



After Liberation

Assessing Stabilization Efforts in Areas of Iraq Cleared of the Islamic State

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Introduction and summary

Two years on, the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State, or IS,* has achieved some important gains. This is particularly true in Iraq, where the liberation of Fallujah last month has focused attention on Mosul—the capital of the so-called caliphate.¹ But military victory is only half the battle. As the Islamic State is pushed out of Iraqi cities and towns, the communities it ruled must be integrated back into Iraq. Nature abhors a vacuum; the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL should do more to support the Iraqi government in filling that vacuum. For its part, the Iraqi government itself must display a greater commitment to inclusive governance that reinforces its own legitimacy. Failure to do so would risk squandering hard-won gains by setting the stage for the Islamic State—or its successor—to return. It also could undercut U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East more broadly.

The key will be to close the gaps in resources and priority afforded to the different elements of the global coalition's campaign. That campaign is organized along five lines of effort: military efforts, counter-finance, stopping the flow of foreign fighters, stabilization, and strategic messaging.² The military line, otherwise known as Operation Inherent Resolve, has cut the territory controlled by the Islamic State almost in half.³ Other key coalition lines have yielded less robust results. In particular, efforts to stabilize territory in the wake of combat operations have not kept pace with progress on the battlefield—even as that progress makes stabilization all the more urgent.

Early on, former Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter-ISIL John Allen warned that efforts to stabilize territory in the wake of combat would be essential to the campaign's success, saying that “Iraq's future as a unified nation” depends upon how well liberated Sunni Arab communities are treated.⁴

*The Center for American Progress refers to this Islamic militant organization as the Islamic State, or IS. It is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL; the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS; and Daesh, its Arabic language acronym. Any variations in the name of the group that appear in this report are due to different source standards; for example, the U.S. government and its allies refer to the group as ISIL.

His successor, Brett McGurk, recently told Congress that “stabilizing areas after ISIL can be even more important than clearing areas from ISIL.”⁵ These admonitions are grounded in hard lessons that the United States and its allies have learned in more than 10 years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. This experience has demonstrated the fragility of battlefield gains in the face of political failures and the absence of legitimate governance. Although these failures are ultimately the responsibility of Iraq’s leaders, members of the coalition also have a significant stake and role to play in the ultimate outcome.

To date, the United States alone has spent more than \$7.5 billion on military operations against the Islamic State.⁶ If this investment is to pay lasting dividends, it must be accompanied by an effort to help establish conditions for stability in liberated areas—an effort that is only now beginning to receive significant resources. It is important to understand that stabilization is not a development or reconstruction program with the attendant enormous cost. Instead, it is a short-term intervention designed to solidify military gains and prepare for longer-term recovery through relatively inexpensive projects. Stabilization can also buy time and build local support for a wider process of national reconciliation, as well as serve as a firewall against the Islamic State as the group is forced to revert to guerrilla warfare by its loss of terrain.

A failure to address this shortcoming would undercut prospects for long-term success in Iraq. But it could also have wider implications for U.S. strategic goals in the region. A unified Iraq remains a major American policy goal in the Middle East. The 2003 Iraq War ended the U.S. strategy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq and shifted the regional balance of power toward Iran. For more than 13 years, the United States has worked to shore up Iraqi stability and reintegrate it into the broader region. But the Islamic State’s rise and capture of key parts of north and western Iraq has marked a dramatic setback in that effort. The failure of the U.S.-led coalition to mobilize the Gulf states and other regional partners in an attempt to hold Iraq together bodes ill for a long-term regional strategy based on strategic burden sharing.

This report—part of an ongoing series on the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL—examines stabilization efforts in Iraq. It uses lessons learned by the United States and the United Kingdom to provide a framework for understanding stabilization and explores how the coalition and its partners have organized themselves to affect it. It also uses extensive interviews with U.S., U.K., German, Iraqi, Gulf, and U.N. Development Programme—or UNDP—officials conducted by the authors

over the period from April to July 2016. The report goes on to examine trends in key stabilization indicators, including data on the return of internally displaced people and donor efforts to meet short-term community needs. The report then reviews post-liberation experiences in Tikrit, Ramadi, and Sinjar and presents key analytical findings. It concludes by offering the following set of recommendations:

- Strengthen leadership for stabilization and integrate it into other coalition lines of effort.
- Strengthen U.S. bilateral support for stabilization.
- Undertake U.S. diplomatic regional outreach to reduce tensions between Baghdad and the Gulf states and build support for stabilization.
- Develop a “day after” plan to govern Mosul before military liberation.
- Undertake a strategic review of the drivers of displacement and instability.
- Accelerate the disbursement of donor pledges and strengthen the capacity to implement on the ground.

There have also been military efforts—and some progress—against the Islamic State in Syria. However, that country’s ongoing civil war has so far prevented the emergence of a full stabilization effort. While there have been some limited attempts to stabilize Syrian communities liberated from the Islamic State, they have taken place outside the framework of the counter-ISIL coalition and are therefore outside the scope of this report.⁷

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And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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