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## U.S. MUST CORRECT ITS IRAQ STRATEGY IN THE BATTLE FOR MOSUL

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18.08.2016

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UPI, 17 August 2016

A soldier of Iraqi government forces flashes a victory sign after recapturing the town Zankoura from the Islamic State northwest of Ramadi on June 16. Sectarian tensions have been on the rise since. File Photo by Abbas Mohammed/UPI | License Photo

BRUSSELS, Aug. 17 (UPI) -- Preparations for the battle of Mosul are well underway. Mosul is Iraq's second-largest city with a population of around 2 million.

It has been held by the Islamic State, also known as Daesh, since 2014 and is hailed by the terrorist group as the capital of its self-proclaimed caliphate. Now Iraqi forces, backed by U.S.-coalition airstrikes and with technical support from 500 American troops, have recaptured four villages on the outskirts of Mosul -- Tal Hamid, Qarqasha, Abzakh and Qura Takh -- and are already constructing an airbase near the village of Qayyara, which will be used as a staging post for the impending assault on the city.

However, following the successful recapture of Ramadi and Fallujah from IS, sectarian tensions are on the rise. Shi'ite militias armed and commanded by the Iranian regime spearheaded the so-called 'liberation' of these major Iraqi cities, exploiting the opportunity to exact a brutal campaign of revenge against the predominantly Sunni population.

The Shi'ia-dominated Iraqi government has launched an investigation into allegations of executions and torture of Sunni civilians and the disappearance of over 1,000 Sunni men.

The forces gathered around Mosul include the Kurdish Peshmerga, some fighters loyal to the pro-Sunni former governor of the city and a number of Shi'ia militias who make up the popular mobilization movement. Leaders of the Peshmerga have expressed fears that the political objectives of the diverse military forces poised to recapture Mosul are widely contradictory.

Sheikh Lakhman Sharawani, a Kurdish military commander, says the Sunni population of Mosul fear they will face the same fate as their brothers and sisters in Ramadi and Fallujah. They fear that the Iranian-led Shi'ia militias are taking advantage of the war against IS to implement a ruthless policy of ethnic cleansing in Iraq's Sunni provinces.

Last month, New York-based Human Rights Watch asked Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to exclude the Shi'ia militias from the battle for Mosul. But there is little hope that this will happen, as the Iraqi military is so riven with corruption that few believe it has the capacity to mount an effective offensive against IS without the assistance of the militias. Abadi, a puppet of the theocratic Iranian regime, has allowed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Gen. Qasem Soleimani to take command of the Shi'ia militias inside Iraq.

Soleimani and the IRGC are listed as international terrorists. Soleimani directed the attack on Fallujah, which led to widespread destruction, with most buildings in the city damaged or destroyed. Thousands of civilians were killed and injured and men and boys were ruthlessly rounded up and tortured by the brutal Shi'ia militias, who claimed they are trying to identify Daesh militants fleeing from the crumbling metropolis.

The widespread purge of Sunnis from the political scene in Iraq and their brutal repression led by the 63 separate pro-Iranian Shi'ia militias, means that many Sunnis fear the sectarian militias more than they fear IS. Indeed the eventual collapse of IS in Iraq will not herald a new dawn of peace and safety for the beleaguered Iraqi people. Such is the corrupt and decrepit state of Iraq's crumbling political system that any vacuum created by the removal of Daesh may be quickly filled by new and menacing sectarian threats to security.

But U.S. pledges of airstrike and logistical support for the Shi'ia militias surrounding Mosul may prove to be a costly mistake with the price being paid by innocent Sunni men, women and children who face imminent death and destruction. The real victors will be the mullahs in Tehran who will forever thank U.S. President Barack Obama for helping them to ethnically cleanse Iraq of its Sunni population and to enable their theocratic Iranian regime to extend its evil influence exponentially across the Middle East.

By defeating IS in Mosul, Obama wants to leave a good foreign policy legacy for himself or at least to decrease his disastrous legacy of failure in Iraq and Syria. But this cannot happen by using Shi'ia militias affiliated to the Quds force at the expense of the Iraqi Sunni population. America's ominous cooperation with the criminal Shi'ia militias, even if it ultimately leads to the expulsion of IS from Mosul, will strengthen the jihadists in the long term and as soon as the U.S. military and air force leave Iraq, IS will return.

If he wants to preserve any kind of reputation in the Middle East, Obama needs to do several things. Firstly he must insist on the expulsion of the Shi'ia militias from Nineveh province; they can be replaced by actively recruiting and organizing local Sunni tribes and forces in Mosul and its suburbs. The United States should arm and train these recruits and treat them as an equal partner in the liberation of Mosul, as they are the only ones who can keep IS out of Nineveh Province in the long term.

Secondly, the United States should strengthen the Iraqi army, purging it of all pro-Iranian elements.

Thirdly, Obama must be seen to support al-Abadi in his bid to carry out radical reforms.

No one can expect a miracle in Iraq. But leaving a wrecked and devastated Iraq will not be a sound legacy for Obama. If he adopts the correct strategy, he still has time. Even if by Jan. 20, the battle for Mosul is still raging, it will be a just and honorable battle to the credit of Obama. But a shattered Mosul, 2 million homeless Sunni men, women and children and IS waiting in the wings to re-emerge, will not be an honor or distinction for anyone.

Struan Stevenson, president of the European Iraqi Freedom Association, was a member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2014 and was president of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iraq from 2009 to 2014.

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