

## Post-ISIS Peacebuilding Strategy for Syria and Iraq

In both Syria and Iraq, ISIS is losing ground due to military offensives by the Iraqi Army, the Peshmerga, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and a wide range of non-state armed groups, together with air and technical support from the International Coalition against ISIS. Yet none of the parties to the conflict prioritizes the human security of civilians, putting in particular internally displaced person (IDPs) and civilians who lived under ISIS at risk. The parties leading the offensive against ISIS have not agreed on long-term peacebuilding and transition plans.

PAX is deeply concerned about the high number of civilians who become trapped in the fighting. Thousands of civilians are stuck on the Syria-Turkey, Syria-Iraq and Syria-Jordan borders, as those countries keep their borders closed. Millions of civilians in the towns and cities still under ISIS control also risk getting caught in military advances. At the same time, the lack of security and post-ISIS conflict between various parties prevent IDPs from returning to their homes. In Iraq, efforts to stabilize through rapid humanitarian aid and reconstruction, organized by the Working Group on Stabilization of the Coalition, are necessary to address the risk of renewed post-ISIS conflict. However, these efforts lack long-term perspective and do not address the root causes of the crisis that led to the rise of ISIS in the first place. In Syria, there is not even any evidence of an *'After ISIS' strategy* for the Coalition. Because of this, the short-term success against ISIS could easily lead to new post-ISIS conflicts and new humanitarian disasters in the longer term.

### Syria first, not ISIS first

The Coalition's strategy in Syria still focuses on defeating ISIS first instead of a more sustainable strategy addressing root causes of the conflict in Syria and the emergence of ISIS, a 'Syria First' strategy. The Coalition undermines its own legitimacy by bombing ISIS yet at the same time not stopping the Assad regime from harming civilians by imposing sieges, using banned weapons, and targeting civilian facilities such as hospitals, bakeries, and schools.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, cooperation with Russia which targets areas that are not under ISIS control and causes high numbers of civilian casualties further undermines the Coalition's legitimacy.

The strategy of cooperating with Kurdish forces in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has led to an expansion of territory under their control in recent months, but has also contributed to new conflict dynamics. A deepened fear of ethnic cleansing by Kurdish forces – the People's Defense Unit (YPG) - amongst Sunni Arab populations has, according to some stakeholders, driven the Sunni population into the arms of ISIS. That Sunni fears are not unfounded was illustrated again by incidents in the town of Sulouk in Raqqqa province in early June, where the population had been prevented by the Kurdish YPG from returning to their homes for 11 months. When the people of Sulouk approached the town demanding their right to return to their homes, YPG forces fired at them.<sup>2</sup>

The Coalition is currently cooperating with SDF forces to liberate the city of Manbej in the Northeast Aleppo countryside. At the moment, the city is fully encircled but there is concern about what will happen to the tens of thousands of civilians in the city. Establishment of an inclusive civil governance system in Manbej will be a condition for long-term stability. Coordination between military strategies and political strategies to develop civilian local governance structures that are responsive and inclusive is a precondition for success as Manbej is yet another mixed city with a Sunni Arab majority, a large Kurdish minority, and other minorities such as Turkmen. In addition to the development of inclusive civil governance structures, it is crucial to secure the ability of IDPs to return and to prevent forced displacement that would be a possible trigger for new conflict. However, this is currently not high enough on the agenda of the coalition.

### Iraq first, not ISIS first

The retreat of ISIS from Iraqi areas such as Tikrit, Falluja, Ramadi, and Sinjar shows that the interventions of the Coalition, including military and logistical support to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Peshmerga, greatly impact security and political dynamics on the ground in Iraq. This includes mass internal displacement, the destruction of infrastructure, and the empowerment of non-state armed groups. The rise of non-state armed groups all over Iraq empowers the political parties with which they are aligned, but poses an increasing threat to the human security of ordinary citizens. Moreover, this trend is further weakening and dividing Iraqi state structures during an all-time low level of confidence of Iraqi citizens in the state. The currently-established militias, often influenced by external actors, are even perceived by some Iraqis as a threat similar to ISIS. This is particularly relevant for communities who have endured ISIS rule and are considered hostile to both Baghdad and Erbil governments.

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Recently, PAX released case studies on Ninewa and Sinjar<sup>3</sup> on how new facts on the ground in post-ISIS areas create prospects for new rounds of violence where most IDP communities are unable to return. At the same time, PAX received alarming messages that Sunni Arab communities are denied from returning to their areas once ISIS leaves their villages or towns.

This reality illustrates the need for a pro-active, comprehensive and longer-term post-ISIS stabilization and peacebuilding strategy oriented to Iraq as a whole, rather than an 'ISIS First' strategy. Such a strategy should take into account root drivers of conflict, such as de-baathification, reform of the security sector, the Disputed Internal Boundaries, and conflicting human security perceptions of the various Iraqi communities. The development of such a strategy is especially urgent in the areas where ISIS has left. PAX also believes that the Coalition must demonstrate accountability for the impact of the military interventions by contributing to a conflict-sensitive peacebuilding strategy in areas where ISIS has retreated, guaranteeing human security of all communities affected by war and conflict in Iraq.

In contrast to Syria, the Coalition already has taken steps to prepare for stabilization after areas are retaken from ISIS. The establishment of the Working Group on Stabilization led by Germany and the United Arab Emirates in coordination with UNDP has undertaken a major effort to create momentum for stabilization right after ISIS retreats, mainly by providing immediate reconstruction and de-mining assistance. However, these efforts have a short-term horizon and focus mainly on technical issues, ignoring the need for addressing root causes, guaranteeing security and protection, creating inclusive governance structures, and addressing grievances with some kind of transitional justice process. It was precisely this lack of a political and security agreement, inclusive of all Iraqi communities, which enabled ISIS to generate support and eventually control many parts of Iraq.

Some of the international institutions, both EU institutions and UN agencies, as well as member states of the Coalition seem to have developed 'Iraq fatigue' and are opting solely for short-term involvement. PAX is concerned that such a short-term approach increases the chance for new destabilization and potential for violent conflict and violent extremism if root causes and drivers of conflict are not addressed.

A major obstacle for longer-term post-ISIS stabilization and a peacebuilding strategy is that Iraq formally is a middle income country according to OECD criteria and therefore not ordinarily eligible for Official Development Aid (ODA) funds. An exception for Iraq to this principle will expire at the end of 2017. PAX has received indications that this is one of the reasons that the horizon for EU planning is limited to one year, despite the May [EU Foreign Affairs Council conclusions](#) announcing that the European External Action Service (EEAS) will soon present options for "enhanced engagement in support of long term stabilization" in Iraq. Given the importance of longer-term strategy and programming in Iraq, concerned donors should either renew this exception, or make other substantial funds available.

## Elements for a long-term post-ISIS Stabilization and Peacebuilding Strategy in Syria and Iraq

◆ For Iraq, the Coalition against ISIS should establish a forum to develop and implement long-term stabilization and peacebuilding strategies in areas where ISIS has retreated. This could be done by creating a subgroup under the Working Group on Stabilization of the Coalition focusing specifically on this issue. On the agenda of this sub-working group the following issues should be addressed at a minimum:

1. Human security and protection of civilians
2. Developing inclusive governance
3. Accountability and transitional justice

◆ For Iraq, the exception to the existing rule that Iraq can receive substantial funds despite being a middle income country should be extended, or other substantial funds should be made available to enable a long-term stabilization and peacebuilding strategy.

◆ In Syria, with utmost urgency, the Coalition against ISIS should establish a mechanism for long-term planning of stabilization and peacebuilding in areas where ISIS has retreated, working in coordination with the UN and other relevant actors. Any such effort must address root causes, including human security, inclusive governance, and accountability.

<sup>1</sup> More on this in the Siege Watch report '[Second Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria](#)', May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> [Ragga is Being Slaughtered Silently](#) on [Twitter account](#), June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016 and related videos: [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#).

<sup>3</sup> More on this in the PAX report '[Sinjar After ISIS: Returning to Disputed Territory](#)', June 2016.

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