

Seeing Iraq Through to the Finish



A British Army instructor delivers a counter-IED class to Iraqi soldiers at Camp Al Asad, Iraq, July 2, 2017.

Executive Summary

There is a path to success in Iraq. The international coalition's legacy could be a stable and secure regional ally. But the defeat of ISIS must be seen through to the finish.

The Government of Iraq's military campaign to regain control of the territorial landmass of Iraq is coming close to the final stages. Iraqi forces learned valuable lessons during the battle for Mosul, and broke the back of the ISIS so called caliphate. Post Mosul, Iraqi forces have conducted operations in Ninewah, Hawijah, and Anbar with renewed confidence and valuable experience. The military campaign has momentum and ISIS are on the back foot. Although difficult battles remain, defeat of the ISIS physical caliphate now looks inevitable, and there is a small (but increasing) chance of an early, catastrophic collapse of ISIS's fighting capability.

The international coalition in Iraq now has the opportunity to finish its current military campaign with mission success. However, while the forces of the Government of Iraq continue to liberate ISIS held territory, there needs to be a clear understanding of what needs to be done to complete the defeat of ISIS and set the conditions for future security and stability. High profile victories against the proclaimed caliphate must be celebrated. They are clear indicators that ISIS, in its current form, is crumbling. But, success of military battles must not distract from what needs to be done in Iraq to complete the defeat of ISIS.

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Note:

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Moving Forward

Three things must be done:

The first is to destroy ISIS in its current form. Liberating the territory they hold, free the population that they control, and take away as much of their capability as possible in the process.

Next is to win the people. ISIS thrived on a disenfranchised, scared and hopeless population. Most will now see that the hopes for a better future were false, but the population will quickly look for other futures if they remain insecure and disenfranchised. ISIS, or similar groups will attempt to exploit societal fragility and some form of insurgency will follow on the tails of the ISIS so-called caliphate. Iraqi security forces will need to counter this threat, and the military coalition will have to keep developing the Iraqi Security forces and structures to ensure that they have the necessary capabilities. Credible governance at local, provincial and national levels must be developed or enhanced; the ISF cannot hold Iraq together in isolation. However, they can be militarily effective and play a wider role. For example, by demonstrating sectarian groups can work together the ISF can set the example for their fellow Iraqis - particularly those sections of society who feel excluded, and even persecuted, by the post-Baathist Iraqi state. For the coalition, there will be a requirement to maintain a mentoring and advisory role until there is confidence that Iraqi security forces are maintaining a stable level of security. Once ISIS in its current form is destroyed, the international military footprint may be relatively modest, but is likely to be a tough pill for nations weary of the military campaign in Iraq. A premature end to the international military effort would be disastrous.

The other key requirement to win the people - equally if not more important - is the immediate stabilisation effort. The Government of Iraq, supported by the international community must deliver future stability and show the population in liberated areas that they are better off without ISIS. A secure environment (discussed above) is a critical element, but so are governance structures and essential services. Effective governance (not necessarily "good") will have to be in place, and the immediate stabilisation effort will have to do just enough to enable the people to return and believe their best future lies with their government rather than insurgent groups. This is not reconstruction or nation building, but an essential part of the defeat of ISIS.

The third element to the defeat of ISIS, is to counter their false narrative. This will be a long-term effort, and one that the international community will have to engage with at a strategic level, but education is an important element. Schools must be reinstated and resourced at the earliest opportunity to support the process of countering the ISIS caustic narrative among fertile young minds. Our early experiences in liberated Mosul, and now in Raqqah, show people are prepared to return and live in austere conditions provided their children can return to safe, secure schools. There is an appetite for education which offers an opportunity in the fight against ISIS. In the longer term, education will be essential to rebuild Iraq, but - more immediately - the provision of schooling is another critical aspect of defeating ISIS.

As the military campaign to destroy ISIS progresses, high profile tactical victories will inevitably raise expectations of an imminent, and successful, end to the international community's effort in Iraq. Capitals will look to reduce their investment and exposure, and withdraw military and civilian personnel.

There will be a tendency to consider anything beyond the current military effort (by with and through Iraqi Forces) to recapture territory from ISIS as the end of it. Consideration of a potential insurgency to follow will be uncomfortable, given the international community's previous experience of counter-insurgency operations in Iraq. It may also be argued that governance, essential services and education are 'Nation Building', rather than part of the counter ISIS campaign. However, winning the people and countering ISIS's false narrative are a crucial part of defeating ISIS.

Lifting off too early would be a mistake. In order to ensure that the huge international investment in the Counter ISIS fight is not wasted, the campaign must be seen through to the finish.