

And the Marginalisation goes on: Iraq and the Politics of Domination

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When the Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, came into power in 2014 he promised to end the politics of dominance that was largely responsible for the rise of Islamic State (IS). Yet, with the military defeat of IS in Iraq imminent, Sunnis are still being marginalised and until this ends, the foundations of IS will remain within the society.

Background

The recent flurry of activity in Erbil – with visits from the [British](#) and [German](#) Defence Ministers, as well as a [tripartite agreement](#) between Baghdad, Erbil, and the United States (US) for the Mosul liberation – would lead one to believe the Mosul battle is imminent. However, the structural and political failures that led to the rise of the Islamic State (IS) have *still* not been addressed – if anything they have recently become worse. Liberating Mosul under these circumstances will only result in IS or another radical entity returning in the future. Both the Obama administration in the US and the Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, are believed to be pushing for the liberation of Mosul to happen for political reasons. There is the perception that Obama would like to end his term on a high, and victory over IS in Iraq would provide just that, at least temporarily. Additionally, a dramatic victory against IS under a Democrat government would almost certainly aid Hillary Clinton in her bid to become the next president of the US. Abadi, on the other hand, promised to defeat IS [before the end of 2016](#) and, as his political position is weak at the moment, this is a promise he needs to deliver on for his short-term political future. However, a rushed liberation of Mosul will only result in a victory that is short-lived and one that the people of Iraq will pay for in the years to come. The issues that led to the rise of IS, as well as the future governance structure of Nineveh, need to be addressed first or at least in parallel.

Marginalisation Continues

Two events have occurred recently that are of concern when it comes to gaining the support of the Sunni population for the liberation of Mosul, particularly with regards to addressing the political marginalisation of

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Sunnis and demonstrating that Iraq has indeed changed. Firstly, Abadi has stated that the Hashd al-Shaabi [will participate in the liberation of Mosul](#) and secondly the Sunni Minister of Defence, Khaled al-Obaidi, [was impeached](#).

The statement from Abadi on the participation of the Hashd al-Shaabi is important, as the Nineveh Provincial Council (NPC) voted unanimously against any role for the Hashd al-Shaabi in the liberation of Mosul City. As the NPC represent the people of Nineveh, their vote should be respected. The population of Mosul fear the participation of the Hashd al-Shaabi, and this is something that IS has ensured through their propaganda mechanisms, thus their involvement against the will of the people will send the wrong message with regards to the post-IS future of the Sunnis in Iraq.

Obaidi, who is from Mosul, losing his post is significant as this harks back to a time under Maliki when political opponents were forced out through politically-driven accusations. If corruption is tackled in the Iraqi parliament it has to happen across the board as part of a holistic process, it should not be used as a political tool to get rid of opponents. For Sunnis, particularly from Mosul, Obaidi represented their community in the higher rankings of the government and it demonstrated, on the surface at least, that the government had changed since the time of Maliki when the armed forces came completely under his control.

As a Sunni living under IS in Mosul, what is going to compel you to trust this government? If Sunni political representatives are not being listened to and are being sidelined in Baghdad, are Sunnis not going to fear what will replace IS? Both of the developments mentioned above demonstrate that Iraq has not changed and that the marginalisation of Sunnis continues. The conditions that led to the rise of IS still exist, and thus the defeat of IS will do little to solve the actual underlying issues. Sunnis need to feel that they are part of the political system, they need some sense of ownership in the governance process, which can only be achieved through actual power sharing and decentralisation. As long as the politics of dominance continues in Iraq, intercommunal strife will persist. There needs to be a realisation that until the governance of Iraq becomes a joint effort involving all the communities, the stabilisation of the country will never happen and the violence will continue.

A New Political Deal

It is crucial that there is a political deal on the national level in order to incorporate all communities into the decision-making process. To ensure stability post-IS, governance at a local level also needs to be addressed. There needs to be a decentralisation of power to the province, but also *within* the province. While interviewing the local political actors for '[The Future of Mosul: Before, During, and After the Liberation](#)', the number of factions within Nineveh became apparent. What is also obvious is that, at the moment, every group has a different idea about post-IS governance, but the groups are not coming together to discuss the issue sensibly. Without a political agreement between the rival political and ethnosectarian groups for the governance structure, they will only use the chaos post-IS to try and manoeuvre their groups into a position of power. There is also a proliferation of armed militias within Nineveh, which makes this lack of an agreement all the more alarming. There cannot arise a situation where both the current and former governor – who will currently not even meet in the same room – are vying for power post-IS, backed by different militias. The effects of political infighting were [witnessed in Fallujah](#) and it significantly hampered the reconstruction process, therefore there needs to be a political agreement between the different factions in Mosul for the post-IS governance structure. It is important to have elections as soon as it is stable enough, as the population needs the opportunity to decide their leaders under these new dynamics. The NPC has been governing for almost two and a half years from outside the city and the current governor has never

been governor from within the territory he actually governs, thus the people deserve the chance to decide if these politicians should continue to represent them and be involved in the rebuilding of Nineveh.

The Way Forward

Iraq has a history of ethnosectarian politics of domination and as long as this continues so will conflict. Now more than ever political maturity is needed from Iraqi leaders; compromises need to be made and the politics of partnerships needs to come to the fore. All communities should be involved in the governance process in Iraq and decentralisation is an important part of this process. Active involvement in governance will give the communities a say in the country's future and only then will radical divisiveness become irrelevant. Abadi made many promises with regards to bringing all the communities into the governance system and now, before defeating IS, is the time to deliver. However, this is a process that needs all the political leaders in Iraq to work together, as he cannot achieve this alone. Moreover, exogenous actors have a role to play as well; great pressure to reform can be exerted on Iraq now in its time of need when there is considerable leverage. The opportunity to rebuild an inclusive governance system in Iraq is there, whether the leaders take this opportunity only time will tell. What is certain is that missing out on it will have detrimental consequences for the city of Mosul and the country as a whole.

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