Defeating the Islamic State in Mosul: What is next for Iraq?

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Abstract: The defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Mosul represents an important turning point in the recent history of Iraq. Psychologically, the Abadi government will be emboldened by this event, but despite this success, there are daunting challenges remaining in Iraq. Repatriating refugees, rebuilding Mosul, creating a functioning security structure to prevent the emergence of similar terror groups, and bridging differences among domestic Iraqi groups all have to be achieved by the Iraqi government at a time of low oil prices. The proposed referendum on the independence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) adds another challenge for the central government in Baghdad. The end of the control of Iraqi territory by a terrorist organization is a big relief, and now the country can direct all of its attention and efforts towards the basic services that its citizens need. However, political rivalries among different figures and fragmented parties also add to the challenges ahead. The possibility of including Kirkuk in the proposed independence referendum and the addition of Popular Mobilizations Units (PMU) to Iraq's security structures are other potentially explosive topics.

On July 9, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi visited Mosul to congratulate Iraqi forces for their success in taking back control of the city in an operation that started last fall. With the defeat of IS in Mosul, another short chapter in the history of Iraq came to an end.[1] This development, however, represents an important success for the Abadi government in Iraq. Despite delays in the declared program of advances into Mosul and the huge destruction in the western part of the city, the end of IS control in Iraq's second-largest city represents a milestone in tackling the country's security challenges.

Over three years ago, IS captured Mosul and declared a new state (caliphate) at the Great Mosque of al-Nouri. The capture of Mosul by IS and subsequent advances toward Erbil and Baghdad were a big shock and led to the formation of an international coalition to defeat IS, given the failure of the Iraqi government to do this on its own. Despite the fact that some chunks of Iraqi and Syrian territory is still under the control of IS, the loss of Mosul and advances against Raqqa signal that the existence of IS as a territorial entity is nearing its end. The present task of the Iraqi government, along with liberating the remaining territories, is to build the necessary environment to prevent a resurgence of IS and address the problems experienced by cities and towns liberated from IS rule.

Security Challenges

When we take a quick look at the challenges of post-IS Iraq, we see that there are substantial questions that still need to be tackled. The first is eliminating the threat of terror, which damages the country and may increase as IS transforms to adapt to losing territorial control. One difference from Al Qaida and other terrorist groups was how control of territory and the claim to statehood a

defining characteristic of IS. It is generally accepted that IS may now continue to survive by perpetrating terrorist attacks in different cities across Iraq. For the time being, IS control in areas like Tal Afar and Hawija enable them to design and carry out attacks elsewhere. After these territories are lost, IS members will retreat into the desert and the group will become dependent on small cells in rural areas for its future presence in Iraq. The prevention of possible attacks by these groups in cities will be one of the top priorities of the Iraqi government in the post-IS period.

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In terms of security problems, the emergence of IS has made the shortcomings of the Iraqi security apparatus clear. The Iraqi government has expended enormous effort and large amounts of financial resources to restructure its security forces.[2] Besides the official forces of the Iraqi army and police, the PMU (known as *al-Hasd al-Shabi*) played a role against IS. In order to legitimize the status of PMU, in November 2016 the Iraqi Parliament granted them legal status, placing them under the prime ministry and providing them salaries and pensions mirroring those of the police and military.[3] There are several groups operating under the umbrella of the PMUs, like the Badr Organization, are eager to be merged with existing security structures and to obey the orders of the government. These groups are said to constitute nearly 80 percent of the PMUs. There are other groups however, like Hezbollah Brigades (known as *Kata'ib Hezbollah*), who follow the *Velayat-i*

Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) line and therefore take orders from Iran. It is crucial for state sovereignty that Iraq gain control over all these security structures. In order to create a functioning state system in Iraq, Prime Minister Abadi has the daunting challenge of taking control of intransigent parts of PMU. In any case, it will take some time for the Prime Minister to take full control over these forces given the security and economic conditions of the country. In addition to this, Iran will not be minded to give up an effective tool for interfering in Iraqi domestic politics.

Economic Problems

In dealing with the security problems of the country, we should take into account economic factors as well. Despite increasing production and export of oil, the decline of oil prices has damaged Iraq's economy. Iraq increased its military spending between the years of 2006-2015 by 536 percent to $13.1 billion,[4] a greater percentage increase than any other country,[5] since the army had to be rebuilt from scratch. Fighting IS drained enormous amounts of financial resources that would ordinarily have been allocated to infrastructural projects. After IS have been driven out of areas like Mosul, the Iraqi government still faces the enormous tasks of providing food and shelter to nearly 1 million internally displaced people, not to mention rebuilding the recaptured cities. According to U.N. officials, western Mosul witnessed the worst damage of the conflict in the country; it will take more than a year and double initial cost estimates to rebuild it. It is said that it take at least $1 billion to repair the

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infrastructure of the city.[6] Responding to these challenges with oil at present prices makes the Iraqi government's job a Herculean task.

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In relation to the prevention of possible terrorist attacks by IS in the future, one of the most important priorities should be the prevention of the emergence of similar terrorist organizations. When we look at the factors that paved the way for the emergence and upsurge of IS, the most important issue is addressing the concerns of the Sunni Arab population of Iraq. These concerns mostly relate to a feeling of alienation from the government, a lack of security and other services in Sunni-majority areas, and a feeling of abandonment and a lack of proper political representation. IS has exploited these concerns to take control of large swaths of Iraqi territory. In that regard, in order to prevent a recurrence of what the country has experienced in the last couple of years, the Iraqi government should focus on the social reintegration of different groups across the country. This can be done through inclusive, representative government structures, a functioning state system and efficient bureaucracy. These things are more easily said than done. In order to secure this trust, the Iraqi government should gain the confidence of all different segments of society.

The KRG's Bid for Independence

In terms of social reintegration, besides addressing the concerns of the Sunni Arab population, the other important challenge is the future of Iraqi Kurds. With the declaration by Masud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), that a referendum will be held on Kurdish independence on September 25, 2017, the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad has become the most important question in post-IS Iraq. For many domestic and international observers, this declaration is very much related to internal political developments in the KRG in Iraq, but has the potential to destabilize the whole region. There is a lot of division among different political groups in the KRG and also within the same political parties in terms of personal influence. Iran, Turkey, and the U.S. have all declared that they are against this referendum, while Israel has remained silent.[7]

In line with the problems of the region, before preparing the KRG for a referendum in terms of technical and administrative matters, Barzani needs to secure a consensus with other political actors in the KRG. One of Barzani's motives behind this declaration is solving all of these problems in his favor through carrying out a historic independence referendum

Several political figures have urged Barzani to focus on dealing with Iraq's post-IS problems instead of pressing for a referendum on independence. The main reasons behind the referendum on independence appear to relate to the economic and political problems of the KRG. The emergence of IS and the decline in oil prices and differences between Baghdad and Erbil over the KRG's share of the Iraqi budget have led to serious economic problems in the KRG. In addition to these economic problems, differences among different political figures have led to political gridlock. Barzani's term as president of the region expired in August 2015.[8] The regional parliament is not convening, its speaker is forbidden to enter Erbil, and the historic

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leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Talabani, is alive but unable to play a role because of his health, while succession in his party is a big issue of debate.

The problem of leadership among the Sunni Arabs is more obvious after the defeat of IS. A lack of trust in existing leaders enabled IS to exploit the feelings of the disillusioned Sunni masses. Prominent Sunni politicians have been blamed for failing to protect the rights of Sunni groups in governorates like Diyala and Nineveh

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Longing for New Faces

In addition, one of the major challenges for Iraqi political life remains the division between different political figures. There is widespread disillusionment with existing political figures from different ethnic and

sectarian groups and parties. It is believed that the emergence of new political figures in the elections due in 2018 might be seen. Given the persistent problems of Iraq and the struggle among different names for power and prestige, there is a desire for new names in political life.

The problem of leadership among the Sunni Arabs is more obvious after the defeat of IS. A lack of trust in existing leaders enabled IS to exploit the feelings of the disillusioned Sunni masses. Prominent Sunni politicians have been blamed for failing to protect the rights of Sunni groups in governorates like Diyala and Nineveh. Potential names are seeking diplomatic and financial support both domestically and internationally. There are regionwide efforts to bring together different Sunni politicians to bridge their differences and to deal with the problems of Sunni groups in post-IS Iraq.

Among the Shiite parties, personal along with ideological rivalries are becoming more obvious with the approaching elections next year. The rivalry between Abadi and Maliki within the Islamic Call Party (known as Hizb Al-Da wa al-Islamiyya) is known to everyone but there are also other names who aim to emerge as prominent figures in Iraqi political life

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years because of transitions in two of the main parties. We may also see increasing support for Islamic parties in the KRG. The nature of the Iraqi political system and the lack of any economic power base other than the state apparatus have resulted in a very predatory environment in Iraqi political life. Large segments of the Iraqi public are tired of this reality and looking for alternative names and programs.

Defeating IS in Mosul may close a chapter in Iraq's history. This is very good news for the security of Iraq and the region. Problems and differences forgotten due to the urgency of the fight against IS will dominate the agenda of Iraqi politics from now on. Dealing with these extensive and pressing challenges will require lots of the energy and time of Iraqi officials as well, but Iraqi success in that respect will contribute to the overall stability of the region.

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