

## **Commentary: Along with assault on Mosul, have plan ready to assist civilians**

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Camera icon BRAM JANSSEN / Associated Press

An Iraqi soldier looks toward Islamic State territory outside Qayyarah, a staging ground for military and humanitarian efforts ahead of the Mosul operation.

By Joe Pitts

ISIS is popular. It has drawn followers from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the United States, and Asia. Those teetering on the edge of society or questioning the level of their religious devotion are drawn to the group like a drowning victim to air. The purity of their goal to create an Islamic theocracy, and to kill anyone who doesn't agree with doing so, is attractive to some in a contorted kind of way.

In cities where ISIS has taken over, like Mosul, Iraq, some refugees have uttered that living under its power is preferable to the indignities they suffer in refugee settlements.

For the United States to recapture ground won by ISIS, it will take successful physical assaults as well as recapturing the hearts and minds of those they have conquered.

On Sept. 28 the White House announced it would deploy 600 additional troops to recapture Mosul. The siege is expected this month. We expect to successfully take the city, but what will come next is a different story.

No political or humanitarian plan is in place to deal with the aftermath. Mosul has a population of 1.2 million to 1.5 million, and once we chase ISIS out of the city, it will have no government. Such a lack of framework will create an unstable local population and will leave Mosul vulnerable to being recaptured.

The local population must have a credible government in place for them to believe in a legitimate alternative to ISIS.

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which I co-chair, held a briefing last week to address this situation. There, several panelists spoke who work with organizations that have been on the ground in Iraq and who participated in securing Fallujah post-liberation.

They explained that one of the biggest problems post-liberation is what to do with refugees. Currently the humanitarian community is not prepared to handle the large influx of refugees that will surely result when we recapture Mosul. Panelists explained that one of the biggest problems is the management of the refugees' settlements and the screening process they must undergo. Many displaced Iraqis are experiencing indignities at these points, which unfortunately is only reinforcing their distrust of the Iraqi government.

Our leading the charge to recapture Mosul is also a test for the Iraqi government to see if it can win the war and maintain the peace that will follow.

Again, our war against ISIS is physical but it's also a war for people's hearts and minds. Making sure internally displaced people are treated fairly and safely is key.

In the briefing my commission hosted, panelists suggested several items to manage the situation. First, they said citizens left after the fighting must refrain from hanging a white flag in their window to signal surrender. This system was used when Fallujah was recaptured, but ISIS fighters would infiltrate homes and use the white flags to camouflage themselves. This issue demonstrates one of the unique components of fighting ISIS: They have no qualms about using civilians as human shields.

The second suggestion was to improve the Iraqi government's screening centers. The indignities that refugees face at these centers are seared into their memories and not easily forgotten. The panelists spoke specifically on the importance of having women work at the screening centers, too.

The third suggestion was to provide safe exits for civilians trying to flee Mosul. In the past, ISIS has employed booby traps to block escape routes so that people are killed if they try to escape. The panelists urged that significant resources be poured into deactivating IEDs and mines, creating safe routes for civilians trying to leave and for humanitarian aid trying to enter the city.

Alongside our assault, we must plan for Mosul's stability. In order to fully beat ISIS, one plan of attack must not precede the other. We must recapture the trust of those who have lived under occupation, ensure ISIS doesn't retake Mosul, and stabilize the population so it doesn't become a breeding ground for further terrorist activity.

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