“‘In the Shade of the Khilafa’: The Rise of Jihadism in Mosul”

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‘In the Shade of the Khilafa’[1]: The Rise of Jihadism in Mosul

Introduction

FROM THE MOMENT it was captured, Mosul was the heart of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In the summer of 2014, shortly after the city fell to the group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi chose its Great Mosque of al-Nuri as the site from which to proclaim the establishment of his caliphate. Mosul dwarfed in size any other city the group captured and held, and comprised the group’s principal tax base. Its fall convinced the West of the scale of the threat posed by the group. And as the Iraqi government’s gruelling nine-month battle to recapture the city drew to a close in mid-2017, the jihadists’ decision to topple the Great Mosque was hailed as “the end of the Da’esh state.”[2]

A number of recent studies have sought to portray Mosul’s population as being somehow at odds with ISIL. An article by Tallha Abdulrazaq and Gareth Stansfield, for example, suggests Sunni Arabs worked with the group only because they had “nowhere else to turn” and asserts that “extremist groups claiming to represent Sunnis such as [ISIL] have never been friends or protectors of Sunni Arabs.”[3] Another recent article, by Mathilde Becker Aarseth, explores the “resistance” of Mosul’s schools to reforms introduced by ISIL, but her study not only fails to make ethnic or sectarian distinctions, but begins with the *assumption* that civilians intended to fight the group.[4]

This assumption does not hold up to scrutiny. While it is clear that many Sunni Arabs in Mosul viewed the group with horror and its brutal methods undoubtedly alienated many more with time, ISIL was nevertheless in large part a creation of the city. By 2014, the group already had deep roots in the fabric of its society. Nothing less would have allowed the third largest city in Iraq to fall after just three days of fighting. In fact, the group’s fierce resistance in 2017, the thousands of largely local fighters who fought and died in the rubble of Mosul’s

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[1] From a statement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2016 in which he called on ISIL’s fighters to resist their enemies advancing on Mosul. He asserted these enemies had “dedicated their media, wealth, armies, and vehicles to wage war against the Muslims and the mujahideen in Ninewah Wilayah after seeing it as one of the bases and beacons of Islam in the shade of the Khilafa.”
From: Orton, K. (2016) ‘Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Calls for the Islamic State to Stand Firm in Mosul’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 11 November, accessed 1 May, 2018 at: https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/11/11/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-calls-for-the-islamic-state-to-stand-firm-in-mosul/.

[2] Ramahi, K., Chmaytelli, M. (2017) ‘Iraq declares end of caliphate after capture of Mosul mosque’, Reuters, 29 June, accessed 1 May, 2018 at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul/iraq-declares-end-of-caliphate-after-capture-of-mosul-mosque-idUSKBN19K0YZ.

[3] Abdulrazaq, T., Stansfield, G. (2016) ‘The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul’, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 4, pp. 541-2.

[4] Aarseth, M.B. (2018) ‘Resistance in the Caliphate’s Classrooms: Mosul Civilians vs. IS’, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1.

old city in the searing summer heat, illustrated the fact that ISIL was not merely an extremist fringe group, but the representation of a wide Sunni Arab rebellion.

It is a remarkable fact that this city, which became a bastion of jihadism, had almost no history with this form of political violence before the American-led invasion. This paper sets out to answer the question of how it was able to flourish there in the years after 2003. In order to answer this, the first section of the paper looks beyond 2003, situating the city in its longer-term historical context. Two trends stand out in Mosul's modern history. The first is the strongly nationalist identity of the city's Sunni Arabs, which arose largely due to ethnic and sectarian competition and eventually made the city a Ba'thist stronghold. The second trend is the long-term importance of Islam. While this, too, was sharpened historically by the city's opposition to outsiders, from the 1990s, young, disenchanted Sunni Arabs increasingly turned to politicised Islam to channel their frustrations against their own leadership.

The second section of the paper shows how the rise of jihadism in Mosul in the years between 2003 and 2008 shared many continuities with the city's earlier history. The turbulent years in Mosul following the invasion were defined principally by aggressive competition between Sunni Arabs and Kurds. However, the nationalism of earlier years appeared to many discredited due to the Ba'thists' defeat, and increasingly Sunni Arabs turned to jihadism instead. Crucially, the paper argues that this form jihadism functioned in much the same ways as nationalism had before it — jihadism flourished as a shared culture, defined by identity politics and ultimately aimed at the capture of political power within a given territory. This not only illuminates the nature of the Iraqi jihad, as a localised struggle at odds with the global jihad envisioned by foreign groups such as al-Qaeda, but it also highlights the malleability of jihadism. It may be taken up by members within a community to challenge its authority, but it may also come to define that community in opposition to others, in the same manner as nationalism. Finally, the third section illustrates how, in the years after 2008, the jihadists were ultimately able to prevail over the city's nationalists.

The roots of jihadism before 2003

Mosul had always been a frontier city. At the northern tip of the Arab world, it faced not only Ottoman power but had also once defended the Sunni orthodoxy against the Shi'ite Safavids, and was more immediately surrounded by a mosaic of ethnic and sectarian communities. To understand how Mosul became a centre of jihadism after the US invasion in 2003, it is necessary to situate the city in its historical context. This section will study two broad, correlating themes in Mosul's modern history that would in time allow for jihadism to flourish. The first relates to Mosul's history as a centre of Arab nationalism, which arose as a result of its frontier status, while the second is the enduring importance of Islam in the city and the turn by a younger generation of Sunni Arabs from the 1990s onwards towards a more politicised Islam.

Toward the end of the Ottoman period, Mosul was a thriving commercial town on the western bank of the Tigris. The north and east of the Mosul vilayet (the wider Ottoman administrative district) were largely Kurdish, with smaller Assyrian and Shabak communities among them; the Yazidis were concentrated to the city's west, while the towns and villages

along the road to Baghdad were predominantly Turkmen.[5] The city itself, was dominated by Sunni Arabs, who were used to playing a leading role in Iraqi political and economic life, in part due to Ottoman support, but also due to their links to extensive Arab mercantile networks across the Levant.[6] Early on, this community was characterised by a strong sense of shared identity, both ethnically as Arabs and religiously as Muslims. This identity, which increasingly became associated with Arab nationalism, would be reasserted periodically whenever it felt its interests threatened.

Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism is, first and foremost, a practical phenomenon. It arises not from "sentiment or sentimentality, atavistic or not, well-based or myth-founded," but as a result of "genuine, objective, practical necessity, however obscurely recognised."[7] In particular, he writes, its intention is to protect power and wealth where they are unequally allocated within a given territory. So long as there is some pre-existing difference between societies, primarily based on *culture*, the disadvantaged society may find "national expression", allowing it to gain autonomy and protect its interests.[8] In this manner, Arab nationalism emerged in the nineteenth century in opposition to the infringement of the more advanced Ottomans, and later European colonial powers. Nationalism also has a secondary advantage of allowing more privileged groups to exclude disadvantaged groups. In Mosul's case, it became the means by which to assert the urban elite's dominance in the face of the range of ethnic and sectarian minorities surrounding it, most prominently the Kurds.

Mosul has a long history of ethnic and sectarian tensions. In 1854, the city's Muslims attacked Christians and Jews in riots instigated by the heads of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri and largely motivated by economic and political concerns. The Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms threatened the power of the city's Sunni Arab elites, who feared Christians would profit at their expense. Further violence broke out in 1909, when the Young Turk Revolution again raised the spectre of reform that might have challenged Sunni Arab power. In this case, a demonstration organised by the city's elite turned into a massacre, apparently along ethnic lines. Sheikh Said, a Qadiriya Sufi leader from the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniyah, was killed along with 24 of his entourage, in addition to an estimated 50 others.[9]

Following the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the vilayet's future was initially uncertain. Though promised to the French under the Sykes-Picot agreement, the British later took it under their mandate, while the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres designated it part of an "autonomous Kurdish region." The League of Nations sent a commission to grapple with its complex identities, and though it would ultimately award the territory to Iraq, it found little trace of an Iraqi identity, but did note growing Kurdish national consciousness and among the Sunni Arab elite, "an Arab feeling, with chauvinistic and often anti-alien tendencies".[10] Nevertheless, this elite found it was able to embrace the Iraqi state so long as the state was founded on Arab nationalist ideals, thereby ensuring their own privileged status. To this end, many from the

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[5] McDowall, D. (2004) *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 144.

[6] Marr, P. (2012) *The Modern History of Iraq*, Third Edition, Colorado: Westview Press, pp. 15.

[7] Gellner, E. (1965) *Thought and Change*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 157.

[8] Gellner, pp. 166-8.

[9] Shields, S.D. (2000) *Mosul Before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells*, New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 58-62.

[10] Shields, S.D. (2009) 'Mosul, the Ottoman legacy and the League of Nations', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 227.

community joined the central government's military and bureaucracy, and it projected itself as "Arabism's historic sanctuary".[11]

Very quickly, Mosul's Sunni Arab community also demonstrated a willingness to take action to protect their vision of Iraq. In 1937, for example, the predominantly Sunni Arab officers corps in the city organised the assassination of the Kurdish general Bakr Sidqi after he seized power of Iraq in a coup. Not only was Sidqi a Kurd, but he had an anti-Arab nationalist agenda, intending to realign Iraq more closely with Iran and Turkey. He was shot dead by a soldier as he was passing through Mosul en route to Turkey.[12]

There was greater bloodshed in 1959, when again the city's Sunni Arabs took action to defend their interests. The leftist Abd al-Karam Qasim had recently come to power with the backing of both the nationalists and the communists, but he soon alienated the nationalists by rejecting their aspiration to bring Iraq into the Egyptian-led United Arab Republic. The nationalists also opposed Qasim's close alliance with the Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani. As a result, in March that year, as the communists were organising an enormous rally in Mosul, the Sunni Arab elite decided to stage a revolt. It was a spectacular miscalculation. Kurdish militants poured into the city, invoking "self-defence against Arab chauvinism" and even recalling the killing of the Kurdish Sheikh Said half a century earlier.[13] As Sunni Arabists fought Kurdish and Christian leftists, and an array of other ethnic, sectarian, and class-based scores were settled, Mosul offered "a stark glimpse of what might be in store for a 'new' Iraq if order were not restored with a firm hand."[14]

Arab nationalists found themselves ascendant again under Ba'thist leadership from 1968 onward. Under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, 'Arabisation' was implemented in Mosul's wider Ninewa governorate, displacing Kurds and resettling areas with Arab tribesmen.[15] As the city's Sunni Arab community benefited from the regime, it in turn helped to fill the Ba'th party and Iraqi army cadres. Overall, the governorate is believed to have contributed more than 300,000 recruits to the military, security and intelligence services under Saddam,[16] and by 2003, the city was reportedly home to as many as 1,100 generals.[17] In asserting its nationalism, the Sunni Arab community was therefore successful in keeping at bay the other ethnic and sectarian communities in the surrounding area and maintaining its privileged status.

To a degree, Mosul's frontier status had also reinforced Sunni Arabs' sense of religious identity. Throughout the Ottoman period, when it stood on the frontline in the struggle with the Shi'ite Safavids, the city's mosques had been the city's most familiar institutions, some of them monumental structures built by notable families as a demonstration of their piety.[18] Omar Mohammad, a self-described historian from Mosul who gained international attention

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[11] International Crisis Group (ICG) (2009) 'Iraq's New Battlefront: The Struggle over Ninewa', International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September, pp. 2.

[12] Marr, pp. 48.

[13] McDowall, pp. 304.

[14] Marr, pp. 91-92.

[15] ICG, pp. 2.

[16] Hamilton, E. (2008) 'The Fight for Mosul', Institute for the Study of War, Iraq Report 8, pp. 4.

[17] Cockburn, P. (2004) 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26, No. 6, 18 March, accessed 19 April, 2018 at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n06/patrick-cockburn/diary.

[18] Shields (2000), pp. 23.

detailing ISIL's years in power on his blog *Mosul Eye*, describes the city as having "an old religious heritage and history," in which Sunni Islam was crucial "in forming the city's identity."[19]

Through much of the twentieth century, however, this identity was eroded, as the nationalists, and particularly the secular Ba'thists, viewed excessive religiosity with suspicion, and political Islam was banned. The Muslim Brotherhood had been present in Iraq since the late 1940s, and even founded a political party, the Iraqi Islamic Party, in 1960, but under Ba'thist rule this was forced into exile.[20] In fact, for the next two decades, there are few indications of even an underground Islamist presence in Iraq, and it was not until the 1990s that a noticeable shift began to take place. The most outward demonstration of this was the Faith Campaign that Saddam's regime itself initiated. The intentions and effects of this campaign remain a matter of debate, although it is generally agreed that the campaign was "instrumental, rather than an expression of Saddam's personal beliefs."[21] Having suffered spectacular defeat in the Gulf War and with the economy in crisis, the number of Sunni Arabs that still had faith in the Ba'thist ideology was dwindling, and Saddam sought greater legitimacy in Islam. 'God is great' was emblazoned on the Iraqi flag, hundreds of new mosques were opened, and a theological university founded.[22] Saddam even claimed to have donated 28 litres of his own blood to produce a hand-written Koran for the Mother of all Battles mosque, whose minarets were shaped like Scud missiles.[23]

The Faith Campaign was not aimed at promoting Islamism, which the regime continued to suppress, but it did nevertheless reflect the growing popularity of Islamism. As Atziam Baram writes, the "about-face for a relatively secular regime" was largely because it had recognised that "a new zeitgeist was filling the horizon — Islam."[24] Realising that large segments of the population were "returning" to religion, Saddam sought to take advantage of its popularity to bolster his own image. This probably further discredited the Ba'th party for many young Sunni Arabs who already questioned the party's ideological coherence. For them, having witnessed the defeat inflicted by the US and its allies and subsequently suffering the brunt of Iraq's economic crisis, Islam offered a more meaningful alternative. In some ways, it was the only possible alternative, as under Saddam's repressive rule, the mosque was the only institution "relatively immune to regime and party control."[25]

The majority of those who turned to Islamism were probably attracted to the more moderate thought of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. According to Baram, the Iraqi

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[19] Mohammed, O. (2016) 'This is how we, the Mosulis, resisted the caliphate', *Mosul Eye*, 4 November, accessed 26 April 2018 at: https://mosul-eye.org/2016/11/04/%E2%80%8Bthis-is-how-we-the-mosulis-resisted-the-caliphate/.

[20] Fuller, G.E. (2003) 'Islamist Politics in Iraq after Saddam Hussein', United States Institute of Peace, August, Special Report 108, pp. 8, 9.

[21] Helfont, S. (2014) 'Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba'thist Regime's Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 352.

[22] Fuller, pp. 10.

[23] Smucker, P. (2001) 'Iraq builds 'Mother of all Battles' mosque in praise of Saddam', *The Telegraph*, 28 July, accessed 24 April 2018 at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1335735/Iraq-builds-Mother-of-all-Battles-mosque-in-praise-of-Saddam.html.

[24] Baram, A. (2005) 'Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq', United States Institute of Peace, April, Special Report 134, pp. 10.

[25] Baram, pp. 10.

Muslim Brother Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid was particularly influential in the years before 2003. His writing was banned by Saddam but would have made its way to Baghdad through Jordan. Baram writes that his thought tread “a thin line between preaching nonviolence and advocating violence.”[26] For the most part, he called on Iraq’s Sunnis to preach peacefully, strengthening Muslim society from below, arguing that in this manner, they would be serving to fight “the parties of atheism today and the governments of infidelity.” However, Rashid also argued that armed jihad was ultimately the way of the true Muslim. The greatest jihad, he wrote, was where the “Muslim will fight with desire, enthusiasm, and love for sacrifice, hoping for death for Allah, happy for it and rushing towards it.”[27] While his writing therefore gave Islamists a mission in a highly repressive state in which political activism was not possible, it also provided a rationale for violent jihad should those constraints be lifted.

While al-Rashid was probably only read by smaller intellectual circles, a larger number of Iraqis would have had access to Islamist video and audio material trickling across the border from Jordan and Syria. Syrian Islamist groups later recalled dispatching video material of sermons and “martial arts fighting” into Iraq in the years before the US-led invasion, and said that young Iraqis, including some from Mosul, had arrived in Syria seeking their teaching.[28]

This trend was not unique to Mosul, and it is difficult to know how popular Islamism really was in the city before 2003. However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that it was capturing the imagination of at least a few. Baram, for example, notes the case of Ahmad Hasan Ibrahim, a young Maslawi who would later be killed fighting American forces. His father was “an upper-middle-class merchant who had prospered under the Ba’th regime,” but Ahmad, during his engineering studies in university, became increasingly religious, reading the Quran compulsively and fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. He also began to curse relatives “for listening to songs on television”, suggesting a salafist influence.[29] Another example was Muhammad Khalaf Shakar, later a prominent figure in al-Qaeda in Iraq. Another Maslawi, he gravitated toward salafism as early as 1997 while serving in the Special Republican Guard. He left the military shortly afterward and returned to Mosul, before later joining Ansar al-Islam, at that time based in the Kurdistan region.[30]

This early turn toward political Islam did not share the causes that had made Arab nationalism such a prominent feature in Mosul. The embrace of nationalism had rested upon cultural difference, whereas these Islamists were creating divisions within a society that was, to use Gellner’s terms, “culturally homogeneous.” Instead, it was being taken up by a disenchanted youth against their own leaders. It was a far cry from the greatly expanded role it would have in the years to come.

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[26] Baram, pp. 10.

[27] Baram, pp. 11.

[28] Abdul-Ahad, G. (2005) ‘From here to eternity’, *The Guardian*, 8 June, accessed 25 April, 2018 at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida.

[29] Baram, pp. 14.

[30] Orton, K. (2017) ‘The Third Deputy of the Islamic State: Muhammad Khalaf Shakar’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 12 November, accessed 24 April 2018 at: https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2017/11/12/the-third-deputy-of-the-islamic-state-muhammad-khalaf-shakar/.

The emergence of jihadism, 2003 to 2008

It did not take long for Sunni Arabs to revolt in the wake of the US-led invasion in March 2003 that toppled Saddam Hussein. In the Ba'thist state, their privileged status had been ensured; now, not only was that lost, but they also suffered the humiliation of foreign occupation and the prospect of long-term Shi'ite dominance.[31] One former officer described how all his life he had been proud to be a Ba'thist, whereas after the invasion it suddenly became "some sort of disease".[32] The Coalition Provisional Authority's decision to disband the army in May that year — initially without pension or severance pay — was the final straw, driving many to the conclusion they had no choice but to take up arms.[33]

But while insurgency flared elsewhere across the country, Mosul remained relatively quiet. On 11 April, Iraq's 5th army corps surrendered without a fight, and the American 101st airborne division, under the command of then-Major General David Petraeus, entered the city from the south, while Kurdish Peshmerga — militia forces whose name means 'those who face death' — swept in from the north.[34] As in most Iraqi cities, there was initially a period of chaos, for which the Peshmerga appeared to have been largely responsible. One resident recalled those days as terrifying, with no Iraqi security forces on the streets. "It was a state of anarchy, and there were Kurds from the Peshmerga looting banks and stealing cars."[35]

Petraeus quickly recognised the city's ethnic sensitivities and ordered that the Peshmerga be disarmed and removed from the city's contentious areas. He recruited locals for a reinstated police force and formed a provincial council that was notably inclusive, reflecting the ethnic and sectarian make-up of Ninewa governorate.[36] A former army general and Sunni Arab, Sultan al-Basso, was appointed governor, while a senior figure in the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), Khasro Goran, was to serve as his deputy. Petraeus was prudent in his use of military force, quick to restore public services and infrastructure, and he initiated a number civil projects. For almost a year, Mosul was almost stable, even if it experienced some violence. The experience suggests that had there been greater care in dealing with the governorate's complex society, the bloodletting of later years might have been avoided.

As it was, the 101st airborne division departed the city in February 2004 and almost immediately things began to fall apart. A smaller American force was deployed, the 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, which used military force aggressively, conducting night raids that alienated the local population. Petraeus' civil projects were abandoned.[37] However, the greatest problem was the increasing power of the Kurds, whose forces were called in by the Americans to compensate for their own light deployment. By the end of the year, Kurds would account for as many as 80 percent of troops in Ninewa governorate.[38]

As they strengthened their military position, the Kurds also began to take on a more active political role. Governor Basso stepped down in March 2004 after he was accused of being a

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[31] Baram, pp. 4.

[32] Baram, pp. 5.

[33] Baram, pp. 5.

[34] ICG, pp. 4.

[35] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 529.

[36] ICG, pp. 5.

[37] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 531.

[38] ICG, pp. 5.

Ba'thist, and his Kurdish deputy, Goran, became increasingly powerful. The Kurds aimed to reverse the process of Arabisation under Saddam through their own process of Kurdisation, often using Peshmerga forces to aid in this process. The tipping point in Arab-Kurdish relations came when Basso's successor, Usama Kashmula, another Sunni Arab, was assassinated in July. According to International Crisis Group, his killing "marked the derailment of the local political process and the onset of Ninewa's tragic descent into violence."[39] Kashmula's cousin, Durayd Kashmula, was brought in as his replacement, but he would never emerge from the shadow of Goran. Sunni Arabs felt control over Ninewa was slipping from them, and they took up arms.

At least initially, Ba'thists played the leading role in the growing insurgency. By some estimates, there were as many as 7,100 former officers and 103,000 former soldiers in circulation across Ninewa, the majority "unemployable" under the new regime.[40] But while they formed "the core" of the insurgency, from the beginning they were supported by local Islamist groups taking up jihad. There was some crossover between the two, although generally Ba'thists continued to view politicised Islam with suspicion. The jihadists, meanwhile, recruited from the governorate's poorer Sunni Arab youth.[41] This segment of the population saw little appeal in a return to Ba'thist rule, which for them represented a morally corrupt leadership that had already been defeated twice by the US and its allies. Jihadism appealed to many adherents precisely because of its anti-patriarchal character, allowing young men "to gain positions of power and authority in their organisations."[42]

However, there are more obvious reasons jihadism became the main ideological alternative to Ba'thism. Omar Mohammad, author of *Mosul Eye*, remembers watching the preacher of a mosque give a sermon the day American forces arrived in Mosul. While Ba'thist soldiers were still on the streets, the preacher spoke of "the duty to defend Iraq against the American population," but later, as American soldiers drove into the neighbourhood, he suddenly began to cry out that it was "the day of freedom" as he condemned the "tyrannical" Saddam.[43] Whatever the anecdote says about the actual views of the preacher, it illustrates the continuity of the mosque as a central institution of Sunni Arab society. In fact it was about the only one, as in three decades of Ba'thist rule, virtually all other non-Ba'thist political and social institutions had been eliminated. As such, it was almost inevitable Sunni Arabs would turn to mosques and religious figures for "guidance and identity" in the aftermath of the invasion.[44]

Of course, the international element was also important. For the global jihadist movement, which had suffered significant setbacks in Afghanistan after 2001, Iraq became the new rallying point, portrayed as the most important battleground in the fight against the "Jewish-Crusader alliance".[45] This was not only due to the symbolic significance of American violence

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[39] ICG, pp. 5.

[40] Hamilton, pp. 4.

[41] ICG, pp. 5.

[42] Lia, B. (2016) 'Jihadism in the Arab world after 2011: Explaining its expansion', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 23, No. 4., pp. 87.

[43] Mohammed, O. (2018) 'Two Caliphates Fall, Mosul Survives', *Mosul Eye*, 18 March, accessed 26 April 2018 at: https://mosul-eye.org/2018/03/19/two-caliphates-fall-mosul-survives/.

[44] Baram, pp. 12.

[45] Hegghammer, T. (2006) 'Global Jihadism after the Iraq War', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 18.

perpetrated against Muslims in the Islamic heartland, but also because of clear tactical advantages. Jihadists from across the Arab world, and particularly the Gulf, could easily slip across the porous border from Syria and come face-to-face with American soldiers in a hostile environment. Mosul, not far from the Syrian border, was often their first destination. The Institute for the Study of War noted in 2008: “Foreign fighters and future suicide bombers are given instructions on how to get to Mosul and from there link up with the network that then funnels them south into central Iraq.”[46] Mosul was also important for global jihadists because it was a commercial hub; jihadist financiers traveled back and forth between the city and Syria, and its banks were able to receive wire transfers from abroad.[47]

But while global jihadists played an important role in shaping the jihadist insurgency in its early years, they were only able to operate in Iraq due to the shelter and support they received from the country’s Sunni Arab population, and particularly its local jihadists. These insurgents, who eagerly accepted the weapons and funds that came from abroad, probably always outnumbered the foreign fighters, and its ranks rapidly began to grow. Omar Mohammed writes that in a very short time after the invasion, jihadism came to dominate Sunni Arab society in Mosul. Its ideas and language, that is, its *culture*, began “to permeate everyday life”. Jihadist principles, he writes, became “part of Mosul society’s basics and habits,” while the city’s daily vocabulary “revolved around ‘jihad’, ‘redemption’ and ‘martyrdom’.” He writes that the city’s poets began to compose poetry praising jihadists and even the cars they used in their suicide missions. The Opel Vectra was presented “as the new war-steed, and its driver as the knight.”[48]

The security situation was already deteriorating when, in October 2004, the main US force in Mosul, the 1st Stryker Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, deployed one of its battalions to Fallujah to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the global jihadist group led by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. With Mosul’s defences down, AQI fighters slipped north into the city. The attacks escalated, until, on 11 November, some 4,000 police officers deserted their posts and the insurgents, led by local and foreign jihadists, suddenly found themselves in control of Iraq’s third largest city. In the subsequent chaos, the jihadists even appointed a policy chief to oversee the city, though they did not yet have the institutional capabilities necessary for running such a large and complex society. Mostly, they channeled their anger toward Sunni Arabs’ principal opponents through brute violence, the Kurds, whom jihadists were able to brand infidels due to the influence of Sufism in their religious practices. Abdulrazaq writes: “In a harbinger of the brutality that was to come at the hands of ISIS in 2014, Zarqawi and his AQI operatives claimed responsibility for a number of beheadings of police officers, Kurdish fighters guarding Kurdish party offices, and others in Mosul.”[49] A Kurdish commander said at the time that he believed 95 percent of the Mosul’s Arab population was helping the insurgents.[50]

Even if one allows for the likely bias of a Kurdish officer in Mosul at that time, it is clear the insurgency had widespread support among Mosul’s Sunni Arabs. As noted, the central

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[46] Hamilton, pp. 18.

[47] Hamilton, pp. 18.

[48] Mohammed (2018).

[49] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 532.

[50] Glass, C. (2004) ‘Diary’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26 No. 24, 16 December, accessed 19 April, 2018 at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n24/charles-glass/diary.

importance of religion, the lack of alternative institutions and ideologies, the attraction of anti-patriarchalism, and international support all fed into the astonishing rise of jihadism in Mosul after 2003. But while this rise marked in many ways a historical discontinuity, what is striking about the violence of late 2004 was its *continuity* with Mosul's past, for it reflected the same ethnic struggle that had defined so much of Mosul's modern history. While politicised Islam had at one point been used to reflect the disenchantment of young Sunni Arabs with their own leadership, after 2003, jihadism began to define this community in opposition to *others*. In short, it was now performing the same function as had nationalism before it.

Jihadism, in this sense, aligns closely with Gellner's understanding of nationalism. Within Mosul, Sunni Arabs and Kurds found themselves competing for power and influence, but after Kashmula's assassination in mid-2004, it appeared as though the Kurds were winning this contest. Sunni Arabs found themselves united by their "shared exclusion from privilege".[51] Whereas in the past, they had turned to Arab nationalism, later exemplified by Ba'thism, these ideologies were for many discredited, and so they were turned instead to their other unifying feature, Islam. Gellner emphasised that his model referred strictly to nationalism and not other kinds of "group loyalty and sentiment." However, nationalism is mostly distinct for Gellner because membership is defined first and foremost by 'culture'.[52] In Mosul, Omar Mohammad demonstrates how not only Islam but jihadism itself had become the common culture of much of the Sunni Arab community.

Of course, nationalism is also based on the idea of political power within a given territory. The global jihadists who arrived in Iraq from 2003 onward had little interest in holding onto territory or achieving state power; they were interested principally in sustaining the fight against the US and its allies. But the attempt by jihadists in November 2004 to take control of Mosul suggested that the struggle was very much about gaining local control. In fact, viewing the Iraqi jihad in this manner, it is clear that local jihadists bore far greater resemblance to nationalist and separatist movements that had employed Islamism as an ideological framework in the 1980s and 1990s than they did to global jihadists.[53] Hegghammer notes that in practice "the distinction between global and local jihadists is often difficult to make," as both often use anti-Western language and even groups with a "primarily nationalist agenda" may attack Western targets in places such as Iraq.[54]

In Iraq, however, popular support was clearly for a struggle with localised aims. It was easy for local jihadists to idealise themselves as global jihadists because they were fighting on what al-Qaeda viewed as the most important battlefront, but in truth the majority of these insurgents would only ever fight in their own immediate environment for extremely localised purposes. While few likely had a clearly defined notion of a future Islamic state, their aim was to create real political power for Sunni Arabs within a given territory, based on their common culture. From a relatively early point, it is therefore possible to discern the tension between the global jihadist movement and local jihadists. Two years later, this would be further underlined when the Iraqi Abu Omar al-Baghdadi would take over the leadership of AQI following Zarqawi's death, and, merging several groups, rename it the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), clearly signalling its intention to capture territory.

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[51] Gellner, pp. 167.

[52] Gellner, pp. 172.

[53] Hegghammer, pp. 13.

[54] Hegghammer, pp. 15.

After the 2004 insurgency, American forces and thousands of Peshmerga were able to restore the semblance of order in Mosul, but the mere fact that the US sought Kurdish support indicated how little had been learnt. The major trends that had given rise to jihadism continued more or less uninterrupted. After Peshmerga were withdrawn, the Iraqi army deployed its 2nd and 3rd divisions, forces that were almost entirely Kurdish. A report in 2006 highlighted the ongoing problem of "the overrepresentation of Kurds in units deployed in this predominantly Arab city." Most came from Kurdish areas, did not speak Arabic, and many "had Kurdish flags sewn on the shoulders of their camouflage uniforms, even though the practice is against regulations."[55] Across the governorate, the Kurds continued to pursue a policy of Kurdisation, and the decision of Sunni Arabs to boycott the 2005 provincial elections only strengthened the Kurds' position.[56]

As the insurgency persisted, Baghdad also sent the so-called Wolf Brigade to the city. This heavily Shi'ite force was viewed in Mosul as an "essentially sectarian force targeting Sunni Arabs."[57] Until this point, Mosul had had little direct experience with the sectarian Sunni-Shi'ite tensions so central to the conflict elsewhere in Iraq, but the Wolf Brigade's gratuitous violence and mass arrests soon changed this. Amid the instability, the economy failed to recover, and by 2006, unemployment was estimated to stand at around 40 percent. Young men were left "little to do but fight or turn to crime."[58] Many of these headed straight to the jihadist groups, where they had a greater chance of rising through the ranks. In much of Ninewa governorate and Sunni Arab areas of Mosul, including almost all the city's west, insurgents remained in control. The Ba'thists at this time were probably the dominant force, but ISI and other jihadist groups were increasingly successful engaging in mafia-like operations, including protection and extortion rackets, claiming "taxes" from local businesses, and kidnappings for ransom.[59]

Through 2007, American forces were able to roll back ISI in a concerted military effort known as the "surge", a strategy greatly assisted by the creation of so-called Awakening Councils across Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland, essentially buying the support of Arab tribes to fight Ba'thist and jihadist groups. Many insurgents fell back on Mosul, which by 2008 had become their last remaining haven. Mosul remained out of reach in part because it was deemed too difficult to create an Awakening Council there that would not support the insurgency. Then-Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki said any council in the city "would be dominated by the same people who had created the problems in the city in the first place."[60]

Despite this, in May 2008, a major operation was initiated to clear Mosul. Hundreds of arrests were made as the Iraqi army rolled through the city in full force. Rather than fight, the insurgents chose to avoid direct confrontations; they simply disappeared. Importantly, Ba'thists realised that Maliki's government was interested in pushing Kurds out of Ninewa governorate too, and, sensing an opportunity to reassert their own authority, they decided for

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[55] Hernandez, N. (2006) 'Mosul Makes Gains Against the Chaos', *The Washington Post*, 2 February, accessed 22 April, 2018 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/01/AR2006020102235.html.

[56] ICG, pp. 7.

[57] ICG, pp. 6.

[58] Hernandez.

[59] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 536.

[60] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 536.

the first time in years to engage politically. Violence dropped in the city, and many hoped the Sunni Arab insurgency had at last come to an end. However, the Ba'thists' decision to engage in politics was a significant gamble. For if it did not bring clear returns for the Sunni Arabs of Mosul and the wider Ninewa governorate, the jihadists would surely return.

Toward a jihadist takeover, 2008 to 2014

From late 2008 onward, the traditional elite of Mosul's Sunni Arab community, mostly led by secular nationalists, sought to take control of Ninewa through political means. They were encouraged by Maliki's government, which sought to build an alliance with Sunni Arabs with "deep-seated feuds" with the Kurds. Former Ba'thist officers, such as Hassan al-Luhaibi, who had led the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, as well as tribal leaders, such as Sheikh Abdullah al-Humaidi, head of the powerful Shammar tribe in Ninewa's west, were brought together to form the al-Hadbaa party. It was led by Atheel al-Nujayfi, head of an established Maslawi mercantile family, who had once supplied pure-breed Arabian horses to Saddam Hussein's sons.[61] Al-Hadbaa was based on a strongly localised identity and was vehemently opposed to the Kurds.

At least initially, Ninewa's wider Sunni Arab population was willing to support their project. They were exhausted by five years of violence and economic turmoil, and the extortion and kidnappings by jihadists had cost these groups a great deal of popular support. As a result, Arab Sunnis voted in the January 2009 provincial elections in droves, sweeping al-Hadbaa to power, with 19 of 37 provincial seats. Their intention was to bring Ba'thists back into mainstream political and economic institutions, and to turn insurgents into legitimate political actors.[62]

But the Kurds, which had fought the elections under the Ninewa Brotherhood list and won only 12 seats, would not willingly give up their hard fought gains. In April 2009, they withdrew from the provincial council, claiming that al-Hadbaa had not given them their entitled number of government posts. Shortly afterward, Kurdish officials in 16 of Ninewa's 30 administrative sub-units announced their intention to ignore all local government orders.[63] The political process was again being derailed, and Ninewa was being carved up along ethnic lines. Al-Hadbaa appeared increasingly powerless. This was clearly to the advantage of armed insurgents and particularly jihadists who had rejected political engagement with Maliki. As one Ba'thist former officer noted: "As long as the Kurdish threat weighs on Ninewa and its Arab identity, the insurgency will have a raison d'être."[64] Levels of violence soon began to rise.

In addition to conflict with the Kurds, Sunni Arabs were also under increasing pressure from Maliki's Shi'ite-dominated government, whose use of the de-Ba'thification orders and Anti-Terrorism Law was increasingly seen as a sectarian bid to eliminate Sunni Arabs that

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[61] Dagher, S. (2008) 'Fractures in Iraq City as Kurds and Baghdad Vie', *The New York Times*, 27 October, accessed 24 April 2018 at: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/28/world/middleeast/28mosul.html?mtrref=www.google.fr&gwh=173FC7D40F3335DD3217CB36A84C068B&gwt=pay.

[62] ICG, pp. 9.

[63] ICG, pp. 13.

[64] ICG, pp. 14.

might pose a political challenge.[65] There were mass arrests across the country and widespread reports of torture. Amnesty International reported that in 2009, 400 prisoners, most of them from Ninewa, were being held at a secret prison at the former al-Muthanna airport in central Baghdad, where most were subject to torture and other ill-treatment.[66]

As American forces withdrew over the course of 2011, Maliki only became more forceful. In early 2012, he attempted to arrest the Sunni Arab vice-president, Tariq al-Hashimi, who fled to Turkey. When security forces raided the home and office of Sunni Arab finance minister Rafi al-ʻIsawi in December that year, it set off Sunni Arab protests across the country. Maliki responded with further violence and the situation began to spiral out of control. Mosul was one of the centres of the demonstrations and one protester later recalled how soldiers "would insult us, curse us, and call us traitors. I remember in January [2013] they used vans to run us over, and many had to go to hospital."[67]

In the meantime, ISI had grown in power. In April 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had taken control of the group after his predecessor, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed near Tikrit. As early as 2011, he sought to expand his movement into Syria as the country descended into bloody civil war, under the shadowy branch Jabhat al-Nusra. In April 2013, he formally announced the incorporation of this group into the expanded Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

But while ISIL's attention through 2013 was largely focused on consolidating its position in eastern Syria, its base in Iraq, and particularly Mosul, remained crucial. As the political efforts of the Ba'thists floundered, the jihadists thrived. Omar Mohammed writes that the members of ISIL who later took control of Mosul were not outsiders but had been in control of much of the city since at least 2012. Indeed, many had even taken up positions in the city's local police and intelligence forces. The head of Mosul's police station, for example, Colonel Mohammed Khalaf al-Jibouri, was, according to Mohammed, previously "a prominent leader in al-Qaeda." He brought 60 fellow insurgents into the police force with him. Many nationalist factions, such as the al-Mujahideen Army, 1920 Revolution Brigade, the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, also joined the police at this time.[68]

ISIL had by this point developed extensive mafia-like operations across the city that provided it with a steady stream of revenue used to fund its military adventures. Even before Mosul became an official part of ISIL's state, these operations may be seen as an exercise in statebuilding. Charles Tilly argues that state-making is little more than a process of "organised crime," in which nascent governments tax their populations on the promise of security from a threat largely imagined, or at least created, by the government itself — that is, a protection racket.[69] Moreover, in the eyes of many local residents of Mosul, these groups no doubt seemed legitimate, given their fear of Kurds and Shi'ites and their disenchantment with the Sunni Arab nationalist leaders.

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[65] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 526.

[66] Amnesty International (2013) *Iraq: A decades of abuses*, London: Amnesty International, pp. 17.

[67] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 538.

[68] Mohammed, O. (2014b) 'Who are the militiamen spread in Mosul? Where did they come from? And how did they spread so quickly like this?', *Mosul Eye*, 17 July, accessed 26 April 2018 at: https://mosul-eye.org/2014/07/17/who-are-the-militiamen-spread-in-mosul-where-did-they-come-from-and-how-did-they-spread-so-quickly-like-this/.

[69] Tilly, C. (1985) 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in: *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Evans, P, Rueschemeyer, D., Skocpol, T., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 171.

Increasingly, the jihadists and Ba'thists were fighting one another as they vied for control of the city, but the jihadists were in a far stronger position than they had been at the time of the 2004 insurgency. Not only was their mafia-like role strengthening their institutional capabilities and drawing them into Mosul's social fabric, but they also appeared to have infiltrated much of the city's official administration. For instance, Badush prison, just outside Mosul and holding a number of jihadists, was described by Mohammed as being "more like an operations room, training centre and a centre to present allegiance."[70] They also had a steady supply of recruits from impoverished Sunni Arabs youths who had been raised "in an environment of poverty and ignorance."[71] Most had not been particularly religious prior to joining the group, but were "from the common people", merely seeking a regular salary. This was especially true of Sunni Arabs who had had arrived in Mosul from other parts of Ninewa looking for work through the 2000s, particularly from Tel Afar.[72] The group also recruited former criminals in search of repentance.[73]

As a result, by the end of 2013, large parts of Mosul were already divided between the jihadists and Ba'thists, the former dominated by ISIL, the latter by the Men of the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order.[74] When demonstrations escalated across the Sunni Arab heartland in late 2013, ISIL fought alongside nationalists to capture Ramadi and Fallujah. It was clear the government was rapidly losing control. Not long afterward in Mosul, men believed to be with ISIL were seen walking into government offices, speaking with management, and leaving with "bags of money" — another illustration of the extent to which the group had already infiltrated the the city's administration.[75]

Mosul's fall finally came in early June 2014, when an ISIL force advanced on the city from the west. The subsequent claims they would make of their victory — a thousand or so ISIL militants triumphing over two Iraqi army divisions of some 25,000 to 30,000 men — belied the reality that the group already controlled much of the city. As one Mosul resident later described it: "The city fell like a plane without an engine." The insurgents, he said, "were firing their weapons into the air, but no one was shooting at them."[76] In the three-day battle against the Iraqi army, ISIL was aided by other jihadist and Ba'thist factions in the city, until at last, as the order came through to the army to abandon the city's west, soldiers began to desert en masse, taking off their uniforms and fleeing the city. One soldier's account illustrated the degree to which the city's takeover represented more a popular revolt than a military assault. On the morning of 10 June, the commanding officer ordered the soldiers to hand over their weapons to the insurgents and leave the city but before they could carry out

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[70] Mohammed (2014b).

[71] Mohammed, O. (2014a) 'Mosul Eye response to Mr. Foss, a Norwegian journalist', *Mosul Eye*, 2 July, accessed 26 April 2018 at: https://mosul-eye.org/2014/07/02/mosul-eye-reponse-to-mr-foss-a-norwegian-journalist/.

[72] Mohammed (2014b).

[73] Mohammed, O. (2014c) 'Notes that must be mentioned about ISIS members', *Mosul Eye*, 22 July, accessed 27 April 2018 at: https://mosul-eye.org/2014/07/22/notes-that-must-be-mentioned-about-isis-members/.

[74] Mohammed (2014b).

[75] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 539.

[76] Chulov, M. (2014) 'Isis insurgents seize control of Iraqi city of Mosul', *The Guardian*, 10 June, accessed 26 April 2018 at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul.

the order, a crowd of civilians stormed the barracks. “They threw stones at us … and shouted: ‘We don’t want you in our city! You are Maliki’s sons! … You are Safavids! You are the army of Iran!”[77]

In the days after Mosul’s fall, there remained significant tensions between the jihadists and the Ba’thists, whom ISIL considered secular and anti-Islamic. But it was already clear where the balance of power lay. The nationalists had discredited themselves yet again in their political gamble, while the jihadists had succeeded in returning the city to Sunni Arab hands through military force. For a brief moment, Sunni Arabs breathed a sigh of relief, seemingly free in their own city again. Jihadism had flourished in Mosul because it allowed this wider political community to unite around a common culture, ultimately leading to their political empowerment within a territory. When Baghdadi proclaimed the caliphate on 29 June, 2014, the nationalist factions simply melted away.[78]

Conclusion

The flourishing of jihadism in Mosul in the years after 2003 was in some ways a remarkable historical discontinuity: a society that had been dominated by secular elites suddenly turned to violence carried out in the name of Islam. However, situating Mosul in its historical context, continuities appear and the shift appears less radical. Mosul’s modern history had been defined by an ethnic struggle between Sunni Arabs and Kurds, as each community competed for power. Historically this led the Sunni Arabs to become fiercely nationalistic, emphasising their Arabism in order to ensure their continued dominance. But the Ba’thists’ repeated failures, internationally and domestically, not only alienated them from ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq they had already shunned, but also led Sunni Arabs to question their ideological coherence. Increasingly these dissenters turned to a politicised Islam to challenge their leadership.

In the aftermath of the US invasion, the Arab-Kurdish struggle remained the chief issue at stake in Mosul, only now the Kurds appeared ascendant. Sunni Arabs resisted, but they relied less and less on discredited Arab nationalism, and more on politicised Islam that had already begun to take root before 2003, now in the form of militant jihadism. It was discovered that this jihadism could be used, as nationalism, to fulfil the aspirations of the Sunni Arab society to gain political autonomy within a territory based on their shared culture. The culture was defined by Sunni Islam, but also by the jihad itself, which involved a language, a set of principles, and a common mission.

The territory, whether Mosul, Iraq, or whatever the insurgents could conquer, would constitute their Islamic state. From 2014, ISIL set out to build this state, creating a fiercely repressive political entity based largely on salafist principles. It is unquestionable that many of Mosul’s Sunni Arabs were horrified by this project from the outset and that many more in time would come to view it the same way. And yet many others not only supported it; as military pressure began to tighten, they proved they were willing to fight and die for it. The majority of these were locals who saw in this project the only means to achieve autonomy in the face of Kurdish and Shi’ite aggression.

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[77] Cockburn, P. (2015) *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, London: Verso, pp. 28.

[78] Abdulrazaq, Stansfield, pp. 540.

Their battle was eventually lost. Mosul was left in ruins by what has been described as the most intense urban fighting since the Second World War. The UN estimated that in the closing three weeks of the battle alone, nearly a third of Mosul's old city was destroyed or damaged, a total of 5,000 of some 16,000 buildings.[79] Thousands of fighters and probably a greater number of civilians were killed. In the aftermath, largely Shi'ite soldiers engaged in what one reporter, Ghaith Abdul-Ahed, described as an "orgy of killing", torturing Sunni Arabs, gaining forced confessions, and carrying out extrajudicial killings. They believed that in the initial chaos after they took Mosul, they would be able "to cleanse the city of Isis fighters." Abdul-Ahed reported: "The officers did not see their victims as humans, let alone as fellow Iraqis: they were simply the enemy."[80]

Looking ahead, the question is whether the jihadists' crushing defeat will have discredited their ideology as it had for the Ba'thists before them. And if so, will rise another rise in its place? It seems increasingly likely that in the face of continued competition with Shi'ites and Kurds, Mosul's Sunni Arabs will inevitably turn to some political ideology should it offer them even the faintest hope of recovering some of their lost power. Its nature will likely be defined by the actions their principal rivals, the Shi'ites and Kurds, take in the coming months and years.

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[79] Dana, F. (2017) 'AP PHOTOS: Drone Captures Mosul's Destruction From Above', AP, 14 July, accessed 3 May, 2018 at: https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-07-14/ap-photos-drone-captures-mosuls-destruction-from-above.

[80] Abdul-Ahad, G. (2017) 'After the liberation of Mosul, an orgy of killing', *The Guardian*, 21 November, accessed 25 April 2018 at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/21/after-the-liberation-of-mosul-an-orgy-of-killing.

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