

## What Next for Iraq after the Battle of Mosul?

Written by Tahir Abbas

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TAHIR ABBAS, MAR 23 2017

For the last few months, Iraqi army, Iraqi Kurdish forces and other anti Islamic State militias, Turkish forces and allies from across the Western Europe and North America are engaged in the struggle to liberate Mosul from the hands of the Islamic State. Numerous people across the world are glued to their newsreels in the hope of some clear new information on the current conflict in Mosul. The lack of clarity on what is happening on the ground, moreover, is potentially creating anxiety and worry that could be avoided, especially at a time when the conflict is resulting in a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions.

It is a bloody and complex state of affairs. Islamic state forces are digging deep and fighting hard. In the last few weeks the Americans have taken a more proactive role in the light of policies introduced by President Trump. Civilian casualties are rising while no real gain is being made in vanquishing these resilient and battle hardened mélange of fighters from all over 100 countries. There is an air of inevitability in relation to the imminent collapse of the Islamic State, as the fight for the end of the world is currently being played out in Mosul. While there is every interest in wanting to see an end to this conflict, the question remains: What is next for Iraq after the battle for Mosul?

One immediate consideration is that as the Islamic State collapses in Iraq, existing areas of Islamist violence across the world, in particular in Sudan and Nigeria, may become the new centers of even more pernicious violent extremism. There are also ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan involving remnants of Al-Qaeda that could transform into something even more sinister than their present forms.

The so-called caliphate will no longer exist as an entity; however, it could re-emerge in the imaginations of some radical Islamists in some other mutated form. The idea of a caliphate reflects apocalyptic notions but if this is now to be suspended, it has the potential to weaken the very idea of the caliphate for some, while for others it will be seen as a temporary experiment that has failed. It could therefore lay the ground for its potential replacement, namely caliphate 2.0.

Mosul has been razed almost to ashes and it will take years to rebuild it structurally. Culturally, there may well be more challenges than opportunities because of deep ethnic, sectarian and religious tensions that Saddam Hussein kept a firm but artificial lid on. Iraq has been lacking effective leadership since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The period post-2003 invasion of Iraq, however, led to the need for massive reconstruction. But before this could be completed, the Islamic State emerged in 2014, creating new conflict zones on top of existing instabilities. The opening up of this Pandora's Box has reopened deeply held old wounds that will not disappear in a vacuum.

As Mosul collapses, foreign fighters may try to blend into a wider Iraq, aiming to remain underground for as long as possible. Alternatively, they will try to get into Europe. Undoubtedly, they can easily slip into Syria, which remains in a state of civil war, allowing these fighters to operate in conflicts there. Some fighters remaining in Iraq may go to the mountains and engage in asymmetric warfare. Though the Islamic State fighters will no longer have a space in Mosul, wider Iraq is still a country on the edge and it seems that the Syrian conflict will continue as well.

There is also the immediate impact on neighbors such as Turkey, which sought to distance itself from the Syrian conflict at first, and then engaged in it at a time when there was little alternative option. The powder keg that is the so-called Kurdish issue, however, could well escalate as the claim for autonomy among Kurdish groups in Turkey

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invariably rises. The Turkish AKP government has been seen to have failed in identifying solutions to the domestic Kurdish problem, but the Syrian conflict has also created further fissures between Kurds in Turkey and the AKP government.

The fact of the matter is that the battle for Mosul is not a local issue. Global actors, including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Russia, as well as British, French and American forces, are all involved in this heady mix. Geopolitical, energy related as well as wider international forces are important to appreciate. The intersection of external and internal political and economic interests is being played out in their starkest and most absolutist terms in the context of this ensuing battle. It is a proxy for a much more complex set of interests competing for hegemony. As has been the case since the outset, no one element will achieve outright victory. These interests, however, will do all they can to ensure that no one victor claims the spoils in this great game, which means the perennial rerunning of this horror nightmare.

As Mosul returns to civilian control, great attention needs to be paid to ensure that a political and economic vacuum is not replaced with further strongman politics in the immediate period, which will mean even more chaos for Iraq in the short run and potentially beyond. Western powers may well regard their abilities to manage these local patriarchs as a particular strength of diplomacy, but there is a risk if there is no long-term planning and greater consideration of the extent of the challenges ahead. The international community will have to pay considerable attention to what will unfold over the next few weeks and months. While it is the battle for the end of the world, it may well spark new conflicts or re-ignite existing ones in other parts of the world.

The battle for Mosul is not the end but, quite possibly, the beginning of the next waves of conflict that will face Iraq, a country that has been destabilized and devastated at every level. In the ninth century CE, Baghdad was essentially the centre of the civilized and intellectual world. Iraq contains some of the oldest cities and civilizations the world has ever known. The country stands before us now as a shadow of its former self, but with significant international will and a great deal of local courage, the hope is that it can ascend again. Until that happens, however, the black of darkness overwhelms any possibility of light and hope.

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### About the author:

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