
THE WAY FORWARD FOR IRAQ AFTER ISIS

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Over three years have passed since ISIS took control of one third of Iraq. The war on ISIS resulted in unprecedented human losses and suffering, economic crisis and destruction of infrastructure and public and private property. It will require billions of US dollars and years to recover.

Vital as it is, the military success is only one step forward: it is now that the real work begins if Baghdad wants long term stability, peace and security.

The consequences of ISIS brutality and the counter military operations are colossal and include the forced displacement of over three million people who lost everything. Thousands of private homes were leveled with the ground and livelihoods erased. Approximately 70% of the infrastructure in areas controlled by ISIS is completely destroyed and requires estimated \$100 billion to reconstruct over the next ten years according to the Iraqi Ministry of Planning.

The trust that once existed between the communities is now totally broken and the emerging trust deficit has become a dangerous cliff. Where there previously were a small number of militia and armed groups, we now find a proliferation of militia groups and total militarization of the entire liberated areas. Thousands of crimes have been committed by ISIS and other armed groups against civilians and the security forces.

The ideology of ISIS yet remains alive and is not likely to diminish anytime soon as thousands of children and youth have undergone brainwashing and indoctrination programs under ISIS. Many of these children and youth constitute a ready-made nucleus to be converted into suicide bombers by command at anytime.

The local authorities are practically paralyzed due to sectarian struggle, corruption, lack of expertise and know-how. They are inefficient and ineffective and have already lost the confidence of communities everywhere. It seems unlikely they will be able to face the multifaceted challenges and lead post-ISIS rehabilitation efforts.

Many factors facilitated the success of ISIS in Iraq, including political, economic and social injustice; governance, development and public services deficits; and discriminatory policies based on ethnic, sectarian, religious and political identities and affiliations. These root causes which paved the way for the rise of this brutal terrorist organization are still in effect and have further deepened over the last three years.

The history of Iraq reveals a number of persistent sources of conflict: systematic demographic changes, sectarianism and purely ideological policies, concentration of political and military power with impunity, and disregard for rule of civilian law.

Blind celebration and overestimation of the military success will not last long and will not bring peace, stability or security in the long run unless Iraqi leaders accept these realities and are brave enough to recognize the critical mistakes made since 2005.

Neither military success nor money will stabilize Iraq if the legitimate grievances of all communities across Iraq are not genuinely considered and resolved.

There are certain steps to be seriously considered by Baghdad.

First, a genuine and inclusive reconciliation process to be led by the prime minister with clearly defined and collectively agreed objectives, timelines, and procedures to meet the needs and interests of all communities across the country. Reconciliation is a process composed of steps agreed upon and implemented collectively rather than ornamented statements and bluff policies.

Second, a meaningful justice process is the foundation of successful reconciliation. Justice cannot be delivered without fighting impunity. Since 2003, absence of justice has been an issue in Iraq despite many initiatives that failed due to factors like impunity and lack of genuine political will. People have lost confidence in the current judicial system.

A transparent, independent justice system must be established to effectively deal with complex crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in order to hold perpetrators to

account and deliver justice to communities and victims.

Third, there is a need for robust disarmament to demilitarize the entire liberated areas, demobilize and reintegrate armed groups into the communities, and transition from military rule to civilian administration. Law enforcement must be handed over to local security forces.

The Iraqi army, after its collapse in 2014, has regained the trust of local communities to certain degree. This should not be ruined by overstaying in cities and towns. With the end of ISIS, there is no legitimate reason for the army to remain deployed to populated areas. They should not allow themselves to be dragged into political or sectarian disputes.

Demographic change policies implemented by successive regimes since the creation of Iraq, especially in the Kurdish areas, have been the source of all conflicts and instability in Iraq. The current status quo in the liberated areas and prevention of internally displaced people to return to their places of origin will pave the way for another cycle of conflict. The land and properties of the IDPs will not remain uninhabited. Such a development will put Iraq back into a vicious circle of violence that will have no winners.

The solution to break this cycle rests in the hands of Baghdad, which has the power to take serious measures to prevent new demographic changes and resolve past demographic changes according article 140. Handling these issues with a winner takes all strategy and terrorism of military success will lead Iraq to an unknown and dangerous destination.

Fourth, fair resource distribution is another success factor to stabilize communities and repair infrastructure, not only in the liberated areas but also in the communities that have been indirectly affected by the war with ISIS. These communities have shouldered the burden of hosting IDPs for three years and are today suffering from reduced access to public services, exhausted infrastructure, and scarce livelihood opportunities.

There is an urgent need for the establishment of a well-defined mechanism for equitable distribution of resources. Such a direction would not only contribute to physical reconstruction, but also rebuild trust between communities and, eventually, lead to the restoration of peace and stability.

Fifth, Iraq is in urgent need of reform in its public and private institutions at the federal, regional and local levels. Since 2003, public and private institutions have experienced a systematic degradation.

There is no right or wrong time for reform. The post-ISIS stage should be accompanied by a robust systemic reform process that genuinely aims to improve the government in delivering services, social protection, and private sector regulation. In Iraq, there are many informal but powerful institutions that direct the way the country is governed. These institutions should be part of systemic reforms. Reform efforts limited to the public sector may not result in sustainable improvements.

Finally, the international community's long term engagement is essential for the future of Iraq. The world can play a key supportive role in this process through continued and unbiased political support and provision of financial and technical assistance. The international community can assist Iraq embark on an inclusive, genuine, transparent, democratic, and constitutional journey that leads to peace and security for all communities. Jointly, all communities can move forward to find peaceful coexistence and safety from cycles of recurring violence, revenge and retaliations.

Kaynak/Source: