

Syria and Iraq: What Comes After Mosul and Raqqa?

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It should scarcely have come as a surprise to President Obama that he could not reach an agreement with Vladimir Putin on Syria at the G20 meeting. The President and Secretary Kerry have now been strung along for nearly a year over discussions of some kind of ceasefire, meaningful relief effort, coordinated approach to operations against ISIS, and form of government for Syria.

The first Russian air strikes occurred on October 1, 2015, and Russia has steadily used its military intervention to promote its own interest in Syria and the Middle East, attack the Arab rebels, and support the Assad regime. Russia has also built new ties to Iran, shipped Iran advanced S300 surface-to-air missiles, and managed to reach out Saudi Arabia in spite of this—seriously discussing agreed limits on their petroleum production and exports.

The United States, in contrast, has focused on defeating ISIS as a Caliphate—and its ability to control key population centers in eastern Syria and Western Iraq—without declaring any clear strategy for what happens afterwards. It has never clearly defined its objectives or what such a “victory” would mean.

U.S. military spokesmen have warned that such a “defeat” of ISIS in Mosul and Iraq could leave it with the ability to use its fighters for months afterwards, and that many fighters might escape and disperse. It also seems clear that “liberating” Iraqi and Syrian cities to date has generally meant nearly destroying them—leaving much of their populations without a source of income, homes, or basic services.

The Administration has never presented any clear strategic objective for either Syria or Iraq. It keeps talking about Arab rebels in Syria as if they had some degree of unity. It talks of “moderates” as if they were both strong enough and experienced enough to govern all or part of Syria, when the vast majority of the actual Syrian’s fighting ISIS are Kurds that have very different goals and objectives from most Arab fighters—who see Assad as the real threat, and large portions of which are Islamist and have some ties to Al Qaida. It has talked about coordinating its Arab efforts with allies like Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but never really shown such coordination is serious or actually taking place.

The Administration has never clearly defined what kind of Syria it wants to emerge, how such a Syria could handle its sectarian and ethnic divisions, and who would help reconstruct a nation with more than half its population dispersed internally or living as refugees. It has never publically attempted to examine how a Syria could recover whose economy is now something like a fifth of the size it was in 2011—when it already had failed to meet the needs of many of its people. It has never addressed the fact that well over 60% of Syria’s population and economy are in the western part of the country, and have never been occupied by ISIS. In short, it has never addressed the fact that the real fight for Syria is taking place where ISIS isn’t.

The Administration also has never come to grips with what will happen when ISIS no longer controls any population centers, but the Hezbollah, Iranian forces, Russians, and now Turks will still be present. It has never addressed the high probability of fighting between the Syrian Kurds, Turks, and Syrian Arabs once ISIS is gone; and it still has not set any clear policy for dealing with the fact that some of this fighting has actually begun. It has never advanced proposals to resolve either the Kurdish issue—or find some way to protect other minorities in a post-ISIS Syria where the fate of Christians, Shi'ites, and Alawites may be a critical issue.

It has never openly faced the fact that almost all of these issues have a mirror image in Iraq, and even U.S. military spokespersons often seem to act as if they were totally unaware that Syria shares a 599-kilometer border with Iraq, and ISIS has to be defeated in both countries or else it will become an open-ended threat that can operate across a broader area with no real physical barriers to irregular warfare operations.

Like Syria, Iraq has critical internal divisions that drive its tensions and perceptions in ways that make ISIS only one security concern among many for most of its population. If the real Syria is in the west, and outside of ISIS occupation and control, the real Iraq is in the East, and much of the area ISIS is shown as occupying—or as having lost—is actually empty desert. There is a reason why many experts see the “blob maps” of ISIS territory—or sectarian and ethnic occupation—as little more than demographic nonsense.

Iraq's Shi'ites and Sunnis—and its Arabs, Kurds, and other minorities—are also deeply divided. Moreover, Iraq's Kurds now occupy substantial areas that have never been Kurdish before, and the Kurds have gained de facto control over Kirkuk and its oil and gas fields. Once again, each major faction is also divided internally and sometimes to the point of armed clashes within themselves.

Just as liberating Raqqa may do as much to create new conflicts in Syria as “defeating” ISIS, liberating Mosul may end up dividing Iraq. Once again, the United States has built up the Kurds as a major force against ISIS without laying any clear groundwork for their role and territory once the fighting with ISIS ends. Once again, Turkey and Iran have their own separate objectives, and can be a source of additional violence or division.

Iraq does have something approaching a central government, but only one that cannot really govern. Iraq seems to have a competent prime minister, but its factions will not let its prime minister govern effectively or make necessary reforms. Worse, both Iraq's central government and the Kurdish Regional Government are too divided, corrupt, and dysfunctional to really work. The government also has no clear regional allies. With the possible exception of Kuwait, other Arab states see the government as Shi'ite and pro-Iranian, rather than Sunni and Arab and have done little to provide support or aid.

This will be critical if ISIS does lose control over Iraqi population centers. The Iraqi government has not yet demonstrated it can rebuild or aid the areas it “liberates”, and war and the crash in oil export revenues have left it nearly bankrupt. Iraq is scarcely as bad off as Syria, but there are millions of refugees and internally displaced persons—mostly Sunni pushed east toward Shi'ite areas.

This is not to argue that there are good options, some magic U.S. military solution, or that some simple change in U.S. policy could cope with the problems in either country—much less both.

But *no* policy? No options? No efforts to offer a concrete proposal to resolve key differences or martial some collective international effort toward reconstruction? Endless talks with the Russians? Not coming to grips with the issues presented by Iran, Turkey, or any given faction of the Kurds? Focusing on ISIS as if it was the central problem, bragging about liberating thousands of square kilometers of empty desert? Implying victory against ISIS in the cities it controls has strategic meaning?

Quite frankly, the Administration seems to be focused on an exit strategy, but the exit is not an exit from Syria or Iraq. It is rather the Administration's exit from office. The Obama Administration may be able to use pyrrhic victories in Mosul and Raqqa as a cover, but its legacy will be one of never having shown it faced its problems honestly, found the least bad options available, or really had a strategy that looked beyond ISIS.

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