

Iraqi Security the Day After Mosul

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Articles & Testimony

Despite much progress on the ground against the Islamic State, missteps by the Iraqi government, political parties, and security forces could breathe new life into the group.

The war against the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) is accelerating, with major victories piling up. Fallujah was liberated in five weeks and damage to the city was far less extensive than in prior victories in Ramadi and Beiji. ISIL fighters fleeing Fallujah were caught by Coalition and Iraqi aircraft and helicopters, with at least 240 vehicles destroyed and as many as 450 militants claimed killed.

In parallel to these operations, the Iraqi Army has deployed eight brigades north of the Mosul front and has been driving towards the city at a steady rate of around 15 km a day. We can expect the city of Mosul to be isolated from the west by the Islamic New Year in October. The assault on Mosul city may begin before the end of 2016 and may unfold more quickly than observers expect, liberating the main ISIL stronghold in Iraq.

If these victories unfold, Iraq will seem to the casual observer to have been returned to the security situation it faced in 2013, but is this really the case?

How Bad Things Were

It has been so long since ISIL seized Fallujah and Mosul in 2014 that it is easy to forget how bad things were in 2013 when ISIL was merely a powerful insurgent group that could overrun police stations and mayors' offices, launch coordinated multi-city bombing operations every eight days and assassinate local Sunni leaders at will.

In 2010, when al-Qaeda in Iraq was at its weakest, car bombings declined to an average of 10 per month (including six suicide attacks) and coordinated multi-city attacks occurred only three times a year. By 2013 the movement -- reborn as ISIL -- was undertaking an average of 71 car bombings per month (including 22 suicide attacks) and

coordinated multi-city attacks every week. In terms of overall incidents, Iraq suffered an average of 358 insurgent attacks in the first quarter of 2011, the low point for overall violence, versus an average of 1,213 in the first quarter of 2013.

Islamic State cells are already reverting to their old tricks in some areas where the group has lost control of terrain. Baghdad was hit by a powerful series of 21 bombings in April and May that killed 522 Iraqis, mostly Shia civilians.

But does this foreshadow a return to 2013 levels of violence, or has Iraq changed in a range of subtle ways as a result of the current war? In my view the war may have temporarily left ISIL in far worse shape than it was before 2014. In 2013 IS was in the ascendant following years of assassinations and local-influence-building, full of big promises. Today ISIL is scattering as a defeated force and local Sunnis have tasted the brutality of its rule and the disastrous impact of the military campaigns to remove ISIL.

Severe Terrorism Threat

This may temporarily suppress the insurgent threat presented by ISIL to levels closer to 2010-2011 than 2013, but the effect will not last forever. As long as Syria is insecure Iraq will face a severe terrorism threat, with ISIL and other jihadis sheltering in the civil war conditions in Aleppo, Homs, northern Lebanon, and even southern Turkey.

Missteps by the Iraqi government, political parties, and security forces could breathe new life into an ISIL recovery. This is exactly what happened after al-Qaeda in Iraq was thoroughly defeated in 2007-2010, only to be reanimated by stalled sectarian reconciliation in 2010-2014.

The murky situation in Diyala province, a cross-sectarian melting pot north of Baghdad, provides disturbing pointers. The Diyala River valley backs on to ungoverned spaces such as the Hamrin Mountains and Jallam Desert, east of Samarra. Local security forces are dominated by the Badr militia. In response to an increasing pattern of ISIL roadside bombings, mortar attacks and firefights, the security forces are carrying out forced displacement of Sunni civilians, house demolitions, and extra-judicial detention and killings -- all activities that are proven to boost insurgent recruitment, driving the population and the terrorists together, not splitting them apart.

If Diyala is a harbinger for the rest of the areas liberated from ISIL, then we can expect an insurgency that repeats or even surpasses the intensity of 2013, which could spread insecurity across the country again, as opposed to mainly on the battlefields as it is today.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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