

# The ghosts of Tal Afar and post-ISIS Mosul

by Dr. Seth Frantzman - 17/11/2017 12:59



*Iraq and its allies in the US administration know the game-plan for defeating ISIS but there is no clear solution to the problems that persisted before 2014. Seth Frantzman assesses the situation.*

The Government of Iraq is celebrating the liberation of Al-Qa'im on the border with Syria in western Al-Anbar Governorate as a victory against Islamic State. Re-taking the border area is the last major offensive of more than three years of war against the extremists. The message to locals has been similar to the leaflets dropped over western Mosul in February. "Get ready to welcome the sons of your armed forces and to cooperate with them, as your brothers on the left side [of the Tigris river] have done, in order to reduce losses and speed up the conclusion." Emblazoned with Iraqi flags, they informed residents that the final phase of the battle for one of ISIS's last major urban strongholds in Iraq was about to begin.

This boundless enthusiasm has proved successful in military terms but is less clear when it comes to what comes next for civilians in one of Iraq's largest cities. Mosul was re-taken by Iraqi Security Forces in early July. The massive city that straddles the Tigris river was once home to around 2 million residents before 2014. Around 650,000 residents were estimated to be in the city during the battle. A UN report documented that as of July 11, when the battle ended, 824,034 people were displaced. Some fled to internally displaced persons camps and then returned.

ISIS has left behind ruination, libraries burned, the University destroyed, and a city festooned with tunnels and IEDs. The job of clearing deadly ISIS bombs from the rubble still continues. The US Embassy Baghdad and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the US State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs have partnered with a group called Janus Global Operations to help clear the city of mines, according to a US State Department report on November 6<sup>th</sup>.

According to a project of the Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund called Mosul Emergency Response, it could take over a decade to clear explosives and repair the city at a cost of \$50 billion. People are still dying in the city from the IEDs left behind. The IHPF claimed 393 people had been killed in explosions. Mass graves from the ISIS era are still being found as well, one near Badush prison contained the body of 40 Indian citizens was found at the end of October. The UN has called upon the Government of Iraq to prosecute ISIS members for "international crimes" committed in Mosul, including 741 executions ISIS carried out.

There are signs of hope in the city, including the attempts to re-open the University, much of which was damaged during the war. Its printing press was destroyed and library burned. An international campaign to save what remains of its books succeeded in restoring around 36,000 monographs, according to Al-Jazeera. But there is still a lot of uncertainty about what comes next. Restoring some of the city's diversity, such as churches ransacked by ISIS, Yazidi and Shia places of worship that were targeted by the extremists and archaeological parks that were demolished, is a challenge. A UK-based NGO called Open Doors said it is helping to bus 30 Christians students to Mosul each day from the Kurdistan Regional Government capital of Erbil. The lack of security and local services mean they haven't been able to return permanently to where they lived before ISIS expelled Christians from Nineveh plains in July 2014.

Many questions remain about what post-ISIS Mosul will look like. Will it revert to its pre-2014 state when it was the beating heart of the insurgency, first against US forces after 2003 and then against the government of Nouri al-Maliki from 2009 as US forces left? Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

argued in February that “Iraq will come apart again and a new Islamic State-type threat will emerge, unless Washington stays engaged.” Washington should support a strong Iraq led by current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. “The first thing [the Trump administration] can do is extend the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve mission by at least two years.” The US should also extend the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF), asserted Knights.

What haunts Mosul and the areas around it are memories of the past. Since the 1980s Iraq has been at war. Many Mosul residents were conscripted into Saddam Hussein’s army during the 1980s. Some of those who became officers under Saddam later supported ISIS in 2014 when it rolled into the city. After 2003 this city that once received extensive investment from Baghdad was neglected. “We haven’t had any development projects from Baghdad in Mosul since 2003,” one resident told Reuters in April. The role of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a group of mostly Shia militias raised in 2014 to fight ISIS, is also controversial. When I was in Mosul in April the sectarian flags dotted mosques, Iraqi army vehicles and checkpoints. Some of the posters showed Hussein or Ali, but others showed swords dripping in blood, not exactly a message of reconciliation. In 2016 the PMU became part of the Iraqi security forces. Around Mosul, it has affiliated with minority groups such as the Christian Nineveh Plains Protection Units and the Hashd al-Shabak, a unit made of the Shabak minority.

Abadi tried to balance the demands of different groups that live around Mosul before the October 2016 offensive. Kurdish Peshmerga would take Bashiqa, while Christian units would patrol the largely Christian town of Qaraqosh. There would be Sunni Arab tribal forces as well. Part of that consensus broke down in October when the central government clashed with the Peshmerga on the outskirts of Nineveh plains. The conflict with the Kurdistan region will distract from efforts to revive Mosul. Much of the trade and goods that go to Mosul come from Erbil, not faraway Baghdad.

From the day ISIS was fully defeated in Mosul and the areas around it a clock has been ticking on whether this government can tamp down tensions, animosity and religious extremism that led to ISIS. In the past, the time frame from defeat to insurgency has been a year or so. A US-led operation to root out insurgency was launched in 2004 and 2008. ISIS arrived in 2014. Mosul and Tal Afar to the northwest have been at the centre of Iraq’s instability and conflict. US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster gained exposure for defeating the Iraqi insurgency in Tal Afar in 2005, providing what some thought was a model for the US Surge. “One of the big grievances in Tal Afar was that we have a Shia dominated, Iranian-influenced government in Baghdad,” McMaster told PBS in 2007. These grievances still exist in

Tal Afar, Mosul and the surrounding areas. How Iraq addresses them in the coming year will determine what comes next.