



Yehia Al-Kubaisi: The future of Iraq after ISIS

Yehia Al-Kubaisi, consultant for the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies based in Amman, gave a seminar on the future of Iraq after the defeat of the so-called Islamic State (Daech), which took place at the European University Institute on 17 November. As the IS-held city of Mosul is being besieged by the Iraqi army, Y. Al-Kubaisi emphasised the dichotomy between ISIS as a military organisation and ISIS as a conceptual framework. The defeat of ISIS will not mark the end of jihadism in Iraq, he argues, it will merely drive it back to an underground anonymity.

“We have lost Al-Anbar to Al Qaida” David Petraeus, Head of the Multi-National Security Transition Command, declared in January 2007 in front of the United States Congress. Nine months later, Petraeus made the opposite statement, assuring that Al-Qaida (AQ) had been completely eradicated from the governorate of Al-Anbar. How do we explain this change in such a short-time? What does it tell us about the US strategy in Iraq and most importantly, about the relationship between the local population and jihadi groups?

AQ and ISIS’ successive implantation in Iraq cannot be understood as a mere ideological phenomenon. The social support that Abu Musab Az-Zarqawi, and after him Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, have been able to gather did not stem solely from ideological affinities with panislamic and salafi-jihadi ideas, but mostly from political grievances against the US-backed central government. Seen through the lenses of the US-military concept of Iraq, AQ and ISIS appear as homogenous communities of militants sharing a common ideology. Iraq, however, is not a mere battlefield: the security situation conceals political and sectarian issues that need to be unraveled.

The appearance and consolidation of ISIS in Iraq was strongly tied to its ability to herald the Sunni resentment against the US-backed and Shi’a-controlled central government. Around ISIS’ ideological core, composed of educated salafi-jihadi with previous military experiences (Afghanistan), there were layers of opportunist militants “*using the organisation as a tool for their personal problems*”, Y. Al-Kubaisi says. Five concentric circles can thus be identified, from the core to the outer circle: an endured jihadi leadership; ex-Baathist officials or soldiers; foreign fighters with weak religious and ideological knowledge; a group of Iraqis who joined Al-Qa’ida after the US intervention

in 2003; and finally a group of anti-American Iraqis disconnected from the ideological narrative of the organisation.

Al-Kubaisi's extensive fieldwork shows that Iraqi salafi-jihadi leaders were not able to federate a genuine movement until the US intervention in 2003. The arbitrary bombings of Iraq by the USA, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the subsequent De-baathification of the state, which led to the empowerment of the hitherto marginalized Shi'a, triggered anti-American and anti-Shi'a resentment amongst the Sunnis. This facilitated the appearance of jihadi groups in the country, such as *Jaysh al-Mujahidin* who took root precisely in Al-Anbar in 2003.

The appropriation of the state by the Shi'a and the political marginalisation of the Sunni substantiated a "*winners – losers narrative*" from which ISIS has been capitalising to attract support. The issue of Sunni representation in Baghdad thus lies at the heart of ISIS' "success" among Iraqi Sunnis. Hence "*the re-capture of Mosul will not be the end of Daesh*" because the "*Sunni problem*" would still have to be solved. The threefold American strategy – civilians returning to their homes; reconstruction; maintaining security – therefore lacks a political element, which takes Sunnis' grievances into consideration .

In that sense, ISIS' territorial expansion cannot be explained without taking into account the interplay between local communities, the central government and Daesh as an "*umbrella organisation*" for individual and sectarian grievances. The military approach is inadequate to understand why ISIS managed to capture Tikrit overnight using only car-light flashing signals or Mosul with only few hundreds combatants, although both cities were held by tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers. The local population's defiance vis-à-vis the Shi'a-dominated army and government remains a central factor to explain ISIS's swift progression in Iraq. "*Daesh does not represent the interests of the local people, but nor does the central government*", Y. Al-Kubaisi concludes.

Today, even if it has gained offensive momentum, the Iraqi army remains unable to pursue IS militants in the countryside. As Tikrit and Falluja's cases show, the re-capture of Mosul is likely to be a mere expulsion of Daesh from the city to the desert. The recurrent use of civilians by ISIS to cover its escape, as well as Iraqi security forces' lack of human-financial resources and discipline, will allow the organisation to withdraw safely from the city and reappear somewhere else.

Yet, the probable expulsion of ISIS from Iraq after Mosul's battle will have tremendous territorial consequences. Ethnic and sectarian groups have already expressed claims over Western Iraqi territories: Kurds plan to extend the KRG on an Erbil-Sinjar axis,

while the Shi'a intend to annex large sections of the Nineveh governorate. According to Y. Al-Kubaisi, only "27% of Niniveh will remain" after this territorial re-shaping. In addition, Athil Al-Nujaifi's (head of *Al-Hachd al-Watani*, the National Mobilization Movement) demands for an autonomous Sunni region further endangers the territorial integrity of Iraq.

Whether regional and international actors will be able to acknowledge these sectarian and political grievances will prove critical in answering the post-ISIS challenges in Iraq. The overarching number of ISIS militants joining the organisation for opportunist rationales demonstrates the limits of the military approach. Jihadi groups' success so far stems primarily from their ability to exploit personal and sectarian grievances for the advancement of their own ideological project. In that way, the place of Sunnis into the system of political representation and of socio-economic resources distribution constitutes Iraq's main challenge in the post-ISIS era.