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Five Takeaways from the Sinjar Operation

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What is the IRIS Iraq Report (IIR)?

The IRIS Iraq Report (IIR) provides “on-the-ground” reporting and analysis on Iraq’s most pressing issues. It is aimed at providing decision-makers and experts with solid research and analysis of Iraq policy. The Report is unique because it is produced in Iraq, and is based on in-country fieldwork as well as open source research. It is the brainchild of Ahmed Ali and Christine van den Toorn, both of whom have years of experience researching and writing on Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

On November 13th, various Iraqi and non-Iraqi Kurdish and Iraqi Yazidi forces cleared the town of Sinjar, Shingal in Kurdish, of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Sinjar is located in western Ninewa province on the Syrian border, a predominantly Iraqi Yazidi town that fell to ISIS in August 2014. Upon taking control of the town, ISIS committed acts of genocide against the Iraqi Yazidis by executing civilians and enslaving thousands of women. ISIS's actions have destroyed the social fabric among Sinjar's different populations and thus present difficult challenges for the future. For the U.S., the fall of Sinjar triggered its decision to launch an air campaign against ISIS.

The forces to clear Sinjar included Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, Yazidi Peshmerga led by Qasim Shesho, the Iraqi Yazidi group of Shingal Protection Forces known as the HPS led by Qasim Shesho's nephew Hayder Shesho, the Iraqi Yazidi forces of the Shingal Protection Units known as the YBS that was formed by the YPG, Syrian Kurdish forces represented by the People's Protection Units known as the YPG, and Turkish Kurdish forces represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PKK).

The clearing of Sinjar is a positive military development. It will contribute to cutting off one of ISIS' main supply lines known as highway 47, connects the ISIS-held cities of Mosul and Raqqa in Iraq and Syria, respectively. Nevertheless, the clearing of Sinjar took a long time to develop due to a severe lack of coordination among the various forces in the field. Furthermore, the stabilization of the area will be more challenging than the military campaign.

The Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) will publish a longer report on the clearing of Sinjar and its various implications. For now, here are five takeaways from the Sinjar operation focused on ISIS' strength, the military and political aspects of the operation, as well as the U.S. role:

- The Sinjar operation is indicative of the current posture of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In Iraq, ISIS is now rolled back tactically and operationally. Strategically, however, ISIS' position is still intact. Tactically, ISIS does not have offensive momentum and is limited to defense. It currently has to be content with probing attacks in which it dispatches small units to test the holding positions of various anti-ISIS forces. This was evident when ISIS launched low-scale



attacks targeting Peshmerga positions in the Gwer area, southwest of Erbil, as the Sinjar operation was unfolding. ISIS has recently conducted similar attacks against Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), known as the Hashd Shaabi, in Samarra. Operationally, ISIS is not able to launch operations to seize terrain any longer. Rather, ISIS is defeated and losing terrain. In addition to their loss in Sinjar, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) backed by U.S.-coalition air power cleared ISIS from the strategic area of Baiji in northern Iraq. Baiji has been contested since October of 2014 and is home to Iraq's largest oil refinery. By clearing it, anti-ISIS forces have the opportunity to start planning for a more serious push northward towards the town of Shirqat. Consequently, the clearing of Shirqat will facilitate a push into Mosul and Hawija in Kirkuk province. These are encouraging developments. But strategically, ISIS still enjoys a good military standing. This is due to the fact that ISIS does not face any serious pressure in its capital in Iraq, Mosul, and its capital in Syria, Raqqa. The lack of pressure allows ISIS to maintain the aura that it is entrenched and that its model is successful. The absence of pressure further projects the anti-ISIS strategy as an ineffective campaign and, as a result, this image is likely producing resignation by the population and anti-ISIS forces that ISIS is not going anywhere.

- The Sinjar operation offers a military blueprint for clearing ISIS. Future campaigns have to include the deployment of overwhelming manpower on the ground coupled with reliable air cover. To be sure, every frontline in Iraq is different. In previous clearing operations, ISIS was cleared with limited air power. This was evident in the October 2014 operation to clear the area of Jurf al-Sakhar in Babil province, south of Baghdad. During that operation, it was possible to clear ISIS due to the great concentration of PMUs and ISF. The forest-like terrain of Jurf al-Sakhar also made it difficult to deploy intensive air power. In Sinjar, U.S.-led coalition airpower was crucial as it weakened ISIS long before the commencement of the operation. This was partially possible because Sinjar was not inhabited like other cities ISIS controls like Ramadi and Mosul. That the PKK, PUK Peshmerga, and HPS had been fighting ISIS in Sinjar for nearly a year also prevented them from entrenching themselves in the town. During the operation, air power was essential in neutralizing ISIS' anticipated deployment of armored Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs). For future operations, anti-ISIS forces have to be equipped with anti-armor missiles that have so far played a major role in removing the threat of armored ISIS VBIEDs.

- The Sinjar operation illustrates that the challenge to clear ISIS is as political as it is military. Leading up to the operation, ISIS thrived on the partisan rivalries and disunity among the various Kurdish factions around Sinjar. Eventually, the various groups overcame their differences, possibly due to U.S. mediation. Given the short period of time it took to clear ISIS from Sinjar, it is fair to conclude that the military challenge was minor compared to the political differences that stalled the operation to dislodge ISIS from Sinjar. Now that ISIS is cleared, a major challenge remains: distrust, division and competition among the Iraqi and non-Iraqi -Kurdish and Iraqi Yazidi factions. The distrust is likely to manifest itself on the battlefield and in Sinjar's post-ISIS governing environment.

- The Sinjar operation should dispel the view that anti-ISIS forces lack the will to fight. Ground forces in Iraq are available and do want to confront ISIS. These forces need logistical support, air support, strategic planning, intelligence, and coordination. Very importantly, the ground forces will need their political leaderships to set aside differences and prioritize the fight against ISIS. Clearing ISIS from any area does not mean that stability is guaranteed. Up to this point, more work is needed to diminish ISIS' long-term appeal in post ISIS areas. However, clearing ISIS could act as the first step towards reconciliation and the re-enfranchisement of Iraqis.

- The Sinjar operation can cement the U.S. role as a trusted mediator. The U.S. achieved this role by deploying hard power including blanket air cover around Sinjar and intelligence support. Diplomatically, the U.S. was likely able to broker an understanding between the various anti-ISIS forces in Sinjar convincing them that it was in their best interest to clear ISIS. Moving forward, this role will need to be repeated for the Mosul operations and more likely to clear towns closer to Sinjar including Tal Afar to the east. Anti-ISIS forces in the rest of Iraq should not view success in Sinjar as the U.S. shifting its attention away from Mosul and Anbar. Those forces, however, may do just that due to preexisting distrust. Therefore, the U.S. will have to send signals that it intends to target ISIS not only in northern Iraq, but in the rest of Iraq and the region.