

## Will the Battle for Mosul Change the Power of the Kurds in Iraq?

Written by Marianna Charountaki

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MARIANNA CHAROUNTAKI, NOV 14 2016

The Islamic State's offensive on 9 June 2014 against Mosul and the largely Sunni areas in Iraq, and its advances during a brief fifteen-day period (1–15 August 2014) towards Kurdish territory, some 40 kilometres southwest of Erbil (6 August 2014), transformed the course of the war, and profoundly affected the morale of both the Iraqi army and the *peshmerga* forces.

However, the subsequent *Peshmerga*'s victories, their regrouping and reorganisation in a relatively speedy time, by dealing effectively with local and regional security dangers, established their role as the main buffer against the Islamic State, which aims to firmly establish its own structures. Despite Kurdish difficulties in securing external (and internal) aid, i.e. equipment and advanced weaponry, the *peshmerga*, who had no previous experience in frontline wars, confronted IS and did so successfully, to the extent that they have evolved into players in their own right.

The recapturing of Kurdish territories in a fairly quick time demonstrated that the Kurds of Iraq are not only an increasingly significant political but also a rising military regional power. Their role as an intrinsic part of the anti-IS coalition forces on the war against terror has gradually upgraded them into a globally-recognised force.

The brutal war against IS also strengthened the position of the KRG at the negotiating table with Baghdad, *mutatis mutandis* their different status, as partners of equal importance. Regular visits and exchange of delegations between the dipole Erbil-Baghdad as well as cooperation between the *peshmerga* forces and the Iraqi army, has revealed the actual role the Kurds continue to play in Iraq in the sense that the resolution of Iraqi affairs is now a shared matter where one pole is dependent on the other. From the very beginning, operations against the IS and especially in the Kurdistan Region, have clearly shown that just as the KRG has to consider Baghdad in facing rising challenges, the Central Government cannot solve problems without the KRG's support and cooperation. Thus the war against the IS compelled both Erbil and Baghdad, and especially the latter, to revisit the traditional perception of a one-way power relation, and acknowledge some parity.

This notion was further reinforced while Kurdish operations against the IS brought the KR closer to some European powers such as Germany or France, as well as consolidating relations with other international powers on an institutional and strategic basis. The role played by the *peshmerga* and their military cooperation with international forces, including the Americans, has considerably strengthened the already existing US-Kurdish relations, as I have constantly argued. Foreign aid and support has also proved a critical factor in facilitating *peshmerga*'s fighting and further the consolidation of the Kurdish status in Iraq.

Moreover the effect of the Kurdish fighters as the main frontline troops against IS – albeit in perhaps not the most auspicious way – has contributed to the strengthening of the Kurdish army as it has had the opportunity to advance its strategy and policies, even though this had not been easy after a lengthy abstention from involvement in hostilities.

Mosul is critically important for both Kurds and Arabs. Whoever controls Mosul controls the Syro-Iraqi border. It is thus believed to be the key to the defeat of the IS, but also the essential connecting line between Erbil and Baghdad. Mosul has functioned as a strategically-located warehouse for the IS and its army, en route between Syria and Iraq.

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In Mosul, IS not only captured 1,700 of the Iraqi army's tanks and 86,000 other weapons, it also seized an oil refinery along with chemical weapons, all of which were used primarily against the *peshmerga*. The Allied capture of Mosul – the last major IS stronghold in Iraq – will indeed determine the future of the war against IS.

Competing claims for the control of Mosul has been a consistent factor in the history of the Middle East. It is noteworthy that the discovery of oil in the Vilayet of Mosul – part of the Kurdish region prior to Mustafa Kemal's successful War of Independence (1922) – was a foundational factor in the rise of the Kurdish Issue and another part of the explanation as to why the formation of a Kurdish state never materialized, post-World War I. The creation of Kurdistan was withheld because the Great Powers feared that their regional interests would be prejudiced if an independent Kurdish state was created. This influenced the Powers' decision to let Iraq keep control of the oil-rich Kirkuk and Mosul areas as without them the economic and political viability of the new state of Iraq would have been in jeopardy.

Furthermore, the National Oath (28 January, 1920) during the last term of the Ottoman Parliament appears to outline the potential territories that the new Turkish state planned to include, namely Kirkuk, Mosul, Alexandretta (Hatay), Antakya, Kars, Ardahan, Batum and Aleppo, with the Aegean Sea described as 'open sea' and with provisions for a referendum in Western Thrace. In fact, even during the time of the Safavid Empire, "Turkey" occupied Mosul and Kirkuk. More recently, Turkey tried to deal directly with Baghdad through the establishment of consulates in Mosul and Basra [2008-2009], with 48 agreements and MoUs (*memoranda of understandings*) relating to energy and other economic issues signed in Baghdad in November 2009. Likewise, Mosul remains vital today due to its natural resources after Islamic State prevented the access and transfer of oil along the route near Mosul.

As far as the battle for Mosul is concerned, due to demography and the ethnic make-up of the district, the Kurds are not involved in urban fighting, thus avoiding instigating further problems in an already tense sectarian situation, given its multi-ethnic, predominately Sunni Arab population. Yet Kurdish military operations have ensured that the surrounding areas have been encircled and cleared of IS fighters and suicide bombers. The Kurdish status in Iraq has been consolidated and therefore Kurdish power extends well beyond the fight for Mosul.

Throughout history Mosul has continuously been a critical point of strategic significance both internationally and regionally. The control of Mosul has been a determinant in the structuring of the Middle Eastern region and subsequently Iraq, as well as the current re-formation of the region plus change.

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