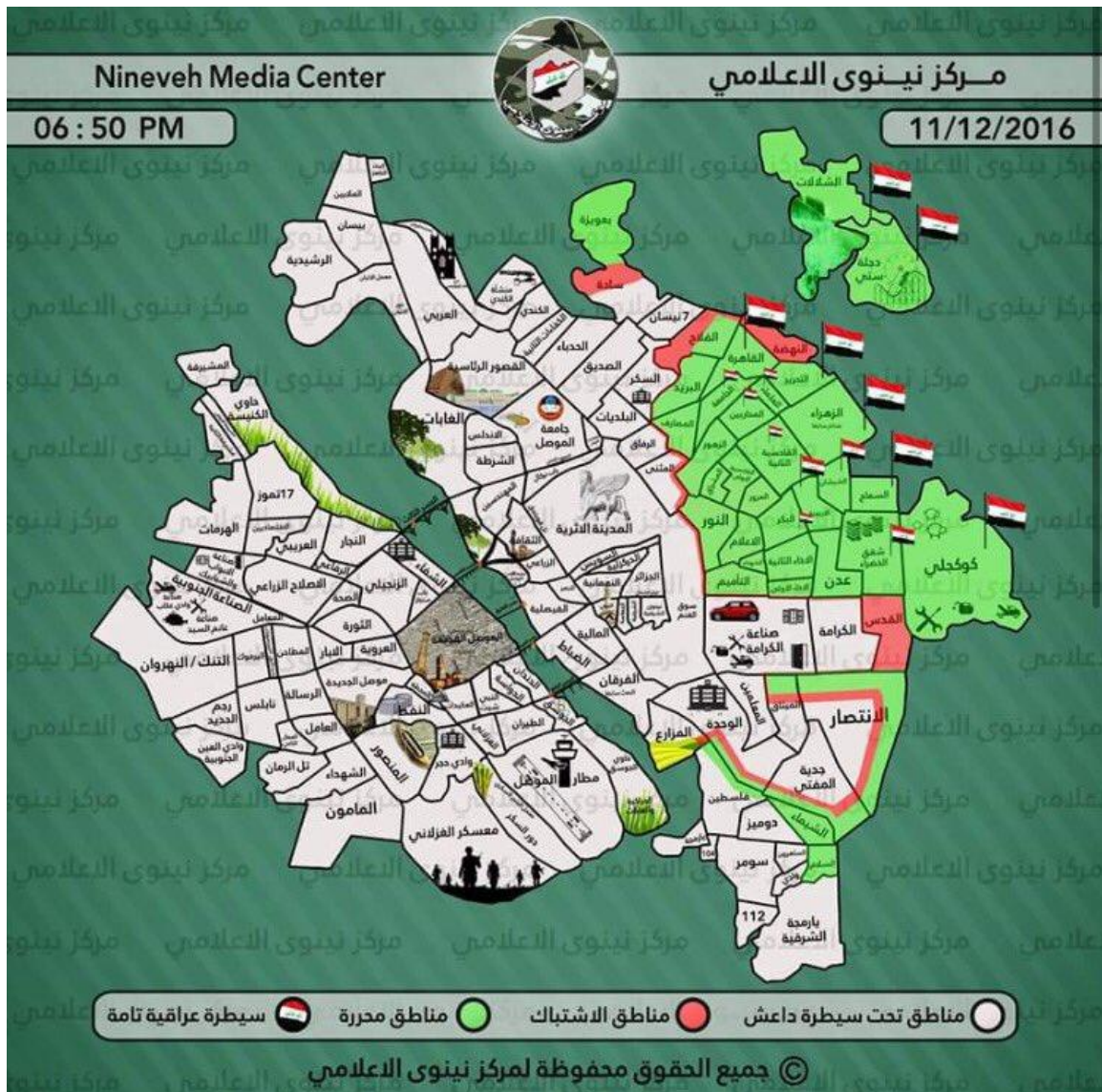


The Battle for Mosul: A Situation Report

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Map of liberated areas in Mosul/Source: Nineveh Media Center

The Iraqi government's military operation to retake Mosul from the Islamic State, *Qadimun ya Nainawa* ("We are coming Nineveh"), began on October 17, 2016. Three divisions of the regular Iraqi security forces (ISF), three divisions of the Iraqi counter-terrorism forces, and units of the Iraqi police and air force are participating in the offensive. They are being assisted by the Kurdish military (*Peshmerga*), Shi'i paramilitary forces (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*), and Sunni tribal forces, which are stationed outside of the city. The U.S.-led international coalition provides limited air support for the forces on the ground, which face an entrenched enemy whose numbers have been recently estimated to be 16,000 (including 6,000 non-Iraqis).¹

The Tigris River divides Mosul into two – east and west. The Iraqi government forces have liberated 40 neighborhoods on the east bank of the city and control about 40 percent of the total area of Mosul.² Four out of five of the city's bridges have been destroyed by airstrikes, which cut the city in two and prevented the Islamic State (IS) from sending reinforcements from its strongholds on the west bank. Government forces have been fighting their way from east to west in the direction of the riverbank, and in some places, notably the south, they are advancing closer to the IS-controlled west bank of the city.



Nearly 1.2 million of Mosul's 1.8 million residents are still in the city. This poses a major challenge for the Iraqi military forces. The Iraqi air force and the U.S.-led coalition have not been able to provide much needed air or artillery support to

¹ Muhammad al-Salihi, [al-Istikhbarat Takhtarik al-Ajhiza al-Siriyya wa Maqtal Alfay Musalah fi Nainawa](#) ("The Military Intelligence destroys a Secret Device and The Killing of Two Thousand Armed in Nineveh"), *az-Zaman*, December 19, 2016.

² [Al-'Abadi Yazur Sahat al-'Amaliyat ba'd Intikasad Mustashfa al-Salam](#) ("Abadi Visits the Operation Field after the Failure in al-Salam Hospital"), *al-Mada*, December 13, 2016.

the units on the ground for fear of killing civilians. International airstrikes have been used against IS facilities on the periphery of the city, but not as cover for units advancing on the ground. The U.S. has denied Iraqi requests to use its Apache helicopters to provide close support to ground forces in the city. Consequently, the Iraqi forces, particularly the counterterrorism units, are fighting street-to-street battles and suffering heavy casualties. The 9th Armored Division's tanks advanced slowly through the narrow alleys of eastern Mosul. In one case, a brigade was able to take control of a hospital at the center of the al-Salam neighborhood as it fought its way toward the river bank, but, lacking air cover, it was immediately besieged by IS fighters and forced to withdraw, suffering a high number of casualties in the process.³

The original plan for Mosul entailed encircling the city from three directions, driving the Islamic State fighters out of the city towards a westward corridor, where they could be killed from the air beyond the city limits, avoiding additional urban warfare that would endanger civilians.⁴ The Iraqi military used this tactic in its battle for Sharqat. However, later it was decided to position the Shi'i militias along the city's western periphery, cutting off the "escape" corridor and leaving the IS fighters in the city, making the mission for the Iraqi Security Forces more difficult. However, the militias have contributed to the operation west of Mosul, capturing Tel 'Afar's airport. The Hashd have been mostly excluded from the fighting in the Mosul operation because they are not trained in urban warfare, but also because there are still fears, especially in Ankara, that they may try to conquer the Turcoman town of Tel 'Afar, which is an IS stronghold. In response, Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-'Abadi declared that the Hashd would not participate in the coming battle for Tel 'Afar. However, Hashd sources claim that the prime minister has in fact agreed to allow them to participate in the Tel 'Afar operation, consenting to the participation of three Hashd battalions, alongside the Iraqi army and the police.⁵

The IS prepared for the battle of Mosul well in advance. It smuggled most of its leadership out of Mosul to safer areas along the border with Syria. The "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is widely believed to be under the protection of four small tribes in the village of Ba'aj near the Iraqi-Syrian border. Other senior leaders are already in Syria, while some remain in the IS controlled western bank of Mosul. The eastern bank is crisscrossed by a network of tunnels from which IS

³ Wa'il Ni'ma, [Ghiyab al-Ghataa al-Jawi Yukabid al-Firqa al-Tasi'a Khasa'ir bil-Arwah wal-Aliyat](#) ["The Lack of Air Cover Inflicted Losses of Life and Equipment on the 9th Division"], *al-Mada*, December 7, 2016.

⁴ Wa'il Ni'ma, [Boslat al-'Amaliya: Tahrir al-Mawsil qabla al-Hawija wal-Hashd Yatwala'Amaliyat al-Tatwiq](#) ["The Core of the Operation: The Liberation of Mosul Before Hawija and the Hashd Will Perform the Encirclement"], *al-Mada*, December 17, 2016.

⁵ 'Ali al-Mussawi, "[al-'Abadi Yuwafiq 'ala Mushrakat al-Hashd fi Isti'adat Tal'Afar](#)" ["'Abadi Agrees to the Participation of the Hashd in the Recapture of Tel 'Afar"], *az-Zaman*, December 21, 2016.

combatants periodically emerge to attack Iraqi troops. Snipers use rooftops to kill Iraqi soldiers and civilians trying to escape to newly liberated areas of the city. Inside some of the buildings, holes were punched in walls to allow IS men to pass through undetected. Iraqi forces have reported the presence a large number of IS fighters in Mosul, suggesting that the organization has concentrated its manpower for the battle. Thus far, Iraqi forces have reported killing 2,330 IS fighters there.⁶

For the first time since 2014, the IS is using civilians as human shields. The number of civilians who have managed to escape IS-controlled territory is relatively low (103,000) compared to previous campaigns in Iraq.⁷ Most of the refugees are from villages around Mosul. The plight of civilians has been aggravated by damage to the water system, which cut off the water supply to approximately 600,000 residents. Similarly, the power grid is not functioning, leaving residents to cope with the winter chill as best they can. In addition, food and medicine are in short supply. The IS has been ruthlessly shooting civilians trying to escape, killing those suspected of collaborating with the Iraqi military and searching homes for mobile phones. The civilian death toll recently spiked in the aftermath of the IS's bombardment of liberated zones of the city.⁸ And yet there is no significant local resistance to the IS, and the IS-controlled west bank is relatively calm on the ground. Overall, there are few options for the international community, either militarily or regarding humanitarian assistance. Most of the humanitarian work on the ground is carried out by the Iraqi military, which adds to its burden.

The slow pace of the Iraqi advance in Mosul has raised concern in the Iraqi media that government forces are getting bogged down.⁹ This concern was reinforced by an ill-timed comment from Prime Minister 'Abadi that the plans for the liberation of Mosul should be revised.¹⁰ Yet, military commanders insist that operations are proceeding according to plan. For now, it is impossible to accurately predict how long it will take to conquer Mosul. It is estimated that fighting on the west bank of Mosul, where the old city is located, will be even more difficult than the fighting to date.

⁶ Awara Hamid, "[Golden Division Commander: We know Where Abu Bakr Baghdadi is](#)" Niqash.org, December 15, 2016.

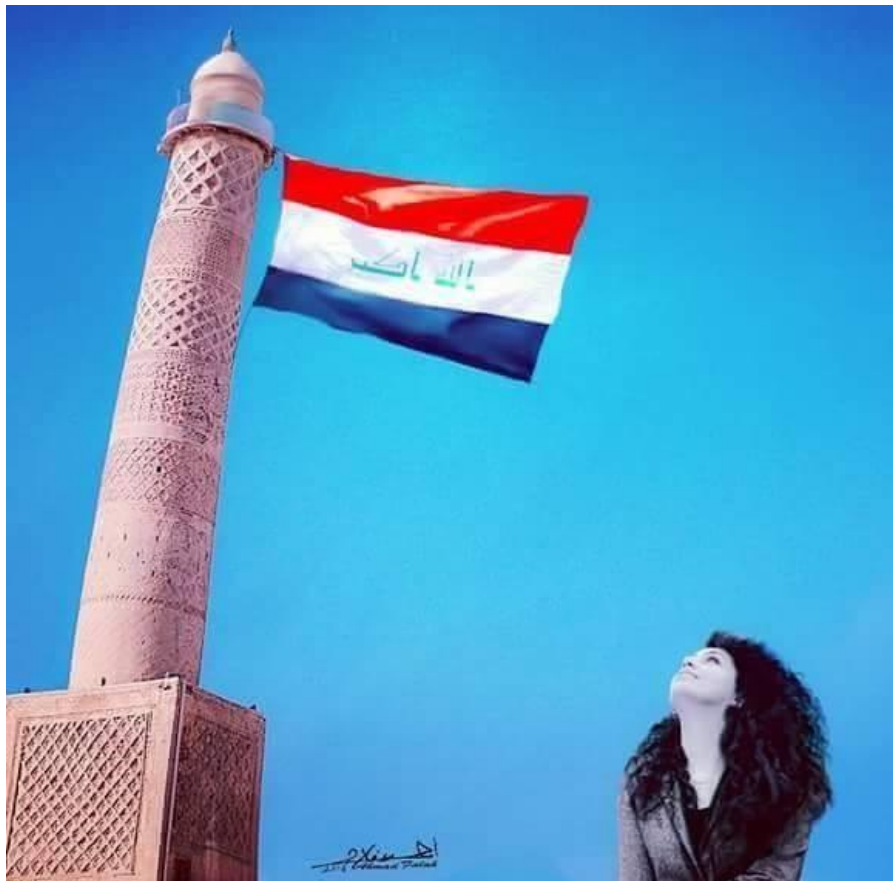
⁷ [103 Alf Madani Ghadaru Musul mundhu Intilaq al-'Amaliyat](#) ["103 Thousand civilians Left Mosul Since Operations Started"], *al-Mada*, December 19, 2016.

⁸ ['Abawat waQadhaif Da'esh Tulahiq al-Madaniyeen al-Nazihin min al-Mawsil](#) ["Da'esh's Bombs and Explosives Follow Civilians Escaping from Mosul"] *al-Mada*, December 21, 2016.

⁹ Wa'il Ni'ma, [Taktik Jadid LiMukafahat al-Irhab fi Mosul](#) ["New Tactic for Counterterrorism in Mosul"], *al-Mada*, December 17, 2016.

¹⁰ [Iraq Reviews Plans to Take Mosul to Spare Lives, Infrastructure](#) *KUNA*, December 18, 2016

The 9th Armored Division and the Iraqi counterterrorism forces are performing well in a challenging environment, without the benefit of air or artillery cover. In some areas they are fighting close to iconic Mosul landmarks, such as the Nabi Yunis Mosque (which was destroyed by the IS in 2015).¹¹ However, they are still not close to breaking the IS's defenses and forcing its surrender. Apparently, the Iraqi forces doing the bulk of the urban fighting have not received military assistance from other units that were supposed to join the invasion of the city. The 15th Division to the south of Mosul was slow to capture the Mosul Airport; it has fought in several major battles in the run-up to the Mosul operation and it may be in need of rest. The American-trained 16th Division, stationed north of Mosul, has not joined the fighting in Mosul as expected. The Iraqi media has suggested that a "revision" of the Mosul battle plans may include a greater involvement from these divisions.¹² It has also been reported that these forces may be used to outflank the IS from the northwest, without having to cross the Tigris River.



The Iraqi flag flying from the al-Hadba'a Minaret in the old city of Mosul, (Photoshop)

¹¹ [Al-'Ameri: al-Hashd Sayuharir Manatiq Gharb Nainawa hatta al-Hudud al-Suriyya](#) ["Al-'Ameri: The Hashd will Liberate the Area West of Mosul to the Syrian Border"] *al-Mada*, December 15, 2016.

¹² [Al-Hashd Yasid Ta'arudayn qurb Tel 'Afar](#) ["The Hashd Prevented Two Attacks near Tel 'Afar"], *al-Mada*, December 19, 2016.

The Iraqi military controls most of the eastern part of Mosul. The pace of its advance had slowed due to fierce fighting in the midst of a large civilian population. The army does not consider the population hostile; on the contrary, it is calculating its moves so as not to harm civilians, and it is dedicating a considerable amount of time and effort to humanitarian work. These concerns have increased the number of military casualties.

The contrast to the fighting in Aleppo is striking: the Iraqi army is not using artillery and the U.S. - led coalition is not bombing the city from the air. The result is that Mosul, which is larger than Aleppo and divided by a major river, has not yet been freed from IS control. Apocalyptic predictions of massacres and ethnic cleansing have not happened.¹³ Even the Shi'i militias have not been accused of atrocities in the fighting west of Mosul. It remains to be seen, however, how the battle for Tel 'Afar ends and what the implications will be for the battle of Mosul. The Hashd has a Shi'i Turcoman brigade (the 16th brigade), whose soldiers are from Tel 'Afar, and which may be used to recapture the town.¹⁴

For the IS, the battle of Mosul is part of the group's millenarian, end of days worldview. Its forces are not trying to escape or surrender. It evacuated the organization's leaders and prepared to defend the city, rather than to simply concede it. Its major concentration of forces in Mosul, the digging of tunnels, the fierce fighting, and even its excessive cruelty towards civilians, are signs that the IS believes it is fighting to save its caliphate. Having concentrated all of its forces here, the IS has been unable to carry out significant offensives elsewhere in Iraq that could draw off Iraqi military forces.

Iraqi social networks are replete with the "victory photo" that everybody expects to see when the IS is finally defeated in Mosul: it is the Iraqi flag raised on top of the famous leaning minaret of the 900 year old al-Hadba'a Mosque, which is Mosul's most famous icon. The IS has demolished other Mosul icons, but this minaret was saved by civilians. However, this minaret is located in Mosul's old city, which is on the west bank of Mosul. The battle for the old city remains on the horizon; when it ensues, it is expected to be the most difficult part of the battle for Mosul as a whole.

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¹³ See, for example: Zvi Barel, "Scared Cities" (*'Arim Mevuatot*), *Ha'aretz*, December 19, 2016.

¹⁴ "[Al-'Ameri: al-Hashd Sayuharir Manatiq Gharb Nainawa hatta al-Hudud al-Suriyya](#)" [Al-'Ameri: The Hashd will Liberate the Area West of Mosul to the Syrian Border] *al-Mada*, December 15, 2016.

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