

The Destruction of Mosul, U.S. Crimes against Humanity in the Name of “Counterterrorism”

Presented in a panel discussion of a side event at the 36th UN Human Rights Council in Geneva: "the destruction of Mosul".

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After 267 days, the end of the battle of Mosul was announced on July 10th. “Liberation” is a misleading notion, because the hostilities have not stopped, the human suffering has not stopped.

There are still victims in the city every day on both sides.

Many refugees have no home to go back to and are suffering from severe mental health problems, especially the children.

No reason to celebrate

Were inter alia destroyed:

- 9 of the 10 major hospitals.
- 76 of the 98 medical centres.
- 6 big bridges across the Tigris.
- three-quarters of Mosul’s roads,
- 400 educational institutions, including schools, universities and education centres.
- 11,000 residential housing units.
- 4 electrical power plants and 65 percent of its electrical network
- 6 water purifying systems and much of the city’s water infrastructure has been booby trapped.
- The pharmaceutical industrial complex.
- All grain stores.
- Two large dairies.
- 212 oil refineries, petrol and fuel stations.
- All public buildings
- All state and private banks.
- 63 religious centres (churches and mosques), most of them valuable historical sites.
- 250 workshops, factories and small factories, including agro-industries.
- 29 hotels
- More than 40,000 civilian casualties
- 38 out of 54 residential areas in West Mosul are destroyed. A staff director in the

office of the Nineveh governor, said that “while eastern Mosul is half-destroyed, the devastation in the western half is much greater”. A member of a local volunteer group said that the destruction in west Mosul is close to “99 percent.”

And in the rest of Iraq, the humanitarian and security situation remains disastrous.

- 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 5.1 million children (OCHA, September 2017)
- More than one million people have been displaced since the military operations to recapture the city of Mosul since October 2016, with about three quarters of West Mosul since April. While 1.95 million people have returned to their residences, 3.2 million people remain internally displaced in Iraq and need humanitarian aid.
- Since June 2014 there were 138 attacks on schools and 58 attacks on hospitals
- More than 3 million children attend school irregularly, while 1.2 million children do not go to school at all. How many more lost generations will this war produce?

The extent of civilian casualties, the massive destruction of American bombs, missiles and artillery and the use by the American army of white phosphorus, a weapon that is internationally forbidden for use in populated areas, are all serious US war crimes.

Little international attention for civilian victims

The catastrophic number of civilian deaths in Mosul receives little international attention from politicians and journalists. This is in stark contrast to the global outrage of the bombing of East Aleppo by the Syrian government and the Russian troops at the end of 2016.



It is believed that more than 40,000 civilians have been killed as a result of the massive firepower that was used against them, especially by the federal police, air attacks and ISIS itself.

Neither ISIS nor the international coalition, neither the Iraqi government nor the United

Nations, provide accurate information about numbers of victims, while groups such as Airwars largely focus on press reports. Airwars estimates that 5.805 civilians have been killed between 19 February and 19 June 2017. However, as always, press reports only cover a fraction of the actual number of deaths.

Mosul, one of the world's largest cemeteries

People are trying to understand why the death toll in Mosul is so high. A solid explanation can be read in a shocking report by Amnesty International (AI): "At Any Cost: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul".

This report does not provide a precise figure of the number of deaths, but it confirms the terrible damage that was caused by continuous artillery and rocket fire for a period of five months in a closed area with civilians who were unable to escape.

Other reports from Mosul state that the *Civil Defense Unit* has already removed more than 2.000 bodies from the rubble. Most victims are reportedly women and children. It is believed that more than 4.000 bodies are buried under the rubble in West Mosul. According to the US, the Joint Operations Command, approximately 1,400 bodies were already excavated. The head of the civil defense unit, **Lt. Kol. Rabia Ibrahim Hassan**, told the Washington Post that he had asked the government for more equipment and resources, but that he had not received any response.

During the fighting to recapture Ramadi and Fallujah - the previous military campaigns - most residents fled or evacuated before the fighting. However, many Moslawis (Mosul residents) remained in their homes, making the operation much more complicated. Some stayed because ISIS killed the people who tried to escape, some remained because they refused to leave their homes or relatives, some because they had some kind of work, but many remained because the government asked them to. The army threw leaflets from helicopters asking residents not to flee.



The reason was not only because they feared that the flow of refugees would be unmanageable in a country where already 3.4 million people were displaced by the war. This decision was mainly based on the view of the generals who thought to be able to use the citizens in their favour. If the Iraqi forces were to treat the Moslawis well, people would probably help the troops, give information about ISIS, and it would also give good publicity about "the Salvation efforts of the Iraqi Army."

Death toll of Iraqi soldiers

Premier Haider al Abadi organized a victory parade in Baghdad on Saturday, July 15, where Iraqi armed forces marched before his eyes in the strictly protected Green Zone of the capital. It is a sign for the state of the country that the parade was not publicly announced due to security issues, that the media only came to know later and that the people of the city were excluded from the 'festivities'. But there was no real reason for celebration because of the enormous losses suffered by Iraqi forces.

The *Counter Terrorism Service* (CTS), an American trained unit, the elite armed forces of Iraq, has lost 40 percent of its people in the struggle for Mosul. While the Baghdad government has always refused to disclose its military losses, this figure was reported by the US Department of Defense, which calls for \$ 1,269 billion to rebuild the unit over the next three years and train 20,000 staff members.

"The requested funding will be essential for the reconstruction of the CTS combat force that has lost 40 percent in Mosul," according to the sentence in the budget proposal. "These funds will be used to replace vehicles and equipment through combat loss while staff will be trained and equipped to restore this military unit in the context of ongoing conflicts."

About the losses in other units, such as the Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilization Forces and the regular combat troops, little is known. There are indications that the losses of the regular armed forces are greater than those of the CTS. If this may be an indication: Middle East Monitor reported on February 23 that 7,000 Iraqi soldiers and military members had been killed.

What about the losses of the "enemy"?

Contrary to the underestimation of civilian casualties, Iraq and the US continuously keep on increasing the number of casualties among ISIS warriors. On July 16, **General Abdul Amir Yarallah** of the *Ninewa Operation Command* announced that more than 25,000 rebels were killed during the Mosul campaign. On July 19th, that number had already risen to 30,000. To emphasize how the Iraqi government increases its numbers: in January, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense declared that there were only 9,400 IS elements in Mosul. **General Sean MacFarland**, Commander of the US coalition, estimated that in August 2016 only 15,000 to 20,000 IS fighters remained in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqis claim to have killed more ISIS members in Mosul only than there are in the whole Middle East. During a discussion at the Aspen Security Forum on Friday, July 21, **General Raymond Thomas**, head of the US Special Operations Command, even claimed that the US-led offensive had killed 60,000 to 70,000 ISIS militants. He has probably included the civilian casualties in this figure.

The return

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the nine-month siege forced 1,048,044 people to flee. On 25 September, according to UNHCR, 823.000 Moslawi's remained displaced by the offensive. On 21 September, Iraqi migration authorities have counted 1,74 million refugees since the launch of operations to retake major ISIS strongholds in October 2016. The Iraqi government plans to repatriate all refugees from Mosul by the end of 2017. But that may well be wishful thinking.



Men, women and children who escaped from the destruction of Mosul are housed in tents camps, often in virtual prisons. Women and children suspected of being family members of IS warriors killed in the siege are redirected to “rehabilitation camps”.

Return is impossible for the majority of these internally displaced war refugees. Many do not have homes to return to because of the artillery and air attacks. Most of the city has no access to water and electricity, food is scarce and schools and hospitals are destroyed.

The Ministry of Migration tries to encourage the displaced persons to return to their homes. Seminars are held in refugee camps to encourage people to return. The UN interviewed displaced after such a presentation. Some said they had nothing to return because their homes were destroyed. They had no money left and felt nothing to return until the services were restored and the economy was re-launched. Another problem that the United Nations noted was that the Migration Department has no programs for people returning. The ministry also does not provide the monthly payments on which displaced persons are entitled.

It is estimated that at least 10 percent of explosives from the US coalition have not exploded, causing thousands of bombs and grenades waiting to explode, on top of the abandoned booby traps left by ISIS. Experts have warned that it may take a decade to clear all explosives in the city.

Peace is possible when corruption ends

There is a high level of corruption among the Iraqi soldiers occupying Mosul. They undermine the security measures to neutralize ISIS in the wake of their defeat. Suspects may proceed through military checkpoints, after payment of \$ 1,000 and can bring a vehicle after payment of \$ 1,500.

Mosul residents are sceptic of what they can expect from government forces. Corruption by the occupying military takes various forms. Moslawis pay soldiers \$ 100 for removing a body from the debris and others pay \$ 500 to return to their home, if it's still habitable. Iraqi military and military units have always been accused of asking money for citizens' protection, demanding money for truckers bringing goods to the civilian population and thus being a particularly profitable milk cow if they have to go through military checkpoints.

Destruction is nothing new in Iraq, and neither is the mismanagement of rebuilding, This problem was on prominent display in a 2013 report by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, which found that the \$60 billion in U.S. funds spent over 10 years in the country produced few tangible results. The report blamed this on poor coordination with Iraqis, misplaced priorities, misplanned projects, contractor wastefulness, corruption, and security problems. Iraq's government, which spent \$138 billion during this period, did not do any better.



Prime Minister al-Maliki shakes hands with U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) in [Baghdad](#) (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Former **Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki** has “lost” 500 billion dollars during his term of office (2006-2014), according to the Iraqi Commission of Integrity (Col). The Col is responsible for investigating corruption scandals in Iraq. “Nearly half of government revenues during the eight-year period was ‘stolen’”, according to the spokesman for the Col, in what he called “the biggest political corruption scandal in history”. Iraq’s oil revenues amounted to \$ 800 billion between 2006 and 2014, and the Maliki government also received \$ 250 billion from various countries, including the US.

The destruction of the Sunni heartland in Iraq

Mosul (Nineveh) is one of the oldest and largest cities of ancient times. The area around the city was already sedentary in 6,000 BC, and in 3,000 BC it was an important religious center in honor of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. The early city was built on a geological fracture line and suffered enormous damage by earthquakes several times.

In the 8th century BC 120,000 people lived in the walled city of Nineveh. The population of Nineveh amounted to about 300,000 people after the reign of Sanherib (704-681 BC). It was the largest city in the world for more than fifty years (668-612 BC).

The destruction of Mosul is not only the destruction of history, but is part of the widespread destruction of cities with Sunni Arab-majority populations.

Under the umbrella of the war against ISIS, the majority of Sunni cities have been destroyed.

Thousands of Sunni civilians have been killed. Before the Mosul “liberation”, Tikrit and other cities and villages had already been destroyed, burnt and looted. A UN team described the destruction of Ramadi as “staggering”, with 80% of the city destroyed. Then came Fallujah. Then Al Qaim.... and the US-led coalition airstrikes are still transforming Sunni areas into rubble.

Many Iraqis believe destruction was the plan all along to definitively silence the Iraqi resistance and rebellious Sunni-majority provinces.

Peace is possible with good governance

Remarkable is MercyCorps’s two-year investigation “Investing in Iraq’s Peace”, published in January 2016. The main finding is that sectarianism is not the main cause of the current unrest.

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) quickly conquered a large part of the Sunni part of Iraq in 2014, experts described this as a natural consequence of the sectarian heritage of the country and a consequence of the Sykes-Picot accords, with the artificially drawn border between Iraq and Syria. But from MercyCorps research between 2013 and 2015, it appears that the main factor for the rise of ISIS is not the sectarian division, but rather an absence of inclusive, responsive and responsible governance.

After the invasion of Iraq, political actors including the USA, actively planted the seeds of sectarian divisions for political gain. Sunni and other minority groups were systematically marginalized, harassed by security forces, accused of terrorism and locked up without evidence or trial. Public services hardly worked. This policy based on division fuelled sectarian ideas and created sympathy for groups like ISIS, claiming to be an alternative to the corrupt Iraqi government.



PM Haider al-Abadi, (Photo by Foreign and Commonwealth Office – Flickr (CC BY 2.0))

The news about the resignation of Prime Minister Maliki in August 2014 was considered by the Sunnis as good news, and Sunni support for armed groups such as ISIS dropped from 49% to 26%. Although Prime Minister Maliki’s successor Haider Al-Abadi is also a shiite, Sunnis expected an improvement in public services and their perceptions about government agencies changed. In other words, sectarianism does not appear to be the primary or only cause of instability. Proper administration would greatly reduce support for further sectarian polarization.

But the expectations of better governance have not been met. Little progress has been made in the promised reforms. As a result, public opinion polls show that trust in the central government continues to erode. From July 2015, public frustration caused major violent demonstrations across the country against corruption, poor services and sectarianism. These protests are still continuing. Nevertheless, the non-violent movement threatens to be overshadowed by the growing success of armed groups, including the increasingly powerful Shiite militias. Premier Abadi seems to have little control over these militias and this poses a major threat to the future of Iraq.

The study shows that improving government performance is essential for a just and peaceful Iraq.

Unfortunately, donor investment in Iraqi civil society is deteriorating. In 2011, the US government's annual spending on one soldier in Iraq was an average of \$ 802,000 - or 80 billion dollars a year for a minimum attendance of 10,000 troops. What the US government plans to invest in democracy and civilian programs in 2016 is nothing, compared to military spending: \$ 72.5 million. There is no miraculous solution for building stability in Iraq, but good governance is essential for addressing the causes of instability and active civil society is essential for good governance.

Testimonies from the war

The toll of the conflict for individuals and families is unusually hard. For close relatives who were locked in the west side of the city, life has been a living hell since the beginning of the conflict.

Not only were they haunted by ISIS, there have been also many crimes and abuses by Iraqi troops since the operation began in 2014. The government in Baghdad has never held anyone accountable. Premier Al Abadi has often criticized human rights organizations investigating the crimes. The fact is that torture and abuse are institutionalized within the Iraqi armed forces, and in all cases they are tolerated by the judiciary. ISIS brought an extreme brutality to Iraq that shocked the country and the world. Now the armed forces are guilty of the same kind of extreme violence.

A testimony in an article from the online news site Middleeasteye reveals the horror of the war.

An Iraqi soldier, fighting the Islamic state said:

“We killed them all, Daesh, men, women and children. We killed everybody.”

What remains of this part of the ancient city of Mosul, where the Islamic state (IS) fighters made their last stand, is a terrible place. And what is under the rubble is testimony of the dark final days of the struggle for Mosul.

Hundreds of bodies lay half buried under the rubble and litter, which was once a flourishing historic district. The dissolution of the bodies occurs rapidly in the scorching 50 ° C summer heat. Feet are the most striking remains.

The last murder party has left terrible traces, and it seems that someone wants to quickly

remove these traces. In the past week, armored bulldozers have driven back and forth over the demolished houses and hundreds of bodies buried under the rubble. But the dead do not go away. Rotting body parts color reddish in the midst of the light gray dust and debris of destroyed buildings.

“There are many citizens among the bodies,” says an Iraqi major. “After the liberation was announced, the order was given to kill everyone and everything that moved.” Speaking on condition of anonymity, the Major said those orders were wrong, but the soldiers had to follow them regardless. “It was not right at all,” he said. “The majority of the Daesh fighters surrendered, and we just killed them.”

The reconstruction

After security is guaranteed, the next major step for Mosul will be reconstruction. **Lise Grande** of the United Nations claims that the situation in East Mosul is going well. There are schools and businesses open, many residents have returned. Local contractors work hard to restore services, and they use local employees.

West Mosul is a very different story. There are 38 out of 54 residential areas severely damaged. That means that much more has to be done than in the east. The first United Nations forecast was that it would cost \$ 470 million to restore electricity, water, sewerage, hospitals, schools and homes in the most affected areas. For the remaining parts of the western half another \$ 237 million would be needed. That’s twice the amount originally estimated by the United States, and those figures are likely to continue to rise. The United Nations has a plan to form civilian groups, composed of local leaders, officials, tribes, etc., who will decide which homes and buildings will be rebuilt and which ones. The UN hopes that this will also promote further reconciliation through dialogue in neighborhoods. The provincial government will begin restoring services in the next few weeks in the west. The World Bank is also involved in the process and launching projects to rebuild bridges across the Tigris River. Through the World Bank and foreign donors, Iraq wants to get the largest amount of money to rebuild Mosul. Up to now, approximately \$ 300 million has been collected, and two donor conferences will be organized to ask for more. It is unclear whether this will be able to make the city live again.

An Iraqi senior official estimates that the cost of reconstruction of Mosul will be more than \$ 50 billion. The regime in Baghdad was mandated in May last year to negotiate a \$ 5.4 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund, demanding sharp cuts in social services. The country’s economy declined by 10.3 percent in 2016 due to falling oil prices and the effects of the war.

There is little hope that the reconstruction will start soon. Let’s have a look at Baghdad: There is no improvement in services, nor is there any reconstruction. Journalist **Dexter Filkins**:

“Baghdad in 2014 looks just like in 2004, despite the fact that the Iraqi government pumps up huge amounts of oil and earns a lot of money: they are the second largest producer in OPEC. We are talking about tens of billions of dollars, over 85 billion dollars a year. There is just not much evidence that the oil money is spent well and I think it’s fair to suspect that a lot of that money is stolen. It’s not a happy story, Baghdad is a wreck. I mean, it looks exactly as

during the war. “

The end of ISIS?

The Iraqi government has achieved a major victory by destroying ISIS as a state-structure with an extensive area. But the terrorist movement has shown that it is able to adapt to new realities. How many weapons and heavy equipment of three Iraqi army divisions ISIS captured when Mosul conquered in June 2014 was never communicated. Much of this weaponry was hidden by ISIS in tunnels, gorges and valleys in areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria. If ISIS loses these areas, it will simply recover as an armed organization returning to unconventional warfare.



The real power of ISIS follows mainly from the political circumstances of Iraq after the occupation. The sharp contradictions in Iraq contribute to instability and can create the same conditions that led to the rise of the ISIS. Sunnis were excluded from the political process of the country. So the future of ISIS in Iraq depends on the success of the political process in an ethnically and religiously divided country.

It is unlikely that the Iraqi government will fulfill its promises to the devastated Sunni provinces, and the confidence crisis between the Sunnis and Shiites will only worsen.

Without a political process that can integrate the Sunnis and realize their fair demands, ISIS will come back in many forms and it can even become more violent.

Peace can be achieved with diplomacy, not bombs

Western countries should come up with diplomatic solutions, instead of putting oil on the fire, by always choosing the military option. Unless they do that, no strategy to defeat ISIS or any other extremist group will be effective. Bombs may even prove to be counterproductive: civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure can push communities further into the arms of extremists. Not only ISIS, but also the Iraqi government's security forces are part of the problem. So it's a bad idea to side with one butcher to defeat another one.

What has been done up to now to achieve a political solution? Nothing. There is a lot of meaningless talk about diplomatic initiatives, but that has already been the case since 2007. Nothing has happened on the diplomatic front. Only massive arms deliveries, the presence of US advisers in all ministries and an embassy larger than Vatican City with more than 10,000 US intelligence officers and mercenaries or contractors, that has been so far the result of "diplomacy". On June 19, 2014, American **President Barack Obama** declared that

there is no military solution, and that a political solution is the only way to solve the problems in Iraq. The White House, however, continues to provide the Iraqi government with US troops and weapons.

An estimated 20 percent of the Iraqi national budget of 2016 was spent on defence, including the salaries and arms of the Hashd al-Shaabi militias. The gross domestic product in Iraq amounted to \$ 168,61 billion in 2015. Thus the Iraqi government's military expenses reached \$ 33,72 billion, while Iraq faces a humanitarian disaster. Iraq's national and foreign debts will most likely to exceed \$125 billion before the end of 2017, according to predictions of the IMF. If the deficit keeps on growing, Iraq would be at risk of bankruptcy in 2017, the inability to pay its employees' salaries and social security services. This situation would seriously hamper the necessary reconstruction of the country.

Military force can be part of fighting extremism, but it is a dangerous method, particularly when the main goal – as it must be – is winning over communities. Only forces that can establish positive local relations should have participated in the assault against ISIS. It was probably better to rule out Shia militias in Sunni-majority areas and Kurdish forces in Arab lands. The Sunni community was able to drive out al Qaeda during the US occupation, but was not so willing to drive out ISIS after 2014, because of the severe repression of the Iraqi government against the Sunni community since the withdrawal of the American troops. Conquering the territory and losing the people – as happened in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq -can make everything worse.

Peace can be achieved if sectarianism stops

The responsibility for the next phase is on the shoulders of the Iraqi government. It must try to control Iraqi armed forces and Shiite militias, punish human rights violations and war crimes, such as happened during the liberation of Tikrit, Fallujah and Diyala. It must ensure that the Arab Sunni population is no longer marginalized and their voices and concerns are heard. The government must act quickly to house the millions of homeless people and restore the services.

The prospects however don't seem optimistic. **Talha Abdulrazaq**, an Iraqi expert at the University of Exeter (UK):

“The sectarian Baghdad regime has always shown its true colors. It's only a matter of time before something happens, maybe even worse than ISIS.”

It doesn't look like the Iraqi government will change its attitude. All political groups, both among Shiite, Sunni and Kurds, are hopelessly divided.

In addition,

“The Iraqi government is detaining more than 370,000 people,” said a security guard to Asso Shittad Press's journalist. “The prisoners suffer from many diseases, including skin diseases,” he said, adding that most of them can not walk through swollen feet. If more human rights violations are committed in the sunni region, this will mobilize young Sunnis to join another extremist organization.”

Peace is possible if foreign interference stops

Without a comprehensive political settlement agreed by all parties, any post-ISIS situation will end in new conflicts, which will have catastrophic consequences for the unity of the Iraqi state and the country will continue to sink further into chaos.

The Iraqi government is faced with the huge challenge of convincing all factions to put their own political ambitions aside. The first signs are not very hopeful, with conflicting statements about governance structures by Kurdish, Shia and Sunni leaders. A sustainable political agreement must be reached about a reconstruction and reconciliation plan for stability in the region, provided that it is considered fair. Any sustainable solution about the country's future must address fundamental issues in order to achieve greater social and economic integration of the different ethnic and religious groups of Iraq.

Iraq has a strong civil society, trade unions and opposition groups, which do have elaborate plans and offer solutions to get rid of the disastrous situation in the country. The government and the Western coalition don't want to listen to their pleas. This makes it particularly difficult to restore stability. The reason for not consulting the civil society is obvious: the Iraqi people want an end to foreign interference and they want their pre-invasion semi-socialized country back and the control over their own resources. The neoliberal Western imperial establishments won't allow that and so they keep on fuelling the flames of sectarianism.

The end of Iraqi sovereignty?

After the US withdrawal in 2011, Iraq remained dependent on US military and logistical support and protection. Collaboration with occupation forces has benefitted at least two-thirds of Iraq's post-2003 political class, while the Iraqi people suffered greatly.

Meanwhile, Iran has strengthened its grip on the Iraqi state. On 26 November 2016, the Iraqi parliament legalized the Hashd al-Shaabi, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), predominantly Shiite paramilitary troops, now getting legal status besides and apart from the regular Iraqi army.

Why have Iraqi legislators decided to legalize the PMF? What does this mean for the future of the state and society in Iraq? The PMF originated in response to a fatwa, a religious edict, announced June 13, 2014 by Great Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an Iraq-based Iranian spiritual and highest religious authority of the Shiite community. In response to the threat of ISIS, Sistani then called for a jihad against this terrorist group and in his fatwa he urged the Iraqis to take up the weapons against ISIS.

This was conceived as a green light for dozens of Iran-supported Shiite militias to unite in a huge super-militia, the Hashd al Shaabi. Men like **Hadi al-Amiri**, **Qais al-Khazali** and **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**, heads of the three largest and most powerful Iran-supported militias, are now the main commanders of the PMF.

Why does the PMF enjoy so much impunity and lack of accountability? The answer lies in the influence and control of Iran on a large part of the Iraqi state structure, not least the Hashd al Shaabi, now being prepared to become a full Iraqi version of the Iranian Pasdaran, better known as The Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRG), a parallel and potentially competitive force besides the Iraqi army.

The new law states that the PMF is under the direct authority of the prime minister itself, which means that the Iraqi Defense Minister has no authority or control over them. Leaders like al-Amiri, al-Khaz'ali and al-Muhandis are all directly linked to Iran. They are not only loyal to Iraq, but also to the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Three major militias, the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah use images of Khamenei on their posters and websites.

Conclusion

Instead of calling the ISIS fighters and their supporters "sad murderous losers", we must first of all try to understand the complex social, economic and political factors that made ISIS a success story. In addition, Iraqi civilian peace initiatives should actively be supported and published by the media. With a fraction of the astronomical sums spent on the war, valuable projects that transcend the sectarian fault lines, should be promoted.

The problem is also this: We must urgently come to terms with our own devastating role in the Middle East and North Africa crisis (MENA). Military interventions from the West in the MENA region have played a decisive role in the radicalization of Muslims in the West. The West has supported the Iraqi government when they were shooting unarmed Sunni demonstrators, bombing Sunni territories and supported Shiite militias that committed large-scale war crimes. Putting all the emphasis on ISIS also has an important political role: the denial of the Western destructive war campaign, which has destroyed the region, hurt the population and caused a major refugee crisis.

Military engagement can potentially weaken the influence of ISIS by demonstrating that they are not invincible. But their eventual eradication will be the result of political processes that may take decades. In the meantime, preventing the destructive fragmentation of multicultural Western societies should be the priority. This requires a clear rejection of the politics of fear, and using the means for prevention at home instead of bombing the Middle East.

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