

Spring 2018

Declaration of the Modern Caliphate: Understanding the Importance of Mosul to ISIL

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Recommended Citation

Marchetti, Megan; Smith, Matthew J.; and Wallace, Ken, "Declaration of the Modern Caliphate: Understanding the Importance of Mosul to ISIL" (2018). *Politics, Philosophy, and Legal Studies: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*. 4.
<https://jayscholar.etown.edu/pplsstu/4>

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Declaration of the Modern Caliphate:

Understanding the Importance of Mosul to ISIL

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PS370

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April 18, 2018

Introduction

June of 2014 was a month that shocked the world's terrorism and national security experts. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant [ISIL], who prior to June was just the newest radical sect of Islam, conquered a significant amount of territory and established a state in their quest to create a new caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – the leader of the ISIL – appeared at the Grand Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul to assert himself as leader, or caliph, of this state. Never before had a terrorist organization managed to build a state in pursuit of their political ends. At the center of this modern caliphate was the Iraqi city of Mosul. Formerly a center of culture and scholarship in the Middle East, overnight, Mosul became the symbol of ISIL's territorial power. Following the experiences of an educated Moslauri who fled Iraq in fear of his own life, the effectiveness of ISIL's rule during the occupation of Mosul and the tactics used to enforce the organization's presence will be revealed. Through research on ISIL's defeat of the Iraqi Army, their governance over Mosul, the forceful removal of insurgents from the city, and the militaristic defeat resulting in the further loss of ISIL's territory in the region, it will be proven that Mosul was the most important city to the legitimacy and stability of ISIL's rule.

Fall of Mosul

Mosul, located in the Iraqi province of Nineveh, fell on June 10, 2014. The loss of Mosul as a stronghold against ISIL's terrorist regime can be attributed to several successful military tactics of ISIL combined with the Iraqi Security Force's [ISF] lack of properly planned logistics. Despite the knowledge of a possible attack, Lieutenant General Mahdi Gharawi, the operational commander of the Nineveh branch of the ISF, was denied the reinforcements he required of the ISF in order to counter any attacks formulated by the terrorist group. According to research done by Reuters, on paper, it was said that ISF was to have over 2,500 troops to add to a total of

25,000 police and security personnel. However, when ISIL attacked, Mosul's defense only revealed forces of around 10,000, unprepared and ill-equipped, to protect the city (Parker, Coles, & Salman, 2014). Pairing the shortcomings of the ISF's defense with ISIL's properly armed troops, the odds were stacked against ISF and their counterterrorism efforts.

Along with the military advantage held by ISIL, the terrorist group utilized technology to seal the capture of Mosul as their own. Through the posting of videos and propaganda via the Internet, ISIL had a leg up on ISF before the battle even started. ISIL published a series of documentaries titled "Clashing of the Swords" online, in order to spread "significant psychological and moral messages that have been professionally conveyed so as to influence the mindset of Iraqi soldiers," (Aghuan, 2016). ISIL played to their strengths with their typical asymmetrical warfare tactics, using cyber attacks when it was transparent that Iraqi forces had no intent to employ any online security measures. Among the social media propaganda/threats posted by ISIL were live videos of executions and burials of soldiers, as a form of recruitment, and a way to destroy the morale of the opposition. Disposable Twitter accounts aided in the issuing of commands and sharing of intelligence via phone, laptop, and drone (Maxey, 2017).

Not only did social media assist in their victory over the ISF, but it provided proof that ISIL was a strong, modernized organization, who now had control over another major city, the capital of the northern province of Nineveh, following the seizure of Raqqa in Syria. The defeat of Iraqi troops exposed the true strength of ISIL as a force to be reckoned with and pinned Mosul as a stronghold for ISIL terrorist activity, due to its size and its location in Iraq.

Life under the Islamic State

Brutality

Once their military campaign in Mosul ceased, ISIL began to solidify their power through a widespread terror operation against different, vulnerable groups in the city. Many scholarly sources have shed light on the atrocities in Mosul, but none as comprehensive and insightful as Omar Mohammed's blog *Mosul Eye*. Mohammed's story begins in June 2014. Then a lecturer and graduate student at the University of Mosul, he decided to begin documenting what he saw on his blog under several pseudonyms, the most famous of which was named "The Mosul Eye." Facing the threat of death, he fled to Turkey, and currently resides in France. In Summer 2018 through early 2019, Mohammed will be studying at Yale University as a World Fellow. Thanks to the work of men and women such as Mohammed, the world can now gain valuable insight about life as a civilian under ISIL.

Before delving into ISIL's relationship with the citizens of Mosul, one must understand where the group received its legitimacy to rule. The group derives its authority from a set of texts that say all Muslims have a duty to support the restoration of Sharia law and the Office of the Caliphate. They also appealed to the religiosity of Muslims and anti-western sentiments by refusing "to codify any but the most widely known Islamic legal rules in order to avoid the emulation of modern nation-states" (March & Revkin, 2015). To the people of Iraq, ISIL's Islamic rule and law is not out of the ordinary. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution states, "Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation," and that "No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam" (*Iraq's Constitution of 2005*, 2005). However, this does not mean that the Iraqis do not resist ISIL. The constitution also makes provisions for protecting the values of democracy and basic human freedoms. The resistance to

ISIL caused the group to harshly force the Iraqi people, specifically the people of Mosul, into compliance and submission.

Early after the capture of Mosul, ISIL began to institute strict laws in the city, while simultaneously committing terrible crimes. Stories of citizens and journalists being arrested for insulting ISIL, breaking the fingers of men caught smoking cigarettes, executions of those who refuse to pay taxes, and the removal of Christians and Shia Muslims were consistently present in the posts on *Mosul Eye* between June and September of 2014 (Mohammed, 2014). The occupation of Mosul started off on June 10th with a shockingly swift series of prison raids, where sympathetic fighters were brought into the ranks and nearly 600 Shiite prisoners were killed on the spot (Robinson, 2017, p. 77). In October of 2015, a report was published on *Mosul Eye* breaking down the executions and punishments issued by the ISIL in September of 2015 day by day. The statistics showed a total of 455 executions during this time, of which the most common charges were blasphemy, apostasy, and spying. There were also 118 public whippings and 118 arrests, each for crimes such as violating the dress code, shaving one's beard, and smoking in public. Most shocking was the amputation of 88 hands for the crime of "thrift." The overwhelming majority of victims were Sunni Muslims (Mohammed, 2015). It can be inferred from the incidents recorded by Mohammed that despite ISIL's appeal to the Muslims of Mosul to accept and support them, many still resisted and rejected the governance of the group. ISIL's response is typical of a terror organization: breaking the human spirit through widespread destruction and murder. Despite the terrible nature of their presence, they managed to slowly make Moslawis unwilling participants in the establishment of their state.

Bureaucracy

Typically, the name ISIL brings about mental pictures of angsty, angry eighteen to thirty-five year old Muslim men carrying guns, driving trucks, waving their flag, and launching intense attacks and executions against combatants and innocents alike. The terrorist organization, however, cannot continued to be viewed as the world's biggest boogeyman, filled with larger than life characters willing to stop at nothing in the name of religious violence (Ryssdal, 2018). Fawaz A. Gerges, author of "ISIS: A History", admits "We dismiss the Islamic State as savage. It is savage. We dismiss it as barbaric. It is barbaric. But at the same time, these people realized the need to maintain institutions" (Callimachi, 2018). Make no mistake about it; Mosul was considered by the international community an Iraqi city occupied by a terrorist organization, but ISIL and many of the people under its control considered itself a legitimate, modern state. A resident of Mosul, by the name of Azzam, grants ISIL high praise: "Administratively they were excellent and ran the state efficiently" (Abdul-Ahad, 2018). The brutality of ISIL has been recorded and their ability to break down the human spirit is well understood. However, few could have predicted the bureaucracy which emerged in Mosul or how it would be used to effectively gain power over the local population.

From the onset of its takeover of Mosul in June of 2014, ISIL had every intention to turn its insurgency into a state. This is revealed in the group's *Madina Document*, which promises to the people of Mosul that "[They] will see by the will of Allah the vast difference between a secular government, that oppresses and confiscates the will and energies of its people and erases their dignity, and our rule, which takes the divine word as a path" (Abdul-Ahad, 2018). Predecessors of ISIL had been operating underground in Mosul for years; organizations like Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq took shelter in Mosul from 2007 - 2012, due to its

status as the largest Sunni city in a Shia-controlled country (Robinson, 2017, p. 73). The Nineveh province, with Mosul as its capital, experienced an 11% rise in its poverty rate during these years, while accounting for 16% of the poor in all of Iraq (p. 75). Despite these difficulties, the value of Mosul remained clear to these terrorist groups. For an Iraqi city, it had the best available economic sectors to profit from and a population of almost 2 million whose labor and land they could exploit (p. 73). Although ISIL disagreed with Iraq's form of government and wished to have extremists revise and its fighters reinforce its own version of Sharia Law, it realized the importance of existing agencies and civil institutions, quickly absorbing these resources and workers into their own administration.

After exerting sovereign, uncontested control over the city, ISIL embedded its leaders in the structure of the Iraqi government, essentially acting as a 'parasite' (Al-Tamimi, 2015). Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, a British specialist on Iraq, describes this relationship as ISIL "thriving off prior infrastructure to continue generating revenue and maintain notions of a functioning state" (Al-Tamimi, 2015). However, the economy of ISIL would rely less on the typical forms of financing associated with terrorist groups, which assumes an over-reliance on oil and military might, and more on existing governmental employees, public services, and Sunni landowners. New York Times foreign correspondent, Rukmini Callimachi, came to this conclusion after collecting approximately 15,000 documents from the period of ISIL's governance of Mosul:

People were obsessed with these exotic forms of financing...[like] black market oil smuggling [and] ransom for hostages. In fact, it was just something much more mundane: It was the dirt under their feet, the people that they controlled who were forced to pay

taxes and the commerce that those people generated, which in turn was also taxed.

(Ryssdal, 2018)

Now, it is true that upon seizing Mosul, ISIL took control of Nineveh's government building, the police headquarters, and the Mosul airport, seizing several arms to distribute to their soldiers, as well as aircraft and heavy equipment to reinforce their presence (Robinson, 2017, p. 77). In addition, they looted an estimated \$429 million from the city's Central Bank, making ISIL the richest terror force in the world (p. 78). Finally, Al Jazeera reports, in the year following the fall of Mosul, the government in Baghdad steadily provided the wages of its state employees, in order to prevent their further suffering as the Iraqi military fought ISIL forces (Beck, 2017). Rather than sit on this wealth and let it waste away, ISIL injected the money into the old administration and eliminated its old officials and rules while expanding its authority, leading to establishment of the new and "improved" state.

Voices rang out over the public speakers in Mosul following ISIL's victory, demanding civil servants to return to their offices and resume their work immediately. They expected the men to show up everyday, properly clothed and groomed, and the women to remain home to take care of children. If there was ever an issue with their appearance or how one conducted themselves in their personal or professional affairs, then the case would be brought to the Ministry of the Hisba, a.k.a. the morality police in Mosul. One receipt found in the department, read, "I, the undersigned, pledge not to cut or trim my beard again. If I do that again, I will be subject to all kinds of punishment the Hisba Center may take against me" (Callimachi, 2018). Missing work was unacceptable, as ISIL replaced the one-day, no pay policy with the promise of imprisonment or much worse. To further encourage attendance, ISIL went as far as to centralize existing offices and to provide a network of transportation services, cutting down the costs for

those who had to travel treacherous routes to get to work (Robinson, 2017, p. 81). One such roadway, in Mosul's eastern industrial park, was built specifically in mind to reduce the commute for city workers and was cleverly nicknamed 'Caliphate Way' (Callimachi, 2018). They ensured every task, even as minimal as street sweeping and trash collection, was carried out to the fullest extent with no houses missed or shifts uncovered. A young 21 year-old street cleaner in an Al Jazeera article, Hatim Jassin, remembers his younger friend asking for time off after his father died. In response, an ISIL leader turned around and shot the young man (Beck, 2017). The most impeding troubles like access to electricity and power outages were fixed promptly by forcefully contracting a team of skilled engineers and technicians to install circuit breakers (Callimachi, 2018). ISIL largely provided power based on economic interests, prioritizing critical facilities like their own base and hospitals rather than residences. In fact, set meters were installed in most neighborhoods, limiting individuals to a set amount of electricity per month (Abdul-Ahad, 2018). Life in Mosul was in no way glorious, but it was impressively efficient up until liberation efforts began in the Fall of 2016, with commercial activity and industrial production persisting (Robinson, 2017, p. 99). Callimachi remarks, "[ISIL] at times offered better services and proved itself more capable than the government it replaced" (Callimachi, 2018).

The two *diwans*, or governmental offices, granted importance in Callimachi's article and the RAND report on economic activity of Mosul under ISIL, were the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of War Spoils. Agricultural output, although profitable, was not the main focus of the new *Diwan al-Zera'a*. ISIL had in its possession 1 million tons of wheat and barley, almost half of Iraq's yearly total (Robinson, 2017, p. 79). The fighting necessary to take Mosul destroyed many fertile fields and chased ethnic and religious minority farmers out of the city,

with a population outflow of 500,000 occurring during ISIL's occupation (p. 73). As the supply for labor and demand of goods remained low, ISIL took the leftover fuel, fertilizer, and seeds, and stockpiled them, patiently waiting for employees in the Ministry of Agriculture to identify properties owned by non-Sunnis and to redistribute them immediately (p. 79). There was a manual for this procedure, entitled *The Caliphate on the Path of Prophecy*, which sought to confiscate the land plots of every "Shia, apostate, Christian, Nusayri, and Yazidi" (Callimachi, 2018). They brought experts out to plot, survey, and record measurements and notes on each property before declaring it to be under the possession of ISIL. Then, ISIL turned around and leased the properties to the Sunni population - even the poor, who entered a sharecropping type situation where they promised to return one-third of their output (Callimachi, 2018). Many of these Sunnis claimed ISIL forced their signatures on the documents. Nonetheless, it is difficult for the existing Iraqi government to assess these individuals' guilt. ISIL was still not done stealing from these families and groups. They swept through homes, searching for the most valuable possessions left behind, rewarding items, such as beds and televisions to ISIL fighters for their loyalty. All items of worth found were reported to the Ministry of War Spoils (Callimachi, 2018). Jassim, the street cleaner, was forced to clean properties in a local Christian town, but recognized that he had "[become] a thief" (Beck, 2017). The theft would not end there, however, as ISIL made its most significant revenue through an ingenious system of taxation.

ISIL's territorial expansion and its impending statehood required a reliable form of financing. A briefcase of the Ministry of Agriculture's administrator, Yasir Issa Hassan, was discovered left behind in his demolished office. Laid out in his documents was a master plan for ISIL to obtain wealth during each part of the supply chain. The first obvious step was collecting rent from the Sunnis who had participated in the land redistribution. When it was time for the

crops to be harvested, they collected another payment. Then, when farmers used ISIL roadways, storage space, or markets, to sell a goods such as grain, another toll would be collected. If grain was processed into flour and sold to another trader, then the process began all over again, until the flour arrived at a shop where both the buyer and the seller were heavily taxed. Millions of dollars from commerce regularly made its way into ISIL's pocket; one of Hassan's spreadsheets from 2015 estimates \$1.9 million was collected in one day for the sale of wheat (Callimachi, 2018). Although the Iraqi military and U.S. led forces tried targeting crop fields and oil installations alike, they could not possibly target ISIL's most lucrative source of profit. The *Zakat*, collected by the Ministry of Charities, is one of the five pillars of Islam. All Muslims are expected to give a generous amount of their income and agricultural output to the mosque, but this is typically a voluntarily motion of good will. ISIL made it a compulsory tax, acting as its own version of the Internal Revenue Service, visiting the homes of individuals who did not comply. The ratio of money earned from the *Zakat*, compared to oil, was 6:1 (Callimachi, 2018).

Although ISIL would inevitably face the military response of the Iraqi and U.S. armies in one of the most brutal battles of the 21st century, with Moslawis continuing to endure a horrendous amount of suffering, for a short time ISIL realized its own dream. Against all odds, ISIL declared its own caliphate, established its own state, and acted like one under its own interpretation of Islam.

Battle of Mosul

The Battle of Mosul, a campaign planned to reclaim Mosul from ISIL occupation, launched on October 16, 2016 by a combination of Iraq and Kurdish Peshmerga governments, with a backing from an international United States-led coalition. With assistance from U.S. troops, weaponry, and plotted attacks, the ISF and Peshmerga militaries pushed towards Mosul,

beginning to recover villages surrounding the urban center. ISIL fighters fought back utilizing typical asymmetrical warfare tactics, such as car bombs and suicide bombers (Walsh, Blau, Grinberg, & Hume, 2016). Despite movements growing nearer to the center of Mosul being met with increased gunfire from ISIL, ISF and Peshmerga forces marched onwards, reporting to have retaken 40% of the Nineveh province within the first three to four days of the coalition (Alsumaria, 2016). ISF and Peshmerga militants continued liberating villages and towns occupying the outskirts of Mosul, including Bazwaya, located about a mile from the city itself.

The battle for the city was set to begin November 1, 2016. Iraqi forces advanced into eastern Mosul, with more assistance from U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, and were greeted by ISIL tire fires, an attempt to shield their visibility (RFERL, 2016). After recapturing East Mosul, the next phase of the battle was to take place in West Mosul, as announced by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on February 19, 2017 (Karimi, Alkhshali, & Atassi, 2017). ISF and Peshmerga counterterrorist troops collapsed on Central Mosul from multiple sides and began the fight to finally reclaim the ISIL stronghold. The final ISIL pocket in Mosul had fallen to Iraqi Security Forces by June 21, 2017, marking a victory for the Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga government forces, and the falling of ISIL in Mosul (BBC, 2017). The regaining of Mosul, one of the largest ISIL strongholds, proved to be a huge step in the process of eradicating the terrorist organization. The fall of ISIL's stronghold in Raqqa, Syria followed not long after Mosul, trampling two of ISIL's largest territories. Following these losses, ISIL was reduced to a pitiful 3% of the territory it originally held in Iraq and Syria (Callimachi, 2018). They held on for dear life to the fading idea of this caliphate and an Islamic state, leaving almost the entire city in ruins. The warfare raged in the Battle for Mosul was so intense that it had been compared to the "worst combat of World War II" (Callimachi, 2018). Thousands were left homeless and mass graves were

hurriedly prepared for the dead. Despite the death and devastation to the people of Mosul, the objective of the international community was met and ISIL was ousted from its stronghold, and its state obliterated. This left the once victorious terrorist weaker than it had been in recent years, with its statehood shattered.

Conclusion

The study of ISIL's rise and fall from June 2014 to June 2017 proves the significance of Mosul and its role as the most important stronghold within all of ISIL's territory. ISIL attempted to establish itself as a legitimate ruler in Mosul by appealing Muslims claiming it was their religious duty to support the establishment of a modern caliphate and Sharia Law in the territory. Through the work of Omar Mohammed and his blog *Mosul Eye*, the physical brutality used by ISIL to force the Moslawis into submission under the new caliphate was displayed to a worldwide audience. Despite this horrific brutality, the true impressive feat was the dense and elaborate bureaucracy that emerged in Mosul, followed by ISIL's experimentation with the operations of a state. ISIL took the abilities and expertise of civil servants and inserted discipline, higher expectations, and unconventional strategies to streamline public services and make a profit on nearly every good produced. In the end, although it was removed by the ISF and the U.S. led-coalition, ISIL's governance of Mosul was measurably more efficient and effective than that of the Iraqi government, proving the legitimacy of their intent to become an Islamic state. Without Mosul, this goal would have never come to fruition.

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