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Mosul Offensive Reveals Larger Geopolitical Game Plan

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Iraqi and Kurdish forces, backed by US-led airstrikes and British and French special forces, launched coordinated military operations early on Monday as the long-awaited fight to wrest the northern city of Mosul from Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, IS and Daesh) got underway. According to Kurdish reports, Peshmerga forces now control the main road linking Mosul with the Iraqi Kurdish regional capital, Erbil, further to the east.

On the face of it, this means the Iraqi government is trying to retake control of its territory. But this idea does not bear close examination. This attempt to recapture Mosul is a considerable

humiliation to Iraq. The very forces it refused to allow to take this city are conducting this operation in its name, but in search of an outcome which will weaken Iraq even further.

Turkish president Erdogan has been insisting that Turkey would play a role in the offensive because only Turkey can prevent a regional schism along ethnic lines, as Mosul is divided between Turkmen and Kurds. But Baghdad understands Turkey's motivation, and even stated prior to the operation that Iraqi forces were ready to take on the Turkish Army should they get involved in Mosul.

Now we find that the assault is being conducted by Iraqi forces trained by Turkey at the Bashiqa camp in northern Iraq. Therefore this is in effect a Turkish operation by proxy, not one organised by the Iraqi government. Other Iraqi troops could have been used, but Turkish-trained units have been chosen, thereby increasing Turkish influence within Iraq, the Mosul region and the US-led team reconstructing Iraq.

So some deal has been done to conduct another strategic handover of Mosul – the initial IS takeover, engineered by the US being the first. But why is this happening? What is keeping the Iraqi out of their own city, but manufacturing tacit Iraqi approval of this process, supposed to achieve?

Too many words for comfort

The Iraqi PM's announcement of the start of the Mosul offensive, broadcast by the BBC, made no mention of Turkey. It merely stated that it involved US and Kurdish forces. That in itself was suspicious. But other aspects of the announcement were even more so.

It is clear that the media coverage has been organised in collaboration with policy planners. The same story is being carried all across the media, and sounds as if the same journalist has written it. Whatever is actually going on, we were only ever going to hear one story, which was not written by the Iraqi government.

We already knew that something was cooking. Various media sources reported prior to the announcement that "the battle for Mosul is expected to be the biggest ground assault in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003." The United Nations warned that it could also result in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, threatening to displace as many as one million people. Heavy bombing in a city as densely populated as Mosul is always likely to result in high civilian casualties – or to put it in politically correct language, "collateral damage".

The US reportedly began preliminary airstrikes on Mosul on the 13th of October. Sources on the ground say that there are now 5,000 US troops inside Iraq, there to provide support for this operation. But making it a US offensive would have posed problems. The US is fighting with the IS in Syria and supports it with arms, personnel and money. It has also had to deal with a number of controversies about its involvement in Iraq, from the justification for the original invasion to the tactics, such as waterboarding, it has used.

So the operation has now to be presented as an Iraqi operation. This cannot be the reality however, as the Iraqi Army has been reduced to an ineffective force unable to carry out operations without support from other forces, as a result of wholesale desertions to IS and large numbers of troops simply going home. Many of these returners were paid to do so by the US, which is why Mosul fell so easily in the first place. NEO was the first journal to report that the fall of Mosul to the IS was actually a strategic handover.

In order for anything to be an Iraqi operation, it needs to be conducted by Iraqi troops led by someone else. The Iraqi themselves were happy with the US leading this operation, but not with Turkey doing so. Turkey is fighting to create a Greater Kurdistan it can deport its own Kurds to prevent Turkish territory being lost in this process. It has no more intention of regaining Mosul for Iraq as the US has for removing the IS without continuing to make a profit.

But now Iraq has had to accept a transfer of Mosul from the anti-Iraqi IS – who according to analyst Gordon Duff were not IS at all, but Turks and Peshmerga Kurds imported for the purpose – to the anti-Iraq Turks under the guise of their own forces. This will legitimise any future breakup of the country – Iraq liberated Mosul, so Iraq can agree to give it away. But it will do nothing to unite Iraq, which is the ostensible purpose of retaking the city from a separatist group not under the control of the Iraqi government.

For the greater bad

The Islamic State (IS) took control of Mosul, a city of over a million people, in June 2014 and declared its caliphate shortly after. Since then, this majority Sunni city has become a stronghold for the group, and is the largest population centre it controls.

However, the force doing the bulk of the fighting in Iraq is not IS but the Shiite Hashd militia, which is trained, led and equipped by Iran, and is modelled on the Iranian Republican Guard. This is in contrast to the situation in other areas where the IS is strong, and gives further credence to the idea that the Mosul “IS” are not IS at all.

It is the Hashd boots-on-the-ground which has given Iran more control and influence over Southern Iraq than the Baghdad government. They have created speculation that Iran will annex the southern half of Iraq, which is Shia in orientation, as is Iran.

The threat of partitioning Iraq between a Sunni Kurdish state effectively controlled by Turkey and a Shia province of Greater Iran in the south is a very real one. We have seen Turkish-Iranian relations improve recently, with new trade deals being signed, etc. There is a similar ethnic mix in both countries, and both need to maintain local export corridors which do not depend on sea routes.

On this, geopolitical analyst Phil Butler weighs in:

“This Turkey-Iran aspect bears deep scrutiny if one zooms out on the geo-strategy map. With Turkey gravitating into the Russian sphere, and if Syria is lost, Mosul is the only outpost from

which the US might contain Russia from the south. This is, of course, if our fears of a hot war materialise.”

Partition is a threat Iraq can do little to stop. The original US invasion of the country and prolonged occupation have left it powerless to resist the whims of US policymakers, and deprived it of the respect to be listened to by them. The fact that the Greater Khorasan movement in Afghanistan is also seeking, without much publicity, to create a Greater Iran which would include parts of Afghanistan only encourages the US to present the breakup of Iraq as inevitable.

Either Iraq accepts the effective handing over of Mosul to the Turks or it will have no help against Iran. It cannot salvage both situations but must pick one. It has been obliged to take the one option it didn't want on the grounds that that is the only way of achieving anything at all, but we will have to see if it does achieve anything by doing so.

Tomorrow is not another day

If Mosul is recaptured, what happens next? There is a story that Obama has struck a deal for the 9,000 IS fighters in Mosul to withdraw into Syria, where they would be used to retake Palmyra and Deir-Ezzur. The US needs both more controlled troops in Syria and a propaganda victory in Iraq, so that makes sense.

There has also been real concern among intelligence experts that an “October Surprise” is needed provide smoke for the US elections. It will go beyond what happened in 2008, when an attempt was made to use Georgia to beef up warmonger John McCain's presidential candidacy. An assault on Mosul would fit the bill, particularly if the only sovereign state which could take credit for it was the US, not Turkey.

But the US too is vulnerable. As we have seen in the aftermath of the Turkish coup, Erdogan is presently able to get away with anything. A secret deal between Turkey and Iran, which bypasses the US, could also have been concluded. They would split Iraq between them, with the Turks taking the north, including Mosul and Erbil, and the Iraqi taking the south, including Baghdad and Basra. This would be waved in the face of the US, but it could do little about it if this was seen internationally as the peaceful way to end the conflict.

There is one solution which would enable both sides to get what they want without being outflanked by the other. It is to follow the original plan of creating a Kurdish state in the region controlled by anyone but the Kurds. Various Kurdish groups have been fighting for their own state for centuries, but that is exactly why they have not achieved one. Their lands divided between often mutually hostile countries, and the enemy of one group has become the friend of another by default.

The present conflicts in the Middle East have, by the merest coincidence, given the Kurds greater common ground than ever before. All the Kurds are fighting for autonomy with US protection, although the same US is making sure they never see it. A Kurdish homeland created through constant attritional war against both oppressor national governments and more radical Islamists would be the best way of resolving that war.

Everyone could walk away with dignity, providing that state had the correct orientation, and it was presented as much the gift of the states it was carved out of. If Syria has to accept this to get its country back, so be it. If Iraq has to create it to save the rest of its territory, so be it. The only question is whether Turkey can be persuaded to make the same sacrifices – one of the factors behind the coup attempt on Erdogan planned by the US, before the Turkish president preempted it with his own.

Turkey's involvement in this operation gives it the chance to both support US policy and try and emerge from the creation of a Kurdish state intact by casting that state more in its own image. As long as the US gets that state, it is happy. What condition will Mosul be left in as a result? As bad a one as possible – which is why the word “offensive” is being used to describe this operation.