

# SMA Reach-back

## ViTTa Special Topic

### Mosul Coalition Fragmentation: Causes and Effects<sup>1</sup>

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#### Executive Summary

This paper assesses the potential causes and effects of fragmentation on the Counter-ISIL coalition. This coalition consists of three distinct but interrelated subsets: 1) the CJTF-OIR coalition; 2) the regional coalition, *de facto* allies of convenience, who may provide any combination of money, forces or proxies; and, 3) the tactical coalition, the plethora of disparate groups fighting on the ground. The study team assessed how a change in either the CJTF-OIR coalition or regional coalition could influence the tactical coalition post Mosul and the subsequent effect of these potential fragmentations on the GoI's ability to control Iraq. The study team established six potential post-Mosul future scenarios. One future consisted of the tactical coalition remaining intact and the other five consisted of different permutations of the tactical coalition fragmenting. The study team then modeled these six futures with the Athena Simulation and quantified their effects on both Mosul and Iraq *writ large*.<sup>2</sup>

During simulation these six fragmentation scenarios collapsed into two distinct outcomes: one in which GoI controlled Mosul and one in which local Sunni leadership controlled Mosul. The variable that determined the outcome was the involvement of the Sunnis in the post-Mosul coalition—if the local Sunni leadership remained aligned with the GoI, the GoI remained in control of Mosul. If the local Sunni leadership withdrew from the coalition the GoI lost control of Mosul and the local Sunni leadership assumed control of Mosul—regardless of whether any other groups left the coalition. Irrespective of the local Sunni leadership's involvement in the coalition the GoI was able to maintain control of everything but Mosul and the KRG controlled areas of Iraq. This included historically Sunni areas of Al Anbar including Fallujah and Ramadi (see Figure 1, below).

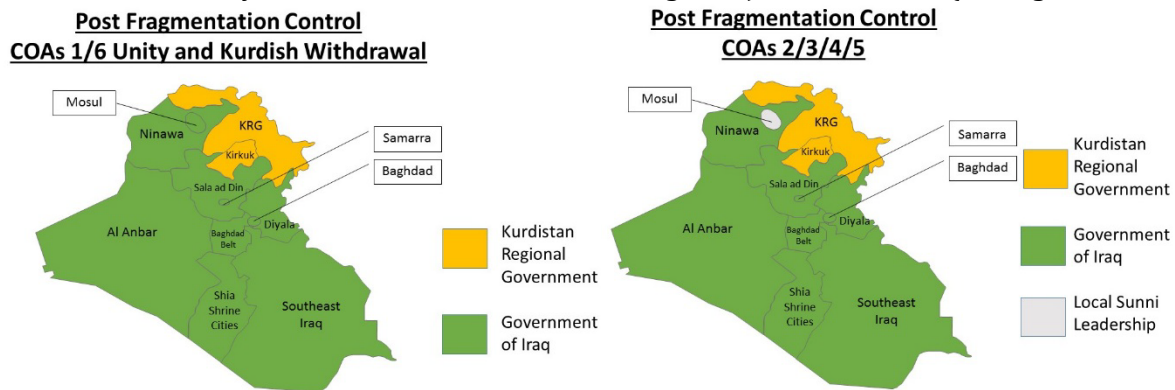


Figure 1: If the Sunnis remain part of the GoI coalition, GoI remain in control of Mosul. If the Sunnis withdraw from the coalition they can gain control of Mosul.

<sup>1</sup> This white paper does not represent official USG policy or position.

<sup>2</sup> The Athena Simulation is a decision support tool designed to increase decision-makers' understanding of the effects of PMESII-PT variables on operations in a given area over time. It was developed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in conjunction with the US Army TRADOC G-27 Models and Simulations Branch.

While several permutations of the regional coalition fragmenting may take place, the centrality of the Sunnis to any outcome puts the actions of the GoI to forefront. PM Abadi's desire to preserve the unity of Iraq may position the GoI at odds with calls for increased local autonomy from some factions of Kurdish and Sunni leaders. In the event of the chaos that would characterize violent civil conflict among Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a forces—likely with proxy support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively—the multi-ethnic, multi-sect members of the Iraqi Army and police will be hard pressed to know which battles to fight and more than breaking with the coalition outright, may for reasons of confusion and self-preservation simply fall and recede as effective fighting forces.

**Methodology**- The methodology of this paper was a combination of open source elicitation and simulation. The elicitation primarily consisted of interviews with Subject Matter Experts that took place during the SMA CENTCOM support operation. This provided the qualitative information of how fragmentation of either the CJTF-OIR coalition or the regional coalition could influence fragmentation of the tactical coalition. The study team used the Athena simulation to model the tactical coalition and quantify the effects of potential fragmentation on GoI control

The study team organized the elements of the tactical coalition as follows: GoI maintained control of Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army, PMF #1 (pro-GoI Shi'a); Kurdish Regional Government maintained control of the Peshmerga; local Sunni leadership controlled PMF #3 (Sunni PMF) and Mosul Tribal Police; PMF #2 (pro-Iranian Shi'a) operated under their own leadership. The degree of fragmentation varied by future with the primary variable being which groups remained united with the GoI. (See Figure 2)

The study team assessed six separate futures. All of these futures had a common beginning in which a clear force secured Mosul and began transitioning to a hold force at week 5 (See Figure 3). At week 10 the simulation branched into one of the six futures. These futures were: 1) the tactical coalition remains intact 2) Sunni forces withdraw from the coalition 3) Sunni forces and the KRG withdraw from the coalition 4) similar to 3 but pro-Iran PMF forces (PMF #2) do not support GoI and operate independently 5) all forces in Mosul are operating independently and 6) the Kurds withdraw from the coalition. While not all encompassing these futures provide a useful framework to judge outcomes. Figure 4 provides detail on the futures while Figure 5 is a synchronization matrix of activities common to each future.

### **Coalitions**

In the context of current C-ISIL operations the term coalition encompasses several different sets of participants which often overlap. In the interests of simplification the study team decomposed the coalition into three separate coalitions: the CJTF-OIR coalition—the countries that are generally allied and have a similar end state for the region; the regional coalition which is a coalition of convenience and includes Turkey, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; and the tactical coalition which involves forces aligned with the GoI for clearance of Mosul but whose long-term objectives may differ from GoI.

**CJTF-OIR Coalition:** SME elicitation showed that the majority of the CJTF-OIR coalition will remain during the battle for Mosul. History shows that if the US has political will it can maintain a force structure much larger than what the CJTF-OIR coalition currently requires. Currently, the core members of CJTF-OIR appear committed to preserving the coalition until Mosul is liberated. Prime Minister May continues the UK's commitment to CJTF-OIR while France, the Netherlands and Germany also appear to be committed to remaining in the coalition during the fight – what is less clear is their commitment to the considerable reconstruction and rehabilitation of Mosul and

surrounding areas that is critical for securing ISIL's defeat there. While it is difficult to assess the combat contributions and stamina of many of the other members of CJTF-OIR it is safe to assume that their contributions while valuable could be made up by other means.<sup>3</sup> While not directly part of the CJTF-OIR coalition, the aid provided by the United Nations and international donors will be critical for the reconstruction and reintegration of Mosul. If the siege is prolonged the deficit of humanitarian funds could produce individually and politically devastating results.

**Regional Coalition:** The regional coalition are the regional governments who have formed a *de facto* coalition against ISIL. This includes KSA, KRG, Iran and Turkey. While united in their opposition to ISIL their long-term goals are often in competition and non-exclusive. They employ a combination of forces, proxies and funding to achieve their goals.

**KSA:** There appears to be little in the nature of the fighting in Iraq that would push KSA to a public break with the coalition. However, perceived further encroachment, or a regional "win" by Iran, e.g., in Syria, could prompt another uptick in KSA-Iran tensions in Yemen. In the past, members of the US Congress and British Parliament have condemned KSA for human rights violations in Yemen<sup>4</sup>. This type of sanction, especially if there were not similar treatment of Iran, would further erode US-KSA relations and perhaps convince KSA to resume connections with Sunni extremist groups in Iraq and Syria as bastions against Iranian influence. A KSA decision to open up funding for Sunni tribes/ extremist forces in the region would: 1) further aggravate KSA-US relations; 2) rapidly provoke conflict among regional proxies, and 3) widen cleavages among Sunni groups in Iraq. Each of these eventualities puts the US in a tight spot with very few levers of influence over KSA.

**KRG (PDK and PUK):** Kurdish fighters may be prompted to break with the coalition if they believe they are not granted the political influence and recognition they deserve for their years of holding up the fight on behalf of the West first against Saddam, Al Qaeda and then ISIL. Specifically, the Kurdish groups could decide to leave the coalition if it became clear that they were going to have to fight to keep the balance of the territorial and economic gains made over the past years of fighting. The appearance that the Government of Iraq would (or, would be allowed to) renege on the recently brokered oil-revenue sharing deal, and/or the presence of uninvited ISF forces in Kurdistan would be clear indication that the Government of Iraq intended to deny Kurdish gains and return to pre-ISIL violent disputes over territorial control and oil revenues.

Of course, the Peshmerga – like other Kurdish groups – is not necessarily a unified force but is led by, among others, both PDK and PUK loyalists. The PUK and PDK fought a civil war in the 1990s and although seem to have buried the hatchet, remain rivals looking to avoid dominance of Kurdish politics by the other. As a result, the Peshmerga could itself split over internal questions of leadership and control with what may appear to be little provocation from outside forces. While there it appears that there are few external factors that would prompt the Peshmerga in general to withdraw from the coalition fight, reduction in funding and arms however is one. Specifically, the PUK could split from the rival PDK over the latter's deal making with Turkey and use of the fighting in Mosul to gain leverage over other Kurdish groups including the PUK.

**Turkey:** In many ways, the tenor of the Turkish conflict with the PKK (and any other groups it believes are associated with it), could make or break post-ISIL efforts to forge a resolution

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<sup>3</sup> An example of US commitment outlasting its coalition was the transition of MNF-I to USF-I.

<sup>4</sup> Radwan, Tarek. "Yemen Heightens Tension in Saudi's International Relations," 9/27/16  
<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/yemen-heightens-tension-in-saudi-s-international-relations>

and interim authority in Mosul. Turkey has two main security interests at stake in the coming battle: avoid massive and destabilizing refugee flow from Mosul; and, avoid strengthening or the uniting Kurdish groups.

On the issue of refugees, Turkey already has seized the opportunity to create a security buffer in northern Iraq which also could be used as territory to house IDPs from Mosul. While it is unlikely that Turkey would publicly withdraw from the coalition or throw its weight clearly onto the side of anti-government forces in Iraq, President Erdogan strongly opposes any further arming of Kurdish groups willing to participate in the liberation of Mosul. The PUK is, in Turkey's view indirectly allied with the leftist PKK – the group at the top of its terrorist list – (via the PKK's alliance with the US-funded Syrian PYD.) This sensitivity could cause Turkey to balk if the PUK were armed and included as equal with the PDK during the fighting in Mosul, and particularly if it were given status as a major player the post-battle political resolution. Similarly, it is to be expected that the Erdogan government would drag its feet, or reject coalition requests outright if asked to take action that it believes would leave any Kurdish group but the PDK in control of Kurdish areas (e.g., withdrawing troops from northern Iraq following ISIL defeat in Mosul, withdrawing support of KDP aims against the Government of Iraq), even if these actions were intended to spur political resolution. In short, reconciliation among the Kurdish groups is the worst outcome for Turkey.

**Iran:** There is significant evidence that the battlefield success of much of Iraq's Shi'a militias—modeled in this series of simulations as PMF #2—is dependent on Iranian resources and expertise (Barnard, 2015; Bazoobandi, 2014; Campbell, 2014; Nader, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Of course this relationship helps Iran increase its regional influence (Khedery, 2015).<sup>6</sup> Given local Sunni sensitivity to the Shi'a militias and their presumed Iranian backing, Iran could readily spur fracture of the coalition before or during the fight by sending pro-Iran militias to “help” in Mosul. Just their presence too close to Mosul may be enough to cause a Sunni break from the coalition. As noted above, inclusion of any forces seen as associated with Iran and/or perceived maltreatment of Sunni by them is one of the conditions likely to discourage Sunni forces from remaining in the coalition.

Still, ISIL's military operations have focused on attacking regional groups who do not submit to their ideological interpretations of Islamic law. After “apostate” Sunnis, Shi'as are their next most important target.<sup>7</sup> As a result, ISIL success in Mosul or ability to strike Shi'a elsewhere presents a direct threat to the Shi'a population, and should it look like a possibility, is likely to encourage Shi'a militia fighters both within the coalition as well as those not currently included to “join” operations in Mosul. This is even more likely if, for example ISIL was able to strike against Shi'a targets in southern Iraq during the Mosul battle.

**Iraq:** At the same time that the Abadi government is attempting to signal that it intends to be more inclusive of Sunni leaders and views, it is restricted first by fears that armed Sunni militia will turn those arms against the central government, and second by its need for support from Shi'a hardliners who do not want to empower Sunnis or meaningfully incorporate them into the

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<sup>5</sup> Barnard, A. (2015, March 5). Iran Gains Influence in Iraq as Shiite Forces Fight ISIS. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/iran-gains-influence-in-iraq-as-shiite-forces-fight-isis.html>; Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran's Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges, and Ambitions (Analysis No. 275). ISPI. Retrieved from [http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis\\_275\\_2014\\_0.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis_275_2014_0.pdf); Campbell, J. (2014, November 6). Iran Switching to Hard Ball in a Last Attempt to Control Iraq. Retrieved June 30, 2015, from <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/iran-switching-hard-ball-last-attempt-control-iraq>; Nader, A. (2015). Iran's Role in Iraq (Perspective). Rand. Retrieved from [http://www.mashregnews.ir/files/fa/news/1394/3/16/1066030\\_363.pdf](http://www.mashregnews.ir/files/fa/news/1394/3/16/1066030_363.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Khedery, A. (2015, February 19). Iran's Shiite Militias Are Running Amok in Iraq. Retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/19/irans-shiite-militias-are-running-amok-in-iraq/>

<sup>7</sup> Braniff, W., & Pereira, R. (2014). A Tale of Two Caliphates. In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL* (pp. 156–160). Arlington, VA: Strategic Multilayer Assessment Program, Office of the Secretary of Defense.

governance of Iraq (Arango, 2015).<sup>8</sup> Further, Abadi's desire to preserve the unity of Iraq puts it at odds with calls for increased local autonomy from some factions of Kurdish and Sunni Tribal leaders. In the event of the chaos that would characterize violent civil conflict among Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a forces -- likely with proxy support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively - - the multi-ethnic, multi-sect members of the Iraqi Army and police will be hard pressed to know which battles to fight and more than breaking with the coalition outright, may for reasons of confusion and self-preservation simply fall and recede as effective fighting forces.

**Tactical Coalition-** At the tactical level there are Sunni Forces consisting of PMF #3 and the Sunni Tribal Police Force; the Shi'a PMFs consisting of PMF#1 (Pro-GoI Shi'a) and PMF#2 (Pro-Iranian Shi'a); and the Peshmurga. While similarly named they often have conflicting agendas. The force structure in this simulation attempted to strike a balance between the ever changing nuance of detail and the monolithic blocks.

**Sunni forces:** Two conditions could easily push Sunni forces to break with the coalition: 1) local leaders see no evidence that situation in Mosul following ISIL defeat will be other than a return to the discrimination and harassment that they suffered at the hands of the Iraqi government (particularly the eight Maliki years) prior to the ISIL crisis; and, most immediately, 2) Shi'a Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs) take an active role in the fighting in or too near Mosul. There is general awareness of the need to keep these forces separated from the Sunni population in Mosul. Media reports claim that coalition leaders will allow Shi'a militias to participate only in rural areas outside the city<sup>9</sup> presumably with the mission of rounding up escaping (Sunni) ISIL fighters and families. Unfortunately, despite aid agencies' intentions<sup>10</sup>, depending on where fighting takes place, Moswalis living in neighborhoods in the city's southwest may attempt to flee by the quickest route which would be to the south -- precisely the areas that the Shi'a militia are purportedly intended to patrol. Again, mistreatment of Sunni at the hands of the Shi'a could convince the tribal forces to leave the coalition in order to protect their own if not to exact revenge. The effects of either of the above actions could be magnified by US actions. If coupled with apparent US acquiescence or failure to respond could be enough to convince the Sunni tribes that they are the only ones willing to come to their defense and that the coalition holds no promise of change for them following the Mosul fight. If they are pushed aside by the US or not included politically by the government in Baghdad they could decide to leave the coalition *en masse* or split over the issue.

**Peshmerga:** Three primary conditions could cause Peshmerga forces to leave the tactical coalition: 1) conflict with GoI over disputed areas escalates, 2) Conflict with Sunni forces in an area such as Nineveh, 3) A split in the Kurdish leadership between the PUK and PDK.

**Iraqi Oriented Shi'a PMF (PMF#1):** It should not be discounted that some of the nationalist Shi'a militia groups currently engaged in the fight against ISIL evolved from groups such as Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army which arose with the goal of ending U.S. presence and influence in Iraq. Although the U.S.-led coalition is currently coordinating with Shi'a militia groups, it is not at all clear that this has or will result in a fundamental shift in the hostile attitude toward Americans in

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<sup>8</sup> Arango, T. (2015, April 30). Proposal to arm Sunnis adds to Iraqi suspicions of the U.S. New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/01/world/middleeast/proposal-to-arm-sunnis-adds-to-iraqi-suspicions-of-the-us.html>

<sup>9</sup> Knights, Michael. "How Will the Battle for Mosul Unfold," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 4, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Newly constructed and emergency camps are mainly in the northern Kurdish areas and to the east of the city. At present international aid agencies have the balance of their assets in the Kurdish areas north and east of the city. Mosul Flash Appeal, UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (20 July 2016), [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Iraq/mosul\\_flash\\_appeal\\_final\\_web%20\(1\).pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Iraq/mosul_flash_appeal_final_web%20(1).pdf).

Iraq. If it looks as if they will be denied reward or recognition of their contributions particularly after the Mosul battle, some Shi'a groups or individuals could easily reject coalition restrictions on their activities in and around Mosul and act out on their own to avenge Sunni violence against Shi'a or in their name of the sectarian rivalry. This is not necessarily a stretch: Sunni grievances have worsened in recent years, fueled by "endless interventions" by Iran and the staunch support given to Maliki and Assad (Moaddel, 2014) who are seen by many Moswalis as persecuting Sunnis in favor of "serving the Shi'a Iran master plan." in the region.

**Iranian Oriented Shi'a PMF (PMF#2):** The primary condition that would cause the Iranian Oriented PMF to leave the tactical coalition is that Iran or the IGRC dictate that they leave the tactical coalition.

**Conclusion:**

Given the tenuousness of the ties that hold the Regional and Tactical coalitions together—and the variety of competing interests and agendas of coalition members, there are any number of occurrences that could cause partial or severe fracture during or after the battle for Mosul. The longer cohesion is required the likelihood that a spoiler event -- perpetrated by actors either inside or outside the coalition on issues either directly or indirectly related to Mosul – will increase.

While many factors could lead to potential fragmentation of the Regional and Tactical coalitions the common denominator in many of these scenarios is the actions of the GoI and the respective responses from other regional actors. Regardless of the cause of fragmentation the only point where the GoI could not maintain control is in the area of Mosul itself. Either the GoI maintains control or the Sunni majority will develop a leadership structure to take control of the area. Regardless the GoI will maintain control in the remainder of Iraq minus the rump under KRG control.

## Actor Relationships to Force Groups in Mosul

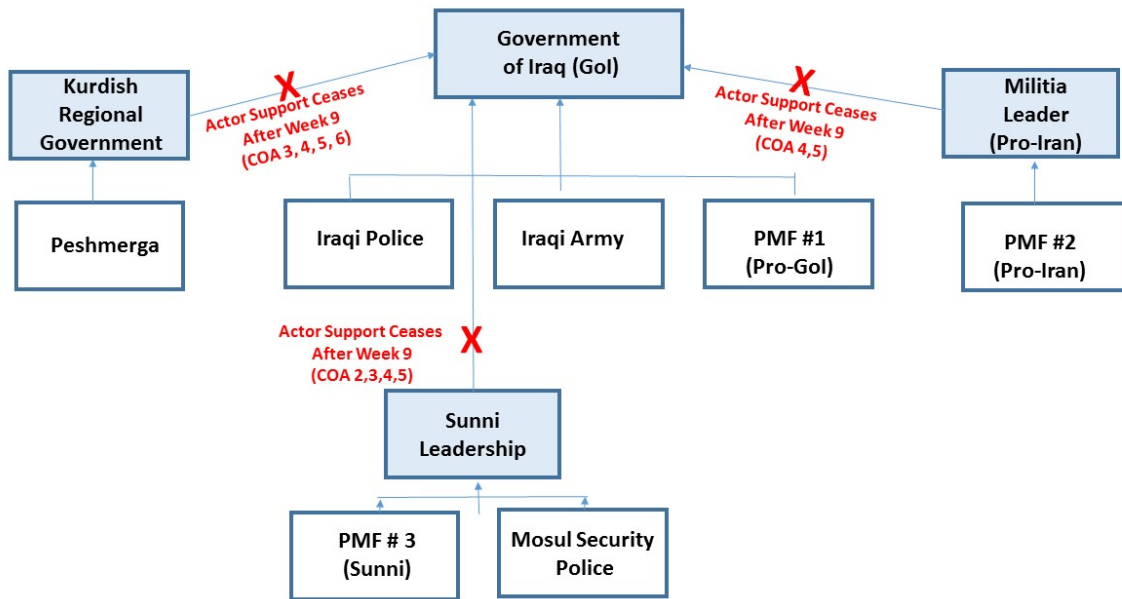


Figure 2: Actor relationships to force groups in Mosul

## Transition from Clear Force to Hold Force in Mosul

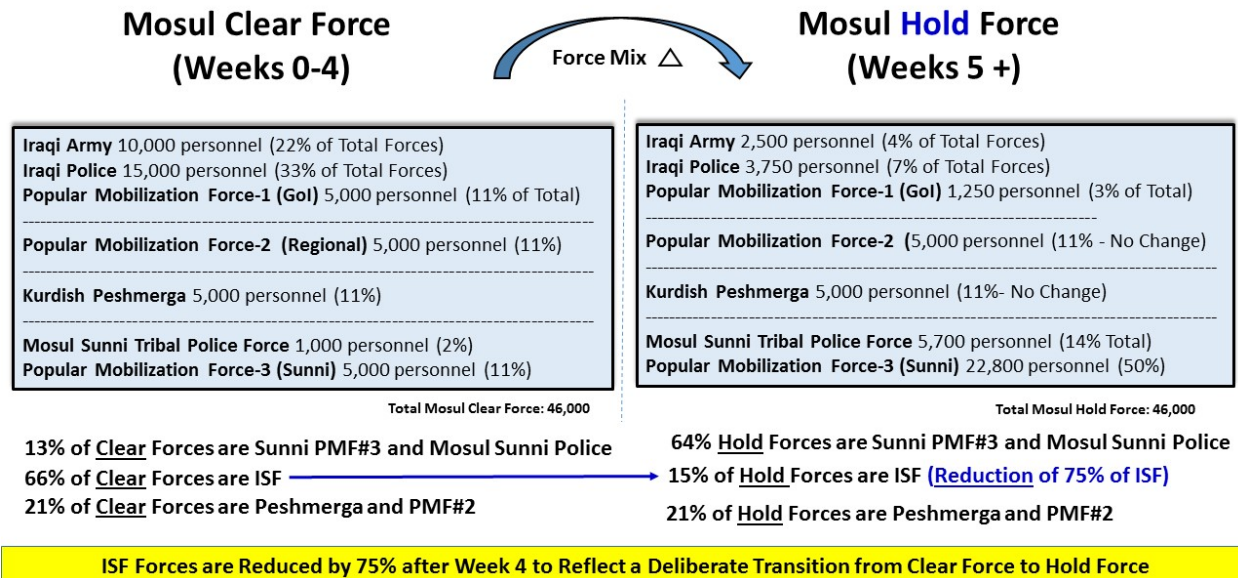


Figure 3: Clear Force and Hold Force composition

Courses of Action Strategies and Tactics	Actor Support	Force Activities
<b>COA 1 (Unified Iraqi Security Forces)</b>	Actors all unified in their support of GOI	Cooperative Patrolling, Checkpoints and limited CMO (infrastructure, law enforcement, education, healthcare)
<b>COA 2 Sunni Break Away</b>	Shia and Kurdish Actors all unified in their support of GoI; local Sunni leaders support themselves	Shia and Kurds together but Sunni forces not cooperating
<b>COA 3 Three Way Melee</b>	Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni leaders support themselves Regional support fragments accordingly.	Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni forces not cooperating with each other on patrols / checkpoints. Clashes between forces.
<b>COA 4 Four Way Melee</b>	Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni leaders support themselves International and regional fragments.	Same as COA 3 but now PMF 2 is also on its own in Mosul; Criminal activity more common now. Clashes between forces.
<b>COA 5 Total Chaos</b>	Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni leaders support themselves Sub-groups fragment.	All forces acting on their own patrolling, checkpoints, etc. Significant criminal activity and graft. Clashes between forces.
<b>COA 6 Kurdish Break Away</b>	Kurdish leaders support themselves vice the GoI coalition.	Shia and Sunni forces united, but Kurdish forces not cooperating.

Figure 4: The six futures the study team assessed

### Synchronization Matrix

COA 4a Force Mix Change in Week 5 Case	Week *	1	4	7	10	13	16	19	22	25	28	31	34	37	40	43	46	49	52
1 Support to GOI and Coalition mission for 9 weeks		Supporting GOI		All actors now vying for control															
2 75% ISF forces replaced by Sunni forces at Week 5 (PMF3 and MSP)		30K ISF		7.5K ISF (75% of Original ISF replaced 1 x 1 by Sunni Hold force (PMF#3 and Mosul Police) in Week 5)															
3 75% of IDPs are able to return within first year (cumulative)		(Shia wk 8 / Sunni wk 16) for 25%				(Shia wk 22 / Sunni wk 32) for 50%				(Shia wk 49 / Sunni wk 36) for 75%									
4 Training Levels for Mosul Hold Force Stays at Partial Training		Partial Training of Iraqi Police																	
5 Demeanor Training Levels for Hold Force Improves in Increments		Average Demeanor of IP																	
6 > 85% Destruction of Infrastructure rebuilt only 40% w/in one year		20%				30%				40%									
7 CMO activities occur where possible, otherwise patrols, checkpoints		Civilian Military Operations is Limited by Security																	
8 Random IEDs (50 Civilians Killed in Each, No Blame Determined)		IED Wk 14				IED Wk 19				IED Wk 33				IED Wk 44					
9 Government services and offices partially operational		High unemployment due to large number of government employees																	
10 Nominal / expected levels of ambient black market and graft		Default Graft, Black Market and Low-level Criminal Activity																	
11 Progress restoring water and power within 120 days		Only Power Restored				Both Power and Water Restored													
12 Heated articulation of grievances, ethno-religious tensions		Sunni Civilians – Average Demeanor until end of Week 35												Sunni Civilians to Aggressive					
13 Considerable sectarian narratives of mistrust and moral outrage		Offsetting sectarian messaging																	
14 International and Regional NGO support delayed / impeded		Few major International and Regional NGO infrastructure programs due to security																	
15 Mosul fighting rarely occurring (few casualties, except IED events)		Sporadic fighting engagements between forces with few casualties (+ CIVCAS Weeks 7, 14, 19 and 44)																	
16 Essential Non Infrastructure Services at 50% required levels		100%				50%													
17 US / coalition funding		Continuous but diminished funding for GOI due to neighborhood atmosphere but continued support to Kurds																	

\* Note: All % figures shown are cumulative which occur during the period of weeks shown

Figure 5: Synchronization Matrix





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Previously he worked as a Counterinsurgency Advisor for the COMISAF Advisory Assistance Team (CAAT) in Afghanistan. He has over 25 years of active and reserve military experience in Infantry, Civil Affairs and Human Terrain operations; with deployments to Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Currently he is an Army Reservist assigned to USSOCOM J-8.

Jimmy received his BS in Military History from the United States Military Academy, an MS in Intelligence from American Military University and graduated the Defense Language Institute as a basic Arabic Linguist. His most recent publication was "The Civil Engagement Spectrum: A tool for the Human Domain" published in the Sep/Oct 15 issue of *Military Review*.



**Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois**

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia; development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on Middle East politics and the cognitive aspects of foreign policy decision making. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York University.

Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.