
IRAQ YEAR IN REVIEW: THE COUNTRY MAY BE FREE OF ISIL BUT LIES IN RUINS

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26.12.2017

The National, 25 Dec 2017

At the foot of the craggy ridge line that slashes across the plains of northern Iraq, the devastated town of Sinjar is slowly repopulating. Crammed into their battered old cars, families pull up to houses they left in haste more than over three years ago, and have not seen since. With a home to return to, they are the fortunate ones.

Many of their neighbours are not so lucky. Sinjar sparked an international outcry in August 2014, when ISIL stormed the town and the surrounding area to kill and enslave the local Yazidi population. In response, the US began its bombing campaign to curb and reverse the terrorist group's headlong advance against a crumbling Iraqi military. Air support by the US-led coalition allowed the Iraqis to beat back and ultimately defeat ISIL in a war culminating in the bloody nine-month battle for the city of Mosul, during which bombs flattened large swathes of the city.

Sinjar, the genesis of the air campaign against ISIL, did not have to wait that long for its destruction. By the time ISIL pulled out of the town ahead of advancing Kurdish forces in November 2015, the historic town centre had been reduced to rubble.

Piles of masonry are all that remains of elegant old structures. The adjacent residential areas lie derelict. Houses and shops have been looted by Kurds and Yazidis, the hospital stripped of its equipment and schools remain dormant. Electricity comes only from diesel-fired generators. The threat of improvised explosive devices □ homemade explosive booby traps □ still lingers. Nothing has been rebuilt.

Across Iraq, liberated towns, cities and villages have suffered a similar fate. Some, like Mosul or desert towns like Al Qaim near the Syrian border, have only recently been wrested from the extremists. Others, like Fallujah, retaken by the Iraqi military in the spring of 2015, still wait for essential services to be restored, and homes to be rebuilt.

The reason for the snail-paced recovery is a lack of funds. ISIL's conquest of Mosul in June 2014 coincided with a precipitous drop in the oil price, which halved to around \$50 (Dh184) a barrel, where it continues to hover. The Iraqi government derives almost all its revenue from oil sales. This has left it financially hamstrung throughout the war on the terror group, and unable to foot the bill for rebuilding the country.

But Sinjar's woes are not down to finances alone. The city lies in territory claimed by both the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad. The KRG had de facto annexed the town and its surroundings prior to the ISIL attack, and it fell back to the Kurds after the terror group had been evicted. This precluded Iraqi government money being spent on reconstruction.

The cash-strapped KRG was also unable to deliver, even if it had wanted to, which it did not. The KRG had competed with a rival Kurdish group, the PKK, for control of Sinjar, so it was reluctant to revive the town, fearing that its influence would wane if its inhabitants returned, so tens of thousands of Yazidis remained moored in displacement camps on Kurdish territory.

In October, Iraqi militia groups swept the Kurds away from the Sinjar area, prompting some Yazidi residents to return. Known as the Hashed Al Shaabi, the predominantly Shiite militias are allied with Baghdad, but many also have close ties to Iran, and follow Tehran's bidding. They have moved into Sinjar to create a land corridor connecting Iran to Syria, but have done little to help the town get back on its feet. Tension between the Kurds and the militias prevents NGOs and aid from reaching the area, and Baghdad's purse remains closed. Synonymous with the horrors of the self-proclaimed ISIL "caliphate", Sinjar also embodies the debilitating instability of the post-war chaos.

A little more than 100 kilometres to the east of Sinjar lies Mosul. The city's fortunes are divided by the Tigris, which bisects the city into east and west. Iraqi forces first liberated the east bank of the river in January. Since then, the rubble has been cleared, bomb craters in roads filled in and a water main repaired. Many schools have reopened, and shops and showrooms selling anything from groceries to fitted kitchens are doing a brisk trade. By day, the roads are choked with traffic. By night, the brightly-lit restaurants are filled with families dining out.

Fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) walk down a street in Raqqa after a Kurdish-led force expelled ISIL fighters from the northern Syrian city, formerly their "capital". Bulent Kilic / AFP

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By the time the military began its assault on West Mosul, its best units had been depleted, and it was forced to rely on heavy coalition air and artillery support to advance. When the fighting ended

in July, much of the West Bank had been levelled, and little has been rebuilt since. While the east thrives, the west lies shattered.

Whatever the extent of any progress, the overall situation remains dire. Air strikes and fierce fighting gutted the two main hospitals. All five bridges crossing the Tigris have been destroyed. The UN in July estimated that it will cost \$1bn to repair basic infrastructure alone.

This is just a fraction of what is needed to undo the damage wrought by three years of war.

Iraq's planning minister Salman Al Jumaili in May announced a plan for the reconstruction of areas liberated from ISIL. Over the next 10 years, \$100bn will be spent on rebuilding the country.

But Iraq's budget recorded a deficit equal to an estimated 13.9 per cent of GDP in 2016. Rampant corruption and an absurdly bloated and inefficient public sector devour the lion's share of state revenues, and oil continues to sell at low prices. With Iraq unable to shoulder the financial burden of reconstruction itself, much of the funding for this scheme will have to come from abroad. Securing such amounts of foreign investment will be a huge challenge for the government.

Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative, setting up a "joint co-ordination council" with Iraq in October. The goal is not only to help with the reconstruction effort, but also to reduce Iran's influence in Baghdad.

As an important ally in the war on ISIL, Tehran's sway in Iraq has increased in the last three years, most notably through nurturing powerful Shiite militia groups.

Because ISIL failed to advance into Iraq's Shiite heartlands, it is the Sunni-majority areas that bore the brunt of the fighting. If the government fails to deliver on reconstruction, the sectarian faultlines are likely to widen again, and Sunni resentment could revive ISIL or spawn a successor. Money raised through the Saudi initiative would be spent on these Sunni areas. Neglect of those areas by the Shiite-dominated government before 2014 was a significant factor in the rise of ISIL. But Saudi efforts might be opposed by Iran, which is unwilling to let its geopolitical rival gain leverage in Iraq.

The war also rekindled Kurdish aspirations for independence. Keen to capitalise on its stellar international image and Baghdad's weakness, the KRG held a referendum on secession from Iraq

in September. But the move backfired, as Iraqi forces pushed the Kurds out of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and other areas they had annexed in 2014.

Without Kirkuk, the KRG lacked the economic basis for independence. The Kurds also discovered that Iran and Turkey opposed secession, leaving the landlocked autonomous zone without access to the outside world. The setback plunged the KRG into deep political crisis. Internal divisions between rival parties will leave it too weak to push for independence for years to come, a rare success for a central government struggling to assert its authority.

After ISIL was finally flushed out of the areas bordering Syria, prime minister Haider Al Abadi on December 9 announced final victory over the extremist group, sparking nationwide celebrations. However, ISIL might be defeated, but it is not gone. It will continue to kill Iraqis in bomb attacks or raids launched from sparsely populated desert areas.

In place of ISIL's self-declared caliphate, which at one point spanned a third of Iraq, is a country more divided than ever, led by a government that is vulnerable to internal challengers and unable to resist outside interference. With much of Iraq in ruins, geopolitical rivalries threaten to undermine its recovery, and internal tensions threaten to push it back into violent chaos.

Kaynak/Source: