



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies

Conference Report

Post-Daesh Challenges to Stabilisation in Iraq

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This conference was jointly hosted by RUSI, the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham through ESRC funds. It was convened to discuss the stabilisation in and challenges facing Iraq after Daesh.

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Published in 2016 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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RUSI Conference Report, December 2016.

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ON 14 SEPTEMBER, RUSI, the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham hosted a roundtable aimed at discussing the stabilisation in and challenges facing Iraq after Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS). Two keynote speakers, Iraqi National Security Adviser and Chairman of the Popular Mobilization Committee Faleh Al-Fayad and the Leader of the Iraqi Scholars Association, Sheikh Khalid Al-Mulla, provided insights on the topic. They were joined by about 50 experts from academia, government and the private sector who are closely watching developments in Iraq. The session was chaired by Professor Gareth Stansfield.

The roundtable constituted the first of a series of workshops that form part of a new ESRC-funded project on 'The Future of Iraq and Syria' undertaken by RUSI in collaboration with the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham.

This report summarises the major conclusions and talking points of the discussion, which focused mainly on five key topics: the legacy of the past; the technical challenges for the provision of security; the role of religion and sectarianism; the role of regional powers; and the battle of Mosul.

This was a particularly timely workshop, taking place about a month before the start of operations to liberate Mosul. Therefore, the roundtable triggered an in-depth discussion on the issues related to the post-Daesh challenges to stabilisation in Iraq, including sectarianism, violent extremism and the interference of regional powers in Iraq's domestic affairs.

The Legacy of the Past

The influence of history emerged as a prominent theme when discussing the current situation in Iraq. The speakers indicated that the current issues in Iraq are a legacy of the violence suffered during and in the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's regime. Those who were part of the regime are alleged to be playing a leading role in today's violence, particularly in light of the fact that they are mostly highly trained security and intelligence personnel, IT professionals and military engineers. Furthermore, entrenched political differences that emerged during Saddam's regime have lent the internal conflict ideological and religious dimensions.

The role played by Western countries as well as other countries in the region was also highlighted, particularly with regard to the mobilisation along religious lines in Afghanistan in order to combat the Soviet Union. According to the speakers, this led to the emergence of Al-Qa'ida and other extremist actors who fostered a Salafi ideology and succeeded in recruiting young Iraqis, driven by radical and extremist views. The speakers claimed that the Salafi ideology is prominent in Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, with Riyadh even promoting it throughout the Middle East via mosques and charity organisations.

The speakers also stressed that today's shortcomings in Iraq, particularly with regard to the technical deficiencies in dealing with the country's security, are a product of the legacy of the past. In particular, the lack of technical training for security personnel over the years was attributed to the coalition disbanding the Iraqi army in 2003, which deprived the country of a strong military and security tradition.

Technical Challenges for the Provision of Security

The roundtable participants discussed the failings of the Iraqi security forces in dealing with terrorism, despite the fact that the army, police and other security forces face no shortage of personnel. Coordination issues and overlapping mandates, due to the presence of multiple intelligence and security agencies, lead to inter-agency rivalries. This is therefore perceived as nullifying the advantage of the army's size. Participants noted that from an external perspective, there appeared to be many security issues and an increase in tribalism, which have further complicated dealing with security threats.

This subject sparked a debate, with speakers noting that the separate security force agencies, each requiring specific capabilities, started to work independently after the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011. According to some, although the agencies have different specialisations and modes of functioning, the overarching theme of their work – combating terrorism in Iraq – has pulled them together, particularly since Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's administration began in September 2014. In particular, the fact that the different agencies gather weekly for a joint meeting, as do the National Security Council and cabinet of ministers, was highlighted as a way to address the issue of communication and coordinated strategy across agencies.

The roundtable also explored the dividends for Iraqi forces from cooperation with the international security community through training programmes and intelligence support. The importance of effective intelligence, in particular, was highlighted with regard to operations targeting terrorist cells around the world conducted by joint forces from Iraq and its allies. The speakers lauded the intelligence work of the army and of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU; or *Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi*) and expressed their optimism about Iraqi security operations, particularly in light of Baghdad's newly acquired technology that proved to be vital during operations in Fallujah.

However, the speakers acknowledged that despite progress, Iraq's intelligence infrastructure contains vulnerabilities, noting that Daesh too has obtained advanced technology and managed to infiltrate intelligence and government agencies. They stated that improvements in capabilities would continue to be a key objective of the Iraqi government.

The Role of Religion and Sectarianism

The speakers accused Daesh of deviating from the principles of Islam and promoting a distorted understanding of Islam's different denominations; they observed that Daesh had misused Islam to recruit young Iraqis and Syrians and to justify violence and extremism. The speakers continued by listing Daesh's crimes: in particular the murder of innocent and peaceful people; forced migration of nearly 3 million people in Iraq; sexual atrocities against Yazidi and Christian women and Muslim girls; the demolition of churches, mosques and monasteries; the burning of schools and hospitals; and the pillaging of valuable antiquities from museums. Special concern was expressed with regard to children in areas under prolonged Daesh control (for example Anbar and Saladin), who, it was thought, were in danger of becoming Daesh supporters because

of protracted ideological indoctrination. A debate ensued about potential plans to reverse this process from a religious standpoint.

Iraqi children have been exposed to extremist ideologies since 2008, when the Birds of Paradise organisation – a youth wing for children under the age of fifteen operated by Al-Qaida in Iraq and also referred to as ‘Paradise Boys’ or ‘Youth of Heaven’ – was established in Hawija, and this has continued in Daesh-controlled territory. An anecdote from Fallujah was shared to underscore the damaging effect of the conflict on Iraqi children whereby those between the ages of seven and eleven were made to compete for large sums of money to kill the highest number of Iraqis. The speakers expressed pessimism about being able to reverse the children’s indoctrination, noting that the extent of brainwashing by Daesh necessitated a combination of military action along with efforts by the UN, the European community and other countries. They also asserted the importance of engaging with children in schools and posited that neglecting this generation in the mire of political problems would inevitably have long-term consequences.

The speakers also lamented Daesh’s global proliferation, noting that the danger of terrorism is no longer restricted to certain groups at risk or to certain countries. Daesh, in fact, harbours aspirations of spreading across Europe and the world, which has elicited a positive response from some Europeans. The speakers stressed that recent converts from Christianity to Islam in Europe often become the most dangerous and ideologically driven recruits for Daesh.

The speakers, however, mentioned that this use of religion for evil purposes constitutes the exception rather than the norm, first because religion generally espouses mercy and forgiveness, and second because in other Muslim countries (such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Nigeria) Islam has not been adopted as a tool for violent extremism. The participants stated that religion has in fact been prominent in the struggle against Daesh, noting that both Sunni and Shia religious scholars, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, have issued fatwas against the group. These edicts were said to have been met with enthusiasm by Iraqi youth, who have stepped up their efforts to confront Daesh.

Some participants at the roundtable discounted allegations that the Iraqi army has committed many of the same violations attributed to Daesh, citing visits to the front line during which it was claimed that Sunni, Shia, Yazidi, Hadidi and even religiously non-affiliated fighters fought side-by-side.

It was acknowledged that the threat of terrorism has been present in Iraq for many years under the banner of anti-imperialism and in the form of Shia–Sunni conflict and that, as a result, sectarian polarisation has become a major problem. The struggle against extremism must therefore necessarily incorporate ideological and cultural aspects. This angle is particularly important for the Sunnis, as Daesh has misappropriated and misrepresented their denomination and religious identity. The roundtable discussed the need to capitalise on Sunni reintegration into Iraqi society, following the fact that they have recognised the increasing brutality of Daesh and, to a large extent, rejected a previous path to radicalisation. This has been made clear by the more than 3 million Sunnis leaving Daesh-controlled territory, migrating and seeking

protection in other areas in Iraq. The importance, from an ethical, humanitarian and cultural point of view, of expressing the true nature of Iraq and Islam to counter the extremist and violent views promoted by Daesh was agreed by all participants.

The Role of Regional Powers

The speakers indicated that as the war against Daesh has progressed, Iraqis have felt increasingly abandoned by regional and other international actors. From their perspective, regional powers should play an important part in defeating the group militarily, as well as in rebuilding relations between different communities, as instability and terrorism in Iraq inevitably affect the wider region.

The roundtable discussed the various sources of Daesh's funding as well as possible measures that can be taken by Western governments to stem the flow of finances. Participants pointed to the role of oil exports, profits from stolen antiquities, private donations and agriculture as Daesh's primary sources of revenue. The speakers also hinted at the negative role played by regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, in funding Daesh.

According to the speakers, Turkey is deemed particularly problematic with regard to aid and human support for Daesh, which translated, for instance, in allowing foreign fighters to use Gaziantep in Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Region as a route to enter the region. Iraq has not appreciated Turkey's supposed role in the conflict against Daesh, both in Syria and in Iraq, and that made an actual agreement on Turkey's involvement in operations in Iraq (with a specific focus on Mosul, as discussed in the following section) more difficult to reach.

On the other hand, some participants indicated that rich Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have used their resources to lend legitimacy to extremist groups. The speakers noted that although these countries also face problems of sectarian division and mobilisation, they cite the failures of the Arab uprising in 2011 to demonstrate that heightened political aspirations can cause instability. Another piece of anecdotal information emerged which appeared to highlight Saudi Arabia's negative role: a participant recalled how an individual was welcomed as a VIP during the Haj season in Saudi Arabia, even though he had previously admitted to funding fighters in a television interview.

There was also discussion about Iran's role in the conflict and its influence in Iraq, with speakers noting that in the first four months after the fall of Mosul, Iran was Iraq's sole source of support, which proved to be essential in preventing the fall of Erbil. The speakers admitted that this early support was tied to Iranian interests and aspirations, as Iran also considers Daesh a great threat. However, it was asserted that Iraq is proud of its sovereignty and does not take direction from Iran, and that people in the Arab world often wrongly confuse Iraq with Iran. Iraq's dealings with other countries reflect its own interests, as is evident by the fact that it has an alliance with the US as well as good relations with Iran.

In relation to Iran's role in Iraq, the roundtable participants also discussed the possible post-conflict role played by the PMU, a force created in June 2014 by the Iraq government after Ali Al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling for a 'sufficiency jihad', urging Iraqis to defend the nation and its holy sites by confronting Daesh in light of the fall of Mosul a few days earlier. The organisation comprises mainly volunteers from the military that previously fought against the US or the Saddam regime. The speakers noted that their military experience was extremely valuable and that they are now affiliated with the armed forces commander-in-chief, following a government decision to take control of the forces. With regard to their role after the war, Al-Abadi has declared that the PMU would reduce its strength and be gradually integrated into the regular Iraq military, while simultaneously dispersing its forces across the country. It was also mentioned that although the PMU began as a Shia-only organisation (thus perceived by many as being directly supported by Iran), it now includes members from various denominations and therefore there is no reason to fear that it would become a parallel and sectarian military force.

Finally, the speakers expressed appreciation for ongoing international efforts to monitor and control the transfer of funds to Daesh, but insisted that proactive targeted measures to tackle these issues need to be implemented to end the group's sources of financing.

The Battle of Mosul

The workshop took place about one month before the operation to liberate Mosul started (in October 2016), and therefore issues related to the strategic planning and the contingency plan for the battle were raised throughout discussions.

The participants examined what would be the likely composition of forces involved in the battle. In particular, some argued in favour of a significant role for the Peshmerga and the PMU, groups which in the past have been indispensable in regaining territory from Daesh. Some raised concerns, however, that allowing these groups' involvement in the operation would lead to political considerations, thus affecting military practicalities. The speakers allayed these fears by noting that all operations in Iraq are directed by the Iraqi armed forces and that decisions are not made based on any individual group's interests or concerns. Rather, military instructions from the top, along with practical considerations of the local context, determine who leads operations and how they are led. This was the case in Ramadi, where the army was deemed to be best positioned to liberate the city. In Fallujah, the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS, an indigenous group originally created by the US to combat insurgents and terrorists and independent from both the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior) entered the city, while other forces played an important role in surrounding it.

The speakers stressed that Mosul would be treated the same as other operations, with the main criteria for strategy being the local context. They also stated that for Mosul, a military plan had already been agreed, and the Peshmerga were in fact going to be part of the operation. However, the plan also established that only the Iraqi army and the local police, as well as volunteer observers from the provincial government, were going to enter the city, thus excluding both the Peshmerga and the PMU from any direct involvement in the liberation of Mosul in

itself. This was considered particularly important to avoid a politicisation of the battle and any unintended consequences.

The speakers also pointed out Turkey's intention to play a military and political role in the liberation of Mosul. They claimed that such an ambition was driven by Turkey's internal politics, and primarily its long-standing conflict with the Kurds. However, the speakers maintained that Turkey's influence in Iraq remained limited to Baghdad, and that operations in Mosul would not accommodate Turkish interests, given that, unlike Syria, Iraq is a democratic country with which Turkey cannot interfere.

Final remarks

The roundtable set the ground for a broad discussion on the challenges for effective governance and stabilisation in Iraq post-Daesh, highlighting common teams and concerns, but also showcasing the relevance of a project dedicated to the study of 'The Future of Iraq and Syria'. The sponsors of the workshop concluded that it was necessary to build on the issues raised to organise a second roundtable, with the same participants but other keynote speakers, in order to discuss Mosul operations, the impact of the battle on the future of Iraq post-Daesh, as well as the humanitarian situation in the liberated areas.

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The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Economic and Social Research Council under grant ES/M009211/1, which facilitated the organisation of this workshop.