

Report

Why does Turkey insist on joining the Mosul operation?

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Armoured military vehicles head towards Mosul in a major offensive [Getty Images]

Abstract

As the Iraqi-led coalition advances on Mosul to liberate the area from ISIS fighters, Turkey has involved itself in the fight—at times against the wishes of the central government in Baghdad. On October 4th the Iraqi Parliament labelled Turkish troops deployed near Mosul “occupiers” and asked them to leave the country, escalating a diplomatic spat between Turkish and Iraqi leadership. The Turkish government responded that its troops will remain active, regardless the statements of the Iraqi parliament or prime minister. This paper looks at the myriad interests compelling Turkish leadership to disregard Baghdad’s requests and instead mobilize its military inside Iraq’s borders.

The numerous actors in the Iraqi-led coalition have complex motives in Mosul that reach beyond merely defeating ISIS. Turkey is no different. In addition to rooting out the terror group, Turkey’s rationale for action includes: (1) halting the territorial advance of Kurdish militia; (2) concern for massive refugee inflows; (3) wishing to destroy paramilitary actors in order to prevent a civil war stalemate as in Syria; (4) pushing back against Shia dominance of historically Sunni areas; and (5) desire to influence the political structures in Mosul that will replace ISIS rule.

The shaky coalition to retake Mosul

Planning for the offensive to retake Iraq’s second largest city has been underway since 2014, but many uncertainties delayed the offensive. One of the central uncertainties was the question of who would conduct the actual fighting. The coalition eventually agreed upon by Baghdad, Tehran, Washington, and other principals included forces from the Iraqi military supported by Sunni Arab tribes and Kurdish militias, and excluded Shia militias.

While all of these groups agree that ISIS should be eradicated from Iraq, there are critical disagreements among them about many serious issues, including the fate of post-ISIS Mosul. If the military campaign succeeds in Mosul, risks run high that the aftermath will turn chaotic as the local and international actors do not share short- or long-term political common ground. The Americans and Western forces, and the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds who comprise the Iraqi force, have serious issues of trust. Moreover, the local actors have drastically different answers to the question What shall become of Iraq? and they find the other groups' answers totally unacceptable.

Adding another layer of complexity, there are serious divisions within each of these groups. The predominantly-Shia Iraqi army, the Kurdish peshmerga, and the Sunni Arab tribes are divided between one another over serious issues, but are also divided within themselves.

Kurdish divisions

There is escalating division between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Gorran (Change), which comprise the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Combined with this fracture, is a simmering regional rivalry between two Kurdish factions—the KDP and the PKK—which risks devolving into armed conflict.

Sunni Divisions

A flashpoint in the current dispute centers on the former mayor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi, who wishes to play an active role in post-ISIS Mosul with Turkey's support. It is al-Nujaifi who—against the wishes of Baghdad—is encouraging increased Turkish involvement. However, neither the tribes in the region nor the Nineveh Provincial Council in Mosul are keen about this arrangement. In fact, some of the Sunni tribes have come to an agreement on certain issues with the Shia militia Hashd al-Shaabi in order to gain a certain degree of control over the city once ISIS rule is over.

Deeper divisions among Sunni Arabs date back at least to the 2005 boycott of the first elections held after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Since that time, Sunni power has been usurped by Shia power, and divisions among Sunnis in the political wilderness have become a chronic problem. Over the past 13 years Sunni Arabs have been deprived of a strong advocate in Baghdad, and some Sunnis view themselves as outcasts in their own country. Thus, some of the Sunni Arabs frustrated by eight years of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian, divisive, and punitive policies prefer Mosul to remain in the hands of ISIS rather than Iraqi forces, which are 95% Shia.

Shia Divisions

As for the Shia community, although they control the federal government, they are afflicted by internal political rivalry. Within parliament, the 100-member Reform Group, led by former prime minister and current president Nuri al-Maliki, represents a conservative Shia counterweight to the Iraqi parliament, and thus to Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi.

Maliki draws his power from the deep relationships he established while prime minister between 2006 and 2014, and from his influence over the Hashd al-Shaabi militia, seen by many as a puppet of Tehran. Maliki has used Hashd al-Shaabi's control on the ground to his political advantage.

Over the past two months the Reform Group orchestrated the dismissal of the Iraqi Minister of Defense Khaled al-Obaidi and Iraqi Minister of Treasury Hoshyar Zebari, a close ally of Masud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This sudden move from a parliamentary faction jolted Bagdad-Erbil relations, which were already very fragile. Maliki struck the final blow when the warming relations between Barzani and Abadi began to conflict with Tehran's regional interests. The Reform Group threatened to submit a motion of no confidence for Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Al-Jafari. Abadi is now in a position where he must tread lightly, aware that a failure in Mosul will cost him his political career.

The divisions within the Shia political structure are also related to differing views on Iraqi-Turkish relations. After Iraq faced political crisis in 2014 following eight years of Maliki's sectarian policies, Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi came to office with the promise to be more inclusive and to improve relations with neighbors. Iran's limited financial capacity as a country isolated from the world, Jordan's economy dealing with multiple crises, Syria's inability to produce anything but instability, and Saudi Arabia's intellectual tradition, left Abadi with only one place to turn to in his plans to rebuild Iraq: Turkey.

The short-lived good relationship between Iraq and Turkey after Abadi became prime minister has turned sour as a result of Iran's desire to be the only powerful influence over the central government in Bagdad. The tide turned when Maliki's Reform Group captured 100 out of total 328 seats in parliament, which made the Tehran-friendly Maliki the most powerful person in parliament. The situation on October 4th, where parliament took a decision against Turkish presence in Mosul, was led by the Reform Group under likely Iranian influence. Specifically, parliament decided that Turkish military presence at Beshiqa Camp 15km outside Mosul—for training Iraqi forces to fight ISIS, which was in fact requested by Prime Minister al-Abadi—was now an "occupying force."

The diplomatic spat between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi that followed the parliamentary decision resulted in the deterioration of Iraq-Turkey relations to a level worse than the Maliki period. Although al-Abadi has not closed all diplomatic channels with Turkey, the prime minister takes utmost care to be in line with influential Shia actors. Hence, he is a political player taken hostage by the Reform Group, Hashd al-Shaabi and, by extension, Tehran.

Why insist on Mosul?

At this point one could ask since the head of the Iraqi government does not want Turkish military presence in the country, why Turkey does not comply and leave the country? It is a legitimate question, but from Turkey's point of view the issue is much more complex than keeping armed forces within the national territories of another country.

Turkey is one of the countries most affected by the Syrian crisis. Due to Turkey's failure to properly intervene, the six-year-old Syrian crisis has taken a heavy toll on Turkey. Turkey has absorbed as many as 3.5 million refugees. The PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, has taken control of 700 square kilometers from which it can stage attacks inside Turkey. ISIS has carved out a safe zone for itself along the border, and has carried out dozens of bomb attacks inside Turkey that killed dozens of citizens. The security situation inside the country runs the risk to evolve into a political crisis at any moment.

The Turkish government is concerned that repeating the same mistake of inaction could result in worsening border security problems that could eventually drag the country into chaos and violence. Turkey shares a 1,300km border with two failed states and is worried that the instability catalyzed by its neighbors could spread to its soil igniting a prolonged crisis. In this respect, Turkey's military presence in the environs of Mosul has more to do with Turkey's security rather than domination over Mosul.

The reasons justifying Turkey's concern are based on four tangible concerns: (1) an expanding PKK threat, (2) an increased refugee surge, (3) counterweight to sectarianism, and (4) pushing back against a misguided US policy.

1. The PKK threat and the emergence of Turkish hard power

The PKK, a Kurdish separatist group with Marxist-Leninist roots, carried out its first bloody attack in 1984 when it killed 12 Turkish officers. From then onwards the PKK, which has received external support, succeeded in spreading violence throughout the country through armed conflict with Turkish military in the countryside, as well as raids into the villages and bomb attacks in the cities, and hostage kidnapping. The death toll of this violence is estimated to be 40,000 civilians over the past 35 years.

In 1999, an operation masterminded by the US flushed the head of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, from his residence in Damascus, forcing him to flee to Russia, then Greece, then Italy, and finally to Kenya. Pressured by the US, none of these countries granted asylum to Öcalan and Kenya became his final destination. Later that year Öcalan was apprehended and handed over to Turkish authorities. The PKK, which recovered during the ceasefire (1999-2004), recently resumed its attacks. In 2007, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) launched a "Solution Process" aimed at resolving the grievances with estranged ethnic and religious minorities that have lingered since the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923. Although it suffered several setbacks, the "Solution Process" was one of the priorities of the government until 2011.

However, when the Syrian uprising devolved into an armed conflict and the central government in Damascus lost control over the country, the PKK began deepening its presence in northern Syria. Increasing conflict with the Turkish state led to a total collapse of the ceasefire in 2012. Since then, the PKK's strategy has been to establish a Kurdish stronghold by gaining control of land in Syria and expanding its reach northwards into south-eastern Turkey. To this end, the PKK has escalated its propaganda within the Kurdish community, portraying Turkey as the absolute enemy. The territories controlled by the PKK's Syrian branch—the PYD—have grown dramatically, offering a base of support and logistics for PKK elements active in Turkey since 2012.

Negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK resumed in March 2013 and the parties declared a ceasefire in vague terms. During that time Turkish officials held a string of negotiations with PYD representatives in Ankara. Ultimately, however, these negotiations failed. The PKK, emboldened by the PYD's expansion in Syria, tried to impose new ceasefire conditions on Turkey that no sovereign state could be expected to accept. One of these conditions was for the Turkish army to lay down its arms in return for the PKK doing so. In 2014, the PKK declared three cantons in northern Syria along the Turkish border in an effort to restrict Turkish maneuvers against the PYD. Turkey declared the cantons illegal but did not act against them.

Turkish politics were turbulent in 2015. The country had to deal with violent incidents brought into the country by ISIS and the PKK while administering two general elections. The PYD took advantage of the present fragile situation and united two of its cantons, Jazeera and Kobani, strengthening its presence in Turkish border. The PYD further declared that it will join the third canton, Afrin, with this zone, thus extending control to the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Turkey refrained from launching a military campaign although sections of society voiced demands for the country to do so. Despite Turkey's strong objections, the US has provided military support to the PYD to fight ISIS—support which has allowed the organization to gain control of over 700km of northern Syria along

the 1100km Turkish border. The government deployed military forces along the Jarablus-Azaz line in an effort to prevent the PKK from gaining control of the entire Turkish-Syrian border area. The bigger picture was clear for Turkey: it was impossible to stop its enemies' expansion and attacks without using hard power. The government, which emerged from the failed coup with a stronger position, prioritizes hard power in its new foreign policy when the national security is at stake.

This new policy has implications for the Mosul operations. Despite the general assumption that the PKK has only three cantons, it has also declared Kurdish self-government in Sinjar, a strategically located city in northern Iraq, under de facto PKK control since 2014. Furthermore, the PKK leadership has held a strong presence on Qandil Mountain and its environs in the Turkey-Iraq-Iran border region since the 1990s. The PKK declaration of self-government in Qandil and Sinjar, puts the group in direct confrontation with not only Turkey but the KRG ruled Masoud Barzani. Just like Turkey, the KRG considers PKK a terrorist organization. In this respect, the cantons that the PKK established along the Turkey-Iraq and Turkey-Syria borders combined with the territories where it declared self-government make a 1,100km long PKK zone. If the PKK solidifies this control, Turkey will have to share a 1,100km long border with a terrorist organization with which the country has been fighting for the past 40 years. Obviously this poses a grave threat to Turkey's borders and national security. In order to prevent this worst case scenario, the Turkish government does not want to repeat its mistake of inaction in Syria. Rather, Turkey would like to be at the table, by deploying its troops and actively engaging in the Mosul campaign. The goal is to stop the PKK's explosive growth along its national borders and be in a position of strength to guarantee its national interests in the new political structure in post-ISIS Mosul.

2. More refugees

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has warned that the Mosul campaign could displace as many as 900,000 people. To prepare for this situation, the KRG has requested \$300m USD in aid from the international community, but these funds have not been forthcoming.

Turkey views the Mosul situation as potentially repeating the refugee crisis created by the Syrian civil war. Turkey, which currently accommodates as many as 3.5 million Syrian refugees, has so far spent \$13b USD to accommodate the wave of refugees. Turkey is aware that a new wave of refugees from Iraq could push the total refugee population towards five million, taking a heavier economic toll while creating larger political and social problems.

There is no guarantee that the same scenario won't happen in Mosul unless Turkey partakes in the campaign. Being an important player in the Mosul campaign, Turkey can

use its extensive experience to shelter internally displaced Iraqis in safe areas inside Iraq.

3. A counterweight against partisan retribution

The estimate for population displacement is high because the UNHCR expects many Sunni Arabs in and around Mosul will flee from the advancing Iraqi army. This is because portions of the Sunni Arab population—who view the Iraqi army as a sectarian force—fear collective punishment similar to recent events in Ramadi, Ambar, Falluja, and Saladin.

It is in this context that Mosul's former mayor al-Nujaifi suggested that Turkey's presence would be a critical assurance for the locals in Mosul. Turkey's involvement in the campaign as a balancing figure could assuage residents' fears and mistrust toward the central government in Baghdad. In the Sunni areas around Mosul, Turkey is regarded by many as a reliable and powerful figure with regards to maintaining security and steering the political process in a transparent way in the post-ISIS period.

4. Countering US pro-Kurdish policy, and sectarian federations

The Obama administration, which has maintained a distance from the Syria conflict, has strengthened its presence in the region following Russia's military involvement in September 2015. Since that time, the US strategy has increasingly relied on Kurdish fighters. Turkey-US relations deteriorated as the US made the PYD—the Syrian branch of the PKK (which the US labels a terrorist organization)—a key partner in Syria. The US did not change its policy despite strong objections from Turkey. The US statement prior to the Mosul offensive in favor of PKK's involvement in the operation only confirmed Turkey's concerns on this issue.

Turkey has declared that Syria's territorial integrity is one of Turkey's red lines and has started to voice concerns over America—intentionally or unintentionally—redrawing the regional map along sectarian lines, much like Lebanon and Iraq. US support for the PYD undermines other groups within the Syrian opposition. From Turkey's point of view the situation appears as if the foreign powers who drew the Sykes-Picot borders one hundred years ago are returning to redraw the map based on sectarian and ethnic calculations. Turkey believes that redrawing the map and remolding nation states into ethnic- and sectarian-based federations with weaker central governments will instigate prolonged bloody conflicts. Of course Turkey is aware that if this bloody era starts, Turkey will not be exempt.

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