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## *The Mosul Campaign: Winning the War, Losing the Peace?*

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### **Executive Summary**

After three years and a costly war, which recently destroyed the great al-Nouri mosque in Mosul, the military defeat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq is imminent. The Mosul offensive is a test case for both Iraq and for the international coalition; if it succeeds, it could be used as a model to be applied elsewhere in the region, such as in Raqqa. If it fails to create stability in Nineveh and Iraq, a new radical group may emerge, with far-reaching consequences.

There are at least four essential reasons for concern. The first is the lack of a real Iraqi and regional coalition against ISIS. The reluctance of regional actors to work together against ISIS makes the ideological battle against it difficult. Governments in the Middle East do not consider ISIS their prime enemy; for instance, for Turks, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and not ISIS, is the main terrorist group. The Saudi-Iran rivalry takes priority over the regional battle against ISIS and fuels sectarianisation and extremism in both camps.

Second, the Iraqi army is still in disarray and, overall the security sector is characterised by a duality that not only reduces combat effectiveness but also fuels Sunni grievances. Western states' support for Iraq's security sector has been centered on the elite Counter-Terrorism Forces and Special Operations Forces. Shia militias stand accused of severe human rights abuses and sectarian practices against civilians; impunity still exists and the legal status of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) is still unclear.

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Third, strong Sunni grievances still exist; most Arab Sunnis are alienated from the state. The Iraqi government and security sector are still dominated by Shias. Although the passing of power from Nouri al-Maliki to Haidar al-Abadi had some symbolic weight, there is still little power-sharing. This propels mainstream Sunnis into spoilers of a potential peace.

Fourth, the internal leadership crisis among Sunni Arabs makes it difficult to formulate governance alternatives. Sunni leaders in Iraq are currently faced with an extraordinary opportunity because of the decline of ISIS' popularity, but are not exploiting it. The extreme fragmentation of Sunni Arab leadership goes beyond societal, tribal and regional cleavages. If divisions are only an expression of regionalism, the intense in-fighting between leaders from the same cities, such as Mosul, stand unexplained. Sectarianism weakens Sunnis in the long run, propelling radicals, like Jihadis, to become spokespersons for Sunnis.

The lack of a political plan for post-ISIS governance in the Nineveh province is of great concern, since the impending defeat of the group in Mosul will not mean an end to Jihadism as an ideology. The root causes that led to the rise of ISIS must be addressed immediately. There is currently an opportunity to re-establish the bases of the Iraqi state, and Iraqi nationalism, in remote and/or deprived areas, should be exploited further by local, federal and international stakeholders. Sunni leaders from Mosul must put petty conflicts aside, and the donor community should expand partnerships with a variety of local and regional stakeholders. Youths in Nineveh must be given job opportunities, to avoid poor governance and a power vacuum in the wake of the liberation giving rise to new radicalisms. Moreover, the question concerning decentralisation, and possibly, the creation of new federal regions, on the model of the Kurdish one, should be discussed.

## Full Report

After three years and a costly war, the military defeat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq is imminent. The Mosul offensive is a test case for both Iraq and for the international coalition; if it succeeds, it could be used as a model to be applied elsewhere in the region, such as in Raqqa. If it fails to create stability in

Nineveh and Iraq, a new radical group may emerge, with far-reaching consequences.

There are at least four essential reasons for concern. The first is the lack of a real Iraqi and regional coalition against ISIS. The reluctance of regional actors to work together against ISIS makes the ideological battle against it difficult. Second, the Iraqi army is still in disarray and, overall, the security sector is characterised by a duality that not only reduces combat effectiveness but also fuels Sunni grievances. Third, the existence of strong Sunni grievances propels mainstream Sunnis into spoilers of a potential peace, unless alternatives are found. Fourth, the crisis of representation of Sunni Arabs makes it difficult to formulate credible and more legitimate governance alternatives to the status quo. Two potential tipping points exist: the reform plan of present Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi and the potential positive role of the international community in forcing through reforms in Iraq. Yet, so far, results have been mixed, providing additional reasons to be pessimistic for Iraq's future.

## No Real Coalition Against Isis; and Fighting it is not a Regional Priority

Nothing has been simple in the preparation of the Mosul campaign. The ground offensive is led jointly by Iraqi troops and the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, with air support from the international coalition. In addition, a total of 100-150,000 Shia, Christians, Yazidi and Sunni volunteers are gathered together and participate under different slogans and under the umbrella name Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) (O'Driscoll and van Zoonen 2017:9). At best, there are several separate battles on-going, a limited day-to-day coordination between actors who are more afraid of each other than of ISIS.

There exist some minimum criteria to be met before we can use the word 'coalition' (Henke, 2017); at the very least that the actors must share the same enemy. The opposite is true for the various actors involved in defeating ISIS in Mosul. Only the United States and the European states in the international coalition actually see ISIS as the biggest challenge in the region. US military advisors returned to Iraq in 2014, as part of the International Coalition against ISIS. More than 5,000 are deployed, and a 1.2 billion USD train and equip program has been disbursed. Other countries in the International Coalition have also helped train Iraq's security forces since 2014; the Italian carabinieri have been in the forefront of



training the Iraqi security forces. Yet, most effort has been centered on the elite Counter-Terrorism Forces and Special Operations Forces, with the regular Iraqi army still in disarray. Many countries in the International Coalition have, following US pressure, sent their special forces to Erbil to train Kurdish *peshmerga*, but not all are involved with the Iraqi federal level in Baghdad.

While the wish to respond to US pressure has also motivated West European states, local and regional actors have other priorities in addition to fighting ISIS. Governments in the Middle East do not consider ISIS their prime enemy; for instance, for Turks, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and not ISIS, is the main terrorist group. Turkey has intervened militarily in Iraq (with around 850 soldiers) in order to play a role in regional diplomacy, but its military presence is contested by Baghdad. For Saudi Arabia,<sup>2</sup> Iran, and its allied Iraqi Shia militias, are worse than ISIS. For Iran and the extremely powerful Iraqi Shia militias loyal to Tehran, such as the Badr Brigades and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, the enemy is more extensive than only ISIS, it also includes other Sunni groups.

Mosul is the first battle to be waged jointly by the Kurdish *peshmerga* and the Iraqi army. Yet, they have approached Mosul from different directions: the Kurdish (Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP) *peshmerga* from the east and the Iraqi security forces and Shia militias from the Popular Mobilisation Forces from the southwest. Moreover, Kurdish *peshmerga* and security forces in Baghdad have different motivations, although all of these seem to be sub-state impulses. Iraqi Kurds, loyal to Erbil and Suleimania, are investing their military contributions into the project to create an independent Kurdish state. The rise of ISIS since 2014 has given Iraqi Kurds what they see as a 'historical opportunity' for independence. Baghdad accepted the provision of weapons to the Kurdish *peshmerga* by both NATO and Russia because it needs Kurdish help against ISIS. Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has warned the international community and Baghdad that the KRG is planning a non-binding referendum on independence on 25 September this year,<sup>3</sup> and he has

2. Saudi Arabia is part of the international coalition against ISIS, but only in Syria, not in Iraq. The monarchy's limited influence in Iraq is mainly confined to religious actors, and its impact is especially low in the Sunni Arab north, close to Turkey.
3. 'Kurdistan region to hold independence referendum

expressed willingness that it is overseen by the UN.<sup>4</sup> This would have granted more international legitimacy, but international actors are unlikely to accept such a concession towards Kurdish statehood because of Turkey. Like in Syria, Kurdish *peshmerga* have used the occasion of the war against ISIS to seize disputed territories, including Kirkuk and Sinjar. The future might see a clash not only between Sunnis and Shia and Sunni Arabs and Kurds, but also between Shia and Kurds over the division of spoils from Mosul.

## The Duality of Iraq's Security Sector

Iraq is today in dire need of security sector reform. Despite Western material support and capacity building, including the US train and equip program, which was mentioned above, progress in reforming security institutions has been extremely slow. US policy has thus far been to circumvent the Iraqi army and Defence Ministry by working with elite forces. Yet, this can be only a short-term strategy, complemented by bringing political pressure to bear on Baghdad.

The Iraqi army was long the bearer of Iraq's national identity; the institution was also politicised and shaped by Saddam Hussein's repressive regime, with extensive patrimonial practices (Parisiliti & Antoon 2000; see also Marashi & Salama 2008). In 2003, the US occupation authorities disbanded the Baathist army, removing the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of officers and soldiers. The Iraqi army created by the US forces has long been known for its weakness and corruption; many top-rank officers were promoted thanks to personal bonds of loyalty to the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. It was known as a "check-point army", because it was fit only for stopping civilians at check-points, sometimes arbitrarily (Luizard 2015: 17), but had little combat effectiveness, despite the more than 25 billion USD provided by Washington since 2003. The total collapse of the army's two divisions stationed in Mosul in June 2014,

on 25 Sept', Rudaw, 7 June 2017. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070620171> (accessed June 2017). For an analysis, see 'Independence referendum bolsters Kurdish position before Iraqi elections', Rudaw, 2 May 2017. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/02052017> Accessed May 2017.

4. 'UN agrees to oversee Kurdistan independence referendum [sic.]: Official' <http://www.iraqnews.com/baghdad-politics/un-agrees-oversee-kurdistan-independence-referendum-official/> (1 April 2017)



in the face of a few thousand Jihadis, was nonetheless unexpected.

The army's inability to protect Iraqis led the grand Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a fatwa calling for the mobilisation of volunteers to fight ISIS. This was the backdrop leading to the creation of the PMF. The inefficiencies, and poor reputation, of the Iraqi army is also why Iraqi youths generally prefer to join a group within the PMF rather than the army. The PMF was recognised as an integral part of the Iraqi state in December 2016; yet despite this, no statutes exist to rationalise its functioning or its operational autonomy. The different groups within the PMF still function as independent militias with competing sub-state political agendas (O'Driscoll and van Zoonen 2017). Some of the groups, such as the Badr Brigades and Kataib Ahl al-Haqq, also fight in Syria alongside Bashar al-Assad's regime. They stand accused of severe human rights abuses and sectarian practices against civilians (Amnesty 2016; Amnesty 2014). Some army divisions, such as the Army's fifth division in East Diyala, are allegedly under the control of the Badr Brigades (Newsweek 2016). Recently, in the Mosul campaign, some army brigades have fought under Shia sectarian banners and the name of Hussein (Twitter 2016-7).

The potential for reform of Iraq's dual security system is a controversial topic of prime concern to the future of Iraq, for several reasons (see for instance, O'Driscoll and van Zoonen 2017:9; Sayigh 2015). To operate throughout Iraqi territory, let alone fight terrorism, the army needs not only material supplies (to replace the equipment seized by ISIS) but also an improved relationship with Iraqi civilians. The very reason ISIS was able to take over Mosul was not only the support of ISIS from among the Maslawi population, but the army's inefficiencies and lack of legitimacy. Since the army hails almost exclusively from southern Iraq, and is seen as having a Shia religious bias, it considers itself in enemy territory when in Sunni areas.<sup>5</sup> In the fight against terrorism, the army is unable to distinguish civilians from enemy combatants. This reduces army combat efficiency, and makes the army prone to avoid battles in Sunni areas.

Obviously, there should also be a strong political incentive for reform of Iraq's security sector. The deficiencies in this sector, and the extensive impunity which emerged as a

result, feeds into the existing grievances of many Sunni Arabs.

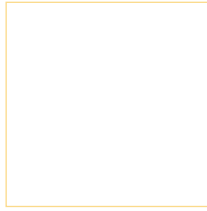
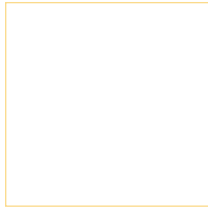
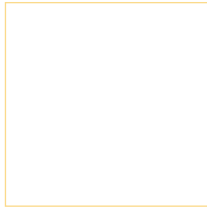
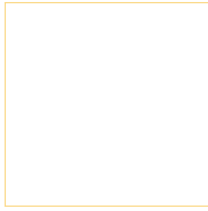
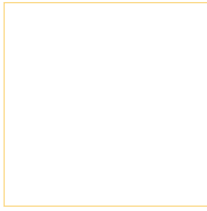
## The Grievances of Sunni Arabs

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, following the US-led invasion and occupation, and the subsequent deBaathification process and disintegration of the Iraqi army, left a void in Iraq. The security situation deteriorated, as Sunni and Shia armed groups first fought the occupation and, in 2006 and 2007, opposed each other in a sectarian war. The US withdrew its last troops from Iraq in 2011, following difficulties in the renewal of its mandate and a more stabilised situation following the US surge (2007-8).

During his second mandate (November 2010-September 2014), Nouri al-Maliki's regime became more reliant on Shia forces (rather than forces from different sects), and corruption escalated. After the US withdrawal, the executive had taken control of the independent agencies created by the occupation authorities, including the Central Bank, and it undermined the power of the parliament (Dodge 2013: 248). Key political Sunni figures, including the then Vice-President (VP), the Deputy Prime Minister and the Finance Minister, were placed under house arrest on disputed terrorism charges. The VP was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in absentia but fled to Qatar via the Kurdistan region. The waves of arrests of prominent Sunni politicians, repeated in December 2012 and December 2013, deepened sectarian tension in Iraq; the arrests were followed by popular demonstrations in Sunni tribal areas. Added to this, another grievance among tribal Sunnis in al-Anbar province was their marginalisation following the US withdrawal.

A central dimension of the US surge was the establishment and arming of Sunni tribal 'Awakening' forces (*al-Sahawat*), in al-Anbar province, to fight al-Qaeda. Although many tribal fighters and leaders were motivated by economic incentives, this proved a way to bring Arab Sunnis in Iraq back into the state, providing them with a livelihood. The former leader of the Awakening Council in al-Anbar province, Abdoul Satar Abou Risha was assassinated by the Jihadis in 2007. Yet despite this, the Council was very successful in re-establishing security: within a year, the level of violence in Iraq was more than halved, from 260,000 dead in 2007 to 120,000 in 2008 (Iraq Body Count 2017). The model of al-Anbar was re-created

5. I am grateful to Dr. Yehia al-Kubeisi for this analysis.



elsewhere, reaching a total force of around 65,000 men (Wehrey & Ahram 2015). The tribal forces had been promised integration in the medium term within the Iraqi state and security apparatus, through the creation of an Iraqi National Guard. However, this never happened; in 2010, the Americans transferred the authority over the Awakening Councils to al-Maliki's government, which immediately disarmed many of them. Men in al-Anbar saw this as a 'betrayal' by the Americans, though it seems (lack of statistics notwithstanding) that the number of Awakening Council fighters who pledged loyalty to ISIS has been very limited.

Jihadism had been weakened in Iraq by 2010 (Tønnessen 2015), but was strengthened again in 2012 because of the violent spill-over from Syria and the ability of Jihadi operatives to take advantage of discontent among Sunni tribes and men of religion. ISIS created temporary compliance among former Baathists, and allied Sufi Naqsbandiya groups. These, and other Sunnis in tribal areas, felt they had little to lose and, against the backdrop of a lack of alternatives, made the decision to support ISIS. In 2014, the Jihadi group was able to take over one third of Iraq, mainly in the northwest, and including Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and the heart of Sunni Islam in Iraq. Sunni tribes and Islamist groups in the country found no other alternative representation, and this paved the way for the emergence of ISIS in Iraq.

Following a period during which the Iraqi government leaned increasingly on Shia groups, and Sunnis were increasingly excluded from power sharing, many Iraqi Sunni Arabs gambled on ISIS statehood. This came as a reaction to the growing power and impunity of Shia militias, which made some Sunnis think that ISIS would be the better, and only available option, to the *status quo*. The weakness and corruption of mainstream Sunni leaders were other reasons for their choice.

### Internal Sunni Crisis and Wasted Opportunities

With the decline in popularity of ISIS, Sunni leaders in Iraq are currently faced with an extraordinary opportunity. Yet, few credible alternatives have been put on the table, neither by Sunni leaders nor by Iraqi politicians at large. Extreme fragmentation means that Sunni leaders are passive and do not respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of the present .

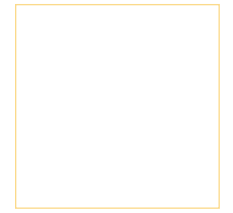
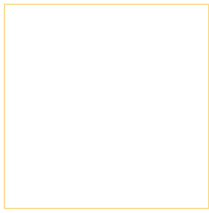
To take the fragmentation first: 'Sunni Arabs' is a category that emerged formally in July 2003 from the Governing Council constituted by the US-led occupation authority, in which, for the first time in Iraq's history, the country's ethnic and religious groups were represented according to demographic size: Sunnis obtained 5 out of 25 seats.<sup>6</sup> Before 2003, Arabs considered themselves part of two majority groups in the Middle East: as Arabs (majority in Iraq) and Sunnis (around 40% in Iraq but a majority in the wider Middle East). Never had they thought of themselves as constituting a minority group of demographically only around 18%. The wish to ally, and merge, with other groups (non-Sunni Arabs and non-Arab Sunnis) explains why, prior to 2003, the political opposition of Iraqis from Sunni Arab families was rarely expressed in communal terms. One exception was the Iraqi Sunni Islamist parties.

Arab Sunnis did not consider themselves a 'community' but saw themselves as true bearers of the Iraqi state, and were treated as *Statsvolk* in their interactions with the state (Haddad 2017: 118). Arab nationalism was, and still is, often accredited to the Sunni Muslim community and associated with the history of Sunni Islam. Moreover, Sunnis were sometimes accused by Shia and Kurds to be pro-Saddam. The majority of Iraqi army officers were Sunni, including many high-ranking officers from Mosul. Conversely, although Shia in the Iraqi army fought Iran between 1980-1988, Iraqi Shia were often accused of being un-patriotic and loyal to Iran.

Saddam Hussein was weakened politically following the crack-down of both a Shia and a Kurdish popular uprising in 1991, and because of the subsequent international sanctions regime. To survive politically, he then gave power to Sunni tribes, re-inventing a tribal ethos that had been lost during socio-political modernisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Baram 1997: 15). A 'faith' campaign to re-Islamise society and introduce religion into the Baath party, was also initiated (al-Rashid 2010: 489). Yet, this did not mean that the regime turned more 'Sunni'; since it was by that time narrower and more personalised and predatory than it had ever been. Moreover, localisms and personal power struggles had taken over from ideology within the Baath party.

Arab Sunni populations in Iraq were and still are extremely diverse. There is strong regionalism and local patriotism, in Mosul, for instance. With its proud

6. 13 seats were given to Shia, five to Sunnis, five to Kurds, one to Turkmen and one to Assyrians



Ottoman and 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, as a city of trade, industry and science, it considers itself superior to other Iraqi Arab Sunni regions. Following 2003, the leadership of al-Anbar in the resistance against the US-led occupation was recognised by many Iraqi Arab Sunnis elsewhere. In Mosul, however, the population disdained al-Anbar and saw it as a region that was too tribal, too primitive and not urbanised enough to have the right to speak in their name. Yet, nor were Maslawis able to come up with an alternative, because of their divisions: while some are close to the political line in Baghdad, others look to Ankara.

Today, Baathism and Islamism constitute the two largest political currents among Sunni Arabs in Iraq, but neither offers a viable alternative and a vision for the future (Mansour 2016: 15). The Iraqi Islamic Party (the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) has been discredited for its participation in the political process and its failure to improve conditions for its constituencies. Actors who still identify with the Baath party, and its refusal of the *fait accompli*, are in exile in Jordan, and more and more out of touch with the population. Ideologically, there is an enormous void. Sunni political movements and alliances such as al-Mutahidun do not have a cause with which they can rally the constituency, and often end up locked in destructive power struggles.<sup>7</sup> At best, the only shared project is the negative one against competing ethnic-sectarian groups; but opposition to political Shiism is insufficient to create a political public, and sectarianism weakens Sunnis in the long run, propelling to the fore radicals, including Jihadis, as spokespersons for Sunnis (Gade 2015, Rougier 2015).

## The Prime Minister's Reform Agenda

After the Iraqi 2014 parliamentary elections, international (in addition to domestic and Shia clerical) pressures were crucial in forcing the resignation of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki from power. Although al-Maliki's *State of Law* bloc had the largest number of shares in parliament, it did not have a majority. This created fears of a constitutional crisis, against the backdrop of huge security challenges. Western powers believed that the exclusivist regime al-Maliki had created in his second

7. See, for instance: 'Iraqi officials to arrest former governor if he re-enters Mosul', Rudaw, 28 January 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/280120174> (accessed January 2017).

mandate was responsible for creating conditions that led to the rise of ISIS.

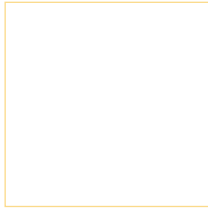
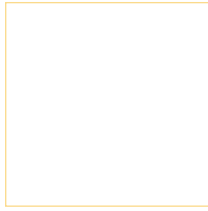
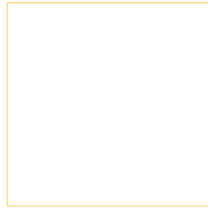
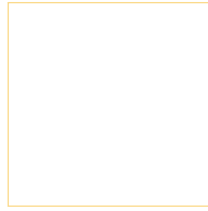
An engineer with a Phd from the UK, Haydar al-Abadi was found as a compromise candidate. He sought to represent a more secular and Iraqi nationalist wing in the Shia Islamist Dawa party, against the 'Malikioun', supporters of al-Maliki, a cleric who had spent a decade in exile in Iran in the 1980s. Al-Abadi expressed a willingness to reform the Iraqi state, towards more accountability and inclusion towards Sunnis, and to recreate an Iraqi army after its collapse in Mosul. There were few credible alternatives to this, since the Iraqi nationalist *al-Iraqiyya* bloc, which had regrouped most Sunni politicians until then under the leadership of Iyad al-Alawi, had scattered following its inability to form a government in 2010 (Dawod 2014: 73).

Abadi's reform program was presented in August 2015, a year after he took office. The seven-point program included decentralisation, anti-corruption measures and rationalisation of the budget and of administrative appointments. The reforms also included a proposal to cut salaries of state officials and remove the three deputy prime minister and three vice presidential (VP) posts, including that of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The shift of power was symbolically important, and made some parts of the opposition more inclined to make a compromise, including the Revolutionary Council of Tribes from al-Anbar, which had earlier supported ISIS. Yet, Abadi's reform efforts have so far produced limited results (Mansour 2016), and have been obstructed by allies of former PM Nouri al-Maliki. These are still numerous, even within al-Abadi's own parliamentary bloc (*State of Law*). Several ministries, including the Interior, are still controlled by the powerful Shia militias loyal to Iran.

## External Actors and Regime Support<sup>8</sup>

The war against ISIS is at the forefront of the common Western, mainly US and EU, agenda in Iraq. A further priority, especially for the EU, is to hinder state collapse and continued migration of the IDPs to Europe; work is therefore centered on preparing for early return and recovery. Other external interests include geopolitical considerations: the wish to contain Iranian influence and to maintain good relations with both Kurdish stakeholders and Turkey. Conversely, Haydar al-Abadi's government is

8. This section is based on Morten Bøås, Stein Sundstøl Eriksen, Tine Gade et al. 2017.



recognised by the West and Iran as the best alternative in Iraq (although the two disagree on how the government should relate to Iranian-sponsored militias).

The US and the EU are key donors in Iraq, with involvement in humanitarian aid; stabilisation- and recovery programmes; political dialogue and reconciliation; economic development; state building and capacity building.<sup>9</sup> Although the material support they provide could have implied leverage, Western donors have not put real pressure on the Iraqi government, with the exception of the issue of counter-terrorism and the pressure on Nouri al-Maliki to resign in 2014; but this meddling in Iraqi affairs was only pursued because it was considered vital to defeating ISIS. Since then, many international stakeholders have feared and still fear that they might push al-Abadi towards Tehran if they voice explicit criticism. Western states see al-Abadi's government as a necessary carrier of local ownership of Iraq's domestic reform and as an interlocutor for stabilisation and local efforts in the war against terrorism, and see few alternatives. Thus, Western donors do not push Iraq towards security sector reform, prioritising short term gains against ISIS over the long-term structural gains of the Iraqi state. Indeed, given the weakness of the Iraqi army and security forces, having the PMF and allied Iraqi decision makers onboard are key to defeating ISIS.

The World Bank Group is an allied partner to Western policies in Iraq. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) returned to Iraq in 2003 following the US-led invasion, after a 30-year absence; their level of commitment speeded up considerably after the rise of ISIS. The World Bank signed three new projects in December 2015 and December 2016, which led to the disbursement of 1,2 and 1,444 billion USD, in order to address Iraq's external financing needs. The IMF's commitment to Iraq also strongly increased in the same period: Iraq received

9. The US has contributed with 75% of the military funds for the global coalition against ISIS (at least 5,000 US troops are deployed in Iraq), including training of Iraqi military personnel, weapons sales, air support and intelligence sharing. The UN and the EU are the key political- and humanitarian actors, often with the UNDP as implementing partner. A small UN operation, the UNAMI, has been renewed yearly since 2003 and is grounded in UNSCRES 1770. It is constituted by around 350 mainly Fijian and Nepalese peacekeepers. The UN Special Representative for Iraq is also the head of the UNAMI mission.

1.2 billion USD emergency financing in July 2015 under the Rapid Financing Instrument, in a Fund decision that made reference to ISIS. In July 2016, the IMF authorised a Stand-By Agreement and a loan of a total value of 5.34 billion USD to be paid over three years. The aim of this package was to address the double shock faced by low oil prices and growing security challenges. This money went directly into the government's budget, strengthening Haydar al-Abadi's position and the government's ability to provide services. The aid package, which was essential to enable Iraq to effectively resist ISIS, comes as an illustration of the tight links between international financial institutions and the political interests of key global powers.

'Governance' is one of three pillars of the World Bank Country Partnership Strategy, but this amounts to economic governance (public and private sector) alone (World Bank 2015). In the mentioning of ISIS, the latter is described as a phenomenon external to the Iraqi political system. The World Bank's praise of al-Abadi's political reform efforts (World Bank 2015) seem, on the other hand, somewhat exaggerated. Many Iraqi civilians see the so-called political process as a pure fiction (al-Rashid 2016), and, if anything, as an embodiment of the rampant corruption in Iraq since 2003. Popular criticisms of the government extend to the foreign, Western supporters of the Iraqi state.

The EU has not, thus far, been adept at publicising its considerable humanitarian efforts, and has therefore not harvested the soft power gains it could have hoped for. The solution has been to work with al-Abadi and the technocrats in his government and potentially undermine Iranian-backed or other actors who oppose the reform agenda. Since 2011, Western donors have primarily used the strategy of 'national dialogue' to address internal conflict and governance issues. Western powers do not enforce solutions. The EU believes that Iraqis must solve their internal issues themselves, and that external actors should intervene as facilitators only once this is secured. Additionally, capacity building, conceptualised as part of economic development assistance, is provided.

Although there has been a trend over the last ten years to support the regime directly through budget funding (IMF and World Bank) and through limiting explicit criticism of governments that could have consequences for the country's stability and investment risk rating, this coincides with initiatives to empower the (secular)



opposition. Western donors are dependent on the regime of the country they support as the bearer of local ownership and as the interlocutor for governance and stabilisation, but at the same time this does not hinder them from also supporting what they see as desirable alternatives to the regime.

The general question of supporting regimes with track records of human rights violations is also pragmatic and strategic. It could be argued that a war against terrorism would be more successful if the root causes of radicalisation, including perceptions of regime brutality (and the brutality of affiliated Shia militias) were addressed more efficiently. Taking the opposite view, however, other scholars have also shown that grievances in the broader population are less central to explaining the onset and duration of civil war than the existence of in-group policing mechanisms to control potential spoilers (see Fearon 2011). While addressing the concerns of the Sunni Arab population is a *sine qua non* for defeating ISIS, the answer probably lies more in power sharing mechanisms than simply in improving the rule of law.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

As a result of the weakened popularity of ISIS in Iraq, for reasons related to its own failure of governance (and unrelated to external donors), there is currently an opportunity in Iraq to re-establish the bases of the Iraqi state, and Iraqi nationalism, in remote and deprived areas, as well as in areas with strong regional patriotism, such as in Mosul. This moment could and should be exploited further by local, federal and international stakeholders alike, so as to promote genuine state building in Iraq and hinder new forms of radicalisation in the future. The lack of a political plan for the post-ISIS governance of Mosul and the larger Nineveh province is of great concern. To seize the extraordinary opportunity presented by the weakening support for radical groups, Sunni leaders from Mosul should put petty conflicts aside for the greater good of the city, and the international community should expand partnerships with a variety of local and regional stakeholders, so as to improve outreach and promote inclusiveness in all areas of Iraq.

The impending defeat of ISIS in Mosul will not mean the end to ISIS as an ideology. The Jihadi group will lose its proto-state and go back to being a classical terrorist organization, with the possibility of cells hidden in

the desert near Mosul and elsewhere (although the international coalition seeks to destroy these). Thus, ISIS must be fought at the doctrinal and ideological level, and Sunnis alone can do this. It is urgent that the ideological and political battle begins, to seize the historical opportunity created by Sunni anger against ISIS rule (al-Amin 2017). It is of tantamount importance that the international coalition, the *peshmerga* as well as the Iraqi army and allied militias attempt to minimise civilian casualties from land and air strikes, and avoid attempting to speed up the battle (see ICG 22 March 2017). The mistakes committed during the liberation of Tikrit and Fallujah – the scenes of massive destructions –, must be avoided at all costs.<sup>10</sup> The Shia groups that are part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces and the Kurdish *peshmerga* must stick to their promise not to enter the city of Mosul, as this would only create new grievances in the local population. Youths in Nineveh must be given alternatives and job opportunities, in order to avoid poor governance and the power vacuum in the wake of the liberation giving rise to new radicalism. The root causes that led to the rise of ISIS in the first place must be addressed immediately. Mosul's infrastructure must be rebuilt, and its civil servants, who have not been paid for years, compensated. The hundreds of thousands of IDPs must be given a package that can help them return. The competing Sunni politicians in Mosul must prioritise long-term collective gains for their city rather than petty power struggles, and seize the historical opportunity to forge a future for their city and Sunnis in Iraq. More generally, the efforts at security sector reform must be more genuine, and the international donor community should precondition needed aid packages on real reforms. Moreover, the question of decentralisation, and possibly, the creation of new federal regions, on the model of the Kurdish one, needs discussion (O'Driscoll 2016). The solution that can include and represent Sunni Arabs best should be adopted. Although competing groups should also be listened to, they should not be able to prevent the carving out of a future for Iraq.

10. Amnesty International (2016) is among the organisations having documented the abuses, on all sides, during the liberation of various Sunni areas, including Tikrit from ISIS.





### **Iraqi actors involved in the Mosul battle:**

Iraqi army, special operations forces, counter-terrorism forces

Kurdish *peshmerga* associated with the ruling Kurdish Democratic party in Erbil (Masoud Barzani)

Kurdish *peshmerga* associated with the Suleimania-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Jalal Talabani)

Various militias part of the *Popular Mobilisation Forces* umbrella. Most of the Shia militias, but not all, are very close to Tehran.

*The Popular mobilisation* forces also include Sunni, Christian and Yazidi armed bands. The main Sunni group, the Nineveh guards, is led by politician and former governor Athil al-Nujaifi.

### **International military actors involved in the Mosul battle:**

The International Coalition against ISIS. Of the around 30 participating states, the US is the most involved (with around 4,000 men), and secondly, France.

Italy is not part of the international Coalition but its carabinieri have trained the Iraqi special forces

Around 850 Turkish troops based near Bashiqa, Nineveh.



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