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Iraq After ISIL
Stabilization, Traumatized Minorities, and Disputed Territories

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Abstract: **This paper examines the political and ethno-sectarian implications of driving ISIL out of Mosul, the last city occupied by ISIL in Iraq. Iraq after ISIL cannot be the same as it was before ISIL, notwithstanding the striking similarities. Iraqi ethnic and religious groups are now more divided than ever. ISIL's brutal and sectarian crimes against civilians have left deep scars on Iraq's multiethnic and religious social fabric. A new social contract is needed to pull Iraq away from the brink of disintegration and the possibility of a civil war similar to that of neighboring Syria. In a turbulent region fraught with toxic ethno-sectarian conflicts, a form of decentralization in governance could become the thread binding Iraq together. Iraq stands at the heart of the shifting sands of the Middle East, where a variety of powers are competing to control natural resources and geopolitical influence, and ultimately to redraw the map of the region.[1]**

DOES RECAPTURING THE CITY OF MOSUL MEAN THE defeat of ISIL in Iraq? Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province, was the first city captured in early June 2014 by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It is also the last city ISIL still controls in Iraq today. Iraq has experience in militarily defeating Islamist extremist groups. Iraqis were able to defeat al-Qaida (AQ) and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) between 2007-2009[2] with the help of local tribal Sunni forces "Sahwa" (Arabic for "Awakening") and the direct support of the U.S.-led coalition forces. However, the defeat of these extremist groups did not last long. Iraq witnessed the resurrection of these extremist groups as soon as 2011. Analysts[3] blame the Iraqi government's mismanagement of the Sahwa forces and poor post-AQ/ISI stabilisation policies for wasting gains made by military victories against these extremist groups.

The political implications of liberating Nineveh hold even more significance for the future of Iraq than the military defeat of ISIL. Nineveh represents the battle of ideas on how to govern Iraq after ISIL. It is also an Islamic landmark rich in political and cultural history. Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province, stands both geographically and historically[4] on the crossroads of great empires which once dominated the Middle East. When Iraqi politicians demanded independence from Great Britain between 1923-1924, Mosul was the bargaining chip offered by the British in exchange for prolonging their mandate in Iraq. Iraqi politicians, then, had to choose between retaining Mosul or the threat of losing it to Turkey/the Ottomans.[5] Losing Mosul would not only have reduced Iraq's territory in size but also would have disturbed its ethno-sectarian balance.[6] Today, Mosul finds itself yet again in a positon to make or break Iraq.

The dispute over who should participate in liberating Mosul is not only about land-grabbing but also about political influence. Arab Sunnis and Shia, Kurds, Turkmen, Yezidis, and other Iraqi groups are yet to agree on a form of governance under which coexistence is possible. The international community and regional powers are also expected to play a role in shaping Iraq's political future.

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One week after the launch of the multipronged offensive to retake the city of Mosul, it seems that ISIL is not planning to withdraw from the city without putting up a fight.[7] In the early hours of Friday October 21, 2016, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, International Coalition fighter jets, and several local Shia militias were called on to repel an ISIL attack in Kirkuk.[8] Approximately 50 ISIL fighters were able to launch attacks against different locations in the city–mostly security headquarters and infrastructure buildings. On Sunday October 23, 2016, ISIL launched similar stunt attacks in the recently liberated provinces of Anbar and Saladin. Several analysts and commentators read these attacks as an ISIL attempt to divert attention[9] away from its losses in and around Mosul. It could also be the first signs of ISIL showcasing its intent to go underground. Recent ISIL attacks in Anbar, Saladin, and Kirkuk did not only target Iraqi security forces, but also Sunni tribal fighters' homes. ISIL has a considerable network of sleeping cells all over Iraq which need to be tackled using counter-organized crime techniques. Michael Knights argues:

> *"Every time ISIS has been defeated in Mosul, it has re-emerged as a mafia-type network. It assassinates and intimidates people who have control of financial resources, like the people running the gold markets or mobile-telephone operators or the people running the real-estate department in the city, and then it slowly amasses money and influence, and then it comes back stronger than before. What we need in Mosul is a counter-organized crime effort supported by international intelligence and police forces. We need to help the Iraqis to finally destroy ISIL in the city by finally destroying their mafia-style organized-crime networks. If we do this, we break the chain of events that inevitably leads to an ISIL resurgence in Mosul."*[10]

Iraq, however, lacks both institutional capacity and the political will to apply such techniques to uproot ISIL networks in Iraq. Effective police forces are a key component in combating terrorism.[11] The lines between international organized crime and terrorism are blurred.[12] Makarenko, T. (2010)[13] argues that since the end of the Cold War, organised criminal activities have become a major revenue source for terrorist groups worldwide. ISI and subsequently ISIL are not foreign to organized crime activities in Iraq. Oil smuggling, kidnappings for ransom, and laundering ill-gotten money are among the major sources of income from which ISIL funds its terrorist activities inside and outside Iraq.[14] The application of counter-organized crime techniques in combating terrorism in Iraq will certainly depend on international assistance.

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Retaking Mosul

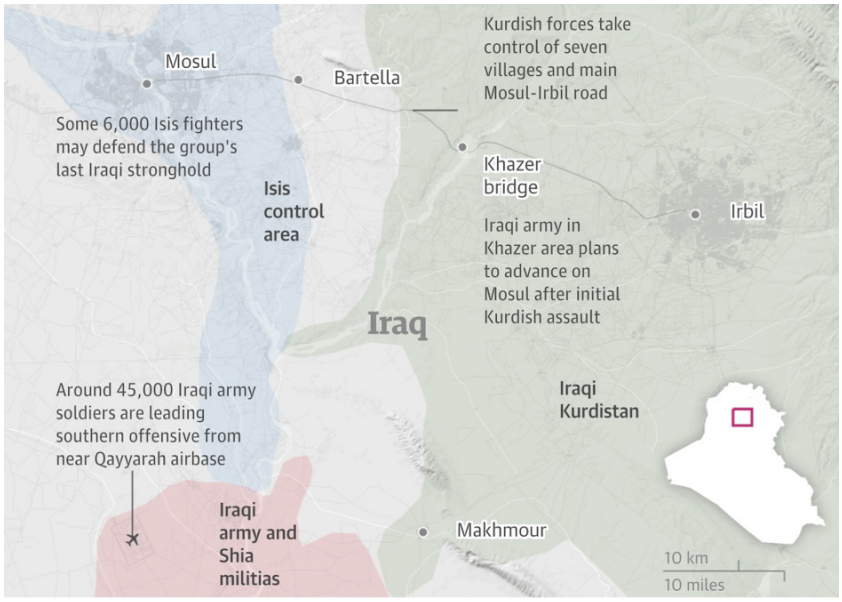
Tikrit, Baiji, Fallujah, and Ramadi are among the major cities in Saladin and Anbar provinces recently liberated from ISIL. These cities are relatively secure now. However, they are far

from being stabilised. There are thousands of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are yet to return to their cities. The mixture of political disputes over who should control these cities after liberation, landmines, and abuses by Shia militias are among the major issues preventing the return of IDPs to their liberated cities.

After many months of heated political debate to determine who is going to participate in liberating Mosul, the offensive to retake Mosul from ISIL is underway. However, military commanders and political leaders do not expect a swift victory against ISIL.[15] According to military commanders on the ground, the battle for Mosul might take up to three months. The challenges security forces are citing include thousands of landmines planted by ISIL on the main roads leading to Mosul, booby-traps in houses, tunnels through which ISIL fighters are preparing to launch ambush attacks against liberating forces, and the fact that ISIL is using civilians as human shields.[16] If we take Ramadi as a reference point, Mosul will take months to secure and clear off landmines and booby-traps in the best case scenario. This, in turn, will slow down the return of hundreds of thousands of IDPs.

Another challenge the Iraqi government and international organizations are bracing for is the possible influx of approximately one million refugees fleeing the military offensive to retake Mosul. There are already hundreds of thousands of IDPs from Mosul living in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)[17] expects the number to increase at least three-fold as liberating forces get closer to Mosul. The possible refugee crisis does not only pose a humanitarian challenge but also a serious security challenge. ISIL Emirs,[18] commanders, and fighters could possibly use the massive influx of civilians as cover for leaving the city. This does not only mean the return of ISIL terrorists to their home countries, but also the return of ISIL sleeping cells to Nineveh. The challenges of liberating Mosul, the IDP crisis, security complications, and political ramifications are immense. A recent analysis[19] shows that the Iraqi government is not at all well-prepared to handle all these challenges.

At this stage, it is hard to predict how the offensive to liberate Mosul will develop in terms of timelines, ISIL resistance, refugees, and the conduct of the liberating forces. However, one thing seems sure to happen: ISIL will be militarily defeated in Nineveh. The military defeat of ISIL, however, is not the sole goal of the coalition. It is worth mentioning, however, that the Global Coalition[20] to defeat the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) is not exactly homogenous. While the ultimate goal of the 60+ member states of the Coalition is to degrade and defeat ISIL, individual states have their own agendas. The declared goal behind driving ISIL out of the city is to stabilize it and ensure that ISIL is unable to resurrect itself in Nineveh. It is expected that the security and political stabilization of Nineveh after ISIL falls will be the greater challenge.[21]



Map: Courtesy of the Guardian[22]

A mixture of armed ethno-sectarian forces are now surrounding Mosul. The Iraqi Army is taking the lead in the offensive to retake Mosul from ISIL. However, Shia militias under the umbrella of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and the Peshmerga are participating too.[23] Sunnis, Christians, Turkmen, Yezidis, and other fighters are embedded either with the Iraqi Army, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, or under the Kurdish Peshmerga command. The International Coalition forces, including Turkey, are mainly tasked with providing air support, heavy surveillance, and artillery[24] when needed.

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One of the reasons there has been a heated political debate over the last several months over who would participate in liberating Mosul is the fear that Shia militias would commit sectarian abuses and war crimes against Nineveh's Arab Sunnis—the largest demographic group in the province. Shia militias are accused of committing serious human rights abuses and war crimes against Sunnis during and after the liberation of Tikrit, Baiji, Fallujah, and Ramadi. To avoid possible crimes against Arab Sunnis, the Iraqi government, Coalition, and Iraqi Army commanders have promised that these militias will not enter the city of Mosul. Instead, militias and Peshmerga are to stay outside the city to provide support to the Iraqi Army. The Shia-dominated Iraqi Army, however, is accused by both Arab Sunnis and international human rights organisations[25] of committing sectarian crimes against Arab Sunnis. Recent eyewitness accounts and video footage purportedly attest to Iraqi security forces abusing civilians fleeing Mosul.[26] The conduct of the Iraqi Army, Shia militias, and Kurdish fighters will shape the form of stabilization the province of Nineveh will need after ISIL.

The relationship among Iraq's major ethno-sectarian groups is fraught with distrust deeply rooted in Iraq's turbulent political history. In my interviews[27] with prominent Iraqi Sunni figures, they seem to agree on a common theme: the decentralization of governance is required to reduce tensions and restore confidence in the central government of Baghdad. Although this might lead some critics to suggest that any decentralization would inevitably weaken the central government in Baghdad, this is not the purported aim. Instead, Sunni political elites hope to ensure that federal provinces will have adequate representation in the central government. This would allow Iraq to stay a strong united country. Atheel al-Nujaifi argues[28] that Nineveh could become a model of political settlement for other provinces recently liberated from ISIL. However, it is not yet clear how Arab Sunnis are going to introduce their suggested solutions to the Shia-led central government in Baghdad.

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Traumatised Minorities

Yezidis, a religious minority in Iraq, have been making headlines since ISIL overran Nineveh province in June 2014. ISIL fighters committed barbaric crimes against the Yezidis of the province, killing thousands

and enslaving hundreds of women. The traumatic experiences of Yezidis oppressed by ISIL in Iraq will never be forgotten. The traumatised minority of Yezidis will need security protection and a form of restorative justice to be able to return to their cities with the aim of reintegrating them into multi-religious and multi-ethnic areas. In order to stabilize Nineveh and secure the safe return of traumatised minorities, local government officials, Members of Parliament representing Nineveh, and local politicians have made two broad suggestions:[29] first, isolating Nineveh from historical political disputes between Baghdad and the KRG; and second, providing international protection and assistance to ensure the development of a representative form of governance in Nineveh based on the rule of law. To achieve these goals, the presence of international troops to protect minorities, restore confidence, and help in the reconstruction of Nineveh is essential.

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The ISIL abuse of ethno-sectarian groups has not been limited to Yezidis. Christians, Turkmen, Kurds, Arab Shia, and Arab Sunnis have been suffering in ISIL-occupied areas across Iraq. The level of distrust and animosity among these groups threatens societal stability in multi-ethnic/religious areas. A plan must be drawn up for stabilizing post-ISIL Iraq. A decentralised form of local governance in Nineveh where all minorities are represented could become a blueprint for other destabilized parts of Iraq.

The resolution of issues regarding disputed territories requires political players who are willing to compromise. The current situation in Iraq is not ripe for such a historical political settlement. Therefore, interim practical resolution should be considered.

Disputed Territories

The disputed territories in Iraq are a contentious and destabilizing issue with wider regional ramifications, mainly with regard to Turkey and Iran. On the one hand, Turkey has been outspoken about protecting the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk province, crossing the border into Iraq to prevent possible PKK attacks, and recently intervening militarily to protect Arab Sunnis in Mosul against possible abuses by Shia militias. On the other hand, the Iraqi government[30] and experts[31] read Turkey's interventions in Iraq as protecting its own interests and projecting power in a larger historical struggle with Iran[32] over who dominates the Middle East.

Iran, in contrast, has played a significant role in arming, managing, and financing Shia militias to protect its interests in Iraq.[33] Iran is also against the inclusion of Kirkuk in the area ruled by the KRG. Iran has a vested interest in reducing the prospects of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. There is a Kurdish minority of approximately 7-9 million[34] Kurds in Iran. However, Iranian government policies towards disputed territories in Iraq are not only linked to the Kurdish issue. These policies can also be understood as part of the rivalry between Turkey and Iran to dominate the Middle East.

The oil-rich city of Kirkuk is inhabited by a mixture of Kurds, Arabs Shia/Sunni,

Turkmen, and other minorities. It represents the core of the disputed territories in Iraq. However, several provincial border areas between Nineveh/Diyala and the KRG are disputed territories too. The resolution of issues regarding disputed territories requires political players who are willing to compromise. The current situation in Iraq is not ripe for such a historical political settlement. Therefore, interim practical resolution should be considered.

One of the proposed solutions to resolve issues of territories disputed between the KRG and the Iraqi government/Nineveh province was made by Atheel al-Nujaifi. Al-Nujaifi suggests drafting an agreement between the local government of Nineveh and the KRG where these disputed territories become territories of mutual interest. These territories of Mutual Interest would be co-managed by the KRG and the Nineveh Regional Government (NRG). Al-Nujaifi hopes that after the defeat of ISIL, Nineveh would be able to become a regional government–similar to the KRG. It is worth mentioning that at the moment Al-Nujaifi is leading a local force of around 4000 fighters embedded with the Iraqi Army to liberate Mosul from ISIL. The Sunni force led by al-Nujaifi used to be called al-Hashd al-Watani,[35] however, it was renamed the "Nineveh Guards" ahead of the offensive to retake Mosul. The new name denotes the desire among local Arab Sunnis to form a regional government in Nineveh under which the "Nineveh Guards" would become Guards of the Nineveh Regional Government (NRG).

Conclusion

The challenges of stabilization, the reintegration of traumatized minorities, and the settlement of disputed territories in Iraq are incredibly complex. There is no reason to believe that they will be solved by the mere defeat of ISIL. Instead, these issues demand concerted efforts from both domestic and international stakeholders to establish a lasting peace in Iraq.

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Atheel al-Nujaifi, and Sheik Jamal al-Dhari, President of the Iraqi Project.
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Muhanad Seloom is an independent analyst and academic researcher into ethno-sectarian conflicts. He is also the co-founder of the Iraqi Research Network (IRN), a non-profit research centre based in London. From 2007 to date, his research has focused on ethno-sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, including the Kurdish issue and the Shia-Sunni schism.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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