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Iraq on the Day after the Liberation of Mosul

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After eight months of fighting by US-backed Iraqi forces, the Iraqi Prime Minister announced the conquest of the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, and proclaimed it a milestone signaling the imminent liberation of Mosul from the Islamic State and an end to the caliphate. However, these declarations do not mean the military campaign to eradicate the Islamic State is over. On the contrary, Iraqi security forces will continue their military efforts to cleanse other strongholds held by the organization inside Iraqi territory. For its part, the Islamic State can be expected to continue carrying out terrorist attacks against public and civilian targets around the country.

Like the external forces operating in the country – the United States, Iran, and Turkey – none of the internal actors in Iraq regard success in Mosul as the final word in the campaign or a moment for pause. They see the day after the liberation of Mosul as a critical time to consolidate their gains and strengthen their hold in Iraq. Furthermore, the security, economic, and political challenges that Iraq has faced in the past persist and will continue to intensify in the years to come, making it extremely difficult to establish stability within the country.

The array of internal Iraqi political forces, characterized by deep divisions within and between the different camps, has hardly changed in recent years, nor has the dead end on the path toward consensus and national reconciliation. Prominent in this context is the traditional rivalry between the Shiite blocs, which is made most evident by the competition for influence over the ruling Islamic Dawa Party between former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who continues to operate behind the scenes, and current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Standing in opposition to these figures are Shiite leaders Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and Muqtada al-Sadr, whose populist movement also attracts many Iraqi Shiites. Meanwhile, splits within the Kurdistan Regional Government, rising Kurdish nationalism, and the plan to hold a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan (scheduled for September 25, 2017) are exacerbating tensions between the Kurds and the central government in Baghdad. The

Sunni camp, which plays a marginal role in the political process in Iraq, has likewise experienced further division. Sunnis also perceive greater discrimination against them, so the Islamic State may have fertile ground to reconsolidate its power among this sector.

Iraq's municipal elections, scheduled for late 2017 unless postponed, and parliamentary elections, scheduled for the spring of 2018, have sharpened these power struggles, and the Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions represented in the parliament have only demonstrated a half-hearted willingness to formulate a plan for national reconciliation. While this has strengthened the position of the Shiites in Baghdad, it has also aroused the same anti-Shiite feeling that prompted the rise of the Islamic State. The major disagreements between Nuri al-Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr, who is threatening to boycott the upcoming elections if reforms are not made to the electoral system, may spark tensions and confrontations between the hard-line pro-Iranian Shiites and those wishing to promote a new Iraqi consensus that is not dependent on Iran.

Amidst this internal strife, the major external actors influencing Iraq – Iran, the United States and Turkey – also play an important role. Iran, which regards Iraq as its own backyard, continues to constitute the most influential foreign power in the country. Iraq's fundamental instability and Shiite dominance have enabled Iran to solidify its hegemony in large parts of Iraq and focus its effort to create a contiguous land route between Tehran and Beirut. Reports that forces loyal to Iran have occupied strongholds along the Syria-Iraq border, the recent appointment of the former general of the Revolutionary Guards as Iran's ambassador to Iraq, and news of the frequent presence of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq over the past few months indicate Tehran's ascendancy in the country. All Shiite elements maintain close ties with Iran and the pro-Iranian militias, except for al-Sadr, who has voiced his opposition to Iran's influence.

The Trump administration, continuing the US campaign against the Islamic State initiated by the Obama administration, has made defeating the organization its top priority in the Middle East. At the same time, the administration is interested in taking action to counterbalance mounting Iranian influence, and it accordingly has authorized greater military involvement in Iraq and the deployment of additional forces, including army and special forces personnel. Turkish involvement in northern Iraq also imposes significant external pressure on the country. Turkey's streaming of additional forces to the region as part of its fight against the PKK in the Qandil and Sinjar mountains and in defense of ethnic Turkmen, primarily in the Tal Afar region, has been severely criticized by the Iraqi government.

This complex reality of power relations in Iraq essentially maintains shared interests of both the United States and Iran: preserving Iraq's unity and preventing the Islamic State and other Sunni extremist groups from operating within Iraqi territory. Despite voices in Washington calling on the administration not to oppose the Kurdish independence

process, US policy leans toward the status quo of a unified Iraqi state. Consequently, the United States currently has no better alternative than begrudging support of the pro-Iranian Shiite elements, which constitute the substantial political force interested in Iraq's stability. On the other hand, America's harsh denunciation of Iran's activity in the region, President Trump's recent visit to Saudi Arabia and the effort to establish a front of Sunni countries against Iran are all indicative of the administration's desire to take much more determined action against Iran's growing influence. However, now that elements of the pro-Iranian Shiite camp have succeeded in solidifying control and influence over large parts of the country, the United States' ability to operate against Iran inside Iraqi territory remains limited.

The question of America's continued presence in Iraq stands as one of the major issues to be considered on the day after the liberation of Mosul. An American presence in Iraq poses a threat to Iranian interests; consequently, most pro-Iran Shiite elements in Iraq are calling for an American withdrawal. Although Prime Minister al-Abadi often reaffirms the strengthening of security and economic cooperation with the United States, he has also recently expressed Iraq's need to work with the Assad regime and affiliated Shiite militias to hold the Syria-Iraq border, reflecting his understanding that he too must be in lockstep with Iranian interests. In any event, an American decision to remain in Iraq is liable to exacerbate the confrontation between the United States and its adversaries. The scope and intensity of the confrontation will be significantly influenced by the assessment of the Islamic State's strength and the degree to which it threatens the government in Baghdad, which may agree to American involvement in order to pursue its interest of destroying the Islamic State. Moreover, Iran and its political allies in Iraq are interested in attracting international investment in general and American investment in particular in order to rebuild and stabilize Iraq. Nonetheless, the extent to which the Trump administration will be willing to invest economic and other resources to support Iraq on the day after the defeat of the Islamic State remains unclear.

In conclusion, the liberation of Mosul, like the future conquest of Raqqa in Syria, will make a major contribution to the US-led international effort to defeat the Islamic State. However, the internal and regional struggles that have shaped Iraq over the past two decades, and which laid the groundwork for the phenomenon of the Islamic State, remain and will persist to varying degrees in the years to come. Division and instability in Iraq will also likely remain constant. The challenge posed by the Kurds, who remain resolute in their separatist goals – which will presumably intensify following the independence referendum – creates a high potential for volatility in the internal Iraqi arena and the region as a whole. However, in light of Shiite dominance in Iraq, and despite the split in this camp, Iran can be expected to continue as the most influential external force operating in the country. It stands to reap the benefits of conditions on the ground and will likely expand and intensify its penetration of all layers of the regime in Baghdad,

thereby solidifying its status as the dominant actor in Iraq. Therefore, the fundamental interest of the US administration will likely be to reduce the American presence in Iraq, although doing so in practice will be conditioned on the extent of continued Islamic State activity in Iraq and its surrounding regions.