

Factors behind the fall of Mosul to ISIL (Daesh) in 2014

Anna Louise Strachan

17. 01. 2017

Question

What factors caused the fall of Mosul to ISIL (Daesh) in 2014, with particular focus on the proximate causes in the period 2011-14?

Contents

1. Overview
2. General factors
3. Proximate factors 2011 -2014
4. References

1. Overview

The city of Mosul in Iraq's Nineveh Province fell to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), known in Iraq as *Daesh*,¹ on June 9 2014, following three days of fighting between jihadists and the Iraqi Security Forces. This report looks at factors behind the fall of Mosul, a majority Sunni city, placing particular emphasis on the proximate factors leading to the city's conquest by ISIL.

There is a fairly small body of literature on the factors behind the fall of Mosul in 2014. The majority of the available literature on the factors leading to the takeover of Mosul consists largely of opinion pieces by European and North American think tanks, and of a few academic journal articles. There is relatively little evidence-based research on this topic. The literature considered in this review was largely gender-blind.

¹ ISIL is also known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and IS (Islamic State), but for the purposes of this report ISIL and *Daesh* will be used to refer to the group.

The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

Helpdesk reports are commissioned by the UK Department for International Development and other Government departments, but the views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, the UK Government, K4D or any other contributing organisation. For further information, please contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

General factors behind the fall of Mosul in 2014 are:

- **Sectarian policies:** Marginalisation of the Sunni minority following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq fostered anger and resentment. De-Ba'athification policies and the dissolution of the Iraqi army made Mosul a fertile recruiting ground for extremist groups like ISIL.
- **Lack of a post-2003 roadmap:** The US' lack of a post-2003 plan for Iraq also contributed to the rise of ISIL.
- **Political system:** The deeply flawed political system in Iraq was arguably a key factor behind the fall of Mosul.

Proximate factors behind the fall of Mosul are:

- **Former Prime Minister Maliki's consolidation of his personal power base:** There is general consensus in the literature on the fall of Mosul, that Maliki's emphasis on expanding his own personal power base at the expense of the effectiveness of state institutions was one of the factors leading to the rapid fall of Mosul in the face of the ISIL onslaught.
- **Sectarian policies:** The violent suppression of Sunni protestors, and the disbanding of the *Sahwa*² fostered anger and resentment among the Sunni community, making them more open to recruitment by extremist groups.
- **The state of the armed forces and ISIL fighters:** While some argue that the ferocity and commitment of ISIL fighters led to their success in Mosul, there is a general consensus in the literature that the Iraqi armed forces' ineptitude and lack of equipment was a more significant factor behind the city's fall to ISIL.
- **The international community's shortcomings:** The international community's unwavering support for Maliki also contributed to fall of Mosul, as they failed to push for political reform.

It is noteworthy that in addition to openly sectarian policies, sectarian undertones appear to be a crosscutting element behind many of the factors discussed in this report.

2. General factors

The International Crisis Group (ICG) provides a very thorough analysis of the factors behind the fall of Mosul in 2014, arguing that rather than new developments being responsible, the fall of Mosul was merely a consequence of the continuation of previous dynamics (ICG, 2014, p. 3). Factors dating back to the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 include:

Sectarian policies

Marginalisation of Iraq's Sunni community post-2003 is one of the key factors behind the rise of ISIL and the fall of Mosul in 2014. This marginalisation manifested itself in a number of ways:

² Groups of Sunni fighters tasked with maintaining stability in their communities. They were initially funded by the US.

- **De-Ba'athification**³ resulted in tens of thousands of individuals losing their livelihoods and resulted in local government in Mosul being unable to provide basic services due to lack of capacity (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 16). This was due to the fact that Mosul had been an area of core support for the Ba'ath Party (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 16).
- **The dissolution of the Iraqi army** following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 drove a significant number of Sunnis to join the insurgency, especially in Mosul (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016, p. 530). This was due to the fact that it rendered a large number of people in possession of arms and military training unemployed (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 17).

Lack of a post-2003 roadmap

The US' lack of a plan for post-Saddam Iraq has also been cited as a factor behind the rapid rise of *Daesh* (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 17). Moreover, the failure of the Obama administration to negotiate a continued US military presence arguably allowed the Iraqi government to become more sectarian and ended up increasing Sunni disaffection (Smith, 2014, p. 15).

The political system

According to Dodge, the fall of Mosul in 2014 was 'the direct result of the contemporary flaws within the political system set up after the regime change of 2003' (Dodge, 2014, p. 16). The *muhāsasa* system whereby the governments of national unity formed in 2005, 2006 and 2010 had to fulfill sectarian quotas has been one of the causes of institutional corruption in Iraq (Dodge, 2014, pp. 13-14). Cabinet posts, and the positions of prime minister and president, are allocated in line with a sectarian formula. The number of seats that each party wins in elections is also taken into account. According to Dodge 'the payrolls and budgets of ministries have become the private fiefdoms of the parties to which they are awarded, fostering personal and political corruption, as well as an incoherent approach to governance' (2014, p. 14). This corruption in turn has resulted in extremely poor government services (Dodge, 2014, p. 14). For example, in 2011 only an estimated 26 per cent of the Iraqi population were covered by the public sewerage network (Dodge, 2014, p. 14). Moreover, Dodge argues that the *muhāsasa* system has resulted in the 'deliberate development or reinvention of sectarian identities by a ruling elite that judges this the best method for rallying an alienated electorate' (Dodge, 2014, p. 14).

3. Proximate factors 2011-2014

Proximate factors behind the fall of Mosul in 2014 include:

Consolidation of Maliki's personal power

An Iraqi parliamentary report released in August 2015 reportedly directly blamed Maliki's actions for the fall of Mosul (O'Driscoll, 2015, p. 8). A special report in the *Independent* argues that Maliki and his government were informed by Ahmed al-Zarkani, head of intelligence in Mosul, that an ISIL attack on the city was imminent in February 2014, several months before the fall of Mosul (Neurink, 2016). This, and subsequent warnings were ignored, despite information in May

³ A policy undertaken by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and subsequent Iraqi governments to eradicate the Ba'ath Party's influence in the new Iraqi political system.

2014 that there were six ISIL training camps outside the city of Mosul, and more specific information that an attack would commence on 6 June. However, despite this information the commander in charge of military operations in Mosul went on holiday on 3 June (Neurink, 2016). Potential reasons for the Maliki government's failure to act on the aforementioned information are:

- Maliki thought that the fall of Mosul could be politically advantageous for him.
- Maliki's inability or unwillingness to trust the head of intelligence in Mosul.
- Maliki simply did not understand that the threat was real (Neurink, 2016).

According to the ICG, Maliki reorganised the security apparatus as a source of patronage, rendered parliament powerless, and politicised the judiciary (ICG, 2014, pp. 3-4). During his second term in power, Maliki held the positions of Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior, Minister of State for National Security, and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, in addition to being Prime Minister (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 18). As he consolidated his power base, Maliki circumvented the elements of the 2005 constitution that dealt with the division of powers, independent committees of Iraq, and a number of checks and balances written into the law (Romano, 2014, p. 553).

During his second term as Prime Minister (2010-2014) Maliki consolidated his power base by replacing high-ranking military officials with his own allies and giving direct orders to them. He also created provincial command centres with generals loyal to him, putting both the army and police under their control (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 18). In addition, he created tens of thousands of 'counterterrorism' troops answerable only to him, as well as six different spy agencies under his command (Romano, 2014, p. 566). This reportedly resulted in him effectively controlling the Iraqi Security Forces (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 18).

Maliki's second term in power arguably resulted in the complete marginalisation of Sunnis and the subsequent rise of ISIL (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 18). This is discussed in more detail in the section on sectarian policies below.

Sectarian policies

While sectarian policies were introduced following the fall of Saddam Hussein, they arguably intensified in the 2011-2014 period. In addition to the sectarian policies discussed in the section on general factors behind the fall of Mosul in 2014, the following sectarian policies led to the rapid rise of *Daesh* in Mosul in 2014:

- **Maliki's use of Article 4 of the anti-terrorism law⁴** to remove political opponents (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016, p. 526). In December 2013, an arrest warrant was issued for the Sunni Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, Tareq al-Hashemi, for alleged links to terrorism. This move was seen as a major escalation in anti-Sunni policy by Sunnis. It resulted in the main Sunni political bloc announcing that it was boycotting the cabinet in response (Smith, 2014, p. 15).
- In 2012 Sunnis began peaceful protests across Iraq, demonstrating for equal rights, the release of prisoners, and the repeal of the anti-terrorism law and de-Ba'athification

⁴ Article 4 allows the Iraqi government to define 'engaging in terrorist activity' broadly to include engaging in "provoking, planning, financing, committing or supporting others to commit [acts of] terrorism" (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016, p. 537).

measures. **The 2013 massacre of 38 unarmed Sunni protestors in the northern town of Hawija** contributed to Sunni disillusionment and anger (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016, pp. 526 - 527). Throughout Iraq, army vehicles began running over protesters to disperse them, and troops began firing on protesters. As the number of protesters killed by live fire increased, Sunni protests began including gunmen as well, who fired on Iraqi troops. (Romano, 2014, p. 552).

- **Disbanding the *Sahwa*** meant that there was no active Sunni-led force to fight against ISIL and protect Sunni territory. Moreover, this created a vacuum with there being no military representation for the Sunnis. ISIL stepped in to fill this vacuum (O'Driscoll, 2015, p. 11). After the US withdrew their forces from Iraq, Maliki's government broke its promises to the *Sahwa* and stopped paying their salaries and, with a few exceptions, Sunni tribal militias loyal to the government were not integrated into the Iraqi security forces (Romano, 2014, p. 563).
- **Maliki used sectarian Shiite militias to supplement the armed forces** (ICG, 2014, p. 3). By relying on sectarian militant groups such as the Iranian backed Shia militia Asaib Ahel al-Haq to provide security locally, the government highlighted its sectarian exclusiveness (Krieg, 2014, p. 1).

The state of the armed forces and ISIL fighters

Some authors have argued that the fall of Mosul can in part be attributed to the ferocity of ISIL fighters. According to a Commons Briefing Paper, 'the sheer ferocity of the ISIS fighters was probably a factor in the Iraqi government security forces' abject failure to resist the advance of the radicals even though they out-numbered them massively' (Smith, 2014, p. 6). ISIL's use of 'mobile tactics' has also been one of the factors attributed to their success in Mosul (Rosiny, 2014, p. 4). ISIL fighters reportedly 'attacked with some suicide bombers, then broke through the "front lines" on pick-ups and looted Humvees and started a guerilla war while "sleepers cells" in the hinterlands simultaneously carried out bomb attacks' (Rosiny, 2014, p. 4). The militias reportedly intimidated the security forces with their use of force, separating border guards, police, and soldiers according to their sectarian affiliation (Rosiny, 2014, p. 4). It has also been suggested that ISIL fighters from Syria helped capture Mosul and surrounding territory (Katzman, 2014, p. 18 in Rohwerder, 2014).

However, others argue that the Iraqi Army did not even attempt to fight ISIL (Ottaway, 2015, p. 4). According to a Reuters report, the Iraqi Army was completely underequipped. It cites the example of the sixth brigade of the Third Iraqi army division, which was the first line of Mosul's defence when ISIL fighters attacked in June 2014. On paper, the brigade had 2,500 men, whereas in reality they had closer to 500 (Parker et al, 2014). Reportedly, the brigade also lacked weapons and ammunition. Moreover, infantry, armour and tanks had been moved to Anbar Province, so Mosul was left with almost no tanks and a shortage of artillery (Parker et al, 2014). Furthermore, soldiers in Mosul reportedly had to buy their own food from local markets and cook it themselves, due to the misuse of funds meant for food (Dodge, 2014, p. 12).

There was reportedly also a problem with ghost soldiers. These were men on the books who paid their officers half their salaries and in return did not show up for duty. There were supposed to be close to 25,000 soldiers and police in Mosul, but in reality there are believed to have been around 10,000 (Parker et al, 2014). Dodge argues that widespread corruption would have been obvious to front-line soldiers, undermining their ability to fight effectively, and having a negative impact on morale and soldiers' willingness to defend the state (Dodge, 2014, p. 12). Moreover,

the fact that military leaders were Shiite and had no allegiance to the Mosul area was reportedly another factor behind the Iraqi army fleeing without a fight when ISIL fighters invaded Mosul (O'Driscoll, 2015, p. 11).

The role of the Iraqi armed forces in the fall of Mosul is not limited to their failure to fight ISIL in June 2014. It goes further back. Corruption and extortion of the local population by the security forces caused anger and resentment, driving people towards extremist groups like ISIL (O'Driscoll, 2016, p. 19). According to polling by an Iraqi market research firm, IIAACS, in Nineveh Province 75 per cent of residents stated that the police or military interfered with people's private lives in their neighborhoods (Charney, 2014).

International community's shortcomings

The international community's almost unconditional backing for Maliki also contributed to ISIL's rise and the fall of Mosul in 2014 (Romano, 2014, p. 548). Focus on fighting 'terrorism' prevented the international community from pressing Maliki for much needed political reform (ICG, 2014, p. 4).

The US failure to act on information they had about the planned attack on Mosul was also reportedly one of the factors behind the city's fall to ISIL (Neurink, 2016).

Manipulation of state resources

Individuals from diverse backgrounds accepted state positions in order to increase their own personal wealth and influence, rather than working together to create a credible alternative to Maliki's government that wasn't ISIL (ICG, 2014, p. 4).

Securitisation of politics

The securitisation of politics in Iraq included excessive use of the security forces both for social control and for perpetuating the government's rule (ICG, 2014, p. 4). Maliki failed to reform the security forces but deployed the army in cities across the country in order to satisfy the US and to put pressure on his political enemies (ICG, 2014, p. 4).

Changing attitudes

IIAACS polls indicated that there had been a significant change in attitudes to the government and the security forces in the months leading up to ISIL's takeover of Mosul in June 2014. Insecurity in Sunni areas was significant; economic conditions were deteriorating; and alienation from the Shia-majority government was increasingly widespread. This 'opened the door' to ISIL's takeover of Mosul (Charney, 2014).

4. References

Abdulrazaq, T., & Stansfield, G. (2016). The enemy within: ISIS and the conquest of Mosul. *Middle East Journal* 70(4), 525–542. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3751/70.4.11>

Charney, C. (2014). *Polls key to understanding – and defeating – ISIS*. New York: International Peace Institute. Retrieved from: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/09/polls-understanding-solving-isis-crisis/>

Dodge, T. (2016). Can Iraq be saved? *Survival* 56(5), 7-20.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.962795>

International Crisis Group (ICG). (2014). *Iraq's jihadi jack-in-the-box* (Briefing No. 38). Beirut and Brussels: International Crisis Group. Retrieved from: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/iraq-s-jihadi-jack-in-the-box.pdf>

Katzman, K. (2014). *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*. Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=131012>

Krieg, A. (2014). *ISIS' success in Iraq: A testimony to failed security sector reform* (CSG Insights). Centre for Security Governance. Retrieved from: <http://www.ssrresourcecentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CSG-Insights-No.-1.pdf>

Neurink, J. (2016). *ISIS in Iraq: The fall of Mosul to the jihadists was less of a surprise to Baghdad than many were led to believe* (Special Report). Erbil: The Independent. Retrieved from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-iraq-the-fall-of-mosul-to-the-jihadists-was-less-of-a-surprise-to-baghdad-than-many-were-led-a6895896.html>

O'Driscoll, D. (2016). *The future of Mosul: Before, during, and after the liberation*. Erbil: Middle East Research Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/the-future-of-mosul-before-during-and-after-the-liberation/>

O'Driscoll, D. (2015). Autonomy impaired: Centralisation, authoritarianism, and the failing Iraqi state. *Ethnopolitics*, 1-18. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1086126](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1086126)

Ottaway, M. (2015). *ISIS: Many faces, many battles* (Occasional Paper). Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/isis-many-faces-different-battles>

Parker, N., Coles, I. & Salman, R. (2014). *How Mosul fell: An Iraqi General disputes Baghdad's story* (GIGA Focus No. 6). Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Retrieved from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>

Rohwerder, B. (2014). *Contemporary conflict analysis of Iraq* (Rapid Literature Review). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. Retrieved from <http://www.gsdrc.org/publications/contemporary-conflict-analysis-of-iraq/http://www.gsdrc.org/publications/contemporary-conflict-analysis-of-iraq/>

Romano, D. (2014). Iraq's descent into civil war: A constitutional explanation. *Middle East Journal* 68 (4), 547–566. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.3751/68.4.13](http://dx.doi.org/10.3751/68.4.13)

Rosiny, S. (2016). *The caliph's new clothes: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* (GIGA Focus No. 6). Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Retrieved from: https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/gf_international_1406.pdf

Smith, B. (2014). *Islamic State of Iraq and Levant and the takeover of Mosul*. London: House of Commons Library. Retrieved from:
<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06915>

Suggested citation

Strachan, A.L. (2017). *Factors behind the fall of Mosul to ISIL (Daesh) in 2014*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

About this report

This report is based on five days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).

This report was prepared for the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and its partners in support of pro-poor programmes. It is licensed for non-commercial purposes only. K4D cannot be held responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this report. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, K4D or any other contributing organisation. © DFID - Crown copyright 2017.

