

Lessons from Mosul

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Jan 27, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

The northern Iraqi city of Mosul and its province Nineveh have become the predominant hub of Sunni Arab insurgent activity, making them one of the areas least likely to be able to host effective polling for the January 30 elections. In the lead-up to the elections, the Multinational Forces (MNF) and their Iraqi partners launched Operation Founding Fathers in and around the troubled city—a program of boosted daytime and nighttime patrolling, raiding, and border closures carried out by 12,000 U.S. forces and 4,500 Iraqi security forces. In the context of ongoing reevaluation of U.S. military strategy in Iraq, it is worthwhile to look closely at how Mosul has been transformed from one of the safest areas in the Sunni Triangle to the central node of resistance activity in less than twelve months. Such analysis can help determine what steps should be taken to prevent further slippage after current offensive operations conclude.

Background

The Mosul area sits astride a crossroads of commercial and oil transit routes, dominating the main trucking road from Turkey to Baghdad as well as some 500 miles of oil pipelines linking Iraq's northern oilfields to the export hub at Ceyhan, Turkey. The city of two million is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous melting pots in Iraq, with Sunni Arabs making up two-thirds of the current population and the remainder composed of Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrian or Chaldean Christians, and Yezidis. Unfortunately, a number of factors combine to make Mosul the focal point of the Sunni insurgency. Historically, the city and its outlying areas are part of the heartland of Iraq's Sunni community and Baath Party, as well as a traditional recruiting place for the Iraqi military. The villages surrounding Mosul witnessed mass deportation of Kurdish and Turkmen citizens during Saddam Hussein's Arabization initiatives, providing ample fuel for ethnic violence. Currently, the Sunni Arab community in Nineveh province is well-structured to undertake resistance activity, with an estimated 1,100 former flag officers, 2,000 former colonels or lieutenant-colonels, and 4,000 other former officers, plus 103,000 other former soldiers in circulation. Moreover, the tribes of the area span across the Syrian border and throughout the Tigris valley, providing critical links between the Sunni insurgency and financial backers in Syria. Despite all of these negative indicators, however, the Mosul area was remarkably peaceful throughout 2003.

What Went Wrong?

The limited scope of insurgent activity in Mosul during 2003 can be traced directly to the active counterinsurgency and community policing program undertaken by the 20,000-strong U.S. 101st Airborne Division and its capable local partners. The size of the U.S. force in Nineveh province enabled not only denser civil affairs, patrolling, and rapid reaction coverage, but also greater capacity to mentor Iraqi security forces and dispense Commander's Emergency Reconstruction Program (CERP) funding. This latter and much overlooked aspect of the MNF presence had made the 101st Airborne the largest single employer in northern Iraq and a recognized force for good in the community. Beginning in January 2004, however, the force was drawn down to the 8,700-strong Task Force Olympia (built around a Stryker Brigade Combat Team), with a commensurate loss of security, mentoring, and CERP capacity.

Astute insurgent factions such as the Ansar al-Sunnah Army were quick to exploit the situation in Mosul as soon as MNF and Iraqi government focus shifted to crises in Falluja and Najaf. The factors that had made Mosul a success in 2003 were systematically dismantled throughout 2004. Multi-ethnic institutions such as universities were subjected to attack, causing Kurdish and other non-Sunni groups to withdraw in large numbers. On July 14, Usama Yusuf Kashmula, the provincial governor, was assassinated near Mosul, eliminating one of the most effective forces driving disbursement of government revenues and job creation in the city. Reduced MNF presence was exploited through an active program of harassment and exploitation of growing ethnic tension to weaken the predominantly Sunni Arab Iraqi security forces in the area, including the eventual corruption of Mosul police chief Brig. Gen. Mohammed Khayri al-Birhawi and the desertion of 3,200 of 4,000 police officers in November 2004. When the newly arrived 1st U.S. Stryker Brigade Combat Team replaced the experienced 3rd Brigade Team and immediately moved south to take part in operations at Falluja, the insurgents took full advantage of the momentary lack of U.S. forces in Mosul to shatter local Iraqi security forces and seize the city center, demonstrating considerable political tact in the process. In addition to posting a communiqué in mosques that warned against future collaboration, the insurgents announced that shopkeepers should keep their businesses open and that state institutions and banks would be protected by the resistance.

Since the return and subsequent reinforcement of U.S. forces in Mosul, the insurgents have maintained a high-tempo campaign of kidnappings and executions against Iraqi security forces, election officials, local government authorities, and non-Sunni community leaders and civilians. Moreover, although the U.S. military effort there has been largely successful in reducing attacks on U.S. forces (from a high of 180 attacks per week in November to around 70 per week in January, compared to around 35 per week in early 2003), the use of predominantly Kurdish units of the Iraqi security forces is a worrisome development. From November 15 onward, these forces have played a major role in the reestablishment of Iraqi National Guard control in Mosul and its outlying villages, protecting Kurdish enclaves in these areas and further stoking ethnic tensions between the Sunni and Kurdish communities. Kurdish Iraqi National Guard troops have patrolled many Sunni areas in Mosul, with the predominantly Kurdish 36th Commando Battalion used to conduct raids and gather intelligence within the Sunni warren of the Old City. Their practice of wearing Iraqi National Guard uniforms bearing Kurdish flags or traditional baggy peshmerga garb has only exacerbated the tension. This has been particularly evident when such forces operate in outlying villages that are undergoing Iraqi Property and Claims Commission arbitration regarding eventual (legal) reversal of the former Baath regime's Arabization policies.

Policy Implications

Mosul and Nineveh province are of exceptional strategic importance in the struggle for Iraq, given their location along key transportation lines (for oil and for support flowing from Syria to Iraqi insurgent groups) and their status as rich recruiting ground for the Sunni resistance. The more savvy insurgents in Mosul have demonstrated that they prefer a slow-burning war of the knife to a Falluja-style last stand; consequently, the struggle for this area will be protracted.

Following the January 30 elections, Washington will be tempted to draw down the level of U.S. forces in the province. Instead, the United States should be prepared to maintain primary responsibility for security in Mosul throughout 2005. The U.S. presence will be particularly crucial during the summer, when ethnic tensions surrounding the development of a new constitution are likely to be high, and when the resident 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team will rotate out and the new 172nd Brigade Team will arrive. Washington should resist the temptation to rely on controversial Kurdish forces and instead maintain its current strong presence in the province while multi-ethnic forces are reconstituted and intensively mentored. The personnel-intensive program undertaken by the 101st Airborne was a winning recipe, ensuring adequate civil affairs, security, and reconstruction support. Indeed, Mosul is one of the very few places where such a heavy investment of U.S. forces can be easily justified.

Michael Knights is the Mendelow defense fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #950

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)