

The consequences of recapturing Mosul from Islamic State

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On 8 July, Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi, announced in Mosul that Iraqi forces had recaptured the city from Islamic State (IS). This marked the end of the operation which began in October 2016 whose land component consisted of Iraqi units (army, federal police and Shia militias) backed by the US-led international coalition (mainly air support).

Mosul was the largest city (2.5 million residents) of those seized in June 2014 by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The city played an important role in the organisation's plans. For example, it was in Mosul where they announced they had changed their name to Islamic State and restored the Caliphate.

Commentary

- The loss of Mosul is a serious blow to Islamic State for which the Sunni (Arab) areas of Iraq are the key support base. However, this does not mean the end of IS's presence in this country. The organisation still controls three large cities, with populations exceeding one hundred thousand residents: Al-Qa'im close to the Syrian border, Hawija to the south of Kirkuk, and Tal Afar to the north of Mosul. Recapturing them, especially Tal Afar, is problematic for political reasons – Turkey has threatened intervention should Shia militias backed by Iran enter Tal Afar, which is inhabited by ethnic Turkmen.
- The return of Islamic State or the emergence of a new organisation originating from it is a very likely scenario. Although radical Sunni organisations, the predecessors of IS (for example, Al Qaeda in Iraq), were crushed, they were cyclically reborn in a new form. Behind this were the systemic problems linked to forming an effective political Sunni representation that could offer a real alternative to the radical groupings and the pressure put on Sunni residents by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.
- Other problematic issues include: the stabilisation of the situation on the recaptured territories, and the return of residents. The continuing war with Islamic State in Iraq has provoked a wave of 3.3 million IDPs. The presence of Shia militias accused of war crimes in Mosul and in the cities in Anbar province in central Iraq recaptured by Sunnis last year (including Falluja and Ramadi) not only escalates the Shia-Sunni religious and political conflict—it also makes it more difficult for the IDPs to return home. Coupled with the financial crisis caused by low oil prices, this makes people more interested in emigrating from Iraq. Since 2014, almost 300,000 Iraqi citizens have applied for asylum in the EU, which makes it the third largest country of origin in terms of the number of refugees,

after Syria and Afghanistan.

- Regardless of how the issue of Islamic State is resolved, Iraq will remain an unstable country affected by internal conflicts. In addition to the conflict between Sunnis and Shias, a number of other political tensions may affect Iraq's stability. First among them is the rivalry between Shia groupings and leaders. This concerns above all the conflict between the current Prime Minister Abadi and the influential former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Secondly, there is the tension between the government of the Kurdish autonomous region (KRG) and the government in Baghdad. At present, the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum scheduled for 25 September is the main bone of contention. This issue has also provoked the escalation of a political dispute inside the KRG. Considering the degree of internal tension, the interests of the actors engaged, and the general dynamics in the region, the conflict in Iraq will most likely continue.