

Battle for Mosul: Protection Issues
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Congressman McGovern, thank you for inviting me to discuss key protection issues related to the retaking of Mosul.

I have spent a considerable amount of time in Iraq over the past two years. I have visited areas retaken from ISIS, spoken with civilians, Peshmerga forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), UN and aid agencies, local officials, US and coalition forces, as well as the various militia forces that have sprung up since ISIS emerged in Iraq to learn how civilians are being affected by the conflict and what can be done to minimize harm to them.

Fundamentally, the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government must ensure that civilian protection is a key pillar in defeating ISIS, stabilizing Iraq, and reintegrating and reconciling communities that have suffered much.

The campaign for Mosul, a city of 1.2 million people—and additional 800,000 in the surrounding Nineveh governorate—began this past summer as ISF and the Peshmerga liberated villages and towns outside the city. But the pace of military operations and civilians displaced continues to be coordinated poorly with aid agencies. My colleagues on this panel will go into further detail about the humanitarian planning to handle displacement, but I would like to share what I saw in July in Dibaga camp outside Makhmour in Northern Iraq.

There were hundreds of newly displaced women, men, and children without shelter for more than a week in 125 F degree heat and given canned food once a day and limited water. Villages in Nineveh governorate were being retaken and civilians fleeing with nothing but the shirts on their backs. Security forces transferred them to camps, which had little notice to prepare for an influx of civilians. A tired 12-year-old boy, suffering without shelter along with other infants and children under the blazing sun, told me, “Send us back. It was better to live under Daesh then be treated like this.”

This is not the message Mosul’s civilians should hear. They need to know that they and their property will be protected from revenge attacks and their dignity respected. Locals are concerned that Mosul—the largest Sunni city in Iraq— will be destroyed like Ramadi or other towns and villages across Iraq in the campaign to retake the city. I have been to many villages and towns and seen how a combination of heavy weapons such as mortars, rockets, artillery, Iraqi and coalition air strikes, and explosives laid by ISIS turns cities and villages into rubble leaving little for residents to return to.

Taking Mosul will require careful planning in how to evacuate civilians and move them to safety, and guidance on how to minimize civilian harm and reduce property destruction in order to allow civilians to return to their homes.

Urban warfare is hard and Mosul will be especially challenging given that ISIS is hiding among civilians, digs underground tunnels, and lays extensive booby traps. In Ramadi, retaken from ISIS in December 2015, residents told me they were used as human shields. Many said they were shot at when fleeing and some were killed or injured because ISIS rings areas with explosives to prevent civilians from leaving. Some ISIS fighters try and hide among fleeing civilians.

In previous battles in Fallujah and Ramadi, Iraqi security forces established clandestine contacts inside these cities to arrange for safe passage at designated points to help evacuate civilians. This is a slow and dangerous process, as engineers have to remove explosives planted by ISIS along the corridors. But not all of it was successful; these corridors were known to ISIS, whose snipers targeted fleeing civilians.

The Iraqi government is dropping leaflets over Mosul asking people to stay in their homes during the offensive. Those who stay will face the risk of harm.

It is essential that forces involved in the Mosul campaign agree upon precautionary measures to minimize civilian harm and property *before* operations begin. The coalition should continue to train local forces on how to positively distinguish civilians from targets to minimize death and injuries and that civilians who remained behind in Mosul should not be presumed to be ISIS sympathizers without further inquiry. Planning should also include what to do if ISIS hunkers down and engages in a prolonged fight. How will the coalition and local forces get humanitarian aid in? What guidance to reduce risk to civilians will be given if local forces engage in house to house battle with ISIS?

There are many armed actors who will be involved in liberating Mosul, and they have many different political agendas. ISF will retain the lead, backed by coalition airstrikes, and Peshmerga forces will support ISF and retake areas outside Mosul city. The involvement of the Popular Mobilization Units (*Hashd al-Sha'abi*) and other militias is of grave concern given allegations of abuse attributed to them during the Fallujah operation.

For the Iraqi and Kurdish governments and the anti-ISIS coalition, how civilians leaving ISIS-controlled areas are treated, and how those who remain during the offensive are protected is a legal and ethical obligation, but it is also a good strategy to reduce hostilities in a multiethnic Iraq.

Developing local forces' capabilities to protect civilians is an ongoing challenge. This past summer, my organization has begun civilian protection trainings for Peshmerga forces involved in liberating Mosul. We are focusing on key strategic messages on how to protect civilians as well as their property, not to presume Sunnis are automatically ISIS sympathizers, and how to conduct battle damage assessments that take into account civilian harm. The training module we designed is aimed to correct mistakes we saw at the beginning of Iraq's campaign to defeat ISIS. Of course, as with any training, its success can only be measured by how it is implemented and

incorporated into the thinking of the troops. Similar trainings are needed for ISF and other pro-government forces.

But we also need to think about the day after Mosul is retaken. Mosul officials want a local holding police force after military forces leave. Training a new representative force capable of protecting civilians from revenge attacks, lootings, and violence in a multiethnic Mosul is not an easy task and must not be rushed.

Mosul, like other cities in Iraq, will likely be heavily mined. For civilians to return to their homes, the herculean task of demining and removing unexploded bombs and IEDs will need to be sufficiently resourced.

Iraq urgently needs a fully-funded reconstruction plan for its cities, so that the thousands of IDPs living in camps, host communities, and abandoned buildings have homes to return to.

Regaining ground from ISIS is tactically easier than creating a secure environment in which a lasting peace can grow. To provide true security, the Iraqi and Kurdish governments need to commit to civilian protection, and not only responsibly clear ISIS from areas, but also hold those areas by providing security for all Iraqis. Finally, the two governments must reject sectarian and ethnic-driven policies and practices.

The retaking of Mosul is a huge challenge, but it is also a test for the Iraqi government to show whether it can win both the war and the peace that should hopefully follow.

Key Recommendations:

Preparation before and during operations:

- Agree upon a coordinated plan on how to safely evacuate civilians and protect those who remain.
- The US-led anti-ISIS coalition should develop joint rules of engagement with ISF and Peshmerga to reduce risk to civilians and civilian objects and ensure all forces agree to these rules prior to operations. Such measures should take into account situations where ISIS does not leave Mosul city and prevents civilians from leaving and what additional guidance is needed to reduce risk to civilians.
- The US-led anti-ISIS coalition should train local forces on legal and strategic importance of minimizing civilian harm and property damage. The training should emphasize how to positively identify targets when ISIS members could be mixed with civilians and exercise tactical patience in the use of force. ISF and Peshmerga need to learn how to conduct battle damage assessments that take into account civilian harm and encouraged to send to operational command HQ to identify lessons to reduce harm.
- Ensure no Shia Popular Mobilization Forces are involved in the assault of Mosul city and at security screening facilities where civilians fleeing ISIS-held areas are questioned.
- Train female soldiers and encourage their deployment with Peshmerga and ISF to engage with women fleeing ISIS areas at security screening centers and to assist women and girls who have been held captive by ISIS.

Planning for after operations:

- Develop plans to communicate when civilians may return to their homes with safety and dignity.
- Ensure a holding police force for Mosul city that is representative of the community is adequately trained and equipped to protect civilians from revenge attacks and ensure sufficient oversight of such a force.
- Ensure adequate resources are allocated to demine and rebuild the city and its environs.

For more information on CIVIC's work in Iraq please see:

<http://civiliansinconflict.org/our-work/countries/iraq/>