

IN IRAQ, AMID ONGOING SECTARIAN TENSIONS, TRUMP
EXPANDS U.S. MISSION TO “OBLITERATE” I.S.
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[Sorry – US Involvement is the Only Way to Reduce Civilian Casualties: Benny Avni, *New York Post*, March 28, 2017](#)—There will be more casualties in the war on ISIS. But minimizing those deaths will take more, not less, American involvement.

[‘We Were Never Brothers’: Iraq’s Divisions May Be Irreconcilable: Aziz Ahmad, *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 26, 2017](#)— ‘I swear by God we are not brothers,’ the Sunni Arab sheik shouted from the audience in response to a conservative Shiite lawmaker’s plea for brotherhood.

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Tom Rogan

[National Review](#), Mar. 28, 2017

Every day the coalition conducts air strikes in Mosul. Those strikes support Iraqi and embedded U.S. coalition ground forces by destroying Daesh (ISIS) personnel in their redoubts. Nearly all the bombs hit their targets without any civilian loss.

But on March 17, a coalition air strike may have killed more than 100 civilians. An investigation is under way, but the specific cause of the civilian deaths is not yet known. One Iraqi commander has claimed that secondary explosions from an air strike on a Daesh bomb truck might be responsible. Regardless, Iraqi and international outcry is growing. The U.N. has implied that the U.S. is bombing indiscriminately. Human-rights groups are questioning the coalition’s commitment to protecting civilians. And in Iraq, Sunni leaders, including the parliament speaker and the head of a major political bloc, have expressed great concern.

Momentum is building toward a pause or restriction on operations in Mosul. That must not happen. We’ve witnessed a tragedy that demands investigation. But we must not risk victory. After all, although it’s tragic, this incident isn’t surprising ... Mosul was always going to be a challenging locale for air strikes. The city is densely populated, and Daesh forces embrace ambush-maneuver tactics alongside human shields. Cumulatively, those factors make efficient targeting an extreme challenge for air controllers.

Another problem is Daesh’s perception of civilian casualties as a strategic weapon. When Sunni civilians are killed by coalition or Iraqi forces, Daesh presents their deaths as evidence of America’s desire to maim Iraq. According to Daesh, the deaths prove the Baghdad government’s disdain for its Sunni citizenry. Mosul is key to Iraq’s future. If the city becomes a symbol of Sunni oppression, Prime Minister Abadi’s reconciliation campaign could implode. Daesh and Iran are united in their desire to see such an implosion.

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Yet pausing or restricting American operations in Mosul would be the wrong move today. Only Mosul’s northwestern sector now remains in Daesh’s hands. Their forces are surrounded and under extraordinary pressure. To hesitate now would give Daesh an opportunity to resupply and regroup, thus prolonging the battle for Iraqi civilians and soldiers, and increasing the political risks to Abadi. At the same time, with Daesh nearly encircled in Raqqah, we have an opportunity to show the group for what it is: an army of losers destined for annihilation rather than divinely ordained victory. Remember, Daesh recruitment in the U.S. and abroad rests on the group’s ability to show credible and growing power. In Mosul and Raqqah that credibility is dying.

Iraq’s recent history offers a critical lesson here. Fallujah, April 2004: After the killing of four U.S. contractors there, the U.S. Marines were ordered to seize the city from insurgent forces dominated by al-Qaeda in Iraq (Daesh’s precursor). Marine commanders (including one James Mattis) believed that the operation was a mistake, but they followed orders. Three weeks later, having taken casualties, the Marines were near victory. But just short of victory, sensitive to international complaints that the Marines were too aggressive, the Bush administration ordered a withdrawal. The Marines were replaced by a poorly led Iraqi replacement force that quickly surrendered to the insurgents. In the ensuing months, the al-Qaeda threat from Fallujah only grew. And in November 2004, the Marines had to return to finish the fight. More blood was lost as our troops retook ground that has been taken and then given up.

Fallujah should have taught us a lesson about urban operations in Iraq. Once committed, the pursuit of victory must not be diverted by civilian casualties, which are sometimes unavoidable. When America, the coalition, and our Iraqi allies entered Mosul, our objective was Daesh’s defeat and the city’s liberation. That objective remains. We must see it done.

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**SORRY – US INVOLVEMENT IS THE ONLY
WAY TO REDUCE CIVILIAN CASUALTIES**

Benny Avni

[New York Post](#), Mar. 28, 2017

There will be more casualties in the war on ISIS. But minimizing those deaths will take more, not less, American involvement. Quietly, President Trump is sending hundreds of additional troops into Syria and Iraq, and is widening US-led air attacks there. The president has also asked Defense Secretary James Mattis to take a more active role in developing the West’s anti-ISIS strategy and in overseeing its implementation, in sharp departure from the micromanagement that characterized President Barack Obama’s war efforts.

Such a leadership role is not without its naysayers. In one incident last week, 112 civilian bodies were pulled out of a house in Mosul – Iraq’s second-largest city, where the Iraqi military is fighting under a US air umbrella. The Pentagon has acknowledged a bombing operation in the area. Cue the critics.

The Mosul incident fits an “alarming pattern” of US-led airstrikes that “destroyed whole houses with entire families inside,” announced Amnesty International. In Geneva, UN human rights chief Zeid Raad al-Hussein said air sorties in heavily populated areas “potentially have a lethal and disproportionate impact on civilians.” So are Americans heartless war criminals? Well, as Zeid, a Jordanian, acknowledged, ISIS is using “children, men and women to shield themselves from attack.” Such “cowardly and disgraceful” tactics, he said, include shooting civilians in the back as they flee – “an act of monstrous depravity.”

Meanwhile in Syria, according to a widely quoted report by the Russian military, US air attacks destroyed bridges over the Euphrates River and hit a critical dam near

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ISIS’ stronghold in Raqqa. Such attacks, tut-tutted Russian Gen. Sergei Rudskoi, risk an “ecological catastrophe” and could lead to “numerous” civilian deaths. Pot, meet kettle: Russian jets have razed entire cities on behalf of Moscow’s ally, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Diplomatically, the Russians shield Assad from accountability for his war crimes, including well-documented chemical attacks on civilians. The United States, by the way, denies damaging the dam. In fact, according to some reports, ISIS is trying to score propaganda points by damaging it themselves.

Free societies, enjoying a free press and unfettered antiwar protests, are by definition at a disadvantage in modern, urban, asymmetrical warfare. And undoubtedly we must minimize civilian casualties. Yet if America is to do what Trump promised and “obliterate” ISIS, mistakes will be made and innocents will perish — each one a tragedy for which the responsible parties must be held accountable. No war can be free of civilian blood, so expect more of it — and the accompanying criticism.

Those critics will at times be 100 percent right, too. But what’s the alternative? For five years, America mostly sat aside as the defining war of the new century raged in Syria. But our clean hands allowed a bloodbath. More than half a million people, mostly civilians, were killed. Millions more fled their homes, living in refugee camps or risking life and limb to escape to Europe. America’s absence from the war did nothing to limit the toll on civilians. To end it, and ensure it stays ended, America’s presence is needed more than ever.

As long as Assad remains in the presidential palace, Syria’s Sunnis will forever seek revenge. If we let Iran and its proxy Hezbollah stay, it will be a staging ground for violence throughout the Middle East. No wonder the Russians, Iranians and other Assad allies hope to keep out the United States and our allies. They (and ISIS) will exaggerate any report of alleged war atrocities, no matter how flimsy. Some of our politicians and the press will bite. They’ll amplify such reports to prove we must stay on the sidelines, as Obama did. But America’s interests were harmed by our self-imposed vacation from history. We lost credibility. Our ability to promote freedom around the globe is now in doubt. Terrorists continued to strike the West, as seemingly victorious ISIS inspired Islamists to take up the “jihad in place.”

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As the Mideast and its environs burned, we claimed to no longer be the world’s fire department, so no one accused us of committing war atrocities (except for occasional drone strikes in Afghanistan). But that didn’t stop the humanitarian disaster. So yes, if America gets more involved, there will be casualties. Any number of civilian deaths is too many, but there will almost certainly be fewer if the United States belatedly takes the wheel.

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**‘WE WERE NEVER BROTHERS’:
IRAQ’S DIVISIONS MAY BE IRRECONCILABLE**

Aziz Ahmad

[Wall Street Journal](#), Mar. 26, 2017

‘I swear by God we are not brothers,’ the Sunni Arab sheik shouted from the audience in response to a conservative Shiite lawmaker’s plea for brotherhood. The occasion was a conference last summer at the American University of Kurdistan, in Duhok. It was the two men’s first encounter since the fall of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, to Islamic State in June 2014.

Conference organizers had hoped for reconciliation, but there was little sign of it. “We were never brothers,” the sheik said. “We’ve always been afraid of each other.” His candor drew nods from the Sunni men seated in front rows. The speakers and audience members condemned one another as failures and exchanged blame for the army’s flight, for embracing Islamic State, and for perpetrating massacres.

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Sectarian distrust—a problem that has plagued Iraq for much of its modern history and has been amplified since Saddam Hussein’s fall in 2003—was laid bare that day. A country that should have been brought together under the adversity of Islamic State’s rampage seemed to be further apart than ever, with divisions extending far beyond Mosul.

Almost a year later, a fragile coalition of Kurdish, Arab and American forces is slowly advancing in Islamic State’s primary stronghold in Mosul. But retaking the city will not unify Iraq. The current Shiite-led political discourse in Baghdad is synonymous with the denial of rights to minorities, including Kurds. Conversely, in Mosul a Sunni Arab majority marginalizes minorities, who in turn accuse Sunnis of supporting ISIS.

Sinjar, west of Mosul, is a case in point. When I visited last year I saw no sign of peaceful coexistence. The local security chief, a Yazidi, told me that Sunni Arabs from his village, Kojo, had joined ISIS’s brutal terror against the Yazidis, a religious minority. Men from the al-Metuta tribe helped kill “hundreds,” he said, including 68 members of his own family. “Of course I remember them,” he said. “Those Arab men had a hand in the honor of our women. It’s not possible to live together again.”

In meetings with Iraqi officials and community leaders, I’ve seen how Islamic State’s campaign has aggravated animosity across tribal, ethnic and religious lines. Without a political track to address tensions between Sunnis and Shiites or Kurds and Arabs, the day-after scenario remains perilous. Addressing the problems begins by restoring trust. For Mosul, Baghdad is already on the wrong foot. The offensive against ISIS includes a coalition of Shiite militias, despite strong protests from Mosul’s predominantly Sunni provincial council. The new formula must tackle minorities’ fears of marginalization by granting local autonomy, including to Christians persecuted by ISIS militants, and by implementing laws already in place to give Sunnis a stake and isolate extremists.

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We Kurds can help. We make up a third of the province’s population. For over a year, our Peshmerga fighters were poised for an assault on Mosul, but our persistent calls for a political agreement were ignored. An agreement during the military campaign is still necessary to prevent intercommunal conflict. Such an agreement should outline a path toward governance and offer more than a Shiite-centric alternative. In parallel, there must be an effort to demobilize Shiite militias formed in the aftermath of the war by engaging the Iraqi Shiite spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, for a religious decree. It should also call for the groups’ withdrawal from areas liberated by the Peshmerga.

Baghdad should not impose solutions. It should instead lead talks with Turkey and Iran to defuse regional tensions that intersect in Mosul. Iraq’s problem with Turkey can be solved by ending Baghdad’s payments to the anti-Ankara Kurdistan Workers’ Party, known as PKK, in Sinjar and demanding the group’s withdrawal, in line with calls from local officials and the provincial council.

More broadly, once the fight is over, there needs to be a political reckoning by Kurds and Arabs about how the Iraqi state can go forward. It’s too late to salvage the post-2003 project; the country has segregated itself into armed enclaves. The Kurdish people suffered a litany of abuses, including genocide, under successive Sunni regimes. More recently, despite a shared history, the Shiite-led government reneged on promises for partnership and revenue sharing. It suspended Kurdistan’s budget and prevents us still from buying weapons. Given that experience, Kurdish loyalty to an Iraqi identity remains nonexistent.

For us, complete separation is the only alternative. Our pursuit of independence is about charting a better course from Iraq’s conceptual failure. The path forward should begin from a simple truth: Iraq has already fallen apart, and the country will be better off realigned on the parties’ own terms. A central goal for the U.S. should be to empower the Kurdistan Region. We are a stable, longstanding U.S. ally amid a sea of unrest. We’ve proved to be a valuable partner in the war on terrorism and

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share common values and a commitment to democracy. The advance on Mosul represents the turn of a chapter that transcends Iraq’s three-year war. It represents a moment of reckoning and an opportunity to consolidate the Kurdistan Region on terms that will de-escalate conflict and safeguard its peoples.

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WHO WILL DOMINATE THE POST-ISLAMIC STATE

LANDSCAPE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA?

Jonathan Spyer

[Jerusalem Post](#), Mar. 18, 2017

On the surface, the wars in Syria and Iraq are continuing at full intensity. The fight between Iraqi government forces and Islamic State in western Mosul is proving a slow, hard slog. This week, government forces captured the police directorate and the courts complex in the city, moving toward the denser warren of the Old City. The jihadists are fighting for every inch of ground.

Further west, the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) succeeded in cutting the last road from the Islamic State capital of Raqqa to its stronghold in Deir al-Zor. In the fight between the Assad regime and the Sunni Arab rebellion against it, a rebel attempt at a counterattack in the city of Deraa has led to renewed bloodshed. The regime is continuing its attacks on rebel-held Eastern Ghouta east of Damascus, despite a new Russian-brokered cease-fire.

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But while the tactical contests are continuing, the general direction of events in both the war against Islamic State and the fight between Assad and the rebels is now clear. Islamic State is on its way to ceasing to exist as an entity controlling significant territory. This process is set to continue many months. But having lost tens of thousands of fighters and with the flow of recruits drying up, facing enemies with complete control of the skies and vast superiority in numbers and equipment, Islamic State has no means of reversing the trend.

In Assad's war further west, meanwhile, the rebellion is in retreat, and its eventual eclipse seems a near certainty. The regime, with its Iranian, Russian and Hezbollah allies, is seeking to reduce and destroy isolated rebel-held enclaves in the midst of regime-held territory in western Syria. Hence the attacks on Eastern Ghouta and on al-Wa'er in the Homs area. Once this is done, the pro-regime forces may well turn their attention to southwest Syria and eventually also to rebel-held Idlib province in the north. The regime is also now engaging in the war against Islamic State. Government forces reached the Euphrates River this week, after sweeping through Islamic State-held territory in the east Aleppo countryside.

As the direction of events becomes clear, so the possibility emerges of the Iran-led alliance achieving an overall victory in the Syria and Iraq wars. Such a victory would, on the face of it, constitute an achievement for Assad. But the Syrian dictator's own forces are entirely dependent for advances on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militia forces and paramilitary formations created by the Iranians to address the regime's manpower shortages over the last five years. That is, the real power behind such a victory would be Iran-arranged forces on the ground. These, in turn, are capable of moving forward only in cooperation with Russian air power, as events in Aleppo and the northwest have shown. Such an outcome is still distant and by no means certain. But it is no longer an impossibility, and Israeli and US planners will be noting its feasibility, and seeking ways to prevent it or reduce its impact.

What would such a victory look like? It would include the following elements. First, the Assad regime would succeed in terminating or severely reducing the remaining

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areas held by the Sunni Arab rebels and Islamists in the western part of the country. Second, following the destruction of Islamic State-held areas in eastern Syria, regime forces supported by Russian air power would succeed in heading eastward, challenging or co-opting Kurdish and remaining rebel forces in the area, and reaching the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Third, following the reduction or destruction of Islamic State in Nineveh province, the Iraqi Shi'a militias organized in the framework of the Popular Mobilization Units would remain under arms, becoming a permanent feature of the Iraqi political and military landscape. The Iraqi parliament in late November passed a law making the PMU a permanent part of the Iraqi security forces. The 100,000 fighters of the PMU do not consist solely of pro-Iranian elements. But the main militias and de facto command structures are in the hands of pro-Iranian forces. Most significantly, the Badr Corps of Hadi al-Ameri and the Kata'ib Hezbollah group of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis are directly linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

The militias are now located west of Mosul city, close to the town of Tel Afar. If regime forces push eastward, they will link at the border with their comrades of the PMU, creating a massive contiguous area of de facto Iran-controlled territory all the way from deep inside Iraq across Syria and into Lebanon. That is what victory for the Iran-allied side in the wars in Syria and Iraq would look like. How might it be prevented?

Advances for the Iranian side are possible only with the support of Russian air power. And Russian goals in Syria (Iraq is less significant for Moscow) do not necessarily dovetail with Tehran's. Iran wants total victory, the reunification of Syria under Assad's nominal control, and the emergence of the Iran-led Shi'a militias as the key power-holders in Iraq. Moscow had and has far more limited goals. The Russians in Syria wanted to prevent Assad's defeat, secure their naval assets on the Mediterranean and make themselves the main broker in the subsequent frozen or semi-frozen conflict.

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There is a large gap between these two agendas, and working on and widening it should be foremost in the minds of both Western and Israeli policy-makers. The Russians need to understand that while their own perceived vital interests in Syria can be accommodated, the far more ambitious Iranian agenda in the area crosses Western and Israeli redlines, and therefore will not be allowed to achieve its goals. Without the Russians, Western and Israeli efforts to contain and turn back the Iranians can proceed apace.

This can be achieved through a combination of diplomatic efforts and facts on the ground. Regarding the former, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on his visit to Russia, will presumably be making clear to Russian President Vladimir Putin that Israel’s security redlines regarding an Iranian and Hezbollah creation of a new conflict line east of Quneitra crossing, and regarding the need to prevent permanent Iranian bases in western Syria, are serious, will be pursued, and can be achieved with no threat to Russian vital interests...

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Hundreds of women and children were killed in west Mosul last week.**

[Iraq: What Should America Do Next?: Elliot Friedland, Clarion Project, Mar. 20, 2017—](#)“We are in the last chapter, the final stages to eliminate ISIS militarily in Iraq,” Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said in a video message before leaving to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump. As the fight against ISIS wraps up, what should America do next?

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[Support Our Kurdish Allies in the Middle East: Seth J. Frantzman, *National Review*, Mar. 9, 2017](#)—For two years U.S. forces have been working closely with Kurds in the war against the Islamic State. This cooperation began in northern Iraq with the peshmerga, the armed forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, and has been extended to include Americans fighting alongside the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria.

[Kurdish Factions Turn Guns on Each Other in Yazidi Homeland: John Rossomando, *IPT*, Mar. 8, 2017](#)—Yazidis living in Iraq's Sinjar region are on edge in the wake of fighting last week between rival Kurdish factions. Some Yazidis joined in the fighting against Peshmerga belonging to Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

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