



# The Real Lessons of Mosul (and Sixteen Years of War in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria)

July 19, 2017

Anthony H. Cordesman

MOHAMED EL-SHAHED/AFP/Getty Images

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

BURKE CHAIR  
IN STRATEGY

Driving most ISIS forces out of Mosul is an important victory at the tactical level. The fight in Mosul is still a work in progress, but Iraq is close enough to driving ISIS fully out of the city to show Iraqi forces have steadily improved over time, and the combination of Iraqi forces, U.S. airpower, and a carefully tailored U.S. train and assist mission has had important successes.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that there is a rush to declare the "lessons" the U.S. should learn from the initial phases of this Iraqi victory in Mosul, and to treat that battle as the culmination of a new and more successful approach to fighting extremism and asymmetric wars. If there is any lesson of war that the United States should learn from the more than a decade and a half of previous fighting, however, it is not to declare "mission accomplished" on the basis of even the greatest tactical victory.

The United States has fought a long and frustrating series of wars and battles since U.S. special forces first entered Afghanistan in October 2001. Again and again, seemingly lasting victories have not turned into strategic successes, and have been followed by new rounds of fighting and strategic frustration. And, *only lasting strategic results really count.*

We must not let the success of the moment blind us to the fact that this is still a limited tactical success that only came as the result of overcoming a long series of unnecessary mistakes. When Mosul is judged by the fact it is not even a complete tactical success—and may not be fully secured for weeks or months—and from the perspective of a decade and a half of previous mistakes, the lessons to date are very different from those that come from only looking at the recent course of a single battle:

### **The Failure to Set Strategic and Grand Strategic Objectives**

One key consistent lesson from the initial U.S. fighting in Afghanistan in 2001 to the recent action in Mosul is that the U.S. is still fighting wars where it does not have clear strategic objectives. It has been well over a decade since the U.S. invaded Iraq without a clear strategic objective or plan for the aftermath of toppling Saddam Hussein.

Yet, it is still not clear what the United States is seeking to accomplish in Iraq once ISIS's physical caliphate is defeated. It is not clear how the United States will deal with Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions, how it will deal with Iran, or how it will tie its future efforts to build a strong and independent set of Iraqi security forces to efforts to help Iraq recover, develop, and create an equally strong, independent, and effective government.

It is also far from clear how Iraq can be secured until Syria is stable, but the moment one looks beyond ISIS, the U.S. strategic goals for dealing with Syria are even less clear than the goals in the fighting in Iraq. They now seem so vague that they may be shrinking to the point of accepting Assad, letting now largely Islamist extremist rebel groups continue the fighting in western and central Syria if they can, and trying to secure the Kurdish areas and some small Arab enclaves in Eastern Syria.

If the U.S. has any plan to shape the role of a post-conflict Syrian regime—and deal with Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Hezbollah, and our Arab security partners—it is totally unclear. Successful conflict termination doesn't even seem to be a serious afterthought. Any clear effort to define and achieve civil goals beyond humanitarian relief—and that could lead to lasting stability—seem to be just as missing as is the case in Iraq.

In the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. has virtually admitted that it has no strategy for the war in and is now trying to create one. It is already the middle of the campaign season in Afghanistan, however, and the U.S. does not seem any closer to implementing real-world plans for the use of military force than it was when it rushed into the country to meet the threat from Al Qaeda and the Taliban in late 2001.

The U.S. seems to have rejected the Obama Administration's withdrawal strategy and realized that its past efforts to shift the burden to Afghan forces have failed. It does not have a replacement strategy or a clear plan for its oldest ongoing war, however, and seems committed to an open-ended effort to support Afghan forces that has no clear strategic objective other than keeping the enemy from overrunning major population centers and hoping for eventual peace negotiations—a hope that is about as likely succeed in achieving its objective as "Waiting for Godot."

And then there is the far broader strategic issue of how we will deal with violent extremism once we do defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the central focus of the current fighting. The "war" on terrorism has focused so much on defeating ISIS's physical caliphate that it is unclear that the U.S. is developing anything like a cohesive strategy and approach to deal with the aftermath of that defeat.

It is not clear how the U.S. will deal with the remnants of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, with ISIS's growing affiliates, or with the much broader threat of other violent Islamist extremist movements. It is also all too apparent that the U.S. has no clear strategy to deal with Iran, Russia, Turkey, or Pakistan— key outside players in our current wars.

### **Civil-Military Action in Failed States: The "Hole in Government" Approach**

One of the key underlying problems that has shaped these strategic failures—or at least the current lack of any credible strategy—is the inability to come to grips with the fact that the U.S. has been fighting in failed states with deep internal divisions and failed governments. These are “failed state” wars where the host country partner has been as much of a problem or “threat” as the enemy, and where U.S ignorance of all of the forces driving a given country's conflicts have been an equal problem.

The U.S. has yet to show that it can cope with the civil dimension of such wars. Virtually every commentary on each of America's ongoing wars has noted that a lasting victory cannot be won by military means alone. The U.S. has found it extraordinarily difficult, however, to come to grips with the true scale of the political divisions, failures in governance, problems in economic development and social welfare, and the demographic pressures on the host country or the regimes it has helped to create.

The U.S. has not found ways to successfully shape and influence governments, deal with corruption and critical failures in the rule of law, create bridges between divided factions, and help host countries meet their broader economic needs. It has talked about a "whole of government" approach, but the efforts to date of the State Department and USAID have been weak and lacked any credible plan and consistency. Reading through the United States' various past attempts to create integrated civil-military plans makes it all too clear that the military can plan and the civil side can't.

The end result has been an expensive series of aid efforts which have only had limited successes at the project level, or proved to be over-hyped temporary successes. As a result, the U.S. has increasingly tried to avoid any form of "nation building" regardless of the obvious necessity of shaping the outcome of our current wars so they bring lasting security and stability.

U.S. efforts to spread the aid burden to other states, use the UN, and involve the IMF and World Bank have had no more success. Even worse, a tendency in the State Department to try to avoid the problems raised by warfighting and conflict termination by trying to return to "normal embassies" ignores the reality that extremism cannot be fought by simple denial. A "hole in government" approach to U.S. warfighting simply cannot work.

If the U.S. is to actually win any lasting victories in dealing with "failed state" wars, it will have to develop a far more effective civil-military approach to warfare, and a realistic way of trying to help the host country achieve some form of lasting post conflict strategic stability. So far, this is a lesson that the U.S. is doing more to avoid than to learn.

### **Creeping Incrementalism vs. Decisive Force**

Another key lesson is that there are clear reasons why our current wars are lasting so long, and the key one is the failure to use decisive force. In 2001-2012, during the first major phases of the Afghan and Iraq wars, the U.S. was far too slow to react to the return of the Taliban in the Afghan War and to the rise of a major insurgency in Iraq. This not only led to insufficient deployment of U.S. combat forces, it led to long delays in real world U.S. efforts to build effective host country security forces, particularly in Afghanistan.

The current fighting in Iraq is scarcely a model of what the U.S. should do in the future. Once U.S. combat forces left Iraq at the end of 2011, the U.S. only maintained a small office of military cooperation. It did not begin to create an effective train and assist mission and level of air support until June 2014—after ISIS had made massive gains in Iraq and established its "caliphate." The U.S. then initially attempted to rebuild Iraqi forces with a minimum effort, and from rear area positions to avoid U.S. casualties.

It took several years to deploy sufficient "train and assist" personnel, and to decide to place them near combat units where they could be effective and provide forward fire support with MRLs and attack helicopters. The U.S. was also slow to deploy effective close air support. It only reacted after insufficient force and train and assist efforts had clearly failed and did so in small increments—creating a strategy approaching "*creeping incrementalism*."

In the case of Syria, the U.S. failed to react decisively when moderates still controlled most rebel forces and Assad was weakest. It did not act on its supposed "red lines" when the Assad regime used chemical weapons. It left a partial power vacuum for Iran and Russia to fill, and focused on ISIS while other rebel elements in the more populated areas of Syria came to be dominated by extremists and fought the Assad regime. It was only when the U.S. began to provide the same high levels of support to Kurdish-dominated rebels in Syria that it began to have significant success in one part of the country and that has since created problems with both the Arabs and Turkey.

The human cost of years of "creeping incrementalism" in Iraq and Syria has been immense. Far too many battles have left cities in ruins. It has created massive civilian casualties, millions of displaced Iraqi civilians, and done immense cumulative collateral damage. It gave ISIS years in which to entrench its positions in Mosul and Raqqa. Syria has become even more of a disaster with some 400,000 civilian casualties, half of its population displaced or refugees, and the loss of at least 60% of its GDP.

In Afghanistan, the lack of a consistent and decisive level of effort has come far too close to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. The Taliban took sanctuary in Pakistan with only limited U.S. complaint and resistance, and crept back into Afghanistan to the point where it began to be a serious threat during 2004-2006. The U.S. focused on Iraq, however, and waited to surge U.S. troops to Afghanistan until 2009. It then wasted much of this surge in Helmand, regardless of the overall tactical need.

The U.S. only began to properly fund Afghan forces, and provide adequate trainers, in 2010—after it had decided that it would withdraw U.S. combat forces during 2011-2014, and then phase out its train and assist program a few years later. It made good on the first half of this plan and withdrew almost all of its combat forces at the end of 2014, and did so regardless of the fact Afghan forces were not ready for transition. It then reduced its remaining forces to a small counterterrorism force, and limited its training and support role for ANSF forces to rear area efforts at the Corps level. It cut most of its combat air support, and initially continued to adopt a "deadline-based strategy" in phasing down its small remaining train and assist mission regardless of conditions on the ground.

The U.S. initially planned for all U.S. advisors to leave by the end of 2016, and only began to end this plan when it became clear that Afghan forces could not survive without U.S. support. It also slowed its force cuts in awkward small stages. This time, the U.S. chose a strategy of "*creeping decrementalism*," although it slowed such cuts sharply towards the end of the Obama Administration and it now seems to be seeking to reverse them.

The U.S. has also increased its air support, and so far, the Afghan government has held onto its population centers. The U.S. is still debating, however, whether to deploy the kind of robust train and assist and fire support mission that eventually worked in Iraq and in liberating Mosul. The Afghan government has also lost many entire districts, and suffered major military and civilian casualties. Much of its modern economy suffered badly when combat forces were withdrawn and aid dropped. The World Bank estimates that poverty has steadily increased since 2008—roughly half the length of the war.

In short, the U.S. failure to provide decisive force on a timely basis has extended its wars, created massive human suffering and added civilian casualties, and sharply increased the risk that tactical victories can still end in grand strategic losses. Describing Mosul as a model for the future is totally unrealistic given the real world character of the fighting and the fact you only really win if you can create lasting post-conflict stability,

### **Real World Time and Resource Needs in Creating and Supporting Partner Forces**

There are more detailed lessons the U.S. should learn from these failures. One is that if you are going to fight wars, you have to provide the necessary resources. Much of the speed in U.S. force cuts, the delay in resourcing host country forces, and the failure to provide adequate air support, fire support, and forward train and assist effort came despite military advice from the field and U.S. commands, and the recommendations of some ambassadors.

The U.S. should, however, learn several lessons which are not clear at either the military or civilian level:

- Constantly changing force goals, one year rotations, major shortages of trainers, and the use of unqualified personnel as trainers—followed by a rushed effort to suddenly transition to local forces—is a recipe for failure, not success.
- Erratic funding and poor control over the use of training funds and equipment aid adds to the problem.
- One year rotations are too short to develop the proper expertise, contact with host country forces and officials, and avoid constant annual efforts to redefine the strategy, tactics and aid efforts. It used to be said after an earlier war that this made it so that, “every year was the first year in Vietnam.” The U.S. now repeated these mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Creating effective new forces takes as long as it takes. This is often years longer than people used to training replacements and personnel to feed into experienced forces seem to understand. Trying to rush the process and set deadlines rather than deal with real world results is another recipe for failure.
- Host country forces cannot be successfully created by relying on training from the rear. New combat forces need train and assist personnel at the forward level to develop effective new combat leaders, help make air and fire support effective, and ensure that units do not suddenly collapse because of poor officers or a lack of reinforcement and resupply.
- Focusing on creating at least a few elite or highly capable units is critical. A new force will rely heavily on lead units with special training, support, and equipment. More effort is also needed to ensure that such units are strong enough to allow leave and avoid using them up.
- New units will often need "equalizers" in the form of U.S. airpower and fire support. Trying to rush host country airpower, light combat air support, and trying to rely on limited host country firepower simply does not work.

- Long asymmetric wars put exceptional strain on host country forces, as do urban warfare and demanding terrain. Force goals need to be tailored to the scale of the challenge, and leave, recovery, and retraining remain critical.
- Failed states often make any form of jobs or income the key motive for many to join the security forces, not loyalty or belief in the government. Training, rotations, and leave need to be adjusted accordingly, and corruption kept to levels where pay is actually provided along with promotion by merit.
- Denial of the problems in host country societies, politics, governments, and forces does not solve sectarian, ethnic, and tribal problems or fix critical problems in host country governments and forces. Constant effort is needed to help bring the host country together.
- Aid needs to be tailored to help bring victory and stability, not try to transform a country in mid-combat or build programs and projects that may not survive the fighting.
- Few real world cases will create environments where police can survive except as paramilitary forces, and where a normal rule of law can operate. Police structures and training must be tailored to the real world security environment.
- U.S. civil and military support of all kinds should be clearly conditional on host country performance, and the U.S. should hold key host country individuals publicly accountable. It should be clear to all concerned that the U.S. will not fund or support the corrupt and incompetent.
- War is not an excuse for a lack of tight fiscal controls, for effective plans and measures of effectiveness, and for practical limits on corruption. Waste, fraud, and abuse lose public support and cripple effectiveness.
- U.S. departments and agencies cannot be relied on to honestly address the complex mix of civil-military issues and report the real world level of success. Open reporting requirements, transparency, and the use of special inspector generals are critical to ensuring success.

### **Triage and Hard Choices**

The most critical aspects of strategy are whether to fight, what levels of resources are required, and whether the U.S. effort should continue or resources should be shifted to other needs. The U.S. is now deeply involved in a wide range of conflicts, and the number of extremist and regional threats continues to grow. The U.S. needs to make far more demanding choices in choosing its military involvements, and to exercise far more triage in deciding its level of effort and when to sustain involvement.

As Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan have shown in different ways, this requires regional strategies rather than just country strategies. Given the spread of extremism, it will also lead to more hard choices about committing resources to long and difficult efforts that require full Congressional and

public support. Containment will sometimes have to be an option. So will helping only those governments that prove they can help themselves. This not only requires transparency and justification by the Executive Branch, it requires formal Congressional action and careful justification and review of each year's effort. Open-ended legislation that permits "long wars" to continue without such action and review are not responsible public policy.

## **Other Burke Chair Studies on the Lessons of War**

- Lessons of War (Collection of historical studies), <https://www.csis.org/programs/burke-chair-strategy/lessons-war>
- *After ISIS: Creating Strategic Stability in Iraq*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-isis-creating-strategic-stability-iraq>
- *Giving Afghanistan a Fighting "Last Chance"*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/giving-afghanistan-fighting-last-chance>
- *The Case For and Against a "Realist" Strategy in Syria*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/case-and-against-realist-strategy-syria>
- *U.S. Military Spending: The Cost of Wars*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-spending-cost-wars>
- *The Afghan War: Key Developments and Metrics*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghan-war-key-developments-and-metrics>
- *Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: Is Decisive Force an Option?* <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-iraq-syria-and-yemen-decisive-force-option>
- *The Uncertain Trends and Metrics of Terrorism in 2016*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/uncertain-trends-and-metrics-terrorism-2016>
- *Stability Operations in Syria, The Need for a Revolution in Civil-Military Affairs*, *Military Review*, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2017/Stability-Operations-in-Syria/>
- *The Comparative Metrics of ISIS and "Failed State Wars" in Syria and Iraq*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/comparative-metrics-isis-and-failed-state-wars-syria-and-iraq-0>
- *The Trump Transition and the Afghan War: The Need for Decisive Action*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/major-new-report-trump-transition-and-afghan-war-need-decisive-action>
- *The War in Yemen: Hard Choices in a Hard War*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-yemen-hard-choices-hard-war>
- *If the Fighting Ever Stops: Stabilization, Recovery, and Development in Syria*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/if-fighting-ever-stops-stabilization-recovery-and-development-syria>

- *Syria and Iraq: What Comes After Mosul and Raqqa?*  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/syria-and-iraq-what-comes-after-mosul-and-raqqa>
- *21st Century Conflict: From “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) to “Revolution in Civil-Military Affairs” (RCMA)*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/21st-century-conflict-%E2%80%9Crevolution-military-affairs%E2%80%9D-rma-%E2%80%9Crevolution-civil-military-affairs%E2%80%9D>
- *Afghanistan at Transition; The Lessons of the Longest War*,  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-transition>
- *Case Studies in “Failed State Wars” in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan*,  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/21st-century-conflict-%E2%80%9Crevolution-military-affairs%E2%80%9D-rma-%E2%80%9Crevolution-civil-military-affairs%E2%80%9D>
- *Creeping Incrementalism: U.S. Strategy in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2015*,  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/creeping-incrementalism-us-strategy-iraq-and-syria-2011-2015>
- *Yemen and Warfare in Failed States*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/yemen-and-warfare-failed-states>

*Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.*

**Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2017 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**