

Crisis for ISIS as Iraqi military seize Mosul

By [Sam Flint](#), Gaming Editor (2016/17)

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Image: Wikimedia Commons

IT SEEMS A LIFETIME ago that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the so-called Caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, declared his caliphate inside a mosque in the heart of Mosul, in the summer of 2014. In that same month, a force of roughly 30 000 Iraqi soldiers fled a determined assault from around 1500 IS fighters – a humiliating defeat for the Iraqi government, and a particularly sour one for the United States. The circumstances today could not be any more different. The reformed Iraqi army, fuelled with fresh recruits from the Shia militias, has forced its way back into the city, with the latest offensive beginning last week, seeking to finally liberate the western half of the city. The task is not an enviable one, however.

The easiest objectives of the offensive have already been reached, with remarkable speed. Key outlying towns such as Bashiqa have been retaken, clearing the road to the west of the city, but Iraqi and American commanders are wise to be wary of counting their success as given. From the information gathered by fleeing civilians and Stratfor satellite images, IS'fighters have created a web of trenches, tunnels and booby traps in the city, and are most likely to launch devastating car bomb attacks as they have done in previous engagements. Combined with western Mosul's maze of small, confined streets, and it makes for a conventional army's worst nightmare, but an insurgents dream.

As of writing on 25 February, Mosul's airport has been recaptured, meaning the final stage of the attack is imminent. It is likely to be a bloody and protracted affair. Make no mistake, this is a fight IS cannot win. They are outnumbered, bombarded from land and from the air, and surrounded on almost all fronts, but they will not give up their prized city without inflicting a heavy cost.

For the Iraqi army, this will be their greatest test. There is a reason attacks have been spearheaded by their special forces, keen to restrict tensions among Sunni villagers wary of Shia militias. For the rest of the world, this could signal the long overdue demise of the Islamic State, at least as we know it. With their territorial ambitions scuppered, it is likely they will be driven further underground, scattering across their shrinking caliphate.

The scenario most foreign observers fear, however, is the resultant shift in tactics. IS may choose to focus on striking foreign nations in terror attacks, of the kind seen in Nice and Brussels – an idea ever more worrying with many of the major European countries heading to the polls this year.

The Islamic State may be down, but they certainly aren't out, and the west will continue to wrestle with their brutal ideology for many years



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