The "End of the Beginning": The Stabilization of Mosul & Future U.S. Strategic Objectives in Iraq.

Dr Michael Knights

Lafer Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony Submitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

February 28, 2017

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and the distinguished committee members: Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on Mosul and the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). I'm particularly proud to be appearing before you for the first time as a new American citizen, an immigrant and an adopted son of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

At heart, we're here today because Iraq is important.

ISIL has known this all along. Their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is an Iraqi. Their main base is Iraq and may remain in Iraq in the future. The territory of Iraq is connected to six of the Middle East's major states and represents a keystone that buttresses the region's geography. The population of Iraq incudes the largest body of Sunni Arabs in the world living under a Shia-led government. As ISIL degenerates back into a terrorist group unable to hold major towns or cities it will view Iraq as a safe haven and later as fertile ground for a comeback.

Iran also knows that Iraq is important. The regime in the Tehran, the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism, has an ambitious agenda inside Iraq. Tehran seeks to exploit the justifiable fear of ISIL that is felt by Iraqi Shia majority in Iraq. Iran is trying to convince the Iraqi Shia that they are alone in their fight

against ISIL, and that only Iranian-backed Shia militias can protect Iraq from ISIL's resurgence in the future.

We in this room know Iraq is important, and that America's role in Iraq is equally important. Just two and a half years after the U.S. military left the country, ISIL took over Mosul and a third of Iraq. ISIL's success and the complete and hasty withdrawal of U.S. military support to Iraq was no coincidence.

Three years ago I was testifying to Congress on the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), something I had been warning about since 2011[1] when the movement rebooted stronger after we killed their leaders the year before.

Back in 2013 it was hard to focus attention on Iraq, and it will be hard to focus attention on Iraq in a year's time, so we need to make smart choices now while we are still keenly focused on the threats to U.S. interests that are present in Iraq. These threats include not only ISIL but also Shia militias groups that parasitically exploit ISIL's presence and which make up part of the Iranian threat network discussed in this committee earlier this month.[2]

I've been focused on Iraq my whole career. I'm starting to see the cyclical nature of our policies.

We wake up to the nature of an urgent threat that has been allowed to grow unchecked. We make mistakes, then we do the right thing, but then we lose interest. The cycle starts again.

This is very clear in the case of Mosul and fight against ISIL and its forerunners. In early 2017, the Iraqi security forces are likely to liberate Mosul from ISIL control. But given the dramatic comebacks staged by ISIL and its predecessors in the city in 2004, 2007, and 2014, one can justifiably ask what will stop ISIL or a similar movement from lying low, regenerating, and wiping away the costly gains of the current war. What can we learn from history?

Stabilizing Mosul: lessons from 2008-2014

In a recent Washington Institute policy paper on Mosul,[3] I took a close look at the underexplored issue of security arrangements for the city after its liberation, in particular how security forces should be structured and controlled to prevent an ISIL recurrence. The paper draws on my interviews with Mosul

[1] In early 2012 I assessed that the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq had been underway since the spring of 2011. See Michael Knights, Back with a vengeance: Al-Qaeda in Iraq rebounds, in IHS Defense, Security & Risk Consulting, February 24, 2012.

[2] Defeating the Iranian Threat Network: Options for Countering Iranian Proxies, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 6, 2016, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/defeating-the-iranian-threat-network-options-for-countering-iranian-proxies-120616p

[3] Michael Knights, How to Secure Mosul: Lessons from 2008—2014 (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016), available at http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote38-Knights.pdf

security forces in the pre-2011 period, and extensive travel in Ninawa governorate both before and after ISIL.

Though "big picture" political deals over Mosul's future may ultimately be decisive, the first priority of the Iraqi-international coalition is to secure Mosul in very practical ways.

As John Paul Vann, a U.S. military advisor in Vietnam, noted decades ago: "Security may be ten percent of the problem, or it may be ninety percent, but whichever it is, it's the first ten percent or the first ninety percent. Without security, nothing else we do will last." [4]

We can learn a lot about the vital next steps in Mosul if we look at two distinct periods of Mosul's recent history.

- Partial success when the U.S. paid close attention. In 2007–2011, the U.S-backed Iraqi security forces (ISF) achieved significant success, reducing security incidents in the city from a high point of 666 per month in the first quarter of 2008 to an average of 32 incidents in the first quarter of 2011.[5]
- Catastrophic failure when the U.S. turned away. In 2011–2014, the trend reversed, until monthly security incidents had risen to an average of 297 in the first quarter of 2014. Shortly afterwards ISIL seized Mosul and a third of Iraq in June 2014.

Drivers of successful stabilization in Mosul in 2007-2011

Explanations for both the 2007–11 successes and the failures of 2011–14 are easily identified. In the earlier span, Baghdad committed to Mosul's stabilization and Iraq's prime minister (then Nouri al-Maliki) focused on the issue, authorizing compromises such as partial amnesty and a reopening of security recruitment to former regime officers. Elections produced a provincial council and governor with whom urban Sunni Arab Moslawis, as Mosul residents are known, could identify.

While the U.S. military was embedded in Mosul until 2011, the ISF achieved a basic "unity of command," and key command positions were allocated to respected officers, including Sunni Arab Moslawis, in part as a result of U.S. urging. Available government troops in Mosul were increased, including through significant local recruitment of Moslawis from poorer Sunni Arab neighborhoods.

The roots of failed stabilization in Mosul during 2011-2014

[4] Quoted in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 67.

[5] All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) data set, which brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private-security-company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the data set as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009–11 and disappeared in 2012–14.

During the 2011–14 stretch, by contrast, ISIL's victory was assured by chronically deficient unity of effort and unity of command among Iraqi government, Kurdish, and Ninawa factions. Baghdad and the Kurdish-backed Ninawa provincial leaders worked at cross-proposes throughout the three-year period.

Indeed, the military "command climate" set by Baghdad's politically appointed commanders resulted in security forces conducting operations intended to humiliate and punish the predominately Sunni Arab Moslawis. From the outset of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term in 2010, Baghdad tinkered with command and control in Mosul, undoing the reasonably depoliticized security structure that existed until that point. The constant shuffling of commanders destroyed the ISF's remaining cohesion.

A rare second chance: the strategic opportunity in Mosul in 2017

Given the strategic opportunity posed by the future liberation of Mosul—an opportunity that may not come again—digesting and making use of these lessons is vitally important.

Assuming neither Kurdish Peshmerga nor Shiite militias flood the city, an outcome the coalition seems to have prevented, Moslawis may initially be more open to working with the ISF, following two and a half years under ISIL, than at any point since 2003. But Mosul residents will also be closely watching their liberators for signs of a return to 2014, with its punitive measures, restrictive curfews, and the widespread specter of arrest.

At the political level, Ninawa requires genuine pragmatic governing consensus, not just a shifting series of "enemy of my enemy is my friend" alliances. It is still early in the process but on this front the U.S.-led coalition has made a good start by bringing together Baghdad and the Kurds, plus the Ninawa provincial leadership for general dialogue.

A compact among these factions should consist of simple ground rules for future political conduct. In such an arrangement, the provincial council and any security coordination committee must be a consensus-based decisionmaking body.

How to structure Mosul security forces

Likewise, the recruitment and management of local government bodies and police should formulaically reflect the pre-ISIL composition of the city's population. Major recruitment of urban locals to the police force, including returning minorities, is a priority.

At the operational level, requirements include stable nonpoliticized command appointments and much stronger unity and coordination among federal Iraqi, Kurdish, and local Ninawa security forces. The Ninawa Operations Command (NiOC), a three-star joint headquarters active since 2008, remains the most appropriate command-and-control architecture, but the concept needs to be implemented much more effectively than in the pre-2014 years.

Just as the U.S.-led coalition has successfully worked since 2014 to encourage Iraqi promotion to high command of talented Counter-Terrorism Service officers, the coalition should now use its influence and advisors to optimize NiOC's leadership and setup.

Such efforts should include the establishment of key coordination bodies on overall security policy, community relations, intelligence sharing, and checkpoint placement. To aid coordination, Iraq should be encouraged to locate NiOC as close as possible to the Ninawa Provincial Council and police headquarters, both in Mosul city.

How to prevent ISIL resurgence in Mosul

The 2007-2014 period provides clear lessons regarding some of the first steps that Iraq and the coalition should take in Mosul:

- Spread reconstruction and economic aid to poorer urban districts. For more than a decade, the city's reconstruction needs have been unmet, and the coalition should encourage Iraq to target reconstruction in the areas most likely to present havens for ISIL and other militant actors. This means greater focus on the poor Arab neighborhoods at the city's outer northwest, southwest, and southeast edges. These areas were consistently overlooked in the past and ISIL used them as incubators for its previous recoveries, employing an economic "class warfare" approach to recruit the poor.
- Don't overlook rural areas. Moreover, urban security must be linked to stabilization of rural militant "hotspots" like Badush, Ash Shura, and Tal Afar, from which a disproportionate number of ISIL fighters have come. ISIL's takeover of Mosul in 2014 was partly a rural versus urban backlash. This social schism needs to be minimized to deny ISIL space to re-grow.
- Treat ISIL as a major organized crime threat. Iraq needs to help develop strong capabilities in countering organized crime and for local governments in fighting corruption, given that ISIL will first reemerge in Mosul's criminal underbelly, as it did after the decimation of its predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq, in 2010. The resurgence of ISIL in Mosul will either success or fail in the markets, the offices and the government departments where the terrorists will try to threaten, kidnap and kill their way back to prominence.

The future role of the U.S.-led coalition in Mosul and Iraq

The U.S.-led coalition can play a critical positive role in encouraging Iraq to place good leaders in charge of Ninawa security policies, support those leaders, and build a combined effort to prevent ISIL resurgence.

First, the U.S.-led coalition needs to itself act in a coordinated manner. The current coalition against the Islamic State is far more useful than a unilateral U.S. mission, drawing on key contributors such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, and Canada, to name just a handful.

Such an alliance, including some of the world's largest economies and security-assistance partners, can help amplify diplomatic pressure in stressing the need for consensus approaches to Ninawa in discussions in Mosul, Erbil, Baghdad, Ankara, and even Tehran.

The alliance also ensures the fair burden sharing between the United States and other partners, many of whom are making very substantive efforts to do things that the U.S. cannot easily do (for instance, Italian Carabinieri support to Iraq's Federal Police).

Extending Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve

If the mandate of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) were extended, the coalition's leverage could be expanded beyond the liberation of Mosul. The coalition should commit the United States to at least three further years of extraordinary security cooperation, subject to review and extension.

The aim would be to provide a bridge for this enhanced security-cooperation relationship into the new Iraqi government in 2018–22.

The message should be clear: the United States will not disengage from this fight after Mosul is liberated. In contrast to the hasty departure in 2009–11, U.S. officials would be committing to an intensified security-cooperation relationship with Iraq through the multinational framework of CJTF-OIR for the mid-term, in order to permanently defeat IS in Iraq.

Such an effort should entail ongoing contribution to a Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Iraq (CJSOFT-I), enhanced intelligence cooperation, continued U.S. presence in the Combined Joint Operations Command (CJOC), and a sturdy Build Partner Capacity (BPC) effort.

What the U.S.-led coalition should do in Mosul

The above steps could greatly increase U.S. and coalition leverage for Ninawa's long-term stabilization. For instance, the coalition could stay directly engaged in the development of Ninawa-based security forces.

If the coalition continues to train and equip Iraqi army forces at the large bases near Baghdad, Taji and Besmaya, then Western governments will be better positioned to ensure Moslawi and Ninawa recruits are brought into the army in appropriate numbers, a key reconciliation metric. Similarly, the Italian Carabinieri training for the Iraqi Federal Police allows monitoring and influence over the development of new locally recruited Federal Police forces for Ninawa.

Specialized training initiatives could not only sustain coalition leverage but also directly assist in Ninawa's stabilization. Examples might include

- special forces and intelligence training for counterterrorism and counter-organized-crime operations;

- development of a "Counterinsurgency Center of Excellence for the Iraqi Army and Federal Police"; and
- development of border security and logistical capacities to support operations in ungoverned spaces far from existing logistical infrastructure, such as the Ninawa-Syria border.

Keep paying attention to Mosul, Ninawa and Iraq

The coalition's attention is simultaneously the cheapest and the most important investment that can be made in Mosul. Keeping the Baghdad, Kurdistan Region, and Ninawa leaderships focused on stabilization, and keeping them communicating and coordinating, is the greatest contribution the coalition can make.