

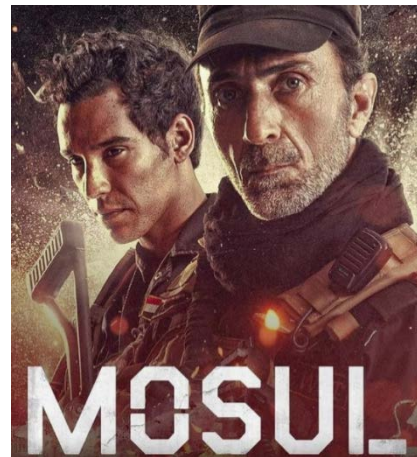


The battle for hearts and minds: ISIS's supporters' response to the feature film Mosul, produced by Netflix

December 6, 2020

Overview

- ▶ Mosul is the third largest city in Iraq. It was taken over by ISIS in June 2014 and became the capital of the Islamic Caliphate established by the organization. The city was controlled by ISIS for about three years until it was liberated by the US-led International Coalition and Iraqi military forces, after about nine months of fierce fighting. The takeover of the city was a severe symbolic and practical blow for the Islamic Caliphate, with its territorial areas of control. Following the takeover of Mosul, the other areas of control of the caliphate were also taken over, and ISIS became a terrorist and guerrilla organization, whose epicenters of activity are Iraq and Syria.
- ▶ On November 26, 2020, Netflix released a **feature film entitled Mosul**, which describes the liberation of Mosul from ISIS. Two days later, ISIS's supporters quickly released a short response video entitled **War and Media**, focusing on the takeover of Mosul from Iraq and the years in which ISIS controlled the city.



Right: Promo poster for Netflix's film, Mosul (Netflix website, November 26, 2020). Left: ISIS's supporters' response video, War and Media (Telegram, November 27, 2020)

- ▶ **The two films about the takeover and liberation of Mosul reflect conflicting narratives.** Netflix's film praises the heroism of the Iraqi forces that fought ISIS and discredits ISIS, while the video made by ISIS's supporters cultivates ISIS's narrative as a victorious organization with military capabilities, supported by the local population.

Considerable resources were invested in the Netflix feature film, while the ISIS response video was hastily edited. It includes basic editing of archive footage plus narration in Arabic and English subtitles. Netflix's target audience is international (with an emphasis on Western countries but, in the ITIC's assessment, it also targets the Arab world). ISIS's main target audience is the Arab/Muslim world, but it also strives to reach Muslim communities around the world, with an emphasis on Western countries.

The speed with which ISIS's supporters distributed the video in **response to the Netflix film reflects the great importance that ISIS and its supporters attach to the city of Mosul and the battle for hearts and minds in general.** The main objective of the response video is to glorify the power of ISIS, which has not yet fully recovered from the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate but is **in the process of rebuilding its military capabilities in Iraq and other provinces.** The video is also intended to raise the morale of ISIS's supporters and operatives in the Middle East and around the world, and to convey the message that **ISIS and the Salafist-jihadi ideology will ultimately emerge victorious.**

Production of Netflix's film Mosul

► In 2020, the American TV service company Netflix produced the **feature film Mosul**, about the liberation of the city from ISIS. The film was released on November 26, 2020, and garnered a large number of views on the American broadcasting platform Netflix, which is widely distributed around the world¹. **The high-budget production was filmed in Morocco.** The actors in the film speak Moroccan Arabic, granting the film a certain degree of authenticity.

► **Mosul is a full-length (101 minutes) action film** based on authentic testimonies from the battles that took place during the takeover of the city of Mosul from ISIS. It centers on an Iraqi elite unit (of the Nineveh Province police), which is eliminating ISIS's last pockets of control in the city. The film portrays ISIS as a terrorist organization that wreaks havoc, shooting at innocent civilians fleeing its control zones. Its operatives are portrayed as defeatists who are relatively easily overcome when fighting against the elite unit. The

¹**Netflix** is an American over-the-top content platform and production company based in California. It was founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph. Its main activity is providing direct viewing services of a library of films and TV shows, some of which are original content of the company, for a monthly subscription fee. Netflix is available worldwide except for China, Syria, North Korea and the Crimea (Wikipedia). In recent years, Netflix has become the world's biggest film and TV production company.

fighters of the Iraqi unit, on the other hand, are portrayed in the film as moral people who care about the local population.

ISIS's supporters' response: War and Media

► On November 28, 2020, two days after Netflix began distributing the film *Mosul*, supporters of ISIS (whose identity is unclear) released a video in response to the film, **clearly reflecting ISIS's propaganda messages and narrative**. The video is about 11 minutes long. It was posted on Telegram **and is entitled War and Media**. The film is in Arabic with English subtitles. Following are the highlights of the video (Telegram, November 28, 2020):

- ◆ The video focuses on the takeover of Mosul by ISIS (June 2014) and the period when the organization controlled the city (June 2014 – July 9, 2017). **The video cultivates the image of ISIS as a victorious and capable organization** that managed to defeat the Iraqi army in a matter of hours with just 300 fighters. According to the video, tens of thousands of members of the Iraqi security forces who were in the city when it was taken over by ISIS fled, leaving behind billions of dollars in military equipment.
- ◆ The video includes footage of battles documented by ISIS when it took over Mosul in June 2014. ISIS operatives are portrayed as exemplary heroes who fought during the takeover of the city and displayed high-level military capabilities and creativity, using a variety of operating methods. Among other things, the video mentions the use of car bombs against the Iraqi security forces, the use of explosive drones, and the use of self-made rockets developed by ISIS.



Right: Archival footage of ISIS operatives during the takeover of the city of Mosul. Left: ISIS operative firing an anti-tank missile at an Iraqi tank on the outskirts of Mosul (Telegram, November 27, 2020)

- ◆ **The second part of the video deals with the years when ISIS controlled the city of Mosul.** The video claims that most of the city's residents were happy about ISIS's takeover. It also claims that when ISIS controlled the city, Mosul enjoyed prosperity. It

was allegedly one of the best periods the city had ever known, with a special character unparalleled in history (in reality, ISIS carried out massacres of the city's residents and imposed a regime of terror on the city).



**Mosul residents welcoming ISIS operatives as they take control of the city
(Telegram, November 27, 2020)**

◆ The video ends with the recapture of Mosul while emphasizing the size of the forces that fought against ISIS and blaming the US for the destruction of the city. The video states that bombs dropped by US warplanes destroyed Mosul, and that about 130,000 Iraqi fighters and Popular Mobilization operatives took part in the battle to retake the city (all in order to convey the message of “few against many” to explain why the city was retaken from ISIS).



**The extensive destruction caused to the city of Mosul during its liberation from ISIS
(Al-Alam, July 10, 2017)**

The video ends by conveying the message that **despite the liberation of Mosul, ISIS continues to operate in Iraq and that the organization is far from defeated**². In addition, there is an (implicit) threat under the caption “soon” to retake Mosul. The video ends with photos of **the Great Mosque in the city, where former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**

²Over the past year, there has been a sharp increase in the intensity of ISIS's terrorist and guerrilla activity in Iraq, but the rehabilitation of ISIS's military forces in the Iraqi arena has not yet been completed. For further details see the ITIC's study from September 24, 2020: “ISIS gaining in strength in the Iraqi arena.”

announced the establishment of ISIS's caliphate. The ending embodies the main message of the video: **ISIS will gain in strength and will return to Mosul as a victor.**



Right: The final image of the ISIS video: a photo from the Great Mosque of Mosul, where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of ISIS's caliphate in June 2014. Left: The Great Mosque being blown up by ISIS on June 21, 2017 (Telegram, June 22, 2017).



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivering a sermon at the Great Mosque in Mosul (YouTube, July 5, 2014)

The Great Mosque of Mosul is a symbol of the Islamic Caliphate, whose establishment was announced by ISIS's leader in the mosque. The caliphate collapsed with the liberation of the territories controlled by ISIS by the US-led International Coalition and Iraqi military forces. The mosque was first built in the late 12th century but has undergone many renovations over the years. Most of it was destroyed by ISIS on June 21, 2017, during the campaign for the liberation of Mosul. In 2018, renovation work on the mosque began, on the initiative UNESCO and funded by the United Arab Emirates, but it appears to be progressing slowly (Al-Sumaria, January 20, 2020).



Right: The ruins of the Great Mosque of Mosul (shafaqna.com, June 27, 2020). Left: The renovation activity (Al-Ain, June 20, 2020)

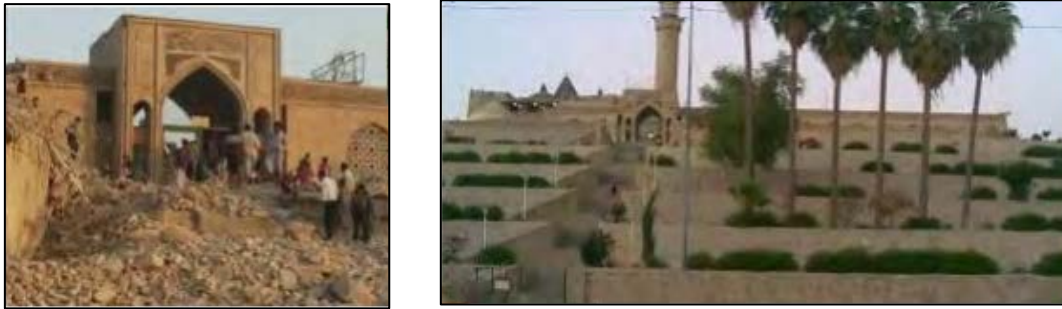
Appendix

The city of Mosul: Its takeover by ISIS and liberation by Iraqi and International Coalition forces

The city of Mosul, capital of the Nineveh Province, is **the third largest city in Iraq**, after Baghdad and Basra. It serves as a center for the oil industry in northern Iraq. **The most recent estimate of the number of inhabitants since 2004 was over 1.5 million.** Most of the population is Sunni Arab, but there were also Kurdish, Armenian-Christian, Turkmen, Yazidi and Circassian minorities. **These minorities were persecuted and murdered by ISIS**, and it is unclear how many of them currently reside in the city (Wikipedia). During the years of ISIS control, about 700,000 residents became displaced persons (it is unclear how many of them returned to the city).

- ▶ In June 2014, ISIS launched a military campaign in Iraq, intended to take over most of the territory of western and northern Iraq and later also the capital Baghdad. **ISIS reached the pinnacle of its success on June 4-10, 2014, when it took over the city of Mosul from large Iraqi army forces**, in whose establishment and training the US had invested many resources for many years.
- ▶ During the takeover of Mosul, ISIS released some 3,000 prisoners from Iraqi government prisons and took control of military facilities formerly used by the US army. ISIS also took control of Mosul International Airport, Mosul Dam to the north of the city, and other state infrastructure (oil facilities and banks). **The takeover of Mosul was accompanied by massacres**, during which ISIS killed Iraqi civilians and military personnel (including Shiite soldiers that it had captured). In addition, ISIS destroyed mosques and sacred tombs, and

damaged churches (ISIS destroyed the tombs of the Prophet Jonah and the Prophet Daniel in the Mosul region, inter alia).



The tomb of the Prophet Jonah in Mosul before (right) and after (left) being destroyed by ISIS (alsumaria.tv; allibad.net)



Right: The tomb of Daniel the Prophet in the Mosul region before being blown up by ISIS (youm7.com) Left: The destruction of ancient statues in Iraq, cultural treasures dating from the beginnings of human civilization (islamist-movements.com)

► As is its custom, ISIS established **legal institutions in Mosul, along with institutions for the enforcement of Islamic law according to its strict interpretation**, oppressing the residents (in contrast to the “ideal” image of the period of ISIS’s rule in Mosul that the organization’s supporters attempt to convey in the video).



Right: Islamic court established by ISIS in Mosul (qanon.302.net). Left: Vehicles of the Islamic Police established by ISIS in the Nineveh Province (alalam.ir; new.elfagr).



Right: Public flogging following a sentence handed down in a Sharia court (alam.ir). Left: Beheading following a sentence handed down in a Sharia court (qanon.302.net)

► About three years after ISIS announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in Mosul, and after around nine months of persistent fighting, **Mosul was liberated by Iraqi forces and the US-led International Coalition**. The operation began on the night of October 16, 2016. On July 9, 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister announced the liberation of Mosul from ISIS's control (and an official announcement was issued on July 10). As a result of the intensive battles during the liberation of the city, many of the city's homes and infrastructure (water systems, schools, and bridges) were destroyed. The restoration of the city is expected to be prolonged and expensive.