

THE POLITICAL STAKES OF THE **BATTLE FOR MOSUL**



Shia fighter in the city of Mosul, November 2016 © Patrick Chauvel

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The battle for Mosul was launched on October 17th, 2016, by Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi. It results from a precarious compromise between political-militia groups with contradictory goals. While Iraqi forces struggle to retake the city, the players of the Kurdish-Iraqi coalition fighting Islamic State (IS, al-dawla al-islamiyya) pursue divergent political goals. This article, based on fieldwork on the ground with the various parties to the conflict, conducted since the start of the crisis in June 2014, surveys the political stakes of the battle for Mosul and the battle lines that presage further conflict in the post-IS era.

Official Iraqi government sources say the attack on Mosul is being led by military units under the authority of a political Council involving members of the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) and the US-led Western coalition. In actual fact, this Council has very little control over the forces on the ground. The Shia militias gathered in the “Popular Mobilization Units” (PMUs, *hashd sha’bi*), Turkish army units backed up by Sunni Arab militias (the “National Mobilization”, *hashd watani*), and Christian militias backed by Iraq’s Kurds and the PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) are each playing their own game, each with the aim of establishing themselves in the north of Iraq for the long term. The battle of Mosul is above all a brutal competition to occupy the territory retaken from IS, to control the local population, and to make new political gains at the national level.

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This competition has been exacerbated by the fact that it is an extension of preexisting tensions between Baghdad and the KRG concerning the political status of part of Mosul governorate. Since 2003, the Nineweh Plain and Sinjar, north and west respectively of Mosul city, were under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government but *de facto* under the influence of Massoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*). The unresolved status of these territories prompted parallel institutions to develop alongside Iraqi state institutions—and contradictory modes of governance. Baghdad kept in place its administrative institutions and a police force, and paid civil servant salaries, without this signifying clear sovereignty over these territories. Erbil could deploy armed forces to control the Kurdish population and part of the informal economy. The stake of this dual control was, however, less armed confrontation than it was a political football with which Baghdad and Erbil pressured one another.

IS conquering these areas between June and August 2014 suddenly changed the balance of power. For several months now, the vacuum left by the military retreat of IS has enabled each side to develop new ambitions. In between these two players, the gradual arrival of the Shia militias, the pro-Turkish groups and the PKK has strongly heightened tensions. The fact that there are no prior political agreements regarding the future of Mosul makes a return to the *status quo ante* unimaginable. For the first time since 2003, the Disputed Territories are becoming the fount of new armed conflicts. Far from being a token of stability, the IS retreat risks opening up a second conflict: the battle for control of the Disputed Territories.

“Everyone knows how the battle for Mosul will start but no-one knows how it will end.”¹

¹ Atheel al Nujaifi, former governor of Mosul, interview conducted in Erbil on the eve of the start of military operations, October 2016.

A MULTITUDE OF PLAYERS WITH CLASHING MILITARY PLANS

Without political agreements to organize the post-IS era in Mosul, the decision to attack the city was taken under US pressure. Within this configuration, each armed group's plans are adjusted in haste and, in the absence of a global strategy, struggle to coordinate. In terms of territorial gains, the stakes of the battle are considerable. These are exacerbating the tensions between players who are increasingly militarized, including rivalries between the PDK and the PKK; the self-assertiveness of the Christian and Yezidi minorities within new armed groups; and the Shia militias' attempts to impose themselves as a national force.

On the ground, the forces involved make do with meeting short-term aims with very little purchase on what is to follow. The order of operations is determined day-by-day from a mixed military council within which Iraqi, Kurdish and Western officers sustain a cold peace. From the south, 45,000 Iraqi soldiers from the 16th, 15th, 9th and 17th divisions encircle the city. To the north, the Kurdish PDK and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, *Yekêtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan*) forces are trying to secure the villages of the Nineweh Plain. For lack of sufficiently trained troops, the attack on the city of Mosul itself has been delegated to the Iraqi Special Forces. This Kurdish-Iraqi alliance is very loose and really only functions based on vague agreements on principle: the *peshmerga* are to remain outside Mosul and deploy only in the Disputed Territories (the Nineweh Plain and Sinjar) that were under Kurdish influence before 2014. The Iraqi Army is allowed to deploy from these territories, but under Kurdish supervision—and only temporarily. In principle, no other force is to participate in taking the city. Three more protagonists, however, add to the mix of these first two: the Shia militias, the PKK and Turkey.

Going against the express request of the Iraqi Kurds, the Shia militias have a part in the retaking of Iraq's second city. Several thousand men strong, they follow their own strategy, uncoordinated with the rest of the coalition. These militias are levied from partisan Shia networks, mainly financed by Iran via the Defense Ministry in Baghdad. They are not under the control of the Iraqi Prime Minister. US pressure on Abadi to keep them away

from the battle for Mosul have got nowhere, and the Iraqi Kurds have resigned themselves to see them take part in operations to take the city.

The PKK, allied with both the Shia militias and with Baghdad, is increasingly present in the Disputed Territories. Part of the Yezidi branch of the PKK, the People's Protection Units (YBS, *Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*) is accredited by the Defense Ministry, from which, like the Shia militias, they receive a salary. Under cover of the battle against IS, they enable Baghdad to counter the PDK's re-installation within the Disputed Territories. Taking advantage of the political vacuum in some Kurdish areas from which IS has been withdrawing, the PKK is developing its own civil institutions and its governance model. Training camps allow it to build up its numbers in case of rapid advances. Its establishment in Sinjar through the YBS allows it to position itself with the aim of potentially establishing itself in future in the Kurdish and Yezidi neighbourhoods of Mosul.

Finally, Turkey is another player in this battle. It seeks to counter the PKK and the arrival of the Shia militias in the north of Iraq by deploying a military contingent around Mosul. Allied to the PDK, Turkish forces have equipped 3,000 Sunni Arabs officially led by the former Governor of Mosul Atheel al-Nujayfi. This militia allows them to intervene in operations without Baghdad's agreement, and at a distance from the international coalition of which Ankara is leery.

POLITICAL TENSIONS AND GROWING INSTABILITY

The US remains focused on military stakes and has no post-IS strategy. The attack on the Iraqi capital of the Caliphate is led by a coalition of politicized armed forces with no prior agreement between them: neither on security arrangements after the battle, nor on interim modes of governance. The question of the city's political reintegration within the Iraqi political system remains a mystery. The «military-only» solution decreed against IS has created a situation of instability for two reasons. Firstly, the timetable for operations is extremely tight. The coalition imposed it to fit the US electoral calendar; it thus concentrates exclusively on military aims and bypasses the question of resolving political tensions. The US State Department has no strategy, and the Pentagon

nonetheless remains the key player on the battlefield. With no clear political mandate, the US military is unable to create political compromises, faced with allies whose aims are too contradictory. But the absence of real consultation between the five armed forces deployed on the battlefield sharply increases political tensions as they conquer IS territory.

To speed matters, the American coalition has been distributing weapons on a massive scale, taking no account of the true aims of each of the groups. The implantation of Kurdish forces in the Disputed Territories, for instance, occurred with no long-term guarantees, thereby risking future conflict with Baghdad. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Army's return to the north of the country is sharpening Baghdad's anti-Kurdish leanings. US support for the PKK's Syria branch (YPG, People's Protection Units, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*) allows the organization to take part in the Mosul operations. The PKK's comeback in Syria has increased tensions with the PDK and given Turkey a pretext to intervene in the battle for Mosul. Finally, short for time, the US coalition, seeks to back the formation of Sunni tribal militias to increase the number of troops on the ground, prompting an outraged reaction from Baghdad, the PDK and the Shia militias, all alarmed at the entrance of a new, uncontrollable player in the battle.

Secondly, no post-IS governance solution has been thought through. The war against IS, and the accompanying power vacuum, has opened up a bonanza in which each military force seeks to maximize its control over the Disputed Territories. Within this context, there is no civil administration ready to take over Mosul. Baghdad has named a new governor, but he has neither the local networks nor

sufficient manpower to achieve his aims. Faced with a local population at its wits' end after over two years of IS occupation, the return of Iraqi state institutions is urgent but risks being radically slowed by a shortage of managers and resources. With military tensions building, each side is moving towards ever more arbitrary measures. While they wait for Mosul to be retaken, the local population is being sent to refugee camps under Kurdish or Iraqi control after an express and arbitrary filtering process of residents said to be «pro-IS». Far from enabling the return of a civil administration, the security-only approach is the only governance model envisaged, reminiscent of how the city was administered by Iraqi elites before IS arrived: a permanent state of siege, growing militarization and authoritarian governance incapable of taking into account local initiatives. These were precisely the factors that allowed IS to take the city within a few days.

The battle for Mosul is the last phase of the reconquest of Iraq. It is the final act of a divided political and military landscape on the verge of new battles. Through the war on IS, militia-formation has increased exponentially in these areas. Security rent has become the main source of income for families, and the militia structures that were set up will not be dissolved any time soon. The post-IS political system relies more on a military balance of power than on an institutional one. Most of the political parties have militias and declare themselves ready to use them against their rivals. Short of any negotiations, none of the players is ready to make concessions. Quite the opposite: the capture of Mosul is seen as the last opportunity to set up one's pawns for an uncertain future. In this context, a security-based rationale predominates, and is offered up by all players as the only way out of the crisis.

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Born in Paris in 1949, Patrick has covered more than 30 conflicts in 49 years of war reporting. His photographs were distributed by Sipa Press, Sygma and he has worked with dozens of magazines like Newsweek, Time, Life, Stern, Paris Match, and VSD. He was awarded the World Press spot news prize, the Missouri prize, the Kodak prize and the Angers prize. Acclaimed author of three books: *Rapporteur de guerre* (2003), *Sky* (2005) and *Les pompes de Ricardo Jesus* (2012), he also directed several documentaries. His complete work, witness to nearly fifty years of international history, half a century of memory, have now been brought together at the "Fonds Patrick Chauvel".