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**Insider's View Bulletin:** IS militants reportedly fortify western Mosul ahead of expected battle

Sept. 12, 2016

**Key points:**

- IS militants claims group drawing down assets from east bank of Tigris
- Focusing efforts on fortifying neighborhoods in western Mosul
- For a number of reasons, western Mosul viewed as easier to defend

**Operational impact:** Individuals and entities with business interests in Iraq should note that a significantly higher percentage of eastern Mosul's population has already departed the city as compared to western Mosul, which remains fairly well populated. Humanitarians assume that remaining residents of eastern Mosul are likely to flee towards the Kurdistan region, whereas residents of western Mosul are more apt to flee to the north, south or west. The upshot is that because many residents of eastern Mosul have already fled, the influx of new IDPs to the Kurdistan region – while still likely to be in the tens to hundreds of thousands – will be less than it would be if eastern Mosul remained as heavily populated as western Mosul is thought to be.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** IS militants have increased defensive preparations in the west side of Mosul, according to residents and militants. The area is seen as the best place to entrench, due to its high density and the fact that its population is relatively homogeneously Sunni Arab, whereas eastern Mosul is populated a mixed population of Sunni Arabs, Kurds and other minorities. Separately, IS released many of its detainees during the two days ahead of Eid al-Adha, and a senior IS leader was killed in an airstrike on Sept. 11.

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**Details:** Following security forces' seizure of Qayara, IS has begun to bolster its defenses in western Mosul, according to statements by local residents and IS militants. Over the past two weeks, IS militants have transferred a number of military outposts from the eastern side of the Tigris (known colloquially as the "left side" of the city, to neighborhoods on the western bank (known as the "right side").

In the past ten days IS commenced erecting concrete walls in the western Mosul neighborhoods of Tal Rumman, Wadi Hajjar, and Mosul al-Jadida. The walls have encircled the neighborhoods, leaving only one way in or out.

An IS militant explained that the decision to entrench themselves in western Mosul was due both to the area being "more suitable to defend in the expected street fight," and because the residents of the area are largely Sunni Arab. The militant explained, "The [eastern] side population are not reliable. They are mostly Kurd, Yazidi, Shabak, Christians, and other non-Arab-Sunni peoples." He also noted that nearly half of the population of eastern Mosul has fled to the Kurdistan region, while in western Mosul, a significantly higher percentage of residents remain.

An IS militant said the group believes that the high population and building density will to some extent deter coalition airstrikes.

**IS releases prisoners for Eid:** IS has arrested dozens of Mosul residents since they lost control of Qayara, many of them accused of collaboration with security forces, and others without any clear charge. Local residents indicate that around 90 people were arrested in August, and that of those, as many as 60 were executed. On Sept. 9 and 10, the group released those currently detained in its prisons for Eid al-Adha, according to one such prisoner who fled the city for the safety of Erbil.

**Analysis:** *Conversations with residents and IS militants anecdotally suggest that IS anticipates consolidating its forces in western Mosul, which it views as more defensible. The rationale appears to be twofold:*

- 1. That the chances of an indigenous insurrection are viewed as lower in western Mosul because of the area's overwhelmingly Sunni Arab population*
- 2. A belief that the coalition's desire to minimize collateral damage from airstrikes, coupled with western Mosul's higher population density, will to a degree mitigate the efficacy of anti-IS forces total air superiority.*

**Senior Baghdadi advisor killed in airstrike:** A senior advisor to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hadidi, was killed in a target airstrike on the evening of Sept. 11. Hadidi was traveling in a convoy between the villages of Ghazal and Ain Jahsh, south of Mosul. Numerous other militants in the convoy were also killed in the strike, according to a source with close ties to the group.

**Analysis:** *Anecdotally, there looks to be an increase in the targeting of individual mid-level and senior IS officials in and around Mosul over the past two weeks. One potential (albeit speculative) explanation for this is increased coordination with anti-IS guerrilla forces inside the 'Caliphate' on targeting.*

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