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***Iraq and Ruin***
***The Once and Future Mosul*** Rasha Al Aqeedi

The city may soon be freed from the Islamic State, but it won't be easy to govern afterward. Foreigners—and even Iraqis—had better study its complexities.

On August 30, General Joe Votel of the U.S. Central Command told Middle Eastern reporters via a video call from CENTCOM Tampa that coalition-backed Iraqi forces could take Mosul back from the Islamic State before the end of the year. "[A]s the Prime Minister has said, it's his intention to try to get through Mosul by the end of the year. My assessment over the course of my visits is that they are on track to achieve that objective…. We are at the point here where we are now really into the heart of the caliphate," Votel said. Coalition forces have already begun "shaping operations" in the outskirts of Mosul.

The liberation of the town where I was born and raised seems to be at hand. So why do I have such mixed feelings, looking on from Dubai these days, about what is likely to happen by year's end? Because I fear that the effort to retake the town will destroy much of it, and because I am skeptical that a post-combat governance arrangement will be easy to put together. Most of all, I fear that other Iraqis and some select group of non-Iraqis who may have a hand in trying to control Mosul in 2017 may not understand what makes the place tick. Mosul is not just any city. It has its own character, wonders, and distempers. To govern it requires first that one really know it. The details matter, but, alas, details are often ignored.

The aftershocks of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq included not least an overthrowing of the balance—or rather imbalance—of sectarian power that had characterized the country since the onset of its modern history. A minority of Sunnis governed a plurality if not an outright majority of Shi'a. The invasion shifted that status quo almost immediately. In late April 2003, barely a month after the statue of Saddam Hussein was famously pulled from its pedestal in Baghdad, Iraqi Shi'a marked the pilgrimage to Karbala. More than one million devotees marched toward their spiritual sanctuary in a ritual that had been suppressed by the Ba'ath regime for decades. They carried colorful banners that bore names sacred to all Muslims: Fatima, Ali, and Hussein. My hometown of Mosul, like most Sunni-majority cities, observed the event with a mix of confusion and apprehension: Was the new Iraq a place that celebrated and implicitly acknowledged the ascent of a set of customs and beliefs foreign to Sunnis?

Mosul's alienation from post-2003 Iraq can be partially understood within the context of a general Sunni distaste for Shi'a ascendency in a nominally secular country. That ascendency ran against the grain of reality, according to those subject to education in Ba'athi Iraq. The Ba'athi approach to essentializing its ideology required the marginalization of the Shi'a practice of Islam and the denial of its relevance. History texts made no reference to the Shi'a interpretation of history. The Imams, revered by all Muslims, were hardly mentioned. The end of the "Righteously Guided Caliphates" era—the Rashidun—was portrayed as a smooth transition to the "companion" Mu'awiya, the first of the identifiably Sunni caliphs of the Ummayyad rule.

Authoritarian regimes often rewrite history to serve their political agendas and maintain power, but completely neglecting events that shaped an entire sect of Islam—one that formed the majority of the nation—was an extreme case. Shi‘a rituals and festivals were severely suppressed and frequently banned during periods of sectarian troubles. While Iraqis often proclaim that “we did not know the difference between Shi‘a and Sunni before 2003,” this is mostly a product of the Ba‘athi regime’s policies. One unfortunate byproduct of this philosophy after 2003 was the Sunnis’ shock at realizing that Shi‘a Islam not only existed, but was ready to energetically express itself. The boisterous celebration of its unique rituals during Ashura and other festivals produced consternation among the Sunnis of Mosul, who had thought themselves to be completely in synch with the Iraqi nation as a whole.

Indeed, the ethnically and religiously diverse city of Mosul was perhaps the most oblivious of all Iraqi cities to the Shi‘a. Unlike Baghdad or Basra, Mosul had a Sunni Arab majority and a significant Christian population (Syriac, Assyrian, Chaldean) that formed its core. Though many “Arabs” came from Turkish, Circassia, Chechen, and Georgian roots, their IDs read “Arab,” and they assimilated willingly into their imposed ethnic group. Other non-Arabs, like the Kurdish, Turkmen, Shabak, and Yazidi populations, faced periods of oppression by a succession of leaders, but held on to their identities proudly, integrating only gradually over the years. The few Shi‘a families in Mosul went unnoticed. Those born into mixed families usually omitted mention of the fact that that their mothers or fathers were Shi‘a, not out of any sense of shame but simply because within the Ba‘athi mental space it was too hard to explain what that meant. Humans by nature fear what they do not know, and Shi‘i Islam was mysterious, opaque, and alien to the ways of the Sunnah. Hence, this group’s overnight ascendance to power had to be a conspiracy of some kind targeting Sunnis. In a city dominated by Sunnis and far from the power base in Baghdad, it was easy to believe that the new regime was illegitimate and, as far as Moslawis were concerned, an historical oddity that would fade soon like all the others who had tried to intrude upon the governance of Mosul.

In addition to its distinctive dialect of Arabic, used also by Iraqi Christians and Jews and drastically different from those of Baghdad and the south, Mosul has certain unique characteristics that set it apart from other Iraqi cities: a resilience in the face of temporary intrusions and a pessimistic temperament that has its citizens always prepared for tough times. These characteristics are expressed in, for example, the common habit of stockpiling supplies for emergencies and a careful ethic of austerity, which has in turn led to the humorous stereotype of Moslawi “stinginess,” the basis of hundreds of jokes about the city. These attitudes emerged, however, from one of the darkest periods in Mosul’s history: the great famine of 1917. As the Ottomans hauled food from Mosul to supply their army during several seasons of drought, the local population was left to suffer. Stories of starvation, loss, and humiliation were passed on from one generation to the next, creating a collective memory that has outlived any witnesses to the famine. The fear of a recurring tragedy of this sort is embedded in Moslawi culture. Another event that lingered for decades in the city’s popular memory was the bloody suppression of the 1959 revolt, which broke out in the young republic just a year after the July 1958 overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy. This event, highly underrated and under-examined, shaped Mosul’s psyche for decades.

Arab nationalism runs in Moslawi blood. It expressed itself during the first two decades of the 20th century in the secret societies of Al-Alam (The Flag) and Al-'Ahd (The Covenant) that sought to align with the British forces against the nascent Turkish Republic, which staked a claim on Mosul Vilayat, as it was called under the Ottomans. Mosul's proximity to Aleppo and Deir Al Zor in Syria also led to the downplaying of Iraqi nationalism in favor of the pan-Arab variety, as did the region's emotional investment in the Palestinian struggle. Religion too runs in the city's bloodstream, as evidenced by the many shrines, decorated mosques, and *madrassas* that taught the Quran and Sunnah during Ottoman times and beyond. When the Communist-leaning and avowedly secular President Abdul Kareem Qasim announced the establishment of a Communist-based forum in the heart of Mosul in 1959, he was almost asking for trouble—Communism does not sit well with conservative Sunni nationalist tendencies.

The city's Arab nationalists had tolerated Qasim's overthrow of the monarchy, but now a clique within Iraq's military—many of whom hailed from Mosul—formed to oppose him. Thousands of armed participants from Baghdad and the southern provinces entered Mosul, and within weeks the confrontations escalated to what is today referred to as "Al Shawaf Revolt." Qasim put down the revolt through his communist surrogates and affiliates: Hundreds of Moslawis were lynched, their bodies left hanging for days. (Hafez al-Assad's approach to rebellion in Hama in April 1982 bore an uncanny resemblance to Qasim's techniques in Mosul 23 years earlier.) Among the victims were women—an unprecedented atrocity in Mosul's modern history.

The tragedy created Mosul's very own "Never Again" moment, which entailed "never confronting authority despite grievances." The civil conflict left scars of distrust and suspicion of central and southern Iraqis. Kurds, too, were seen as collaborators with Baghdad.
Within this context, it becomes easier to understand why many citizens opted to remain in the city after the Islamic State surge in June 2014. Refuge in Kurdistan was not an option for most families, who were prevented from entering by a suspicious Kurdish Peshmerga already dealing with a massive influx of displaced Iraqis. People without contacts, relatives, or public-sector jobs with continuing salaries feared what their families would face in the already economically burdened Kurdish towns, or even worse, the refugee camps. Breadwinners chose to stay in Mosul to take on simple manual jobs to support their families instead of facing uncertainty and deprivation elsewhere. Today, as plans for the military campaign to retake Mosul are being made, the city's civilians recall the recent refugee crisis during Fallujah's liberation and find themselves on the horns of an insoluble dilemma. They might want to leave to avoid unknown but not improbable ISIS depredations during the battle, but they now realize too that the Iraqi government's effective concern for the safety of Sunni residents and refugees is close to nil. Indeed, in a recent conversation, an elderly relative of mine who was an eyewitness to the carnage of 1959 expressed her fear of another "Shawaf" happening if Shi'a militias were to enter Mosul. Her comparison startled me. Was the Islamic State in her imagination equivalent to a pan-Arab movement? Would she defend the Islamic State against other Iraqis, just because the former is Sunni and the latter mainly Shi'a? Her answer was "IS will go, just like Saddam did. No injustice sustains. Allah will exert his wrath on Daesh, but the revenge of humans is always crueler." Her faith in Allah's proximate reaction is not mine, but as far as her warning of human revenge goes, I had to admit that the implications of certain pro-Iranian elements participating in the liberation of Mosul with the Iraqi Army regulars are quite ominous.

I also argued that the Communist era—a shorthand in Mosul for any secularist regime—was over, and that Mosul's religiosity was no longer an issue. She insisted in return that, "they all hate Mosul equally." Again her words arrested my attention. After all, President Qasim is still hailed in Baghdad and elsewhere as a hero who "placed Iraq first, and ended the injustices of social hierarchy," language that elides fairly nicely with the Shi'a-centric slogans on the PMF banners. If Qasim's 1959 barbarities do not stand condemned, is similar conduct in late 2016 liable to be condoned? Indeed, some Popular Mobilization Unit apologists have wasted no time in justifying, or dismissing, the documented abuses in Tikrit and Fallujah. Old ladies are not to be dismissed easily.

After 1959, Mosul raised a white flag that can be described as "indifference" or, perhaps, fatalism. Inscribed on the symbolic banner are words more or less to this effect: Whatever grievances occur shall pass, and the most reasonable method of confrontation is patience; the status quo will run its course, but human life sacrificed against the current of superior power cannot be restored. The logic behind not confronting ISIS, and not evacuating the city when it was possible, lies in a kind if hermetic, steely indifference—not contentedness. Indifference explains why Mosul initially remained calm for more than a year after the Americans toppled Saddam, and why the population avoided tensions with the Kurdish Regional Government's Peshmerga forces that had gradually expanded their presence in the region. Moslawi culture prefers *post hoc* lamentation to active insubordination.

On the social side, the shock of 1959 translated to a state of "disconnection" with the rest of Iraq. The populace began to abstain from the company of strangers, with the strangers being other Iraqis. They associated the south of the country with anarchy, paramilitaries, and vengeance, a perception strengthened by the Saddamist narrative of the Sha'abaniya Uprising. It was uncommon for families from other provinces to choose to relocate to Mosul despite its pleasant weather, fresh water, and abundance of greenery. Students who attended the University of Mosul from other areas often reported feeling alienated or unwelcome. Even during Iraqi Sunnis' hardships, Mosul was regrettably unwelcoming to Sunnis who relocated from Basra and Baghdad.

Some argue that Mosul "fought" the Iraqi Army after 2011, then caved in to ISIS and, as some video footage shows, welcomed the militants with open arms. This is not so. The citizens of Mosul never confronted the Army. One video showed children from "Al-Zanjili" area throwing stones at an Army vehicle. Anyone familiar with Al-Zanjili would know the children there hurl stones at any moving target. Other footage is in fact from Sadr City in 2013. Terrorists, whether jihadists or rural folk seeking an uncharacteristic domination over Mosul's urban elite, ran riot in and around Mosul for years. The Army, police, and civilians were all targets. The thousands of people extorted and threatened by these groups would not celebrate an overt surge and the collapse of the state. Resentment existed, true, as it did in all the aforementioned situations, but it hardly translated into violence. With the exception of a fringe driven by radical thoughts and opportunists who found brokering with the extremists to be financially rewarding, Mosul's Arab-centric culture and conservative Sunni Islam beliefs did not lead it to join the caliphate. Moslawis are among the most eager to repeat the phrase "ISIS does not represent Islam," and refuse to equate religious-based intolerance—and Allah knows there has been plenty of that in the city—with the endemic violence and mass graves of the Islamic State.

A common error portrays Mosul as a staunch enclave of Saddam's supporters, and therefore susceptible to also supporting IS. One recent article claimed that the "City of One Million Officers" is literally home to one million loyal Saddamist military veterans, although Mosul had earned that title long before Saddam hijacked state authority in the 1970s. In truth, Mosul's strong middle class had been an attractive source for educated prospective officers since the Ottoman era, and it was this rather than ideology that produced Mosul's historical sobriquet. Another mistake is failing to distinguish between "Nineveh," the province that includes eight other districts in addition to Mosul, which is the provincial center, and the city itself. Most Iraqis pointed to Mosul as the culprit in the Yazidi genocide. Again, not so. The rest of Iraq seemed oblivious not only to the geographic reality of Nineveh, but also to the political dynamics of the province following 2003. Many thought Sinjar was a rural village on the outskirts of Mosul, and that Moslawis themselves had taken part in purging Yazidi men and enslaving the women and children. But Sinjar is a Nineveh district nearly 100 kilometers west of Mosul. As the U.S. Army secured its grip on Iraq, Kurdish Peshmerga forces partially annexed Sinjar under the banner of the KRG in 2003**.** Nineveh's local government, located in Mosul, has had little to no influence on Sinjar ever since. Moslawis could not have been complicit in the tragedy of the Yazidis, nor could they have prevented it.

The social dilemma between Mosul and its rural sub-districts is another subject unfamiliar to most Iraqis, despite similar phenomena observable in Baghdad and in southern Iraq as well. For decades, governments have failed to address the discontent of the tribal societies living in Nineveh's under-urbanized and underserved districts. The majority of the Iraqi Islamic State militants in Mosul today hail from Tel Afer, Sheikhan, Rabeʻa, and other rural areas, according to several investigations.

Tribal elements and families who moved in the 1960s and 1970s to central Mosul from the town of Qayyarah, for example, faced social discrimination in employment, education, and real estate in certain areas, among other struggles. Rejected by society, they allied with the "authority" then opposing the local elite; the Baʻath Party. It was clear by the mid-1970s that the majority of Baʻathis in Mosul were lower- to middle-class rural immigrants who used this path to achieve upward mobility. One can see the same dynamic taking place today, with many of the IS fighters occupying Mosul revealing rural accents, and much hostility, to the citizens of Mosul. Such social divisions are not exclusive to the Arab Muslim population of Mosul. The city's Christians also maintained a social hierarchy: The rural Assyrian or Chaldean sub-districts of Alqosh, Qaraqosh, Tel Kef, Bartalla, Hamdania, and others were also seen as "different" from the Christian families who inhabited Mosul's suburbs. Families of Turkish roots in Mosul saw themselves as distinct from other Turkic groups in Tel Afer.

Tel Afer, a name that stands out in any discourse on the Islamic State, suffered from systemic marginalization in both social and sectarian terms. After decades of disenfranchisement, ridicule, and rejection by Mosul's urban population, the post-2003 order gave prominence to the 35-40 percent Shʻia population of the district. In one anecdote, a Sunni family from Tel Afer was evicted from their home, stripped of the small piece of land they owned, and forced out of the district in an almost "Ba'athist" act of demographic change under the patronage, or disregard, of the Iraqi government. The family relocated to Mosul to live with more urbanized relatives, but

held onto a grudge against the new Iraq. Al-Qaeda knew which doors to knock on. Indeed, salafi thought spread in Iraq as it did elsewhere, but the fertile ground in the complicated Tel Afer made jihadi recruiting almost too easy.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide object to the Islamic State's brutality and refuse to believe that their faith condones the ideology behind the caliphate. The Sunnis of Mosul are no exception. The fraction of citizens who fled the city have been vocal in denouncing the "deviation" of IS from true Islam; those who remain dare not even try.

There is, in the Mosul context, another dimension worthy of further investigation. Violent Islamist ideology is, to the vast majority of Moslawis, an imported belief system alien to the city and its Islamic roots. Mosul has long taken pride in its Islam. The many dynamic trends of Islam that flourished in the city throughout its history range from Sufism to quietest salafism. The more political and social Islamists are embraced and accepted because they are seen to represent the intellectual, social, and religious grassroots activism of Mosul's most respected families. Saddam's religious initiative of the early 1990s—the "Faith Campaign"—offered Islamists a unique platform for exerting social influence over citizens. Values perceived as liberal or Western were frowned upon. Women as young as 16 were encourage to marry and raise families. Men and teenaged boys were judged on their attendance to Friday's prayers. The U.S. invasion only strengthened the Islamists' influence as activism transformed into the "Islamic Party," and they were well prepared to hijack Sunni politics in the absence of other competitors.
The Islamic State's brand of *sharia* is seen as an "intrusion" by the religious circles of Mosul, and one that will quickly die out as soon as the city is liberated. However, "grassroots Islam" in Mosul—social-activism Islam—has fallen into the predicament that many devoted Muslims elsewhere avoid: Political Islam, however mainstream it may be, sets the intolerant foundation for the likes of the Islamic State to flourish.

For example, during Saddam's Faith Campaign, we were told by influential individuals never to initiate a greeting with a Christian, as Mohamed himself ordered according to one hadith, with the intent of pressuring them to convert. We were told non-Muslim were unclean, impure, and doomed to hell regardless of how good they were as human beings. It remains debatable whether such intolerance was the intended goal of the campaign, but it was certainly an outcome. Alas, many Muslims will dismiss the connection between the deliberate second-class treatment of Christians and demanding *jizya* (a tax on non-Muslims) or dispossessing and dispelling Christians all together—but the latter will follow the former unless efforts are made to prevent it. The same bunch will claim that Islamic State militants are "apostates," yet continue to call secular and liberal Muslims apostates, too.

There is some relief in knowing, from personal experience, that the vast majority of Mosul's homegrown Islamists would not resort to violence to impose what they believe is the righteous path, but it remains problematic that many yearn for some form of *hisba* (religious police) to safeguard the implementation of *sharia* in society. Alas, not all *sharia*-law enthusiasts are created equal. Several former Islamists from Mosul have crossed the line that separates "moderate" political Islam from revolutionary Islam. Their numbers remain just a fraction of Mosul's population, but their motivations for supporting the Islamic State are purely ideological.

This serves as a reminder that political Islam is in many cases the incubator of, and not an alternative to, violent extremism.

In short, Mosul's Sunni Islamic identity is a complex one. There are traditional pious people, grassroots social activists, and political types up to and on occasion including IS supporters. They agree on much and disagree on much as well. Withal, visiting shrines and tombs was a part of the city's heritage before the Islamic State occupation. Seeking help from gifted sheikhs who claimed to be able to heal illnesses or exorcise demons was a social norm. Celebrations of Al-Mawled (Mohamed's day of birth) were festive in nature. These customs, all considered signs of polytheism by extremists and salafists alike, remain part of Mosul's grassroots Islam and will certainly return once the Islamic State is gone.

Despite the ongoing campaign against the city's Christians, too, all Moslawis grew up with churches a common sight in most neighborhoods, another feature that distinguishes Mosul from other Sunni strongholds like Fallujah. The historic monasteries of "Der Mar Matti" and "Der Al Sayyida" were attractions for students and young people during much happier times. The multiculturalism of Mosul can be revived to set a new foundation for a more tolerant and accepting grassroots Islam, emerging from the young people within the city who watched as the monasteries, churches, and shrines were destroyed by the epitome of intolerance.

The practical point of all this: God help any American or other foreigner who may come to have a hand in trying to govern Mosul after its liberation, if they think that there is only one kind of resident in Mosul, one kind of Muslim, or one kind of anything else. The place is just not that simple, and missing the details is bound to end in tears for everyone.

Other Iraqis also need to understand Mosul a bit better than they have demonstrated in recent years. In Mosul, thousands of civilians have been killed by the Islamic States for reasons that hardly constitute the slightest misdemeanor. Children have spent the past two years witnessing beheadings instead of attending schools. If Moslawis felt isolated before 2014, they feel close to despair today. There are, however, a few silver linings from the Islamic State experience. A new and tangible "Never Again" moment has been formed. Ultraconservative doctrines are being questioned and debated. Feelings of alienation from "Iraq" are rapidly diminishing, in particular after the recent liberation of Fallujah, and some degree of faith in the Iraqi Army and Special Forces units has been restored. Civil society figures have reached out to their counterparts in Baghdad and the south in rapprochement efforts to help Mosul's image after two years of defamation. If social media is an indication of public sentiments, the anti-Mosul rhetoric has subsided dramatically as well.

Sensitivities still exist, however. Sectarian misunderstandings often prevail, and it is within everyone's best interest to steer clear of provocation. A friend recently asked why Sunnis felt offended by Shi'a reciting a hymn near Fallujah. The answer lies in the fact that Iraq has yet to hold an honest conversation on religion and sectarian identities. Community leaders have failed to promote concepts of "coexistence," whereby groups can choose to not subscribe to others' beliefs, but still respect their right to celebrate those beliefs.

In 2004, a Sh'ia friend who lived in Mosul expressed her utter disgust at a wedding that took place a day before Ashura. Her comments sounded illogical to me because Sunnis do not adopt a culture of mourning the dead via rituals. The wearing of black garments in grief for a loved one rarely exceeds forty days, let alone 1400 years. But less than ten years later, sentiments like my friend's were politicized and exploited. In one incident, Iraqi Army convoys halted a decorated vehicle carrying newlyweds. The groom was savagely beaten in front of his terrified bride. In other incidents, the army ordered shops be closed and streets blocked. Black flags signifying the martyrdom of Al Hussein were forcefully raised at public attractions and schools as military convoys blasted Shi'a hymns and songs—an unnecessary provocation in an overwhelmingly Sunni city at a critically dangerous time. The "mainstream" Iraqi response to such incidents would be: "Would Mosul then prefer the black flags of ISIS?" I answer that Mosul should not have to choose between either.

Mosul's Sunnis will not embrace the rituals of Ashura, and Shi'a from Karbala will not accept "Ta-ra-weeh" prayers during Ramadan. Mosul does not await the Hidden Imam, and Najaf does not consider "Mu'awiyah" a reverent companion of the prophet. These communal convictions will not change, and need not change. Until Iraqis realize that such differences are manageable, it would be wise not to raise banners that tout Al-Hussein's vengeance in the center of Mosul. "Liberation" might then be confused for "subjugation." Instead of injecting sectarian triumphalism into a dynamic situation, it would be much better to keep the focus on the Islamic State's failure to win over Moslawis, and so let "the Caliphate" be Mosul's final "Never Again."

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