



Royal United Services Institute  
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Conference Report

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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.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s), and do not reflect the views of RUSI, the University of Exeter, the University of Birmingham or any other institution.

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**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies  
Whitehall  
London SW1A 2ET  
United Kingdom  
+44 (0)20 7747 2600  
[www.rusi.org](http://www.rusi.org)

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ON 28 NOVEMBER 2016, RUSI, the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham hosted a workshop aimed at discussing the stabilisation in and challenges facing Iraq after Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS). The event comprised two sessions, the first of which included Iraqi parliamentarians representing areas across the country. The MPs – including members of parliamentary committees dealing with foreign relations, corruption, education, civil society and labour and social affairs – expressed their viewpoints and provided local-level insights on the issue. The MPs were joined by experts on Iraq from academia, the government and the private sector; they continued the discussion in the second session. The sessions were chaired by Professor Stefan Wolff and Professor Gareth Stansfield.

The roundtable was the second in a series of events constituting an 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 issues: weak governance and legitimacy; national reconciliation beyond ethnic and sectarian lines; Kurdish infighting; the Mosul operation; and the role of external powers.

## Weak Governance and Legitimacy

Numerous challenges were pointed out throughout the discussions. However, one of the most challenging aspects in Iraq's fight against Daesh is a lack of resources. The MPs noted that despite military and humanitarian assistance from other countries, Iraq is facing a shortage of resources – military, economic and humanitarian.

This shortfall has made it extremely difficult for the Iraqi government to rehabilitate the millions of internally displaced people (IDPs) created by the conflict, who are currently being forced to survive in conditions unfit for human habitation.

Compounding this problem and delaying reconstruction are the cross-departmental coordination challenges the government faces. The MPs noted that a side effect of the liberation in 2003 following decades of tyranny has been the absence of a mature democratic culture that facilitates the building of efficient institutions. This is critical, because even after Daesh is defeated, government programmes, supplemented by international cooperation and assistance, will be necessary to strengthen the concept of Iraqi citizenship and the government's legitimacy, which in turn will be essential to keep extremism at bay.

Questions were, in fact, raised about the central government's legitimacy outside its strongholds, as well as its ability to provide infrastructure, law and order and economic growth. These subsequently led to concerns over the probable emergence of localised power centres. Frictions between the federal state and the governorates, combined with the sectarian divide, make it difficult to identify relevant local and international actors who could provide a platform for the peaceful settlement of this problem.

Thus, conflicts resulting from the governance structure and territorial disputes, previously restricted to the disputed territories of Northern Iraq, have become the norm across the country.

One speaker, for instance, stated that there was talk of converting the northern (mainly Yazidi) Sinjar District into a governorate before dismissing this as unrealistic, given the lack of available resources to run a provincial government.

This problem will only be exacerbated after the liberation of Mosul. A reconfigured relationship between the Nineveh government and the centre, including a long-term political strategy for Tal Afar, will need to be discussed. Although it was mentioned that the region may be given more autonomy, the MPs asserted that there is no desire for secession. This is especially because the Mosul operation has involved sacrifices by Iraqis from across the country, including the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shia security forces and militia.

An extension of poor governance is the high level of corruption that permeates Iraqi bureaucracy and this contributes to the lack of the legitimacy of the government. The MPs acknowledged that Iraq may be one of the countries most affected by corruption, but they attributed this to elements of the previous government and a lack of effective institutions. Moreover, they highlighted that progress had been made, with high-profile investigations – such as that of the former minister of finance, Hoshyar Zebari, and former minister of electricity, Karim Aftan Al-Jumaili – undertaken by the Commission of Integrity, although critics have suggested that these investigations are politically motivated. Further, the MPs pointed out that as corruption charges are not subject to statutory limitations, they have so far been able to examine more than 600 cases, including those involving former and current ministers and deputy ministers. As a further indication of Iraq's attempt to root out rampant corruption, the MPs cited their work, in coordination with the US and UK embassies, on implementing the 2003 UN Convention against Corruption.

## National Reconciliation Beyond Ethnic and Sectarian Lines

Suggesting a silver lining, the MPs stated that the struggle against Daesh had united Iraqis for the first time in thirteen years. Forces gathered from Basra, Saladin, Kurdistan, Anbar and Nineveh, among others, are fighting alongside each other and with the Peshmerga, tribal militia and predominantly Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU, or Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi). In addition, in Tal Afar, despite the opportunity for retribution, the dividing lines have held and the PMU has not overreached. However, other speakers argued that problems of cohesiveness remain, both between and within communities. Although they agreed that this does not jeopardise the future of Iraq as a state, it is problematic for consolidation as community leaders may be content with being self-contained warlords operating in their traditional zones of influence.

Apprehensions regarding Shia militia groups, and indeed governance in general, flow from the widespread lack of trust between different sections of Iraqi society, which is what facilitated Daesh's emergence.

This lack of trust increased as a consequence of the law passed by the Iraqi parliament in November, establishing a new security force independent of the Iraqi army, which includes the PMU, under the leadership of the general commander of the armed forces. The MPs noted that

the government's objective was to bring all weapons and fighting units in Iraq under the state's authority. They did recognise, however, that the integration of diverse fighting forces would not happen with the flick of a switch and would require sustained efforts from the Iraqi government as well as regional governments and institutions.

The MPs admitted that the central government, as well as international assistance, had often been biased in favour of certain groups, and it must now expand its focus to provide equal rights to all communities. In particular, they highlighted that victims of terrorism from all groups, including Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, and all governorates should be assisted to avoid planting the seeds of retaliation among future generations.

There is considerable unease among observers regarding the plight of the Sunni population in Mosul once the city is liberated and the seemingly insufficient steps taken by the Iraqi government to instil confidence among the community. It was highlighted that substantial efforts needed to be made to heal the Sunni–Shia rift and create an atmosphere in which the different groups could live alongside each other. The MPs, however, argued that such initiatives needed to be made by political groups within Mosul, which did not yet have an agreement on what a post-Daesh landscape should look like. Moreover, they pointed out that reconciliation efforts must also include other groups, such as Yazidis, Kurds and Turkmens, and must cover the entire province of Nineveh.

One of the speakers cited his personal experience of visiting Mosul, noting that there is a mistaken impression among external actors that Daesh is receiving support from certain segments of the Sunni community. The speaker maintained that on the contrary, there was large-scale support for the Iraqi army and added that concerns about Shia militias occupying areas with a Sunni majority or mixed population, such as the majority Turkmen Tal Afar, have thus far proved to be unfounded.

Another speaker provided an anecdote that demonstrates the seriousness of the fragmentation. The speaker said that even in IDP and refugee camps for civilians displaced from Mosul, Sunni and Yazidi parents do not allow their children to attend school together, reflecting an ingrained, long-term trauma, particularly among Yazidis.

The MPs agreed that trust and confidence-building among communities is vital, and it is important to send a message that the entire Sunni population could not be labelled as the villain. Nevertheless, they insisted that reconciliation would involve justice and accountability, as a general amnesty would not be well received, and it would be impractical to assume that the deep sectarian rifts could be rectified merely by dialogue. Therefore, victims' rights must be considered and international assistance would be necessary in this process. During the roundtable, it was noted that an official plan for national reconciliation was in the initial stages of development, and it had been recognised as realistic by the UN and other international actors.

The speakers highlighted that although the focus is almost solely on relationships between communities, differences within ethnic groups also need to be studied. For example, a part of

the Yazidi community is aligned with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the impact this has on its interaction with Baghdad will be crucial.

Managing all these complexities is the key obstacle in reconciliation. At a time when the state is preoccupied with Daesh and administrative issues, there has been a tendency towards simplification rather than an inclination or capacity to deal with multiple actors with differing motivations. Furthermore, there is also a concern that even within communities, the ability to take a long-term view of reconciliation, along with the nuances and challenges it entails, is limited. A clarification of the nature of any final configuration and social contract could facilitate negotiations and flexibility among communities.

Once the Mosul operation is completed, this is likely to become a thorny subject, as that is when tough decisions will need to be taken. Therefore, sustaining dialogue, with one possibility being Track II diplomacy away from media scrutiny, becomes crucial.

## Kurdish Infighting

The internal conflict between the two main Kurdish factions is a prime example of the differences within communities that are often overlooked. One of the participants argued that if Daesh was not occupying Mosul, factions within the Peshmerga would have been pointing their guns at each other.

Although international actors focus on Kurdish President Masoud Barzani (of the KDP), he controls only half the Kurdish forces. This leads to a dangerous situation; US military equipment intended to assist the Peshmerga as a whole is disproportionately distributed by Barzani to the troops under him as opposed to those loyal to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

This disparity has also been reported by US military trainers, who are adept at their jobs, but not generally well-versed in Kurdish politics. Nevertheless, they have noticed that have reported that the KDP Peshmerga gets paid more and receives better weapons than the PUK units. Thus, Washington's unwillingness to address the Kurdish split is potentially disastrous.

At the time of the roundtable, the dividing line between PUK and KDP forces was the Kirkuk oil field. However, it is feared that after the Mosul operation, the KDP will attempt to take the field and make a unilateral declaration of presidency for Barzani, whose term, already extended by two years in 2013, has expired. Moreover, Barzani has expanded the mandate of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the disputed territories, even though he has limited resources and even core Kurdish areas are facing economic issues that hinder governance.

This dynamic has played out even on the national political front, a particularly important factor in an election year. The KDP has started reaching out directly to Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and broken links with the PUK. In response, the PUK has begun reaching out to former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, the face of the opposition in the upcoming elections. Despite being part of the same Dawa Party, Abadi and Maliki have opposing views on ties with the US,

Iran and Saudi Arabia. Maliki's faction has approached Abadi to distribute unpaid salaries in Sulaymaniyah, the home of the PUK, while Barzani has threatened to raise the issue of Kurdish independence if Abadi accedes.

## Mosul Operation

After initial promise, the battle for Mosul did not progress as well as hoped by the time the workshop took place. This is due to the fact that international actors refrained from using air strikes – which were key during Iraqi Security Forces operations in Tikrit, Anbar and Hawija – for fear of civilian casualties. Further, although the successful retaking of some neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Mosul indicates that the overall strategy is not flawed, an over-reliance on Iraq's Special Operations Forces, the so-called Golden Division, hamstrung by a lack of ammunition, has been detrimental to the operation.

Mosul is quickly turning into a humanitarian catastrophe, with numerous people fleeing the city, primarily through the west. The PMU's occupation of areas around the airport and to the south has caused concern among civilians that they may become the victims of retaliatory violence. Additionally, the conditions for agricultural livelihood in the area have been destroyed: air pollution and sulphur levels are chronically high, and livestock is depleting. Already, the area has become unsuitable for human habitation on a semi-permanent level. Combined with the lack of resources at the disposal of the government and NGOs in the region, this is likely to result in a medium-term displacement from the area. Civilians are further endangered by the abundance of mines in the region, and while the Iraqi government is attempting to clear the area, these efforts are not forecast to be as successful as they were in Tikrit.

Moreover, although, as mentioned above, the dividing lines around Mosul have held, Barzani has declared that the Peshmerga will not give back what they have won with blood. This is problematic, especially for the Christians in the area, who neither identify as Kurdish nor have positive relations with Sunnis. Their interests are unlikely to be advanced under a government dominated by either group. In fact, according to one participant, some within the Christian community have even said that their situation under the Saddam regime may have been better.

In Mosul, every notable political figure, from every community and with backing from a diverse range of actors, has a post-operation plan. However, the lack of communication among these figures is ominous and sets the stage for contestation down the line.

## External Powers

The MPs stated that they are suffering because of regional and international polarisation and are caught in the crossfire as the dynamics among countries such as the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey play out.

For Turkey, the Kurdish question is crucial. There were reports that the foreign ministers of Turkey and Iran met in Tehran, possibly to discuss operations against the Kurdistan Workers'



Party (PKK). It should be noted, though, that Turkey's animosity to the Kurds extends only to the PKK, and they share relatively positive relations with the KDP.

Turkey has drawn a red line around Tal Afar, perhaps indicating a willingness to intervene west of Mosul in order to dissect the Kurdish-dominated regions in Iraq and Syria. Arguing against this, one participant pointed out that despite Ankara's rhetoric, greater intervention is unlikely because the Turkish base in Bashiqa (Iraq) is too distant to facilitate a logistically feasible operation. Compounding the issue is the fact that Turkey's aerial superiority might not be exercised as it would be difficult to authorise air strikes outside the remit of the Combined Joint Task Force (the US-led coalition fighting Daesh in Iraq and Syria). In addition, Turkish troops would be sharing an arena with groups controlled by Baghdad or Tehran, creating an opening for an unnecessary and unwelcome escalation.

Although Iran's objectives in Iraq remain unclear, the speakers believed that it seemed focused on operations in Syria, especially since the regime had suffered at the hands of rebels and Tehran was wary of losing primacy in the region to Russia.

Nevertheless, its proxies and paramilitaries have been effective, especially in eastern Iraq, where they have successfully kept Daesh, as well as Sunni civilians, away. In towns in Saladin and Diyala governorates, for example, while some Sunni families are able to return, most are not, and they are being replaced by members of Shia militias and their families. Furthermore, Iran has encouraged localised recruitment for the Badr Organization (the most important in terms of size, experience, strength and organisation among the armed groups within the PMU).

The speakers observed that Iran's influence runs extremely deep in Baghdad: one participant presented the example of Hadi Al-Amiri, current head of the Badr Organization and a former minister of transport, who has close ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and a pivotal role in facilitating the movement of fighters from Iran to Syria.

Additionally, the speakers noted that although Russia is also vying for influence in Baghdad, Iraq is not as important as it is for Iran.

The US has tended to engage only with the elites in the country, which has proved to be a strength as well as a weakness: this has rendered them unable to manage the different strategic objectives and relationships among groups in Iraq.

The Trump administration, however, is perceived as a wild card. President Donald Trump has highlighted that the Kurds are friends of the US, and he has displayed loyalty towards key allies. While there are concerns that Trump may want to back away from the Middle East, continued support for the Kurds has thus far been a safe and inexpensive bet.

At the same time, the US State Department is looking for Baghdad to play the key role, although it is worried about the rising anti-American rhetoric from the PMU and potential KDP isolation, which might cause Barzani to lash out.

## Final Remarks

The roundtable confirmed many of the themes and challenges to effective governance and stabilisation in post-Daesh Iraq that emerged during the first workshop. It once again demonstrated the relevance of a project dedicated to the study of 'The Future of Iraq and Syria'. The sponsors of the workshop thus decided to organise a third roundtable, focusing in particular on the relationship between Baghdad, the Kurdistan Region and the disputed areas between them, as well as the broader fight against Daesh.

*Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi is a Research Fellow in International Security Studies at RUSI.*

*Aaditya Dave is a Research Analyst in International Security Studies at RUSI.*

*Gareth Stansfield is Professor of Middle East Politics at the university of Exeter, and a Senior Associate Fellow of RUSI.*

*Stefan Wolff is Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham and an Associate Fellow of RUSI. His expertise is in the international management of intra-state conflict and war-to-peace transitions.*

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