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The Last Piece of the Puzzle: Achieving Lasting Stability in Post ISIS Jalawla

By Christine M. van den Toorn

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The IRIS Iraq Report (IIR) provides “on-the-ground” reporting and analysis on Iraq’s most pressing issues. It is aimed at providing decision-makers and experts with solid research and analysis of Iraq policy. The Report is unique because it is produced in Iraq, and is based on in-country fieldwork as well as open source research. It is the brainchild of Ahmed Ali and Christine van den Toorn, both of whom have years of experience researching and writing on Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Jalawla Bazar, May 2015



Jalawla Bazar, April 2016

What will it take to restore peace and stability to areas liberated from ISIS? How can Iraq deal with the challenges of disputed territories? These are two of the biggest questions facing authorities in the country at present. Jalawla, a subdistrict of Khanaqin in Diyala province, may provide some important answers for how to handle these challenges in the future. The town is a microcosm of some of the wider political, territorial and economic challenges facing Iraqi authorities, and the measures taken there to restore stability after it was liberated from ISIS in November 2014 offer salutary lessons for Iraqi authorities, both in terms of how to achieve success, and the longer-term obstacles that will need to be overcome in order to consolidate it areas of the country that are disputed between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

A majority Sunni-Arab town, Jalawla is also home to significant Kurdish and smaller Turkmen minorities, most of whom fled when ISIS attacked in June 2014. Unlike many liberated areas, however, around half of Jalawla's population, 4,000 mostly Sunni Arabs, have returned over the past three months. Local peace has been maintained between the different communities, despite the informal transfer of control over the area from the federal government, which was the dominant force in Jalawla before the ISIS attack, to the KRG. Meanwhile, some basic services, such as water and electricity, have been restored.

A number of factors account for the relative success witnessed in Jalawla, many of which are applicable more broadly in Iraq. However, two in particular stand out: political deal-making between rival factions representing the federal government and the KRG; and, the role of local actors and the emphasis on homegrown



solutions that emphasize the peculiar character and ethno-sectarian make-up of Jalawla itself.

On the political front, Jalawla benefited from an early post-liberation deal between the leaders of the Badr Organization and the PUK, which effectively carved out areas of control between the two groups and satisfied federal-government and KRG aspirations, temporarily at least. Badr, and the wider Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization units) supported by Baghdad, accepted an arrangement that allowed the PUK – and, by extension, the KRG – to retain uncontested control over Jalawla in return for Badr/federal-government authority over Saadiya, Jalawla’s sister town to the east. This arrangement defused tension between the competing armed groups, which despite their alliance at senior levels are nonetheless more often rivals at a local level in disputed territories. It also mitigated the impact of national politics.

Perhaps more important has been the role that Jalawla sub-district director Sheikh Yacoub Lhebi has played in the return and reconstruction efforts. Lhebi – whose father is Sunni Arab and whose mother is Kurdish – is a member of the PUK and a supporter of KRG control over Jalawla. His dual ethnicity has made him a bridge back for some of the Sunni Arab population, as well as between Kurdish and Arab population. Lhebi’s “Jalawla first” message clearly resonates locally, helped by the fact that he is from Jalawla, was the principal at a local school for years, and has deep ties to the local community. Moreover, he has willing partners among the local population; the Jalawla bazaar, which was destroyed by ISIS, has been thoroughly cleaned and cleared by local volunteers, and many shops are now open.

Lhebi’s approach stands in contrast to the policies of Baghdad and Erbil, which emphasize exclusive control over disputed territories. As such, it offers an alternative model for conflict resolution and local reconciliation throughout contested areas. In his view, the town need be neither Kurdish nor Arab, and he seeks to convince the Kurds and Jalawla’s Sunni Arabs that it is in their interest work together. The two ethnic groups must turn over a new leaf, and he points to a history of cooperation between them during the repression of the Saddam Hussein era. Lhebi is committed to finding local solutions to the town’s problems, emphasizing the importance of power-sharing arrangements between Arabs and Kurds, irrespective of sovereign control. As Lhebi himself says, “Jalawla is the key to Iraq.”

However, the arrangements that sustain stability in Jalawla remain fragile, and will need to be reinforced through national initiatives if they are to be preserved. The deal between Badr and the PUK remains prey to conflicts between Baghdad and Erbil, and it will need follow through – to be bolstered quickly, and expanded to other areas – in order to sustain it. There is also the “politics of return.” While the town has a committee that decides who gets to go back, there are scattered accusations of patronage and tribalism regarding the process. And displaced Sunni Arabs from Jalawla opposed to Lhebi’s policies and KRG control over their town also remain a festering problem for which no workable solutions have been proposed by either Baghdad or Erbil.

At present, however, the omens are not particularly propitious. Rather than building on local successes, both the federal government and the KRG are adopting policies that are punitive at worst, and neglectful at best, which risk reigniting conflict. Because of its KRG-controlled status, the federal government might withhold desperately needed reconstruction funds. Meanwhile, the KRG also has a tendency to ignore disputed territories, especially those with non-Kurdish populations, thereby complicating the process of local reconciliation, and creating ready recruits for groups determined to destabilize these areas.

Ultimately, both governments need to recognize the political value of local compromise arrangements, and to ensure sufficient economic support and reconstruction money to encourage further reconciliation, in Jalawla and elsewhere. Neither the federal nor the regional government has excess funds at present due to the sharp drop in oil prices; nevertheless, bolstering stability in liberated territories where local solutions are being found should be a priority for government spending, rather than being overlooked due to national political disputes. The long-standing dispute over territorial control in Iraq has thus far been a cause for deep hostility and instability, which ISIS among others have benefited from. Jalawla offers an alternative vision, which – with sufficient political wisdom and financial support – could be applied elsewhere, and offer local solutions to hitherto apparently intractable national conflicts.

