosul liberation forces.

Makhmour is a good location for the 15th division because it is something of a no man's land -- a place where Iraq's Kurds are comfortable with the presence of Iraqi Army units. Although it is formally within the Kurdistan Regional Government's Erbil province, it was not liberated from Saddam's forces until 2003, over 20 years after the rest of Erbil province was liberated by the Kurds and their Kurdistan Regional Government formed.

Makhmour, which is home to a mixture of Arabs and Kurds, is also a symbol of the pragmatism that is increasingly undergirding the war against the Islamic State. The Kurdistan Region has allowed its rival, the federal government in Baghdad, to host a whole Iraqi army division there -- a mere half-day's drive from the Kurdish capital of Erbil. Baghdad, meanwhile, is paying the salaries of the Iraqi Army 91st brigade (also part of 15th division, stationed near Makhmour) which has always been made up of Kurdish Peshmerga. It is also the only place in Iraq where the Kurds have embraced the U.S.-promoted idea of Sahwa, or Awakening forces, building their own Arab auxiliary force, the Brayati, since 2009 and until this day.

The KRG and the federal government make deals they don't like because the alternatives are worse. The Iraqi army will never be welcome near Kurdistan's borders -- but the Kurds much prefer it to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the predominantly Shiite volunteers who took up arms after the fall of Mosul. In the race to liberate Mosul, the Kurds are backing the Iraqi army and giving it a head start at Makhmour.

BUILDING THE COALITION TO LIBERATE MOSUL

Just as the Kurds accepted the deployment of Iraqi army forces in Makhmour, a lot of thinking is going into the coalition of local actors who will be required to capture Mosul from the Islamic State and stabilize the city the day after its liberation.

Kurdish and local Arab leaders agree on one thing: The PMUs have to play as limited a role as possible, because the predominantly Sunni residents of Mosul could react negatively to the presence of large numbers of Shia fighters. There is likely to be an ancillary role for the PMU -- most probably they will get to liberate Tal Afar, the Islamic State's heart of darkness 40 miles west of Mosul, home to many of the Islamic State's leadership and a place where Shia Turkmen were driven out by the Islamic State after Mosul fell. Many of the Islamic State's key leaders were Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar, as was the case with the movement's forerunner, al Qaeda in Iraq.

As I heard last week in Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan, local leaders also seem to agree on some basic spheres of influence. There is a general agreement that authentic Moslawis (Mosul's urban natives) must rule the city, not the Arab tribal leaders of rural Nineveh province.

The Kurds will undoubtedly play a major role in sling-shooting their favored Moslawis back into the city. One of these actors is former Nineveh governor Atheel al-Nujaifi, who has collected a force of about 3,000 fighters and has

secured Turkish military training plus Kurdish and Turkish artillery support for their advance.

The Kurds are likely to play an important part in the liberation of "left bank" Mosul -- the parts east of the Tigris. These are the areas of the city closest to the Kurdish front lines, and the side of the city where the most Kurds lived. The Christian militias associated with the Kurds will also come from the east with Kurdish support. These forces, backed by multiple Peshmerga brigades and artillery, will tie down important elements of the Islamic State, making the Iraqi army's job easier in predominantly Arab west Mosul. Though involving Peshmerga in the urban battle could risk a negative reaction from Mosul's Arabs, their presence alongside non-Kurdish Moslawi units is probably a risk worth taking.

HOW WILL MOSLAWIS REACT?

The great unknown about the coming battle is how urban Moslawis will react to the imminent prospect of liberation. Mosul was always unique. Until the Islamic State captured the city in 2014, Mosul was never fully conquered -- but never fully compliant either. Al Qaeda never entirely gave up its grip on the criminal underbelly of the city. Mosul was never "surged" by the United States or the Iraqi military.

The Islamic State will have controlled Mosul for at least two years by the time the liberation comes -- compared with nine months in Tikrit and less than six months in Ramadi. It is hard to know how the city's youth have changed over the last two years: A young boy who was 13 when Mosul fell might be a strapping 16-year-old street fighter by the time the fight for the city begins.

If the population stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Islamic State, then the government will simply not be able to recapture Mosul. Thankfully, this is probably the least likely scenario. The visible presence of government forces on Mosul's outskirts will put the Islamic State's grip on the city under unprecedented strain. In all likelihood, the group will choose to limit its defense to certain neighborhoods, and other areas will "self-liberate" as Islamic State fighters pull out.

But Moslawis will take a lot of convincing that liberation is permanent. They will fear the Islamic State's return, so their embrace of government forces may be tentative, particularly in predominantly Arab areas of west Mosul, where the Islamic State has drawn the strongest support. Some areas may already have covertly cut deals with the Iraqi and Kurdish governments before the urban battle even starts, opening the way for their rapid recapture.

After the city is captured, of course, its liberators will face a whole set of new challenges. Whereas most of the areas liberated from the Islamic State have been tribal areas, Mosul is still a city of urbanites. There is a tried and tested formula for resolving intra-communal vendettas in post-Islamic State areas farther south: The tribes work with the security forces to negotiate huge community-wide blood money payments from locals who worked with the Islamic State to those victimized by the Islamic State to bury the hatchet. This is happening right now in Ramadi, Tikrit, and many other places.

But the tribes are not as strong in Mosul city, meaning that the authorities will need another way to tackle the issue of all the abuses that pro-IS locals have heaped upon their fellow Moslawis. If Mosul's residents have been impressed by any aspect of Islamic State rule, it has been the rapid judicial processes that speedily resolve everyday civil conflicts. One option being discussed to minimize revenge killings is quick-fire justice, with local courts rapidly convening to convict known Islamic State affiliates during the short honeymoon period in which Moslawis will look to the state, rather than the gun, for justice.

Some local leaders, notably Atheel al-Nujaifi, believe that the city will need more than justice and security to recover. They posit the need for a fundamental change to Iraq's political order: the creation of a Sunni regional government, akin to the Kurdistan Regional Government next door, bolstered by Turkish-backed trade deals. Others, like Kurdish Moslawi politician Khasro Goran, favor splitting Nineveh into three provinces: Mosul for the Arabs, the Nineveh

Plains for the Christians, and Sinjar for the Yezidis.

These ideas underline the mixture of promise and peril that will unfold as Operation Fatah grinds on toward the liberation of Mosul in late 2016 or early 2017. There are probably as many ideas about the future of Mosul as there are Moslawis inside that beleaguered city -- over 1 million by most estimates.

If the coalition-backed Iraqi and Kurdish governments make the right deals and send the right messages, the liberation of Mosul could be very different from the military slogs in Tikrit and Ramadi. The future of one of Iraq's great cities hangs in the balance: The Moslawis, to a greater extent than any of the other captive populations held in the Islamic State's thrall, will probably get a vote on whether their city rejects outsiders and is reduced to rubble, or makes a deal and metaphorically opens its doors to the liberators as in the sieges of old.

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