Beat: Local

The Day after Mosul Liberation

Iraqi situation

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USPA NEWS - Introduction

On July 9, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi claimed victory over the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or Daesh), after fierce fighting for nine months to retake Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. ISIL is out, though it is not completely defeated. It still has strongholds in Hawija, along the Euphrates River, and in Tal Afar, the Turcoman city to the west of Mosul. Tal Afar is the city that controls the highway to Raqqa, ISIL´s Syrian stronghold. After so many defeats, ISIL´s capabilities have become diminished from what they were in 2014, and the militant group is much poorer than it once was after defeating the Iraqi army and storming Mosul.

After capturing the city, ISIL´s fighting force increased dramatically to about 30,000 by the start of 2016. Needless to say, the success in Mosul afforded ISIL the ability to thrust southward to occupy more cities in the region and other parts of Iraq in June 2014. In fact, ISIL´s victory gave it control over about one-third of Iraq´s territory within a couple of weeks. It even threatened Baghdad and Erbil (the seat of the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG) after it defeated the Peshmerga. Duhok, another major city in the KRG, was also threatened. Indeed, the Kurdish region could have been occupied were it not for the air support provided by the international coalition.

The result of that unexpected thrust was the loss of highly sophisticated Iraqi technology and weaponry to ISIL. In addition, close to nine million Sunni Arabs in the area came under ISIL´s control and were forced to follow its rules of behavior. Their suffering under ISIL was an extension of the persecution they felt from Baghdad during the previous eleven years, especially during the prime ministership of Nouri al-Maliki. Many Sunni Iraqis believe that Maliki´s sectarian policies paved the way for ISIL to prevail in the Mosul battle and other military confrontations. He is also accused of not preparing the army for the battle in Mosul despite advance notice from locals and foreign intelligence sources.

The Tragedy of Mosul

Mosul and other major cities in central, western, and northwestern Iraq have seen tragic events since 2014. Casualties among civilians have been high, caught as they were between ISIL´s fighters, the government´s undisciplined soldiers, Shia militiamen, and the international coalition. Government calls on civilians to remain in their houses during the fighting resulted in high death tolls due to the coalition´s indiscriminate bombardment of ISIL targets. The number of people executed by ISIS amounted to hundreds just in the recent battle to retake western Mosul. What is worse for civilians and security personnel alike is that the city appears to be booby-trapped by ISIL fighters, with the aim of inflicting as much damage as possible.

One example of indiscriminate coalition bombing was the March 17 US Air Force raid on an alleged ISIL truck, which resulted in the death of at least 112 Iraqi civilians. The Pentagon blamed the incident on ISIL. In fact, much of the responsibility falls on the Iraqi military´s planning staff, the Iraqi military command that asked for the air strike, and the American military command for not verifying the target for the air strike“”a most important condition for close air support.

The Day After: What Is to Be Done?

The day after the claimed victory over ISIL dictates many imperatives from the Iraqi government and the international coalition led by the United States if their aim is to ensure the integrity, sovereignty, and intercommunal reconciliation in Iraq. The recent United Nations Security Council Resolution 2367/2017, though it aimed to extend the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), revealed some serious and well-founded concerns about the destruction of Mosul, the humanitarian crisis there, the role of armed militias, and the Iraqi government´s need to act in a more balanced way to address the problems of civilians in Iraq, including Mosul.

One of the main safeguards against a reproduction of an ISIL-type insurgency in Iraq lies in addressing the real problems of Iraqi society: sectarianism and sectarian militias, Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs, and corruption. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was neutralized by the same Sunni population of the western-northwestern governorates. It was also targeted by Nouri al-Maliki´s government, and it seems that it is still targeted by the militias that control the battlefield as they are led by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard strongman and representative in Iraq, General Qasem Soleimani. US General David Petraeus, who oversaw the American surge in 2009 when the Sunni tribes´ "awakening forces"⍰ (the "Sahwa"⍰) undertook the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, said that economic, social, and political measures were needed to bring about a real reconciliation in Iraq.

Unfortunately, these measures were not addressed, neither by the government of former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari nor by his successor Nouri Al-Maliki; instead, they aggravated the situation by pursuing a full-fledged sectarian agenda in the country. Preventing an ISIL revival lies in addressing the real grievances of the vast Sunni population, which some estimate to be about 50 percent of Iraqi Arabs (although no official census data exists). Failing to do so will result in a new type of ISIL, on the one hand, and in continuing the path of failure, sectarianism, and corruption which marked the performance and functioning of the Iraqi federal government since 2003 and onward, on the other.

How to Establish Real Reconciliation

Pursuing real reconciliation means that the Iraqi government and parliament need to address the shortcomings and drawbacks of the current political process and the constitution. Both were reasons for current instability and inequality in the country. By reforming the political process, the road will be paved for essential change. One of the major reasons of the current situation in Iraq is the hegemony of the sectarian religious parties. While establishing political parties on a sectarian and religious basis is prohibited by the constitution, the entire political process in Iraq is controlled by such parties that thrive on the political differences of early Islam, which resulted in today´s deep schism between Sunnis and Shias, itself the basis of political divisions in Iraq. Shia political parties today have an interest in branding Iraq´s Sunni Arab community as a foe.

What is required is a political process that guarantees equality, justice, and human rights and that is based on liberal-secular principles, leaving spiritual beliefs to the private realm. Indeed, Article 7 of the Iraqi Constitution prohibits establishing or associating with organizations that justify racism or terrorism and act against political pluralism. The sectarian parties in Iraq that control the political process and political life practice what Article 7 prohibits, either directly or through their militias. This will obviously continue to hinder political development in the country.

The Kurdish Problem

Mosul´s future must also address the Kurdish problem in a democratic and civilized fashion. The long-lived Kurdish dream of establishing a Kurdish state is a legitimate one, but Iraq is not the country that aborted the Kurdish quest for independence. In fact, Iraq is the only country in the region that recognized the rights of Kurds and granted them autonomy since 1970""and even some forms of it before then. However, exaggerating this demand by the Kurds will give birth to hatred and complications. The three present Kurdish governorates (Sulaimaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok) are home to the majority of the Kurdish people; in fact, Sulaimaniyah is the only predominantly Kurdish governorate, while Duhok has sizable Christian and Yazidi communities and Erbil´s population includes many Turcomans and Arabs. Moreover, the effort by Kurds to control other territories that contain Kurdish communities (such as Kirkuk and others) will aggravate the situation, not to mention that their quest for independence is not encouraged internationally, regionally, or even locally.

Arriving at an agreement of coexistence will be the best exit out of ethnic differences in Iraq. The present Iraqi Constitution stipulates in Article 140 that the government carry out a census in those areas allegedly belonging to the KRG within six months from the adoption of the constitution in 2005; but that has not been done. What the Iraqi government and Iraqi Arabs""Sunnis and Shias""object to is the KRG´s aim to gain control over mixed areas, even where Kurds do not constitute a majority, in order to annex the oil-rich areas in Kirkuk to the Kurdish region, a prospect with political, economic, and social repercussions.

Conclusion

In modern Iraq, the most decisive factors to ensure stability are mutual acceptance, coexistence, and justice. All these will lead to a cohesive society no matter how multiethnic, multilingual, and multi-denominational that society is. Such was the case in the past, when Iraqis experienced this sort of coexistence. They can experience the same in the future, provided that no foreign meddling will hinder their quest, for Iraq is already a diverse society with four major ethnic groups and two major religions. It is noteworthy that Iran is just as diverse with at least ten different ethnic communities.

Moving the political orientation in Iraq to nationalism rather than ethno-sectarianism will facilitate the process of reconciliation in the country after not only defeating ISIL, but also disarming sectarian militias and cutting the lifeline that feeds them. Therefore, Iraq needs a neutral government with no partisan inclinations, or a technocratic government that will face the country´s hardships head on without regard to what dominant factions want or impose. Additionally, the rule of law must be safeguarded so that the judicial branch can be above the fray and independent of interference from any party. Perhaps then, the people who helped create the tragedy of Mosul will be brought to justice and held accountable for their deeds.

Crafting a new social and political order after the defeat of ISIL in Mosul, and elsewhere in Iraq, is a responsibility not only for the Iraqis, but for their allies, the regional powers, and the international community. All of them should join hands to find ways to create a new stable and prosperous Iraq.

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