

The 'End of the Beginning': The Stabilization of Mosul and Future U.S. Strategic Objectives in Iraq

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Feb 28, 2017

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



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An Iraq expert offers detailed advice on how the U.S.-led coalition can avoid another Islamic State comeback, explaining the cascade of negative effects that have followed previous American withdrawals.

The following is an excerpt from Dr. Knights' prepared remarks at the Senate hearing "Iraq After Mosul." To read his full testimony, download the PDF.

The 2007-2014 period provides clear lessons regarding some of the first steps that Iraq and the coalition should take in Mosul:

- *Spread reconstruction and economic aid to poorer urban districts.* For more than a decade, the city's reconstruction needs have been unmet, and the coalition should encourage Iraq to target reconstruction in the areas most likely to present havens for ISIL and other militant actors. This means greater focus on the poor Arab neighborhoods at the city's outer northwest, southwest, and southeast edges. These areas were consistently overlooked in the past and ISIL used them as incubators for its previous recoveries, employing an economic "class warfare" approach to recruit the poor.
- *Don't overlook rural areas.* Moreover, urban security must be linked to stabilization of rural militant "hotspots" like Badush, Ash Shura, and Tal Afar, from which a disproportionate number of ISIL fighters have come. ISIL's takeover of Mosul in 2014 was partly a rural versus urban backlash. This social schism needs to be minimized to deny ISIL space to re-grow.
- *Treat ISIL as a major organized crime threat.* Iraq needs to help develop strong capabilities in countering organized crime and for local governments in fighting corruption, given that ISIL will first reemerge in Mosul's criminal

underbelly, as it did after the decimation of its predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq, in 2010. The resurgence of ISIL in Mosul will either succeed or fail in the markets, the offices, and the government departments where the terrorists will try to threaten, kidnap, and kill their way back to prominence.

THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE U.S.-LED COALITION

The U.S.-led coalition can play a critical positive role in encouraging Iraq to place good leaders in charge of Ninawa security policies, support those leaders, and build a combined effort to prevent ISIL resurgence. First, the U.S.-led coalition needs to itself act in a coordinated manner. The current coalition against the Islamic State is far more useful than a unilateral U.S. mission, drawing on key contributors such as Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, and Canada, to name just a handful.

Such an alliance, including some of the world's largest economies and security-assistance partners, can help amplify diplomatic pressure in stressing the need for consensus approaches to Ninawa in discussions in Mosul, Erbil, Baghdad, Ankara, and even Tehran. The alliance also ensures fair burden sharing between the United States and other partners, many of whom are making very substantive efforts to do things that the United States cannot easily do (for instance, Italian Carabinieri support to Iraq's Federal Police)...



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