As the U.S.-backed forces in Iraq move to reclaim west Mosul, the Islamic State’s (IS) final territorial stronghold in Iraq, U.S. policymakers are certain that the group will be eradicated, but are uncertain as to what will follow. As retired U.S. Army General David Petraeus notes:

There is no question that the Islamic State will be defeated in Mosul; the real question is what comes afterward. Can the post-Islamic State effort resolve the squabbling likely to arise over numerous issues and bring lasting stability to one of Iraq’s most diverse and challenging provinces? Failure to do so could lead to ISIS 3.0.[1]

Accordingly, the Islamic State has executed a string of attacks in Baghdad, including January bombings in the Shiite neighborhood of Sadr City and other parts of Baghdad that killed over fifty-six Iraqis. IS also retains operational units in liberated areas of Anbar province and, in November of last year, used a car bomb to kill seventeen Iraqis attending a wedding in Amiriyah, Al-Fallujah and exploded two car bombs near a government building, killing nine. [2] In Diyala, which is dominated by more extremist Shiite militias, such as the Badr Organization, IS has resurfaced.
using guerrilla style tactics. More recently, attacks have taken place in Ramadi, Tikrit, Samarra, Kirkuk, Najaf, and elsewhere. While many IS attacks may be attempts to divert resources from the campaign to retake Mosul and create political turmoil in Baghdad, they also demonstrate the potential for a residual insurgent movement. As stated by Iraqi parliament Speaker Salim al-Jabouri, the Islamic State “will not follow the same tactic once defeated in Mosul and will seek to reinvent itself to produce a new generation of terrorists with the ability to cope with the post-defeat phase and meet the resulting challenges.”[3]

Other groups could also rise after the liberation of Mosul. Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN), for example, is a less ideologically extreme Iraqi insurgent group that was formed in 2006 to challenge the U.S. occupation and thereafter opposed the Nouri al-Maliki government and Iranian influence in Iraq. JRTN allied itself with the Islamic State until disagreements and conflicts between the two groups forced JRTN into hiding in 2015. If the Islamic State is weakened, defeated, or no longer controls territory in Iraq, JRTN and other similar groups may emerge as a less extreme resistance to perceived Shiite and Iranian aggression.[4] At the same time, the proliferation of Iranian-backed militia groups and the presence of Turkish troops and Sunni militias in Iraq could foment intra- and inter-sectarian fighting or even regional Sunni-Shia proxy conflicts.

Post-conflict destabilization redux

As is currently the case in Iraq, post-conflict stabilization can pose a greater challenge than the main conflict.[5] The United States and NATO, for example, expelled the Taliban in Afghanistan in less than a year, only to face an extended counterinsurgency and state-building endeavor that marks the longest war in U.S. history. Similarly, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq overthrew Saddam Hussein in a period of months, but precipitated an arduous counterinsurgency and state-building project that lasted almost a decade. In Libya, NATO air support enabled rebels to successfully remove Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, but left the country in disarray. Hence, as forces armed by the United States and the wider Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (Coalition) defeat the Islamic State as a territorial insurgency in Iraq, it is critical to understand what causes this “destabilization redux” and what strategic measures might generate stability.

A couple of factors help to explain the specter of post-conflict destabilization in modern warfare. First, as expounded upon by many theorists, the overall capabilities of insurgencies have been growing through advancing methods (in part through technology) and increasing integration into transnational networks. Transnational insurgent networks can involve outside states, non-state actors, and criminal organizations that expand the resources and scope of insurgent groups and intensify the threat of internal armed conflicts or internationalized internal armed conflicts. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, al-Qaeda in Iraq generated funds through outside actors and international criminal networks and quantities of foreign fighters from regional states, while Shiite militias, although engaged in less prolific networks, received support from Iran. [6] More recently, the Islamic State has benefited from regional and international streams of fighters and illicit funds, and subsequent insurgencies in Iraq will likely utilize transnational networks and could even again involve al-Qaeda.
A second and less discussed cause of post-conflict stabilization is that outside states are increasingly “delegating,” or “outsourcing,” combat to local groups. Tactics of outsourcing seek to reduce the costs, risk, and casualties incurred by an outside state or states, while also benefiting from the knowledge and legitimacy of local groups.[7] In what Jeffery Record refers to as the “new American way of warfare,” foreign interventions by larger states often outsource ground operations to local surrogates while providing air power, training, intelligence, and other support, and may even contribute troops.[8] In Afghanistan, for example, Operation Enduring Freedom partnered with a loose affiliation of warlords, or the Northern Alliance, and the 2011 NATO-led coalition provided air support to rebel forces in the Libyan civil war. Similarly, the current Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq allies with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Kurdish forces, and other groups on the ground to liberate areas from the Islamic State.

One of the drawbacks of outsourcing is that it forfeits some portion of control to local groups whose skills and interests may not align with those of the outside actors. As a result, outside states generally must apply influence over local actors or concede certain objectives. Additionally, outsourcing to local surrogates will likely empower those same groups after the conflict. During the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the warlords of the Northern Alliance that helped overthrow the Taliban were later instituted into the government and nation-building project that followed. Although certain local actors may be effective in defeating a common enemy, they may be incapable or inimical regarding the task of stabilization. At the same time, the leverage gained from exogenous military support often diminishes after the critical conflict phase. Hence, as Record noted in 2002, “our new way of warfare may be of limited value in situations requiring the conquest, occupation, and administration of territory.”[9]

As such, conflicts that outsource to local actors in unstable terrain must design strategies that incorporate the short-term objectives of the initial conflict (e.g. liberation from the Islamic State) with long-term goals (e.g. inclusive governance and security). First, outside states should attempt to identify and support local surrogates and political actors that have similar interests (or that can be influenced during and after the initial conflict). Developing such a force may increase the required costs and risks to an outside state or states before and during the initial conflict, but can raise the likelihood of a successful stabilization agenda. Second, a post-conflict plan for governance and security is best established prior to the conflict and made a condition of exogenous support. Such planning helps to abate post-conflict power competitions (as was the case after the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya) and also lays the groundwork for reprisals if some actors attempt to renege. Finally, the formulation of a pre-established framework for post-conflict security and (if necessary) reconstruction can calm domestic strife and extend the influence of outside states into the post-conflict theater.

In Iraq, the U.S. strategy remains centered on the short-term and narrow objective of defeating the Islamic State as
a territorial insurgency but does not sufficiently address long-term goals of post-conflict stabilization. In particular, policymakers have not leveraged their external support in Iraq to enforce the development of a stable security force, promote essential political inclusion and reforms, or establish sufficient post-IS stabilization and reconstruction plans. As a result, there is a heightened risk that a successful territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq will be followed by fighting between armed groups and a potential guerrilla insurgency.

**Local partners in Iraq**

> We don't want Sunni tribes armed, Shiites armed, because the second day after liberation you will see inter-Sunni fight, inter-Shiite fight, Sunni-Shiite fight, everyone will be fighting each other. You have to institutionalize and this is the job of the government who refused to listen to us (former deputy prime minister and former finance minister of Iraq Rafe al-Essawi, 2016).[10]

There are currently several groups engaged in the fight against the Islamic State. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and some Kurdish forces have been trained and equipped over the past decade; currently, these groups benefit from U.S. and Coalition support in the form of expertise, training, weapons, air power (including manned and unmanned aerial vehicles and precision strikes), and large-scale “fusion of intelligence.”[11] Shiite-dominated Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) militias (*Hashd al-Shaabi*), which were originally used primarily as holding forces for liberated areas, have since directly challenged the Islamic State, recaptured Tal Afar airport and villages from IS control, have extended their forces west of Mosul into Syria, and coordinate with Peshmerga forces outside of Mosul. Turkish troops are also stationed in Bashiqa camp north of Mosul (under protest from the Iraqi government) and reclaimed Bashiqa from the Islamic State with U.S. and Coalition air support. A small number of Sunni militia groups also exist, such as the Nineveh Guards, which was recently incorporated into the PMF and are participating in the liberation of Mosul.

This multiplex of forces is cooperating reasonably well in the fight against the Islamic State, but lacks the necessary structure to avoid post-conflict volatility. First, while Shiite groups are well represented within Iraqi Security Forces and the Popular Mobilization Front, and Kurds retain local security as a semi-independent region, Sunnis are vulnerable to outside groups. In the case of Iraqi Security Forces, the once more inclusive security apparatus has been transformed into a more sectarian force since the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011. Former Iraqi Prime
Minister Nouri al-Maliki replaced competent leaders with political cronies, marginalized the Sons of Iraq (Al-Sahwa or Awakening Councils), which consisted of groups of Sunni fighters that had fought and nearly defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq, and used the ISF as a sectarian instrument against Sunnis. In Mosul, for example, Michael Knights explains:

> From the outset of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term, 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.[12]

As such, Iraqi Security Forces are suspect to many non-Shiite groups in the wake of post-IS devastation. Kurdish forces offer an alternative to ISF for post-IS security, but are also viewed by some Sunnis as occupiers. In certain cases, Kurdish forces that hold liberated Sunni areas have been reported by Human Rights Watch to engage in some human rights violations and Kurdish favoritism and have refused to allow some displaced persons to return to liberated areas if they belong to tribes that have cooperated with IS.[13]

While U.S. congressional support for training and advising in Iraq requires the development of Sunni participants, Iraqi Security Forces and the Shiite-led government have been leery of Sunni fighters. Instead, the Iraqi government augments its strength through the predominately Shiite militias of the Popular Mobilization Front. Following a call to arms in 2014 by Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the PMF multiplied to approximately 110,000 fighters by the end of 2016, of which only about 8% are Sunni. The failure to develop moderate Sunni forces within Iraqi security institutions escalates concerns for Sunnis in (or returning to) liberated areas and could engender sectarian clashes and renewed insurgencies under the banner of Sunni resistance. Sunni groups, which were involved in the liberation of Ramadi and Fallujah, are also needed for legitimate post-IS security as well as critical counterinsurgency operations.

Popular Mobilization Front militias differ: less extreme groups, such as the Imam Ali Brigade, Ali al-Akbar Brigade, and Abbas Division lean more towards Iraqi nationalism; others, such as Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Organization are loyal to Iran and in some cases directed by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the more extreme groups are accused of extreme human rights violations. Recently, the Iraqi government has fully legalized the PMF state-sanctioned militia groups (including those engaged in war crimes) as an official, but separate, wing of Iraqi Security Forces, which has paved a path for Sunni groups, such as the Nineveh Guards. In January 2017, the deputy commander of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, also confirmed that the Iranian-backed militant Shiite group, Lebanese Hezbollah, was in Iraq with the consent of the Iraqi government. These partially independent groups lack the structure of a fully institutionalized National Guard and could devolve into post-IS power competitions and acts of retribution between and also within sects. Local Sunni groups, for example, have a history of disagreements that may be further polarized by recent tribal cooperation or resistance to the Islamic State, and there are divergent loyalties within the expansive Popular Mobilization Front militias.

Furthermore, the integration of Iranian-supported PMF units and, to a lesser extent, Turkish-backed Sunni militias, misaligns Iraqi security with those of outside states. Although PMF groups are officially under the authority of Iraq, National Security Advisor Faleh al-Fayad’s relationship with PMF leaders is more that of coordination.[14] Similarly, the Nineveh Guards are trained and supported by Turkey and headed by former Nineveh governor Atheel al-Nujaifi, who has an arrest warrant from Baghdad for collaboration with Turkey and the facilitation of Turkish troops in Iraq. These outside state ties threaten to advance Iran’s influence in Iraq, engender fears that Iraq is becoming an Iranian client state, interpose Turkish interests in Iraqi security, and could even cultivate Sunni-Shiite proxy conflicts.

**Iraqi political progress**
We do not have the ability to simply solve this problem by sending in tens of thousands of troops and committing the kinds of blood and treasure that has already been expended in Iraq. Ultimately this is something that is going to have to be solved by the Iraqis (President Barak Obama, 2014).[15]

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq can be largely attributed to divisive politics, which, if unaddressed, could again incubate violence and instability. The degeneration of Iraqi politics began after the Iraqi 2010 national election rendered a narrow victory for Iraqiyya, a moderate Sunni and Shiite alliance, over Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition. The election was followed by a nine-month negotiation in which Maliki, supported by Iran, maintained power while attempting to form a government, and eventually agreed to a power-sharing arrangement under the Erbil agreement and retained his position as prime minister. Maliki later reneged on the power-sharing accords and instead centralized control of Iraqi institutions, engaged in sectarian abuses against Sunnis, and forced key Sunni leaders into exile.[16]

Prime Minister Maliki was succeeded by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in 2014 with the political support of Iran and the United States. The shift marked a point of significant improvement that was viewed by the U.S. administration as a sufficient sign of political progress to initiate Operation Inherent Resolve. As such, the U.S. administration has taken a position of limited involvement in Iraqi politics and the promotion of political inclusion and reforms.

Abadi’s premiership initially appeared promising. Following a humiliating defeat in Saqlawiya, Anbar in 2014, in which the Islamic State surrounded Iraqi Security Forces, Abadi removed two Maliki loyalists, General Abboud Qanbar and General Ali Ghaidan, that were culpable of using ISF as a sectarian instrument. Later, the prime minister abolished the Office of Commander-in-Chief, an office instated by Maliki to centralize his power over the military. Additionally, after demonstrators protested a lack of basic services and excesses of corruption in 2015, Abadi pursued several reforms. For example, he moved to abolish the offices of three vice president posts, including that of former Prime Minister Maliki; institute anti-corruption initiatives, such as curtailing payments to ISF members that were not performing service; and replace Iraqi politically-aligned ministers with technocrats. He also supported the development of a National Guard law to enable groups similar to the former Sons of Iraq that fought against the Islamic State’s predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Many of Abadi’s reforms, however, have not succeeded and have instead been used by adversaries to undermine his power and counteract political reconciliation. In November 2015, the parliament voted to restrict Abadi’s powers to enact reforms. A year later the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq overturned his attempt to eliminate the vice presidential posts. In May 2016, Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Sadrist Movement and the Saraya al-Salam militia, organized a protest following a failed attempt by the Council of Representatives to replace ministers from political parties with technocrats. Sadr’s supporters overran the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq’s political center, and entered the parliament building. Additionally, former Prime Minister Maliki organized the Reform Front: a political block of about one hundred representatives. The group led the Council of Representatives to impeach Abadi’s Sunni Defence Minister and key supporter, Khaled al-Obeidi, over corruption allegations, and later to withdraw confidence from Abadi’s Finance Minister, Hoshyar Zebari.

As Abadi’s power weakens, there is an increasing risk of a “no confidence” vote in the Council of Representatives, which threatens to empower, and possibly reinstate, a resurging Nouri al-Maliki. Abadi’s National Guard law has also been eclipsed by the formal integration of Shiite and even Iranian-backed PMF militias, which arouse Sunni fears of a repeat of former political marginalization and sectarian security. There are also concerns over expanding influence from Iran, which has interfered in the past three elections and may be consolidating its political support in Iraq in anticipation of post-IS power competitions.[17]

Iraqi political discord is also parlous to stability the day after Mosul’s liberation. Iraq’s leaders have not finalized a definitive framework for security, governance, and decentralization after the Islamic State. For example, Shiite leaders in Baghdad prefer to retain Nineveh, the home of Mosul, as a province and delegate greater local control;
the President of the Kurdistan region in Iraq, Massoud Barzani, has proposed partitioning Nineveh into three separate provinces that may independently choose to align with Baghdad or the Kurdish region; and Atheel Nujaifi, the former governor of Nineveh and leader of the Nineveh Guards, supports the creation of a separate region for Nineveh. Additionally, Kurdish forces have reclaimed and hold disputed territories in Iraq while, at the same time, some Kurdish leaders call for independence.

Post-Islamic State planning

Since August, more than 200 United Nations programs have ceased operations in Iraq because of funding shortfalls in the 2016 U.N. Humanitarian Response Plan. The cost of humanitarian operations in Iraq in 2017 will climb still higher, reflecting the potential for a rise in the number of Iraq’s internally-displaced population as a result of the intensified conflict (Office of the Spokesperson for the Small Group of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, 2016).[18]

Iraq’s devastated post-IS territories, destroyed infrastructure, and lack of essential services threaten to breed animosity and violence. As much as 80% of Ramadi was in ruins when liberated in 2015, and some estimates for its reconstruction are as high as $10 billion. The deputy governor of Anbar province, which contains both Ramadi and Fallujah, predicts that $22 billion will be required for reconstruction. The costs for Mosul are uncertain, but some estimates are in the tens of billions of dollars. The number of internally displaced Iraqis also rose to over three million in January 2017, representing escalating humanitarian costs, and in 2016, the United Nations estimated that over $100 million would be needed for demining over the course of one year. At the same time, civil war and declining oil prices have left Iraq with an estimated deficit close to $20 billion for 2017.[19]

Although stabilization and reconstruction costs are expected to be daunting, the U.S. administration’s nine lines of effort under its Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) does not include post-conflict stabilization.[20] The existing international efforts to provide stabilization include a group of over twenty nations under the Coalition Working Group on Stabilization (CWGS) within the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. The CWGS primarily raises funds for two autonomous U.N. Development Program (UNDP) stabilization channels: 1) the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization (FFIS) to address the immediate post-liberation needs of populations; and, 2) the Funding Facility for Expanded Stabilization (FFES), which will attempt to restore Iraqi institutions and infrastructure. Thus far, the international community has pledged over $2.3 billion to Iraq, the majority of which was
allocated to immediate stabilization and demining; however, significantly more resources will be required to meet the needs of displaced Iraqis and returnees that lack basic infrastructure and essential services.

**Conclusion**

Modern tactics of foreign intervention are increasingly outsourcing ground operations to local partners while, in many cases, there is often an increased threat of internal uprisings and transnational insurgent movements. As such, many U.S.-led conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, have succeeded in the main conflict, but were followed by post-conflict destabilization. Hence, changing tactics and circumstances require new approaches to foster long-term stability. These strategies should design the conflict and post-conflict phases in tandem to formulate a coordinated long-term strategy and employ methods to extend outside state(s) influence and succor beyond the initial conflict phase. In Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition should address three main areas.

First, military and economic support should be conditioned on the establishment of a cohesive and multi-sectarian force, the development of an institutionalized National Guard that incorporates Sunni forces, and illegalization of unauthorized or independent militia groups. The United States should also establish a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to extend Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). The extension of forces will temper concerns of post-IS sectarian strife, allow a multinational force to promote stability by training and advising Iraqi forces, and further extend the Coalition’s influence in the critical post-conflict stabilization period.

Second, as Congressman Seth Moulton, a veteran of *Operation Enduring Freedom* in Iraq, stated at the U.S. Institute for Peace: “Iraq is dependent on American weapons to fight ISIS, and that leverage should be used to demand political reform as a stepping-stone to long-term stability.”[21] Political influence could include strengthening the current government; supporting critical political and institutional reforms; promoting the reintegration of Sunnis into Iraq’s political system (pressure could even be applied to the goal of reinstating exiled leaders); and resisting and counterbalancing Iranian influence in Iraq.

Finally, the United States should include post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction in its lines of efforts. Through this mechanism, the U.S. and its Coalition partners should work with the government of Iraq to resolve issues of decentralization, governance, security, and territorial control and establish a comprehensive economic and reconstruction plan. Furthermore, U.S. and Coalition partner funds for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction would be best implemented by the U.S.-led Coalition and not channeled separately through an autonomous international body; this will enable the United States and its partners to build upon leverage already gained through military support and extend its influence into the post-conflict stage.

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[5] The post-conflict stage here refers to the period after the initial or main conflict, but often involves counterinsurgency operations and armed conflict.


