As Battle of Mosul Begins, & Aleppo Disaster Continues, the Next President Will Inherit a M.E. in Flames

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A Cheat Sheet for the Battle of Mosul: Benny Avni, New York Post, Oct. 17, 2016 — To the Iraqi forces that launched a campaign to liberate Mosul and deal ISIS its most serious blow yet: Godspeed. To America: Welcome back to Iraq, and let’s hope we get it right this time.

Why the U.S. Role in Mosul Is Crucial: Tom Rogan, National Review, Oct. 19, 2016 — Approaching from the east and south, Iraqi forces have begun operations to retake Mosul.

The New Middle East: Caroline Glick, Jerusalem Post, Oct. 6, 2016 — A new Syria is emerging. And with it, a new Middle East and world are presenting themselves.

The Roots of America’s Mideast Delusion: James Traub, Wall Street Journal, Oct. 10, 2016 — From the moment he took office in 2009, President Barack Obama tried to repair America’s standing in the Middle East by demonstrating his sincere concern for the grievances and aspirations of Arab peoples.

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What are Israel’s Strategic Military Threats for the Coming Jewish Year?: Yaakov Katz, Jerusalem Post, Oct. 14, 2016


The Real Middle East Story: Walter Russell Mead, American Interest, Sept. 23, 2016


A CHEAT SHEET FOR THE BATTLE OF MOSUL
To the Iraqi forces that launched a campaign to liberate Mosul and deal ISIS its most serious blow yet: Godspeed. To America: Welcome back to Iraq, and let’s hope we get it right this time. “We will meet soon on the ground of Mosul to celebrate liberation,” Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi vowed early Monday, announcing the long-awaited start of the battle to free the country’s second-largest city from ISIS.

Capturing Mosul was ISIS’s most valuable victory. In the spring of 2014, after tearing through other parts of Iraq’s Sunni areas, these terrorists took over the city — prompting Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, its megalomaniac leader, to announce a caliphate, an Islamic state that was to grow in territory, fame and influence and defeat the world’s infidels. Since then, would-be terrorists from as far as Orlando, Fla., have sworn allegiance to the victor of Mosul, which is why defeating it there is so crucial.

ISIS’s victory came about two years after President Obama ordered all US troops out of Iraq. In the face of the enemy, the Iraqi army — armed, trained and funded by America since 2003 to become the best fighting force in the Arab world — collapsed, fleeing the city and abandoning piles of modern US-made weapons.

But ISIS’s ensuing atrocities prompted Obama to quietly return to Iraq, and US-backed Iraqi units now look a bit more promising. Iraq’s counter-terrorism brigades, including the elite Golden Division, will carry most of the Mosul fighting — with American air cover (plus help from the Brits, French, Germans and others).

There’s much to worry about, though. The United States has wisely conditioned its
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Air support on the exclusion of Iranian-backed Shiite militias from the battlefield. Abadi has agreed: Where we bomb, those militias — loyal to Nouri al-Malaki, prime minister before Abadi, and Tehran’s fave — can’t fight. But what if Abadi’s special forces aren’t enough to capture and control a city of over 1 million terrorized locals? Especially when ISIS fighters have likely booby-trapped every nook and cranny of the city, and dug deep fighting tunnels under it?

True, independent Kurdish peshmerga fighters are helping. In the early fighting, the Kurds captured several villages northeast of Mosul, as the Iraqi armies moved in from the south. But the Kurds aren’t likely to go deep into Mosul or risk major losses to liberate the city’s Sunnis. So if the Iraqi army gets bogged down (or if Iran insists), the Shiite militias might well enter the fray. Sectarian enmities will then reignite, making the rise of some new extremist Sunni threat more likely.

Turkish forces that have been stationed near Mosul may also join the battle. Officially, they’re there to protect Iraq’s Turkmen minority — but Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also detests Iraq’s Abadi. The Turks may itch to show off their prowess — and to stick it to Baghdad while expanding Turkish influence in Iraq.

Then there’s a real fear that Mosul will become an Iraqi version of the horrors of Aleppo. Unlike the Russians, Iranians and regime forces in Syria, US planes won’t target hospitals or schools — but mistakes happen, and ISIS will do its best to encourage them. Will war-shy Obama then keep his eyes on the prize, defeating ISIS? Will he insist, as he must, on keeping Iran from dominating Iraq’s Sunnis through its proxy Shiite militias? What if Tehran threatens to tear up the president’s beloved nuclear deal?

The answers to those questions depend on whether Obama has learned from one of his worst mistakes. Remember: His premature, hasty withdrawal from Iraq created the divisions that allowed ISIS to take over Mosul in the first place. To
Avoid a repetition, he may have to accept a deepening American involvement in the battle for Mosul. Iraqi spokesmen estimate that liberating the city will take up to six months — which leaves the messy Iraq theater as a top foreign-policy crisis for our next president, who’ll need to start handling it minutes after the Jan. 20 inauguration. Here’s hoping that he or she has learned from all the errors committed by the two previous administrations.

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WHY THE U.S. ROLE IN MOSUL IS CRUCIAL

Tom Rogan


Approaching from the east and south, Iraqi forces have begun operations to retake Mosul. Their fight will not be easy. While ISIS, or Daesh, knows it will lose the city, it hopes to make the Battle of Mosul as militarily and politically bloody for Iraq as possible. In that scenario, Daesh believes a tactical defeat will serve broader strategic interests. If Iraq is to prevent Daesh from carrying through its ambitions, the U.S. contribution will be crucial.

Securing Mosul and deconstructing its Daesh garrison will not be easy. For a start, consider the scale involved here: Mosul has around 1 million residents spread across both banks of the Tigris, which intersects the city. It is much larger, for example, than Fallujah — where the U.S. Marines lost nearly 100 men in November 2004. Moreover, Daesh is well prepared for the attack. Estimates suggest it has three to five thousand fighters in place. They have lined houses and streets with explosives, have constructed tunnels, arms depots, and fortified positions, and will
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use civilians as human shields. The reliable MosulEye Twitter feed claims Daesh holds thousands of prisoners inside the city. Still, the current battle map hints at the basic Iraqi-Coalition strategy. Kurdish militias and coalition Special Operations forces are advancing on Mosul along a wide eastern front. From the south, the Iraqi army is pushing up Highway 1. In concert, these offensives appear designed to clear Daesh skirmishing forces from Mosul's satellite villages before compressing the city's southern and eastern approaches. Then, it seems, the final attack will begin.

In the final assault on Mosul, U.S. participation will be most instrumental. The last few weeks prove why. As researcher Kyle Orton points out, the U.S. has recently prioritized the targeting of Daesh officers who have specific operational relevance to Mosul. That's no surprise. It shows the capability of U.S. and allied intelligence services in pummeling Daesh's resistance networks. Yet these shaping operations cannot do everything. And as Iraqi forces enter Mosul, they will face a concerted barrage of suicide bombers, ambushes, and snipers. As the operation unfolds, Iraqi forces will rely on U.S. tools including video footage from drones and cellphone intercepts to help them navigate a city full of threats.

Of course, the major U.S. complement to Mosul's liberation will be air strikes. As a September 2004 paper explained with regard to urban air support, “structural density restricts maneuver and makes direct-fire engagements during ground combat occur at very close ranges (25-100 meters), in contrast to similar engagements in open terrain, which occur at much greater distances (300-800 meters). Consequently, the majority of urban CAS missions will fall into the category of troops in contact or danger close.’” In essence, because Iraqi forces will be operating in close proximity to Daesh forces, the need for effective air support will be instrumental. And that means U.S. (and perhaps British and French) Special Operations forces will have to deploy within Iraqi frontline units. They must do so, because with multiple aircraft from many different nations flying overhead (perhaps including troublemaking Russians), and with Daesh moving rapidly and using civilians for cover, air strikes must be quick and accurate. Delivering those strikes requires great skill. U.S military air controllers are best able to provide it.
U.S. assistance in Mosul is equally important in its political dimensions. After all, Daesh aside, the Iraqi state remains deeply fragile. And if problems arise in retaking Mosul, Iraq’s various adversaries will seek advantage. For one, there are the Iranian-supported (and often -directed) Shiite militias opposing Iraq’s multi-sectarian democracy. Having abused Sunni civilians during other operations, the Shia militias have been banned from Mosul. But if just one of the militia leaders senses opportunity to please Iran by undercutting Iraq’s moderate prime minister, Haider al-Abadi — perhaps by killing Sunni civilians — he might do so. Another complication is the militia infiltration of certain Iraqi police units. Prime Minister Abadi hopes to mitigate that risk by assigning Iraq’s professional counterterrorism service to lead the ground incursion. At the same time, for all their courage and sacrifice, the Kurdish militias involved in the Mosul operation also have their own territorial ambitions. The U.S. must ensure that these militias respect property rights in Mosul.

These broader political dimensions cannot be understated. As I noted in March, Daesh wants to turn Mosul into a political bloodbath for the Iraqi government. They want Iraqi frontline units and Shiite militias to slaughter Mosul’s Sunni civilians under a narrative of Shiite domination. They want the Kurds to rob Mosul’s Sunni civilians. They want the Turks to continue agitating against Baghdad. Such developments, Daesh hopes, would force Sunnis to continue supporting them for reasons of self-defense. Remember, Daesh’s power resides both in weaponizing delusional theocracy and in manipulating human desperation. Thus, to counter Daesh, Iraq’s government must earn popular credibility by liberating Mosul in good order. As former Delta Force commander Jim Reese put it to me, “victory requires unity of effort and unity of command with our Iraqi partners.” If the multi-sectarian city is secured and its people protected, Iraq will have won a great victory for its future.

Regardless, the coming days will be hard. Daesh fighters in Mosul know they are going to die and will wreak havoc on their way to hell. And even if Daesh is quickly pushed into the western desert and annihilated, their organization will remain a very serious threat.
THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

Caroline Glick

Jerusalem Post, Oct. 6, 2016

A new Syria is emerging. And with it, a new Middle East and world are presenting themselves. Our new world is not a peaceful or stable one. It is a harsh place. The new Syria is being born in the rubble of Aleppo. The eastern side of the city, which has been under the control of US-supported rebel groups since 2012, is being bombed into the Stone Age by Russian and Syrian aircraft. All avenues of escape have been blocked. A UN aid convoy was bombed in violation of a fantasy cease-fire. Medical facilities and personnel are being targeted by Russia and Syrian missiles and barrel bombs to make survival impossible.

It is hard to assess how long the siege of eastern Aleppo by Russia, its Iranian and Hezbollah partners and its Syrian regime puppet will last. But what is an all but foregone conclusion now is that eastern Aleppo will fall. And with its fall, the Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah-Assad axis will consolidate its control over all of western Syria. For four years, the Iranians, Hezbollah and Bashar Assad played a cat and mouse game with the rebel militias. Fighting a guerrilla war with the help of the Sunni population, the anti-regime militias were able to fight from and hide from within the civilian population. Consequently, they were all but impossible to defeat.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to join the fight, he and his generals soon recognized that this manner of fighting ensured perpetual war. So
they changed tactics. The new strategy involves speeding up the depopulation and ethnic cleansing of rebel-held areas. The massive refugee flows from Syria over the past year are a testament to the success of the barbaric war plan. The idea is to defeat the rebel forces by to destroying the sheltering civilian populations.

Since the Syrian war began some five years ago, half of the pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced. Sunnis, who before the war comprised 75% of the population, are being targeted for death and exile. More than 4 million predominantly Sunni Syrians are living in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. More than a million have entered Europe. Millions more have been internally displaced. Assad has made clear that they will never be coming home.

At the same time, the regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah masters have been importing Shi’ites from Iran, Iraq and beyond. The process actually began before the war started. In the lead-up to the war some half million Shi’ites reportedly relocated to Syria from surrounding countries. This means that at least as far as western Syria is concerned, once Aleppo is destroyed, and the 250,000 civilians trapped in the eastern part of what was once Syria’s commercial capital are forced from their homes and property, the Russians, Iranians, Hezbollah and their Syrian fig leaf Assad will enjoy relative peace in their areas of control.

By adopting a strategy of total war, Putin has ensured that far from becoming the quagmire that President Barack Obama warned him Syria would become, the war in Syria has instead become a means to transform Russia into the dominant superpower in the Mediterranean, at the US’s expense. In exchange for saving Assad’s neck and enabling Iran and Hezbollah to control Syria, Russia has received the capacity to successfully challenge US power. Last month Putin brought an agreement with Assad before the Duma for ratification. The agreement permits - indeed invites - Russia to set up a permanent air base in Khmeimim, outside the civilian airport in Latakia.
As battle of Mosul begins, & Aleppo disaster continues, the next president will inherit a M.E. in flames.

Russian politicians, media and security experts have boasted that the base will be able to check the power of the US Navy’s Sixth Fleet and challenge NATO’s southern flank in the Mediterranean basin for the first time. The Russians have also decided to turn their naval station at Tartus into something approaching a fullscale naval base. With Russia’s recent rapprochement with Turkish President Recip Erdogan, NATO’s future ability to check Russian power through the Incirlik air base is in question. Even Israel’s ability to permit the US access to its air bases is no longer assured. Russia has deployed air assets to Syria that have canceled Israel’s regional air superiority. Under these circumstances, in a hypothetical Russian-US confrontation, Israel may be unwilling to risk Russian retaliation for a decision to permit the US to use its air bases against Russia.

America’s loss of control over the eastern Mediterranean is a self-induced disaster. For four years, as Putin stood on the sidelines and hedged his bets, Obama did nothing. As Iran and Hezbollah devoted massive financial and military assets to maintaining their puppet Assad in power, the Obama administration squandered chance after chance to bring down the regime and stem Iran’s regional imperial advance. For his refusal to take action when such action could have easily been taken, Obama shares the responsibility for what Syria has become. This state of affairs is all the more infuriating because the hard truth is that it wouldn’t have been hard for the US to defeat the Iranian-Hezbollah axis. The fact that even without US help the anti-regime forces managed to hold on for four years shows how weak the challenge posed by Iran and Hezbollah actually was...

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THE ROOTS OF AMERICA’S MIDEAST DELUSION

James Traub

From the moment he took office in 2009, President Barack Obama tried to repair America’s standing in the Middle East by demonstrating his sincere concern for the grievances and aspirations of Arab peoples. He gave interviews to Arab news outlets. He issued New Year’s greetings to the people of Iran. He delivered a speech in Cairo in which he acknowledged America’s past wrongs, and he called on Israel to accept the legitimacy of Palestinian demands for a state. Mr. Obama did almost everything liberal critics of the policies of George W. Bush wished him to do. And he failed. Or rather, he found that the Arab world was afflicted with pathologies that placed it beyond the reach of his words and deeds.

Had Mr. Obama had the chance to read “Ike’s Gamble,” Michael Doran’s account of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s statecraft before, during and after the Suez Crisis of 1956, he might have saved his breath. Mr. Doran, a scholar and former State and Defense Department official in the George W. Bush administration, describes a seasoned, wily and prudent president who aligned the United States with what he understood to be the legitimate hopes of Arab peoples, even at the cost of damaging relations with America’s closest allies—and made a hash of things.

Mr. Doran illuminates a narrative with which very few non-specialists will be familiar. His tale begins at the moment in the early 1950s when America was reaching its zenith. The United Kingdom was reluctantly acknowledging the end of empire, and the United States was filling the vacuum in the Middle East. Neither Eisenhower nor his fervently anti-communist secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, understood this transition in strictly geopolitical terms; both believed that the liberating American faith in national self-determination and consent of the governed would supplant Britain’s self-aggrandizing colonialism. Both morality and national interest dictated such a course. As Dulles said in a prime-time televised address in 1953: “We cannot afford to be distrusted by millions who could be sturdy friends of freedom.”
The familiar story—and it is all too true—is that Cold War competition led the United States to side with friendly but despised dictators in the region like Iran’s Reza Shah Pahlavi. Yet at the same moment that the U.S. was plotting to overthrow Iran’s democratically elected leader in favor of the shah, leading policy makers were infatuated with Egypt’s immensely popular revolutionary leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Eisenhower and Dulles saw in Nasser the kind of nationalist leader whom America needed to recruit to its side in order to demonstrate that postcolonial nations were better off in the democratic than in the communist camp.

The problem was that in order to do so, they had to sell out their closest ally. To British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Britain’s 80,000-man garrison in Suez was irrefutable proof that his nation remained an imperial force. But Eisenhower and Dulles took Nasser’s side in 1953-4 as he whittled away at British influence and demanded that Britain withdraw its forces. Unintimidated by his former wartime ally, Eisenhower brusquely advised Churchill to defer to “the very strong nationalist sentiments of the Egyptian Government and people” by agreeing to hand over control of the base. Churchill had loudly declared that he had not been elected prime minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire; having no choice, he now agreed to do just that.

Britain was one impediment to America’s grand bargain with Nasser; Israel was the other. Eisenhower, Dulles and State Department officials feared that the United States would never win Arab hearts and minds if it was seen as the ally of a nation that almost all Arabs reviled. The problem has hardly gone away over the past six decades. But while the American response today is to gently prod Israel to rein in the growth of illegal settlements, the answer in 1955 was to push Israel to make unilateral territorial concessions—and, remarkably, to present the plan to Nasser for his approval before disclosing it to the Israelis. Mr. Doran makes it clear that the anti-Semitism of the Washington elite converged with what seemed at the time to be perfectly sound strategic calculations.

But Eisenhower’s “gamble” was based on a delusion. Nasser was not an Egyptian
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George Washington or Moses, determined to lead his people out of colonial bondage and into a proud independence, though this witty and roguish figure did a fine job of playing those roles for gullible American diplomats. Mr. Doran shows that while Nasser claimed to be a moderate barely surviving the pressure of hard-liners, it was he who was pulling the strings. Nasser spoke of Israel as a consuming passion while viewing it more as a highly useful rhetorical target. He showed interest in buying arms from the U.S. while secretly concluding a deal with the Soviets. By now the British knew better and tried to drag the Americans off their high horse. But that was dismissed as special pleading.

Nasser was, of course, an Arab nationalist. But he was also an empire builder who saw America’s Arab allies—Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon—as dominoes to be knocked over on his path to regional hegemony. At the same time that Washington was propping up Iraq's King Faisal and Jordan’s King Hussein, Nasser was dispatching his agents to torpedo their rule. (He succeeded in Iraq and failed in Jordan.) The great irony was that while the United States was increasingly viewed as the enforcer of the global status quo, it was bestowing blessings on the man most determined to upset it...

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What are Israel's Strategic Military Threats for the Coming Jewish Year?: Yaakov Katz, Jerusalem Post, Oct. 14, 2016—First, the good news: At the onset of 5777, the new Jewish year, there is no conventional or existential military threat against the State of Israel.
Is the Battle to Liberate Mosul Good for Its Residents?: Ran Meir, Clarion Project, Oct. 19, 2016—Mosul is one of Iraq’s largest cities - the capital of Nineveh Province. It’s a beautiful, developed city, bisected by the Tigris river. More than two and a half million people called Mosul “home” in 2014.

The Real Middle East Story: Walter Russell Mead, American Interest, Sept. 23, 2016—Peter Baker notices something important in his dispatch this morning: at this year’s UNGA, the Israel/Palestine issue is no longer the center of attention.

Unstable, Unruly, and Reprobate: The Middle East Today: Jamsheed K. Choksy and Carol E. B. Choksy, World Affairs, Spring 2016—Grappling with unstable, unruly, and reprobate Middle Eastern nations, and by extension North African ones such as Libya, has constantly been and will continue to be a major challenge for U.S. administrations.