

Iraq after Mosul

Iraq after Mosul: Old divisions renewed

by [Glen Ransom](#).

The recapture of Mosul from Islamic State (IS) marks a turning point in the campaign to shatter its grasp on Iraq. But re-establishing government authority over the city will trigger a new and potentially more destabilising phase of political competition and communal conflict in 2017.

Divisions and disputes that were overshadowed by IS will rapidly resurface, including the status of disputed territories between the Kurdistan Region and federal Iraq, and calls for decentralisation of government control. And while IS may soon lose its control over Iraq's major population centres, it will leave a complex legacy.

Political competition will intensify in 2017 as an array of domestic and regional players vie to secure influence. IS rule over significant portions of federal Iraq since 2014 has further fractured an already divided country, and increased the involvement of external actors. The campaign to retake Mosul – IS's biggest territorial and symbolic triumph – mobilised a diverse military coalition. Federal government forces are backed by the US-led international coalition against IS; the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), an umbrella group of predominantly Shia volunteers and militias; Kurdistan Region Peshmerga; Sunni militia; and a variety of smaller armed groups. The US will continue its assistance to the Mosul offensive and remain committed to combating IS in Iraq under president-elect Donald Trump, though its willingness for deeper engagement will be determined by the new administration's eventual regional strategy.

Resilient insurgency

Dispersing IS from Mosul does not resolve the underlying drivers of militancy. Indeed, operations against IS may compound anti-government sentiment. Even if IS's harsh rule reduces its future support among the Sunni population, unresolved grievances towards the federal government will persist, along with fears over retaliation against Mosul's Sunni residents.

The federal government needs to ensure that efforts to create stability post-IS and hold IS supporters accountable do not deepen sectarian divides. Prioritising reconstruction that allows displaced residents to safely return home is also important, so communities are not indefinitely displaced with limited economic opportunities. In addition, the government will need to prevent or punish reprisal violence from all armed groups.

But limited government resources and reliance on myriad armed groups to enforce security mean these aims are unlikely to be achieved. Despite the devastation caused by IS in the Sunni heartland, militant groups will continue to attract new recruits, and portions of the Sunni community will remain fiercely opposed to the political status quo.

IS will continue to mount a serious insurgency in federal Iraq as it is pushed from areas it controls. It will retain the capability to temporarily challenge territorial control in its historic strongholds. The organisation is likely to disperse into rural areas and neighbouring Syria to regroup, before re-infiltrating areas of support to revive its anti-government insurgency once again. IS will increase terrorist attacks in northern and western federal Iraq aimed at exploiting divisions within the broader population to fuel instability and weaken opposing power structures.

Contesting authority

Removing IS from Mosul will fire up long-standing disagreements between the federal and Kurdistan Region governments over the disputed territories in northern federal Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s security forces have maintained control over most of these areas since mid-2014, when they filled the vacuum left by federal security forces retreating from IS. Elements within the federal government are unlikely to accept that current Kurdish control has settled the issue, but the KRG is unlikely to relinquish control, given its security concerns and historic territorial claims.

The issue will take on increasing importance as the IS threat is reduced. A sustained deployment of federal security forces and the PMUs close to Kurdish forces increases the potential for conflict. This is most likely in the disputed territories particularly around Mosul and near the Kurdish-held city of Kirkuk. PMUs are also likely to participate in operations to liberate nearby Hawija.

Political agreements and compromises on local security and post-conflict administrative authority are necessary to advance resolution of these concerns. Local agreements between influential parties, armed groups and communities are more likely in 2017 than formal agreements between Erbil and Baghdad, given the range of disputes between the governments and their internal political divisions.

Devolution

Expect to see some moves towards decentralisation in 2017. Nineveh province is likely to lead such calls, given the federal government's 2014 failure to defend its constituents against IS, and perceptions among the province's religious and ethnic minorities that the KRG similarly neglected them. Calls for autonomy are also likely from the oil-producing southern provinces in response to poor service provision and a lack of investment. Devolution of power within one province would be likely to prompt similar demands from communities throughout federal Iraq. In the face of such agitation, and struggling with limited resources, the federal government is likely to take practical steps towards decentralisation in 2017.

Creating several provinces or autonomous regions from Nineveh province to reflect its ethnic and religious diversity is one way to address local grievances. Nineveh includes Turkmen, Christian, Kakai, Shabak and Yazidi minority communities, segments of which desire a greater degree of self-governance and security control. However, the exact arrangements – and whether such areas fall under KRG or federal control – will be fiercely contested.

The federal government is likely to oppose any loss of influence in Nineveh given support for Sunni militants that paved the way for IS's capture of Mosul. Federal insistence on tight security and political control over the province is likely to sustain Sunni perceptions of domination by the Shia-majority government.

The federal and provincial governments' ability to balance local demands for control and obtain buy-in to secure federal interests in a realistic manner will drive the relationship between Baghdad, Erbil and the provinces. However, political interests – of provincial or regional governments or parties – are likely to be prioritised over national aims, preventing effective compromise and sustaining instability. For business, greater local control will create an additional layer of complexity in the operating environment, particularly as diverse local stakeholders compete over economic influence.

Struggles at the top

Internal challenges are continuing to mount for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government. His anti-corruption and political reform efforts since August 2015 have sparked fierce resistance. Attempts to translate military success into political capital and move forward with reform are likely to prompt further challenges. A particular challenge has come from the Reform Front bloc, which is linked to Abadi's predecessor Nuri al-Maliki (2006-14) and influential within his Shia base. The bloc in 2016 led efforts to remove Abadi's defence and finance ministers, and has suggested summoning the prime minister for parliamentary questioning.

Provincial and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2017 and 2018 will be focal points for opposition attacks on Abadi's government and political allies. The prime minister is likely to survive, given the divisions between and within the main ethno-sectarian political blocs, along with continued support from the US-led coalition. However, efforts to weaken his government will hinder its efforts to address Iraq's security, economic and governance challenges. Iraq in 2017 will remain beset by domestic conflict and instability.

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Image accreditation: Press Association - Iraqi citizens who fled fighting between Islamic State and Iraqi forces in the Samah front line neighborhood, Mosul, Nov 2016.