

The Caliphate Project in Iraq Post-Mosul

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Brief Analysis

Destroying the vestiges of IS governance will not eliminate the group -- which will continue to pose an insurgent and terrorist threat -- but it will remove any arguments the jihadists might be inclined to make about the near-term viability of their state.

The battle of Mosul was a hard-fought victory for Iraq and the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. It cost lives as well as destruction to the old city. Moreover, the Islamic State (IS) as a militant jihadist group is far from dead: it continues to conduct insurgent and terrorist attacks along with maintaining some governance in pockets in Iraq. While Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi noted in late June that the fall of Mosul "marks the end of the IS state of falsehood," the group remains active in pursuing its so-called caliphate project through varying levels of continued, if limited, governance efforts in different areas of Iraq.

Based on IS governance-related official media output, as archived and documented, one can deduce that the group's capabilities in Iraq peaked in summer of 2015. Today, it retains only a roughly estimated 6.5 percent of that governance capability, illustrating that even as IS has contracted mostly to an insurgent force, it still does uphold state-like structures in some areas of Iraq, particularly in four of its self-styled provinces: Wilayat al-Jazirah (northwest Iraq), Wilayat al-Furat (west-central Iraq), Wilayat Dijlah (north-central Iraq), and Wilayat Karkuk (north-central Iraq). Each province has varying degrees of strength, with Wilayat Karkuk having the most active administration. To better illustrate how IS continues to govern certain locales, this piece will examine content from each province, starting in April 2017.

In assessing the group through this lens, one should note that while following IS official media does help illuminate the group's governance capabilities, it likely cannot document the full scope of such endeavors. Yet this approach gives a relatively consistent snapshot of IS governance over time, as evidenced by differences observed in the

group's abilities over the past three years.

Moreover, understanding the Islamic State's continued power projection in certain areas of Iraq can provide a road map for driving the jihadists out of the territory they still control. It can also impart insights into locales that might be easier to retake, providing quicker victories and more momentum. Based on the evidence provided here, the best order in which to tackle IS's three main spheres is Tal Afar first, then Hawija, and finally al-Qaim.

Wilayat al-Jazirah

In Wilayat al-Jazirah, the Islamic State is weaker than in any of its four Iraqi "provinces," controlling only the city and environs of Tal Afar, about fifty miles west of Mosul. This *wilayah* is also the group's most isolated, surrounded by the Kurdish Peshmerga to the north and the Iraqi state to the south, west, and east. The province is correspondingly light in terms of public administration, with IS not having released governance-related content after April 2017. And the April content was thin. Thus, in the middle of that month, it had two *dawa* (proselytizing) campaigns, wherein IS members distributed propaganda to residents of Tal Afar -- CDs of a Wilayat Ninawa video titled "Caravan of Light #2" and the latest issue of its weekly newsletter, *al-Naba*. Later in the month, it showed off the vibrancy of the local market in al-Aluliya, a village northeast of Tal Afar.

Both the *dawa* and market activities were aimed at illustrating IS provision of knowledge and news, along with the continued ability of residents to shop under IS control amid a flourishing local economy. Concealed here, however, is any particular IS operation of services or industries, suggesting that such operations may be slim or now nonexistent. Finally, the absence of any governance-related content for the past three months indicates a substantially diminished ability to govern. Such weakness would seem to validate the federal Iraqi and U.S. coalition's apparent designs on retaking this territory, with some citing a timeline for Tal Afar's fall of thirty to ninety days.

Wilayat Dijlah and Wilayat Karkuk

The second isolated pocket still controlled by the Islamic State -- consisting of areas in its Wilayat Dijlah and Wilayat Karkuk -- encompasses territory within the Iraqi state's Kirkuk governorate. This IS territory abuts Kurdish Peshmerga-controlled terrain to the northeast and the Iraqi state to the southwest, and is located about forty miles to the southwest of Kirkuk city. As contrasted with Wilayat al-Jazirah, this area represents the strongest IS governance project in Iraq, although its isolation could well make it a better second target than territory in Wilayat al-Furat, which straddles the Iraq-Syria border region, controlled on both sides by IS.

Within Wilayat Dijlah, the Islamic State is most active in al-Zab and Shumayt -- both about sixty to sixty-five miles southwest of Kirkuk city -- where it has continued to distribute *dawa* literature, administer sharia lessons to students, harvest and sell fruits and vegetables (watermelon, cucumbers, peppers, eggplant, tomatoes, and pumpkins) as well as wheat, and to distribute *zakat* benefits to the needy (cash and grain), among other activities. This highlights a larger capacity for service and industry, as compared with Wilayat al-Jazirah.

Islamic State governance is even more sophisticated in Wilayat Karkuk, as compared with its other provinces. There, it remains active in Hawija, Riyadh, al-Rashad, and Dugmat. In al-Rashad, for example, in late June, the IS office of membership, advocacy, and education hosted the al-Zubayd tribal clan. In Riyadh, IS was involved with harvesting wheat and barley as well as distributing money and grain to the poor through its *zakat* office.

Interestingly, on July 10, after the announcement of Mosul's fall, IS released a photo essay showing its *dawa* office receiving new *bayat* (pledges of allegiance) from supporters in Dugmat, a rural town. The possible aim here was to indicate that the group was still relevant, continuing to gain new adherents, and that the fall of Mosul was just a roadblock rather than an end.

Lastly, in Hawija, where the Islamic State appears to be at its most powerful in Iraq, the group has set fire to confiscated cigarettes through its *hisba* (moral policing) patrols, showcased a bustling central market, distributed wheat to the poor through its *zakat* office, cleaned up bombed streets through its service office, built a new market, watered foliage, conducted Quranic memorization lessons for children, harvested and sold crops (apricots, squash, cucumbers, peppers, okra, eggplant, and tomatoes), distributed *dawa* literature, observed and recorded the new crescent moon for the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and conducted a meeting between leaders of Hawija tribes and its own public relations office, among other initiatives. Therefore, IS administration, while shy of its peak a few years ago, remains quite robust in its Wilayat Karkuk, and in Hawija city in particular.

Wilayat al-Furat

Finally, on the Iraqi side of the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Furat, the group has been most active in the cities of al-Qaim and Rawa. There, members continue to go on fishing expeditions and sell their catch in markets, spray pesticides in agricultural fields, run enterprises that manufacture and sell ice cream, and harvest and sell fruits such as apricots. This suggests that much of the IS focus in this region is on ensuring residents have adequate access to food.

Although IS governance on the Iraqi side of Wilayat al-Furat has not reflected quite the acumen found in Wilayat Karkuk, the former province benefits from its lack of geographic isolation, in comparison to the other three provinces discussed here. Because the other half of Wilayat al-Furat is in Syria, IS has freedom of movement across the border, complicating potential military plans. Furthermore, the U.S.-led coalition working to retake Raqqa, in Syria, will likely not be able to advance far enough south to connect efforts on both sides of the border before Tal Afar falls in Iraq. This is why it would make most sense to focus on Wilayat al-Furat third among the three remaining IS locations within Iraq. The success of such a battle, meanwhile, would rely on further advances in the anti-IS campaign in Syria, accepting that the most effective approach would entail taking all of Wilayat al-Furat, on both its Iraqi and Syrian sides. If the coalition just focuses on one side, IS elements could cross the border, regrouping and neutralizing the desired effects of coalition actions.

Conclusions

Given this profile of holdout areas of Islamic State control, Iraqi and coalition forces should indeed laud their victory in Mosul -- but should likewise keep an eye on what's next, regarding not only where IS retains insurgent strength but also where it holds territorial control and administrative resilience. Destroying the remaining vestiges of the IS caliphate project will not eliminate the group, which will continue to pose an insurgent and terrorist threat, but it will remove any arguments the jihadists might be inclined to make about the viability of their state -- even if that state is a shell of its former self.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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