
IRAQ'S NEVER-ENDING WOES

23.11.2016

Daily Times, 23 Nov 2016

By: S P Seth

Much is expected from the battle for Mosul in Iraq. It is hoped that if Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, is liberated from the IS, it would significantly curb the new kind of terrorist menace that it represents. Ever since the IS dramatically captured some important Iraqi towns and declared a caliphate, it became the centre for foreign jihadis who flocked to fight under its flag. They did so for all sorts of reasons that included social alienation, discrimination and isolation, and to restore the previously lost Islamic pride and glory from the perceived western humiliation of the Islamic world, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The IS-proclaimed caliphate, thus, became the rallying point for many Muslim youths looking for adventure, for righting historical wrongs, and to have a sense of power by creating fear through grotesque killings, particularly in western countries like France and Belgium. The IS encouraged the alienated and angry Muslim youth in western countries to serve the cause in whatever way, including by individual acts of violence in countries of their residence and/or targeting events where people congregated for sports, entertainment avenues and so on. If the battle for Mosul is won, it is likely that the pace and the number of random and lone wolf attacks would increase in the targeted western countries and elsewhere to keep up the IS brand. But, here it is important to point out that all through the Middle East cauldron where the US-led coalitions have sought to enforce their writ, the military victory was the easy part, though it might not be as easy against the IS in Mosul where they have dug in to fight to the finish, because many of them might not have anywhere else to go. And their defences are multilayered from hidden explosives of all kinds that include explosive-laden trucks, suicide bombers, blowing up oil installations to create mushroom clouds to interfere with US aerial bombing and whatever else might be feasible.

The IS has known about the Iraqi counter-offensive for quite some time and they have had enough time to work out their strategy to impede and frustrate the attack. But they are arrayed against forces with tremendous firepower backed by US aerial bombardment. It appears that the IS might not be able to hold on for too long and would need to disperse into smaller and more mobile guerrilla units, requiring the Iraqi coalition of regular Iraqi forces, Iranian-backed Shiite militia, and

Kurdish peshmerga fighters to be in a state of constant readiness. There will be enough mayhem caused by the suicide bombing in towns like Baghdad, already hit hard by such explosions.

However, in some ways, the bigger challenge would come after the IS has been pushed out of Mosul. And that challenge would be to hold together the fractious Iraqi coalition, as their interests do not converge apart from putting together a common front, as far as possible, against the IS. For instance, Iraqs Kurds already have an autonomous state, virtually independent of the federal government. And they would like it to become a reality. But Iraqs Shia government, as well as its Shia population, are not inclined to see the country split.

The Iraqi government wants to limit the Kurdish peshmerga forces role in the liberation of Mosul to the outskirts of the city. Indeed, the Kurdistan Regional Governments prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, had said that the peshmerga would play a central role in the liberation of Mosul, which has a minority Kurdish population. Iraqs Shiite government, on the other hand, would like peshmerga to withdraw from Mosul as soon as the battle would be over. The role of Shiite militias is also highly controversial, because of Irans involvement and backing. It is controversial regionally from Sunni governments, as well as within Iraq among its minority Sunni population.

Mosul is a majority Sunni city, and the record of Iraqs Shiite government under its former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, was atrocious for its treatment of the Sunnis generally. The compact that the US had forged with Sunni tribal chiefs during 2006-7 against the al Qaeda insurgency in Iraq had helped to virtually eliminate the movement at the time. As part of a general understanding with the Iraqi Shia regime, these Sunni units were to become an integral part of the regular Iraqi forces, which did not eventuate because the Baghdad regime was against it. Instead, they went out hunting for Sunnis and tortured and killed a good number in the process, thus, destroying the nebulous compact that was designed to create a cohesive Iraq.

And it was out of this that the IS emerged and managed to capture some major Iraqi towns, like Mosul, in 2014, creating the outline of an expanded caliphate. They seemed to have the passive support/submission of much of the Sunni population against the backdrop of the atrocities of its Shia government. As the Iraqi coalition forces have advanced towards Mosul, it is increasingly emerging that the IS has outlived its welcome and the residents of the liberated villages are relieved that they might not have to live under the IS rule.

There are, however, two problems here. First, will the advancing Shiite forces regard the civilian Sunni population with suspicion? Second, as they start the screening process, will it turn into a general witch-hunt, leading to torture and killings? Therefore, any military victory, unless it is followed up by a comprehensive policy of social and political inclusion, is likely to make things worse because of the fractious nature of the Iraqi coalition on the ground with their competing and contradictory agenda, apart from a shared enemy in the IS. As if the Sunni-Shia sectarianism,

compounded by the Kurdish component, was not enough, Turkey is also threatening to jump into the fray, demanding a role in the military operations and the final disposition of Iraq's fate. It is demanding a determining role for three reasons. First, it seeks to become the protector of the Sunnis as well as the small Turkmen population of Mosul's 1.5 million people. Turkey is also keen to be in the fray to neutralise and, possibly, contain Shia Iran's perceived dominant influence over Baghdad.

However, Iraq is dead set against Ankara's self-appointed role in the region. Its prime minister has even threatened war with Turkey if its troops and armour headed in Mosul's direction. The US has tried to justify a role for Ankara to pacify the situation but there is no resolution. In other words, we have a situation potentially where the emerging Iraq-Turkish confrontation is likely to make an already difficult situation a lot more volatile.

The second reason for Turkey is that it wants to be in the region to keep a lid on Kurdish ambitions overlapping with the separatist/insurgent PKK Kurdish movement in its southeastern region. In the wake of the failed military coup in Turkey, Erdogan's government is going after Turkey's legitimate predominantly Kurdish political party, HDP, which has 59 seats in the Turkish parliament. But these members have been deprived of their parliamentary immunity and are being rounded up for alleged links with PKK.

The third reason is that Turkey under Erdogan, especially after the failed military coup, appears keen to establish a historical claim to the region from the Ottoman times when its far-flung Middle Eastern territories were carved out under an Anglo-French agreement following WW1. If one looks at the complex interplay of forces in Mosul, any hope about the future seems bleak, to put it mildly.

Kaynak/Source: