

Victory in Iraq and Syria?

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In the last month, victory against the Islamic State has been repeatedly declared in both Iraq and Syria. On November 21, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iran's efforts in Iraq and Syria, sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, announcing the termination of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹ On December 6, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced victory against the Islamic State on "both banks of the Euphrates",² and, on December 8, Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-'Abadi delivered a victory speech in Iraq.³

These victory declarations mark the defeat of the Islamic State and the preservation of the pre-IS borders of Iraq and Syria. But important questions remain about the nature of Iraqi and Syrian states in the aftermath of the IS. To be sure, their sovereign borders have been restored. But to what end? And for whose benefit? What will constitute the state in post-IS Iraq and Syria? What will bind their respective peoples together? What will provide their governments with legitimacy and authority?⁴

Moreover, it appears that the post-IS period will be marked by a struggle to fill the power vacuum in the territories that were ruled by the Islamic State between

¹ "[General Soleimani congratulates Ayatollah Khamenei and Muslims on ISIS termination](#)," Khamenei.ir, November 21, 2017.

² "Putin declares 'complete victory' on both banks of the Euphrates in Syria – Interfax," *Reuters*, December 6, 2017; See, also: "[Briefing of Chief of Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff Colonel Sergei Rudskoy](#)," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, December 7, 2017.

³ Maher Chmaytelli and Ahmad Abouleinin, "[Iraq declares final victory over Islamic State](#)," *Reuters*, December 9, 2017.

⁴ Joel Migdal makes an important distinction between the *image* and *practice* of states. This is a useful distinction in the cases of both Iraq and Syria, where the image of the state has been preserved but the practice remains to be determined. See: Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 15-23.

2014 and 2017.⁵ Yet, herein lies the paradox: On the one hand, the principal actors in both Iraq and Syria are declaring victory, suggesting a return to the pre-IS borders in Iraq and Syria.⁶ On the other hand, the competition to fill the vacuum suggests that the central governments in Iraq and Syria may not be able to govern the territories that were under IS rule for the past three and a half years.

For many of the parties involved in Iraq and Syria, these conflicts were never exclusively about the Islamic State. There were broader interests at stake, many of which pre-dated IS's rise.⁷ In fact, it was, in part, the pre-IS vacuum in Iraq and Syria that created the space for the IS to emerge as a governing power in 2014.⁸

Three years later, Iraq and Syria still face outstanding challenges at the international, regional, and state levels. At the international level, the great powers are pursuing their material and strategic interests, which in many ways have transcended the conflict with the Islamic State. Russia, for example, was interested in securing its military bases in Syria, restoring its regional influence and demonstrating its military power, and expanding its energy investments in the Fertile Crescent.⁹ More parochially, President Putin's victory declaration should be seen as part of the build-up to his own 2018 presidential campaign.¹⁰ For its part, the United States has not explicitly defined its post-Islamic State interests in Iraq and Syria, which has led to uncertainty among many of the regional actors, which are looking to secure their particular interests in Iraq and Syria.¹¹

Other issues have been more regional-centric and dynamic, focusing on how Iraq and Syria's neighbors will safeguard their security interests in the aftermath of

⁵ Daniel L. Byman, "[How the Islamic State will grapple with its defeat in Raqqa](#)," Brookings Institution, October 19, 2017; Raz Zimmt, "[Iran in the Post-Islamic State Era: Aims, Opportunities, Challenges](#)," The Meir Amit Terrorism and Intelligence Information Center, November 26, 2017 [this is an expanded version of report initially published on August 31, 2017].

⁶ "[Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's answers to questions from Interfax news agency](#)," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 27, 2017; Patrick Wintour, "[Vladimir Putin briefs Donald Trump on plan to end Syrian civil war](#)," *The Guardian*, November 21, 2017.

⁷ See, for example: Uzi Rabi, Brandon Friedman, "[Weaponizing Sectarianism in Iraq and Syria](#)," *Orbis* 61:3 (2017), 423-438.

⁸ Aaron Y. Zelin, "[Interpreting the Fall of Islamic State Governance](#)," Policywatch 2871, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 16, 2017.

⁹ Ruslan Pukhov, "[Russia's unexpected military victory in Syria](#)," *Defensenews.com*, December 11, 2017; Jasper Mortimer, "[Russia tempers Erdogan's threats against Iraqi Kurdistan](#)," *al-Monitor*, September 29, 2017.

¹⁰ Shaun Walker, "[Putin makes it official – he's running for re-election in 2018](#)," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2017.

¹¹ This uncertainty is the theme of an extended essay by Nibras Kazimi: "[Arriving at Singularity](#)," *Talisman-gate.com*, July 7, 2017.

the Islamic State's defeat. For example, in northern Syria, Kurdish self-governance has the potential to reignite conflict between Syria's Kurds and Turkey in Efrin and elsewhere along Turkey's long southern border. In southwest Syria, the ungoverned territory along Israel's northern border has already generated an increasing degree of indirect confrontation between Iran and Israel. In western Iraq, will Turkey and Iran maintain a presence at the Syria-Iraq border crossings? If so, how will this affect the economy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq? Will Iran be able to secure the much discussed land-corridors between Tehran and the Lebanese/Syrian coasts?

Some of the outstanding issues are more fundamental than controlling the common border crossings and preventing a security vacuum. They relate to the very nature of state sovereignty and cohesion in Iraq and Syria. For example, will there be a place for Sunnis or Kurds in the governing institutions of post-war, Shi'i-centric Iraq?¹² Will the post-IS government in Syria include the Asads? Will it be able to reshape a shattered Syrian nation?¹³ Now that the Islamic State is in retreat, many of these unresolved political and security issues have the potential to fuel a new phase of conflict in both Iraq and Syria.

Iraq

In a televised victory address on December 8, Prime Minister 'Abadi declared, "Honorable Iraqis: your land has been completely liberated. The dream of liberation is now a reality."¹⁴ In the aftermath of victory, Iraq is preparing to hold provincial and federal elections in May 2018, and 'Abadi faces several major challenges that will directly affect the future of the Iraqi state.

The first major challenge is reconciling with the Kurds of northern Iraq. In mid-October, the Iraqi military, together with Iraq's Iranian supported Shi'i militias, seized Kirkuk's oil fields and pushed *Peshmerga* forces back to the KRG's pre-IS (2014) borders. Despite 'Abadi's December 9 proclamation that "The joy of victory is complete...The unity of Iraq and its people is the most important and greatest accomplishment,"¹⁵ he alienated nearly all of the Kurdish factions in Iraq by failing to acknowledge the *Peshmerga's* contribution to the war against the

¹² Fanar Haddad, "[After Sectarianism](#)," Postwarwatch.com," November 20, 2017.

¹³ Sima Ghaddar and Lily Hindy, "[A Nation in Pieces: Views from Syrians in Exile](#)," The Century Foundation, November 30, 2017.

¹⁴ Maher Chmaytelli and Ahmad Abouleinin, "[Iraq declares final victory over Islamic State](#)," *Reuters*, December 9, 2017; Prime Minister Dr. Haider Al-Abadi, "[Victory Speech](#) [in Arabic]," pmo.iq, December 9, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Islamic State (the speech was subsequently revised to include the *Peshmerga*).¹⁶ ‘Abadi has said he won’t negotiate with Erbil until after the KRG annuls the results of its September 2017 referendum on independence and surrenders control of Iraq’s northwestern border crossings to Iraqi forces. Even if Erbil meets Baghdad’s preconditions, there is a huge chasm to bridge between the two sides. There are significant gaps on a variety of issues, such as the KRG’s share of the federal budget, control of oil infrastructure, and the future administration of Kirkuk.¹⁷

Second, ‘Abadi faces resistance from many Sunni Muslim political parties, which believe that May 2018 is too soon to hold elections. The Sunni territories in western Iraq have not yet recovered from the devastating war against the IS, and many Sunnis remain displaced and traumatized. Sunni politicians believe that these Sunni majority areas won’t be prepared for elections and as a result their voices will be marginalized. Third, ‘Abadi is facing an economic crisis. Iraq’s debt is \$120 billion, which means it may not have the means to rebuild the predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq that were destroyed in the war against the Islamic State. This will make it all the more difficult for ‘Abadi to reintegrate western Iraq and convince Sunnis that they are real stakeholders in a Shi‘i-centric Iraq.

Fourth, it is unclear what will happen to Iraq’s Shi‘i militias, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* (Popular Mobilization Units or PMU), which have nearly 100,000 men under arms. Will these men be integrated into Iraq’s security services, or will they remain an independent armed force similar to Hizballah in Lebanon? Fanar Haddad has argued that the Shi‘i militias lie at the heart of a new narrative that has “reinvigorated” Iraqi nationalism in Arab Iraq. According to Haddad, this narrative presents a “good-versus-evil” story that was designed to transcend sectarian boundaries. In this story, Iraqis were saved from the brutal Islamic State “by the ‘salt of the earth’ young men from southern Iraq, who demonstrated a love of country and obedience to Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani’s call to arms.”¹⁸ Haddad claims that this narrative has gained traction across sectarian boundaries because the Islamic State provided Iraqis with a powerful unifying “other” by virtue of its unprecedented cruelty and barbarism.¹⁹ Haddad may be right, but ‘Abadi still faces the practical challenge of facing down those militias

¹⁶ Sangar Ali, “[Iraqi Prime Minister concedes to Kurdistan pressure, amends speech](#),” Kurdistan24.net, December 11, 2017; See, also: Prime Minister Dr. Haider Al-Abadi, “[Victory Speech](#),” pmo.iq, December 9, 2017; [Media Office of the Prime Minister](#), Facebook.

¹⁷ Mustafa Habib, “[After the Extremists: Can The Leader Iraqis See As A Hero Today Solve Tomorrow’s Problems](#),” *Niqash*, November 23, 2017.

¹⁸ Fanar Haddad, “[After Sectarianism](#),” Postwarwatch.com,” November 20, 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

that maintain strong ties to Iran and appear unwilling to give up their arms or subordinate themselves to Iraq's government institutions.

Syria

Bashar al-Asad's surprise meeting with Vladimir Putin, in the Russian resort city of Sochi on November 20, was the beginning of Russia's effort to signal an end to the military phase of the war in Syria and the transition to a political process.²⁰ On December 11, Putin reciprocated Asad's visit with his own surprise visit to Russia's Khmeimim air base in Syria, where he met with Asad, reemphasized Russia's victory against terrorism and announced his intention to withdraw "most" of Russia's forces from Syria.²¹ Russia wants to step back from its military role and instead focus on steering the political process between Asad the Syrian opposition.²² As such, it will be transferring some of its burdens in the Asad-ruled territory west of the Euphrates, to Iran and Turkey.²³ More cynically, Russia may be making yet another effort to reduce its costs in Syria, anticipating challenges on several fronts that don't directly affect its core interests and could lead to significant costs for others.²⁴

First, Russia stands to benefit from tension between Turkey and the U.S. regarding the evolving prospect of Kurdish autonomy or self-governance in northern Syria. The potential rift between the two NATO allies provides Russia with more leverage over Turkey in Syria. Second, Russia would like to avoid the costs associated with a full military operation to consolidate control over Idlib Province, which remains in the hands of the jihadi opposition.²⁵ The current situation in Idlib also keeps the Asad regime weak and dependent on Russia. Third, Russia would like to avoid being caught between Iran and Israel as tension escalates over Iran's efforts to build military bases in southwest Syria, with

²⁰ Hamidreza Azizi, "[Russia's multilayered Syrian diplomacy worries Iran](#)," *al-Monitor*, December 6, 2017; Maxim A. Suchkov, "[Assad makes last-minute trip to Russia before trilateral summit](#)," *al-Monitor*, November 21, 2017.

²¹ "[Putin orders Russian forces pullout from Syria](#)," *TASS: Russian News Agency*, December 11, 2017; "Putin meets Syrian President – Kremlin transcript," BBC World Monitoring, December 12, 2017; "[Vladimir Putin visited Kheimim Air Base in Syria](#)," *kremlin.ru*, December 11, 2017.

²² Bassma Kodmani, "[What Makes the Current Round of Geneva Talks Different](#)," *Valdai Club*, December 8, 2017; "[Syrian government returns to Geneva talks, Western envoys skeptical](#)," *Reuters*, December 10, 2017.

²³ Maxim A. Suchkov, "[Moscow's leverage in Syria is strong, but limited](#)," *al-Monitor*, December 8, 2017.

²⁴ Alexander Bratersky, Mikhail Khodarenok and Elvira Kokaya: "Great game: What Putin is preparing for Syria. Russia plans to retain its positions in Syria after end of war," *Gazeta.ru – BBC World Monitoring*, November 22, 2017; For more on Russia's efforts to reposition its role in Syria, see: Brandon Friedman, "[Trump's First 100 Days and Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes*, May 10, 2017.

²⁵ Charles Lister, "[Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria](#)," *Warontherocks.com*, October 31, 2017.

access to Israel's border. Further, if the U.S. tries to prevent Iran from creating a land-bridge extending from Tehran across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Russia would stand to gain important leverage over Iran, which would presumably move closer to Russia if it were more directly confronted by the U.S. in southeastern Syria.

Russia and the U.S., together with Turkey and Iran, may be focused on preserving Syria's sovereign borders, but perhaps the most challenging issue facing Syria is imagining a workable political transition. Six and half years of brutal war has claimed more than 500,000 lives and displaced half of Syria's 25 million people. Fanar Haddad argues that a reinvigorated Iraqi identity has emerged in the aftermath of the Islamic State: can the same be said about Syrian collective identity? Mazen 'Izzy, a thirty-six-year-old Syrian journalist at [al-Modon](#) newspaper, who lives in Lebanon, was quoted in an important new report on Syria by the Century Foundation, "A Nation in Pieces: Views from Syrians in Exile,"²⁶:

You know this topic, about what it is to be Syrian? I always wonder: what is it that brings together one person, in this current Syria, a person with a group in Dera'a [where the revolution started], with another person that works in the regime air intelligence? What is the link between members of a municipality in the [Druze] village of Suwaida with an employee in the Kurdish offices in Amouda? What is it? What brings them together? It is time to ask these questions.

Indeed, until such questions are adequately addressed, declaring victory against the Islamic State on "both banks of the Euphrates," only begs the question of what constitutes post-Islamic State Syria.

"Defeated but not Vanquished"²⁷

Cohesion, or the absence of it, in Iraq and Syria matters. In a provocative essay published as the Islamic State was being defeated in Mosul this past summer, Nibras Kazimi, referring to a ninth century Arabic proverb, pointed out that "victory declared is sometimes no victory at all." He reminded his readers that in 2008 Washington had also declared victory against al-Qa'ida in Iraq (the group that became the Islamic State), only to see the group reconstitute itself between 2009 and 2013. Kazimi added that defeating the IS in Iraq and "pummeling its

²⁶ Sima Ghaddar and Lily Hindy, "[A Nation in Pieces: Views from Syrians in Exile](#)," The Century Foundation, November 30, 2017.

²⁷ Rukmini Callamachi, Eric Schmitt, and Margaret Coker, "[With Loss of Its Caliphate, ISIS May Return to Guerilla Roots](#)," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2017.

remaining territories in Syria” was no longer “a guarantor that the monster has been slain.” The jihadis, Kazimi argues, have demonstrated that their project was viable and what was lacking was wider Sunni participation. In other words, not enough Sunni Muslims answered the caliph’s call this time around. According to Kazimi, the jihadis have already demonstrated their resolve and so can be expected to try again, and they have proven that operating in chaos and anarchy is their comfort zone.²⁸ Without greater clarity on a range of outstanding issues with respect to the future of Iraq and Syria, and in particular, without a realistic formula for state cohesion, victory will be but a fleeting moment on the road to sustained geopolitical confrontation and jihadi-fueled conflict.²⁹

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²⁸ Nibras Kazimi, “[Arriving at Singularity](#),” Talisman-gate.com, July 7, 2017.

²⁹ Tamer el-Ghobashy, Mustafa Slim, and Louisa Loveluck, “[The Islamic State’s ‘caliphate’ has been toppled in Iraq and Syria. Why isn’t anyone celebrating?](#)” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2017.