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The Battle for Mosul; Pre and Post ‘Liberation’ Planning

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There is the opportunity for the rebirth of Mosul and Nineveh, as well as for Iraq, but without a valid plan in place for the liberation of Mosul, that includes the formation of political agreements and huge post-conflict efforts of reconstruction, reconciliation and de-radicalisation, it will be a stillbirth rather than the beginning of a new and promising life.

Background

The occupation of Mosul by the Islamic State (IS) has become an issue of global importance. The liberation of the city is seen as a symbol for defeating IS in Iraq and there is international pressure to press ahead and begin the process. Herein lies the problem; there are an estimated 1.2 million people trapped in the city and 800,000 in the surrounding areas. Great damage can be caused and many lives lost if there is not a proper plan put into place that addresses both the political and military aspects of the situation, as well as the complex dynamics of post conflict Mosul that will need to involve reconciliation and reconstruction.

The way the security forces gave up Mosul so easily is demonstrative of the deep structural and political failures in Iraq and these need to be addressed or any military defeat of IS will be pointless, as they will merely be replaced by another radical entity looking to represent marginalised Sunnis. Lessons must be learnt from the actions of the post Saddam era; the failure to create a political, civil and security system that represents the entire population of Iraq led to radicalisation and disengagement with the Iraqi state. These same mistakes cannot be repeated post IS.

Roots of conflict

There are deep roots to the issues that need to be addressed – drastic changes to the governance system needs to happen. There needs to be decentralisation, which cannot consist of individual fiefdoms, but rather needs to involve power sharing at local level as well as at the central level. The governance system in Iraq has failed to represent the various communities in the country and since 2003 the government has been unable to deliver economic and security stability.

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Under these [circumstances IS grew and thrived in Iraq](#), which makes it clear that a political solution needs to come before any military decision. IS is the grotesque manifestation of the marginalisation of the Sunni population and defeating IS will not solve this issue – it needs to be addressed politically. Once this is achieved IS will no longer have a mandate to exist and it is less likely to reincarnate into another violent entity.

There was hardly any [post conflict reconciliation after the fall of Saddam](#), thus divisions were not addressed and former members of the government institutions became isolated, which led to them joining radical groups. Post 2003 reconciliation was merely a slogan, one that was never implemented, and this cannot be repeated. The acts of violence in Nineveh have been at a local level and have often involved neighbours and neighbouring communities; therefore the need for reconciliation is greater than ever. There needs to be a differentiation between those who joined IS voluntarily and those who were forced to do so due to circumstances. Following this categorisation there needs to be a reconciliation process devised for the specific context of Nineveh in order to prevent a cycle of revenge. Guilty parties need to be brought to justice through the legal system and there are already strong calls from members of the provincial council and from the local population for the involvement of international courts. Tribal agreement to this process is essential in preventing the cycle of retaliation.

Reconciliation Process

The reconciliation process is imperative in order for reconstruction and the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) to happen. On this basis, a key issue is that of minorities and addressing the crimes against them as well as their future protection in the region. At the same time, it is important to note that the Sunni community has also suffered greatly under the occupation of IS. Once liberated, all these communities have to take control of both the political and security systems in Nineveh, however they need immense, and coordinated, support from the international community, Baghdad and Erbil. It is crucial that there is not a [proliferation of armed militias in Nineveh](#) post-IS and therefore these groups need to be incorporated into the new security system with clear command structures.

Mosul is not Fallujah

The recent battle in Fallujah is an example of how not to liberate a city and lessons must be learnt from these failures. Where was the post-conflict plan? Why did Hashd al-Shaabi participate? What was the rush? There are numerous reports of [torture and murder being carried out by the Hashd al-Shaabi](#), as well as of the [unnecessary destruction of the city](#). Following the liberation there is already a large political [disagreement within the provincial council, as well as issues over the reconstruction](#). Moreover, there was a severe lack of preparation for IDPs, which has led to [desolate conditions in the camps](#).

Mosul has a far larger population than Fallujah and Iraq cannot currently afford the destruction of the city and another mass influx of IDPs. The international community is prepared for around 120,000 IDPs, however the numbers will far exceed this – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) estimates that the number is likely to be between 400,000 and 1,000,000.¹ Action cannot be taken until structures are in place to deal with the worst-case scenario. Both during and after the liberation there needs to be massive international coordination to deal with these IDPs. Militarily, most of local leaders agree that the Sunni forces must play a leading role alongside the Iraqi army in entering the city and they should be backed up by the Peshmerga from the North, whilst receiving air and logistical support from the coalition forces.

¹ These figures were voiced at the launch of the Joint Humanitarian Contingency Plan, Erbil – 22 June 2016.

Reconstruction

There also needs to be a reconstruction plan. There are military plans currently being devised in order to defeat IS in Mosul with minimum destruction of the city. However, certain levels of destruction are inevitable and much of the city has already been destroyed. Plans need to be put in place to rebuild the city and provide basic services, such as electricity, water, medical care and education. Investment in the economy of the city is also extremely important, as without jobs there can be no hope of economic security. Without these forms of reconstruction IDPs will not and cannot be expected to return to Mosul. It is crucial that the reconstruction happens immediately, as the rebuilding of the city and return of the population will reinforce IS' defeat.

De-radicalisation

There also needs to be de-radicalisation programmes, as much of the youth have been living under IS for over two years, which is going to have a major psychological impact on them at this easily-influenced stage of their lives. Additionally, the youth of Mosul have been denied a proper education during IS' occupation and systems need to be put in place to deal with the new dynamics of uneducated youths joining a curriculum designed for those following the normal educational path. The people of Mosul have endured a great deal and have witnessed numerous brutal acts, therefore there needs to be a long term plan to address mental health issues and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Planning, coordination and funding

Many of the issues raised above can be addressed through careful planning, coordination and funding. However, clearly the political issues are complex and require multiple parties to come together and reach agreements for the governance structure of Nineveh, the power dynamics between the province and the central government, and the relationship between the province and the surrounding areas. Consequently, there needs to be a political deal between the local (particularly between the former Governor and Provincial Council members), national (Baghdad and Erbil) and international (regional and global) actors. There is the opportunity for the rebirth of Mosul and Nineveh, as well as for Iraq, but without a valid plan in place, the formation of political agreements and huge post-conflict efforts it will be a stillbirth rather than the beginning of a new and promising life.

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