
THE LOGJAM IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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A few days ago, the Iraqi army launched its second offensive in the last six months to recapture Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that has controlled the city and its surroundings for almost three years. Although the first operation by the Iraqi forces, with the air support of the U.S.-led coalition, to shake ISILs control over Mosul began on Oct. 17, 2016, only the eastern part of the city was finally liberated on Jan. 24 after months of heavy fighting. The second offensive will focus on the western part of the Tigris River that divides the city on an east-west axis.

This is a daunting task, as the ISIL-controlled part of Mosul is densely populated and the geographical conditions are not suitable for an easy way out. U.N. agencies estimate that there are between 650,000-800,000 civilians trapped in the city with scarce food and drinking water, and four out of five bridges across the Tigris River have been destroyed. Moreover, ISIL militants use civilians as cover and have the advantage of hiding and slipping away through an extensive network of tunnels that have been dug over the last three years.

The concerns about the presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians led the Iraqi government to drop thousands of leaflets over western Mosul to inform trapped civilians about the incoming assault and appeal to ISIL militants once again to surrender. However, leaflets do scarce good for the confined civilians, who are willing but unable to leave.

While the fight in Iraq against ISIL has intensified with the latest move of the Iraqi army, the peace talks in Geneva, due to start on Feb. 23, affect the Syrian agenda, where the fight against ISIL is still being carried out by the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and regime forces. While the cease-fire, which was brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran in late December 2016 between various rebel groups and the Syrian army, is generally holding, no one expects a breakthrough in Geneva so long as ISIL commands wide swathes of the country.

The competing priorities of local, regional, and international actors that are involved in the Syrian imbroglio further complicate any possible settlement. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the Donald Trump administration in the U.S., which asked for a new strategy to be prepared by the Pentagon within 30 days, also undermines the efforts of other actors. So far, the statements by various U.S. officials have signaled wider alternative actions, including sending additional troops to the region, creating a safe zone within Syria, supporting Kurdish groups to take Raqqa and reinforcing the joint Russian-Turkish-Iranian cease-fire effort.

The Trump administrations seemingly unexperienced and, so far, shaky behavior in foreign policy

has already created confusion and contradictory expectations in international politics and in the region. While Trump expressed his wish to destroy ISIL totally, he also tried to halt the travel of citizens from seven Muslim countries, including Iraq and Syria, into the U.S. His inclusion of Iraq on the travel ban particularly created tension with Iraq, whose prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, is under constant pressure in his country to reduce cooperation with the U.S. The latest Mosul operation started amid these tensions, while the visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to Iraq on Feb. 20 has somewhat eased the relationship and laid the ground for more effective coordination against ISIL in Mosul.

In both cases, in addition to the various domestic and regional complications, the current wait-and-see attitude of most of the actors involved is the result of the uncertainty surrounding the U.S. position and intention. Once that is determined, we will see movement once again.

Kaynak/Source: