

How Is the War Against the Islamic State Going? 10 Expert Opinions

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights), [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aug 20, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-tsy-alhrb-ddw-tnz-m-aldwt-alaslamyt-ara-shrt-khbra\)](/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-tsy-alhrb-ddw-tnz-m-aldwt-alaslamyt-ara-shrt-khbra)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Articles & Testimony

In a recent compilation, two Institute fellows shared their views on the situation in Iraq. Read the full set of remarks on the [Musings on Iraq \(http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2015/08/how-is-war-against-islamic-state-going.html\)](http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2015/08/how-is-war-against-islamic-state-going.html) website.

Michael Knights

Speaking just about Iraq, which is clearly only one segment of the broader war, any assessment of the current level of progress has to take into account the perspective of the differing participants.

The Shia-led government in Iraq might be impatient but it will see the defense of Samarra, Baghdad and Karbala as major successes. The liberation of Jurf as-Sakr (which overlooks Shia pilgrim routes), Tikrit and other areas will likewise be viewed with pride. There will be optimism about the unfolding battles in Ramadi and Haditha. In Baghdad's view, Iraq's military is recovering but it remains too reliant on autonomous Shia politicians with military forces of their own. Thus one of Baghdad's key concerns about the war is not necessarily how slowly it progresses but what non-governmental Shia rivals are being enabled by the war. It also pays to look at the recaptured territories through Shia Iraqi eyes: to a Westerner much of Iraq still needs to be liberated, but to a Shia Iraqi politician almost all the Shia areas have already been liberated and remaining ISIL-controlled areas far away from Baghdad are a lower priority. Thus, from an Iraqi Shia perspective the war has seen an inspiring popular mobilization and secured most Shia areas from overrun, which looks like a qualified success.

The Iraqi Kurds share some similarities with the Shia-led federal government view. The defense of Erbil showed that America and the West cared a lot about Iraqi Kurdistan's survival, and subsequently an unprecedented level of international military support has been provided to the Kurds. This alone makes the war effort of the last year a diplomatic success of the first order. The Kurds recaptured most of the places they cared about and have established a very strong defensive line that incorporates most of Kirkuk. From the Kurdish perspective the job is not done, however: ISIL is simply too close for comfort. So the Kurds will say the war against ISIL is going OK but that it would be a disaster if it now shuddered to a halt and left them with ISIL-controlled Mosul just a half-hour's drive from their capital, Erbil.

Most of the Sunni Arabs of Iraq would undoubtedly view the war against ISIL as going very badly. Those in safer areas like Baghdad fear backlash if ISIL starts to launch more bombings of Shia areas close to them. Those in liberated areas face a mammoth reconstruction challenge and many are being constrained from returning to their towns and villages. Those in ISIL-controlled areas or waiting to return to them from IDP camps are uncertain that anyone is really going to liberate the Sunni areas for them. If Sunni Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units) have to self-liberate the areas as the leading combat forces, a bloody road lies ahead for many of their sons. The war since 2014 has been a disaster of unprecedented scale and intensity for the Sunnis, even set against the Sunni Iraqi disasters of previous years.

The international community, including the United States, probably has a very varied view of whether the war is going well in Iraq. The U.S. leadership wanted to check ISIL's advance in Iraq without becoming an indispensable ground force provider again: it has succeeded in that narrow aim, which may give some satisfaction in the White House if not in many other places. The Iranians have gained a lot of influence at fairly low cost by being ungrudging and quick to act -- exactly what the U.S. could and should have done. But they are probably not satisfied overall: Iran is increasingly paranoid that the war is not going fast enough in Iraq, that Western involvement is (very) slowly escalating and that ISIL may spread and pose a direct threat on and within Iran's borders.

Though it is harder to get inside the mind of ISIL's leadership I suspect they are very content with the last year in Iraq on a number of levels. First, they have appeared virile and aggressive for much of that period, even if they struggled to move much beyond Sunni-populated areas. Over the last year global media has boosted them into 10-foot-tall supermen based on their achievements in Iraq and this has sparked a wealth of opportunities for expansion elsewhere. Iraq is where they made their brand over the last year. But there have also been disappointments in Iraq: in particular running an oil industry and holding the requisite terrain and infrastructure proved to be too hard. But generally the ISIL view of the last year in Iraq can probably be summed up as: "I can't complain."

Aaron Y. Zelin

One year since the military campaign started in Iraq, there have been mixed results. For the Islamic State (IS), one of its main slogans is "remaining and expanding." While IS has taken over places such as Fallujah and Ramadi, it has seen its territory in Iraq on the whole shrink, especially in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and parts of Anbar governorates. That said, IS has further entrenched, consolidated, and advanced in its governance in its western provinces, Wilayat Ninawa, Wilayat Dijlah, and Wilayat al-Jazirah in particular. Beyond its *hisba* justice, just in the past week, IS has been involved with cleaning and repainting roads, working at the salt production factory, surveying the landscape for establishing new sidewalks and pathways, repairing sewage lines, running hospitals, running various markets in many cities and villages, running poultry farms, running sewing shops, providing *zakat* funds and food distribution to those eligible, repaving roads and sidewalks, decorating streets, running car dealerships, building a sports hall, resuming a water filtration plant, settling disputes and reconciling differences between clans, and starting the second round of tests in schools. Of course, this is just a one-week sample, illustrating the increasingly sophisticated nature of how IS runs the territory it controls -- it goes well beyond the executions that most people only associate IS

with. That said, there is still a major humanitarian disaster in areas IS controls and its governance still is not that impressive -- it's just that compared to prior jihadi governance, this is the most advanced we have seen, as well as the fact that expectations are so low and IS is indeed trying on some level. Because of this it might get the benefit of the doubt by some. Therefore, at least in the territories IS still controls and has a tighter grip on now, the military campaign should be viewed as a failure.



Musings on Iraq

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)