
BIGGEST TEST AFTER MOSUL

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It was over a month ago that Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Al Abadi announced that the battle to recapture the city of Mosul was entering its final stages.

But seven months after the military operation began, Iraqi troops are yet to take control of the heart of the heavily populated western sector of the city.

Daesh fighters are refusing to give anything away without a bitter struggle.

The Iraqi forces are backed by US-led coalition jets, which have intensified their bombing raids, sometimes with catastrophic results.

On March 17, US air strikes in west Mosul are believed to have killed at least 200 civilians, in what was described as the most devastating attack by the US against civilians in more than two decades.

Indiscriminate bombing by Iraqi forces of crowded neighbourhoods in the besieged old city has killed hundreds of civilians since February.

Daesh is also responsible for carrying out mass executions of people fleeing Mosul.

By the time the city, or what is left of it, is recaptured, the death toll could reach thousands.

Eyewitness reports speak of massive destruction of entire neighbourhoods; over 80 per cent of the city is in ruins.

But the civilian calamity does not stop here.

The Abadi government is blamed for gross negligence and ill preparation in dealing with hundreds of thousands of displaced citizens who had fled their homes since the battle for Mosul began.

According to the UN and other agencies, between 300,000 and 400,000 civilians have been displaced by the fighting and are living in poor and inhumane conditions in refugee camps near east Mosul.

They are in bad need of shelter, food and medicine, and the Iraqi government has been blamed for failing to prepare for the humanitarian crisis that was expected to unfold.

Liberating Mosul was always going to be a controversial operation.

Daesh had been preparing for this battle for more than two years.

The heavy resistance its fighters have put so far is not surprising. Their use of suicide bombers, explosive laden cars, underground tunnels, booby-trapped houses and civilians as human shields was expected; it is making Iraqi forces advance costly and slow.

The civilian toll and the deep humanitarian crisis have deepened political schisms in Baghdad and raised the stakes for the Abadi government.

But the final outcome of the battle for Mosul is assured. No matter the cost, retaking Mosul is a high priority for both Abadi and US President Donald Trump.

Dislodging Daesh from its most important stronghold in Iraq will be used by both as a major achievement.

The US hopes to use its victory in Mosul as a launching pad for its operation, led by a coalition of Syrian Kurds and Arab tribes, to advance on Raqqa in Syria, thus fulfilling one of Trumps regional priorities.

Following Mosul, Iraqi forces, backed by the US, will head towards other Daesh positions in Tel Afar and the border strip with Iraq.

Abadi knows that his growing dependence on Washington will come at a political price once the dust settles.

Trump's second regional priority centres on weakening and containing Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria.

In the former, he needs Abadi, who now finds himself fending off attacks by members of his Dawa Party and other pro-Iran politicians and power players.

The battle for Mosul, despite its heavy political and humanitarian cost, will be small in size compared to what awaits the Iraqi premier.

In addition to dealing with the challenge of repatriation and reconstruction, he must find ways to attract disgruntled Sunnis who see themselves as victims of Daesh terror, Shiite retribution and a dysfunctional political system.

Mustering the political will to launch national reconciliation and fix an ailing and corrupt system will not be easy.

This is perhaps why he needs the support of countries like Saudi Arabia, whose Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair was in Baghdad last month on an historic visit, and other Arab countries.

Undercutting Iran's influence in Iraq was one of the objectives of the Arab League summit meeting last month in Jordan.

The summit's final communiqué called on Iraqi leaders to find ways to end the policy of exclusion and achieve national reconciliation.

Another challenge facing Abadi in the aftermath of the Mosul battle lies with Iraqi Kurdish political and territorial ambitions.

Aside from signs that the Irbil government is considering seceding from Iraq, it has taken a provocative measure last week in disputed oil-rich Kirkuk by raising the Kurdistan flag on government buildings.

A showdown between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Baghdad government in the coming weeks will test Abadi's ability to lead a fractured country that is grappling with sectarian rifts, failing institutions, kleptocracy and, soon, US-Iranian struggle for dominance.

Abadi will liberate Mosul, but his biggest test will be to keep his country intact following the fallout.

Kaynak/Source: