

A photograph of a heavily damaged mosque in Mosul, Iraq. The image shows a tall, light-colored stone minaret with several arched windows, some of which are boarded up or missing. The surrounding walls are in ruins, with large sections of stone missing and debris scattered. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene depicts the aftermath of conflict and the state of reconstruction in the city.

The Failure of Reconstruction in Mosul: Root Causes from 2003 to the Post-ISIS Period

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*** This reprint (released June 10, 2020) is a modified and updated excerpt of an October 2019 IRIS/KAS publication entitled "Mosul and Basra after the Protests: The Roots of Government Failure and Popular Discontent."***

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INTRODUCTION

On March 21, 2019, the city of Mosul witnessed the sinking of a tour boat that claimed the lives of more than 100 people. While the ship was run by a private enterprise, the incident unleashed mass public expressions of discontent against local and national political actors. Protestors threatened the convoys of both the governor and the Iraqi president during their official visits to the site of the disaster. Soon the governor Nofal Agub was forced to step down on charges of corruption and the misappropriation of reconstruction funds. Transpiring 1.5 years after the end of the ISIS campaign, the unrest following the sinking episode highlighted the degree of local dissatisfaction with the performance of the government, and its failure to deliver on its promises to reconstruct the city.

What explains this outpouring of discontent against the government? Certainly one major factor is the present material condition of the city and province in the aftermath of ISIS. In Mosul city alone, there were 19,888 affected structures, 4773 of which were destroyed. Scores of residents remain displaced, with no homes to go back to two years since the liberation of the city from the Islamic State. While UNDP claims to have made considerable progress towards its reconstruction goals, the broader picture remains bleak, especially in West Mosul where most buildings remain gutted, crumbling shells.

Moreover, regardless of whatever steps UNDP and other international organizations have made, this does not mean that the local or national government has necessarily played any substantive role. In fact, most UNDP officials have called attention to the obstructionist action of the government in stalling or blocking projects rather than facilitating them. Or, when projects are completed (e.g., a rebuilt school), the government often does not staff and operate them.

Importantly, the failure of the government to coordinate the reconstruction of the city is not understood by the people of Mosul (known as *Maslawis*) as a function of technical or budgetary gaps. Nor is it a result of what many analysts call inadequate 'Sunni representation' in positions of influence. More than the identity of the group or groups occupying the seat of power, the core problem has always been one of how that power is obtained and utilized at the expense of others, and in neglect of governmental performance.

Since the first days of the post-2003 era, reconstruction and overall responsiveness to the local populace have taken a backseat to a chaotic, violent struggle for control over the city between many different actors, including Sunni Arab political factions, the two main Kurdish blocs, the Americans and Coalition, the Prime Minister's Office, the Iraqi Security Forces, and most recently, the Popular Mobilization Forces and their political proxies. These political/military entities are often internally divided and shift alliances quickly, rendering the basic structure of power and governance unclear even to political insiders. This competition and incoherence since 2003 to the present day has resulted in pervasive insecurity and a depletion of the resources allocated for

development, leaving the majority of Mosul's citizens feeling left out of a high-stakes game.

Understanding the way forward amidst the present instability requires a close look at political and security dynamics during three key stages: (1) The American and Kurdish takeover (2003-2009); (2) The rise and fall of a Sunni Arab coalition (2010 – 2014); (3) The anti-ISIS campaign and the era external political influence (2015 – present). Subsequently the analysis turns to the specific relevance of these periods in the present challenges facing reconstruction.

2003 Invasion and Aftermath: American and Kurdish Dominance

Analysts of the post-2003 insurgency in Mosul have framed the local uprising against the Americans as structurally inevitable from the start, pointing to the fact that the Ba'ath party recruited a high concentration of its members and top officers from Mosul. According to such analysis,¹ not only did Maslawis stand to lose the most in terms of political power from the Occupation, they also had the means and experience to fight back. The present study contends that while the fact of Mosul as a former Baathist stronghold is undeniable, the breakdown in the relationship between the population and Coalition forces was not preordained. Decisions made and strategic blunders during the very first weeks and months of the occupation set in motion the conditions for a violent, confused struggle among the city's various political- security interests for years to come, with major implications for the stability and reconstruction of the city.

After the fall of Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Tikrit, Maslawis waited in anticipation for an American invasion.² But such an attack would never materialize. Local leaders and tribal actors came to a deal with the US Army that there would be no resistance from the population whatsoever. But lacking clearance from the Pentagon, the Americans stalled for several days after the agreement was reached, unable to enter the city. Instead, *peshmerga* eager to extend their influence into a city with a significant Kurdish population arrived in Mosul and took up positions in the governmental center as well as the eastern side,³ where a significant number of Kurdish families resided among Sunni Arabs.⁴

Not only did the arrival of Kurdish troops instead of the Americans stoke local rivalries and ethnic tensions, it also left an entire city without any clear political and security framework whatsoever during a time of immense uncertainty. Looting as well as

¹ Eric Hamilton, 'The Fight for Mosul', The Institute for the Study of War, (March 23, 2008), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/Iraq%20Report%208.pdf>

² Voanews.com, 'Rumsfeld: Mosul About to Fall to US-Kurdish Forces', (April 11, 2003), <https://www.voanews.com/archive/rumsfeld-mosul-about-fall-us-kurdish-forces-2003-04-11>

³ Mark Oliver, 'Kurds celebrate fall of Mosul', The Guardian, (April 11, 2003), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/11/iraq.markoliver1>

⁴ Luke Harding, 'Mosul descends into chaos as even muse is looted', (April 12, 2003)

violence among and between Baathists, Kurds, and tribal actors broke out across the city.⁵

When the Americans finally received clearance from their command, they entered a scene of immense instability and collective anxiety. With only a small band of special forces driving in jeeps and no tanks, the US troops were compelled again to rely upon Kurdish forces at the front and rear of their convoy, extending the perception among the majority Arab population that their political fortunes had been dissolved overnight. To make matters worse still, top Kurdish politicians from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) accompanied US troops in their first meetings with local representatives from Mosul. A negative, distrustful relationship between the majority of the local population and the American-Kurdish military apparatus was set in motion.

In the coming days and weeks, the American leadership further alienated Arab tribal and political actors through poorly executed negotiations with local leaders, while also failing to contain the continuing entrenchment of the Kurds into the local political and military institutions, particularly the KDP. The KDP pushed for its Kurdish and Arab allies to take leading positions within the local administration.⁶ Soon demonstrators took to the streets of Mosul protesting against the US and Kurdish presence in their city. It was at this point that Ba'athists and former officers increasingly organized themselves as nascent insurgent groups, staging attacks against US forces and their Kurdish allies. Community leaders, protestors, insurgents and clerics used the mosques to call for unity and opposition to the US troop presence in Mosul.⁷

Analysts have observed that the entrance of the well-equipped 101st division of the US Army under General David Petraeus in late March momentarily restored order.⁸ Petraeus sought to return ethnic balance to the city, attempting to empower Sunni Arabs through proportionate representation in the newly created 28-member local council. The council subsequently picked Sunni Arab Ghanim Baso as governor and Khosraw Gorran, a Kurd, as Deputy Governor. Furthermore, Petraeus constrained the activities of the Kurdish forces in Mosul city and limited their presence to the disputed areas of Nineveh where fewer Arabs reside.⁹

This political settlement quickly fell apart under the US policy of de-Baathification. After the forced resignation of Baso on accusations of Baathist party membership, the local council appointed Usama Kashmulla, who was promptly assassinated by the insurgents in June 2004.¹⁰ Deputy Governor Khosraw Gorran subsequently

⁵ Harding, *op. cit.*

⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle Over Ninawa', Middle East Report No.9, (September 2009), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/90-iraq-s-new-battlefront-the-struggle-over-ninewa.pdf>, p.3

⁷ Hamilton, *op. cit.*

⁸ ICG, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5. See also: Michael Knights, 'Lessons from Mosul', The Washington Institute, (27/01/2005), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014>

⁹ Interview with Khosraw Gorran, KDP leader, Erbil. August 20, 2019

¹⁰ ICG, *op. cit.*

managed to secure the appointment of a new Sunni Arab with closer ties to the KDP, Duraid Kashmull. This maneuver on the part of the Kurds resulted in all 12 Sunni Arab members of the council resigning in a boycott. The boycott was the first of many instances in which Sunni Arab Maslawis rejected the imposition of Sunni Arab political figures aligned with adversarial political factions.¹¹

In addition to the political turmoil caused by the US policy of de-Baathification in Mosul, a second major blunder of the Americans was to return the local security apparatus to Kurdish dominance. When US troops were relocated away from Mosul in order to combat the Falluja insurgency, the American command subsequently ordered the resumption of Kurdish military control over Mosul's city center to fill the vacuum.¹² This decision restoked ethnic tensions across the city and emboldened the still nascent insurgency, particularly in Western Mosul.

By the beginning of 2005, Mosul was divided into two parts: the western (insurgent-dominated) and eastern (Kurdish dominated).¹³ Politically, the situation was bleaker still. As extremist armed groups gained strength and intimidated the Sunni Arab population into a wholesale boycott of the 2005 elections,¹⁴ the Kurds won the elections by a landslide, securing 31 seats out of the total 41 seats. The Iraq Islamic Party (IIP), the only Sunni Arab party calling for the participation in the post-2003 political process, won only 3 seats.¹⁵ The election results enabled the KDP to dominate the formal governing institutions in Nineveh for the next four years, furthering the despondency and alienation of the Sunni Arabs.

The Rise and Fall of a Sunni Arab Coalition

The Sunni Arabs of Mosul would not remain on the side-lines of formal politics forever. The rise of the Hadbaa party in 2009 ended Kurdish dominance over Nineveh and weakened the already embattled insurgency. By the time of Hadbaa's emergence, the insurgency's influence in Mosul was already on the decline. As part of the broader 'surge' campaign, Maliki ordered "Operation Mother of Two Springs" in 2008 aimed at clearing Mosul from non-state armed groups.¹⁶ Not only did the operation bolster the reputation of local and national state security institutions, the positive security

¹¹ Interview with Khosraw Gorran, KDP leader, Erbil. August 20, 2019

¹² Thanassis Cambanis, 'Kurdish militia helps keep order', The Boston Globe, (November 18, 2004), http://archive.boston.com/news/world/articles/2004/11/18/in_mosul_kurdish_militia_helps_keep_order/

¹³ Hamilton, op. cit.

¹⁴ From 2004 and on, multiple insurgent and extremist groups were operating in and around Mosul including: the AQI, Ansar al-Sunna, the Supporters of Islam, the Naqshbandi Army, the Hamas brigade of Iraq, the Islamic Army, the Muhammad Army, and the 1920 Revolution Brigade. Most of the members of the Ba'ath party and officers of the former Iraqi army joined one of these groups and contributed to their activities and designing their strategies. See: NGO Coordination Committee For Iraq (NCCI), 'Ninawa: NCCI Governorate Profile', (December 2010), https://www.ncciraq.org/images/infobygov/NCCI_Ninewa_Governorate_Profile.pdf

¹⁵ Interview with Khosraw Goran, KDP leader, Erbil. August 20, 2019.

¹⁶ Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 'Operation Mother of Two Springs', (December 2008), <http://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operation-mother-two-springs>

developments finally allowed the Sunni Arabs of Mosul to focus energies on political control.¹⁷

Hadbaa was the mechanism through which Sunni Arabs of Mosul would return to electoral significance. Unfortunately, the means of attaining power further stoked ethno-sectarian political turmoil. As a reflection of the Arab-Kurdish tensions of the previous six years, the Hadbaa party led by Athil Nujaifi ran on a firmly Arab nationalist and anti-Kurdish platform.¹⁸

With a large turnout (60%) in Nineveh during the 2009 provincial elections, Hadbaa won the majority of the seats (19) out of the total 37 seats of the provincial council. The Kurdish list only secured 12 seats.¹⁹ With the balance of power on the council realigned, Athil Nujaifi would become the first Sunni Arab since 2004 to rise to the governorship without the backing of the Kurdish bloc.

Far from a strictly local dynamic, Hadbaa owed its sudden electoral success in part to a broader set of forces beyond Mosul. At the national level, Nouri al-Maliki was seeking to combat the Kurds' military might in order to bolster his credentials as a nationalist leader. Thus, Maliki found himself in a marriage of convenience with the Sunni Arab nationalist leaders of Hadbaa. Meanwhile, Turkey and the US government supported Hadbaa as a means of restoring a level of ethnic balance to Nineveh.²⁰

But Hadbaa's grip over Mosul's politics would begin to wane almost just as quickly as it coalesced. As a first sign of the fragility of Hadbaa alliance, the government formation process following the 2009 election took longer than expected due to disagreements among the main elements of the coalition.²¹ Furthermore, Nujaifi's refusal to grant the Kurds any position whatsoever in the new government resulted in a wholesale Kurdish boycott of the provincial council. Nineveh became militarily divided into two areas, as Kurdish forces prevented the governor from so much as visiting the disputed territories of Nineveh beyond the perimeter of Mosul city.²²

Hadbaa was also weakened by a fierce and all-consuming rivalry between Nujaifi and Maliki. Maliki gained a foothold into local Mosul politics through several strategic

¹⁷ ICG, *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹⁸ In addition to the local political and commercial elite eager to regain power from both the Kurds and the insurgents, Hadbaa gained the support of the major tribes in Nineveh. Among these were the powerful Sunni Arab Shammar tribes and the Zebaris, a Kurdish rival tribe to KDP's leader Masud Barzani. See: Kilaas Gleneinkel, 'The Hadbaa National List', *Niqash*, (January 28, 2009), <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2368/>, Adel Kamal, 'New Ninawa Governor Rejects Kurdish Alliance', (February 24, 2009), <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2393/>

¹⁹ Musings on Iraq, 'Official Iraqi Election Results', (February 19, 2009), <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/02/official-iraqi-election-results.html>

²⁰ ICG, pp.9-10

²¹ Interview with Abdelaziz Jarba, civil society activist from Mosul. Sulaymaniyah, September 16, 2019.

²² Interview with Khosraw Goran, former Deputy Governor of Mosul. Erbil, August 20, 2019. See also: Ramzy Mardini, 'Factors Affecting Stability in Northern Iraq', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.2, No.8, (August 2009), <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss8-Art6.pdf>

maneuvers,²³ the most important of which pertained to the security apparatus. Beginning in 2011, Maliki made changes within the top commandship of Nineveh's Operational Command and put loyalists in charge, consolidating his control over the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the province. With the withdrawal of American forces from the country that year, the Prime Minister sought to secure unfettered military power.²⁴ Nujaifi saw this consolidation as a direct challenge to his authority. After Nujaifi tried and failed to reassert the control of the governorship over the ISF through appeals to the Iraqi Constitution,²⁵ he subsequently encouraged and participated in a local protest movement against the central government and especially the ISF. Inspired both by the region-wide Arab Spring and the national-level movement on the part of several blocs to oust Maliki from power,²⁶ the protestors demanded the release of prisoners held by ISF, an end to arbitrary arrests and torture, and the elimination of de-Baathification. This movement generated anti-ISF slogans such as "Maliki's army" and "the Safavid army". The ISF responded by arresting community leaders, religious clerics, and activists,²⁷ further deepening the relationship of opposition between locals and the central government.

The Nujaifi vs. Maliki struggle for control took Hadbaa's focus away from strengthening security and providing services for Maslawis. Instead of cooperating against insurgent and extremist groups, the ISF and local authorities were embroiled in an intense political rivalry that gave space for local insurgents to re-establish influence. Members of these armed groups were collecting illegal taxes from all types of businesses in the city of Mosul. Grocery stores, private clinics, and contractors implementing development projects all had to pay taxes to insurgents in return for protection.²⁸ It is estimated that such armed groups were extorting 5 million USD per month during this period. Many established contractors left Mosul, leaving the pool of local expertise.

²³ Maliki turned the tide of de-Baathification and re-appointed many of the formerly banned political elite into important posts. Furthermore, in 2009, Maliki formed a special federal reconstruction committee for Nineveh and put 120 million USD under its control. The committee carried out several projects (water, electricity, and infrastructure projects) through contracts with local companies. See: Adel Kamal, 'Bureaucratic Conflict Blocks Mosul Reconstruction', Niqash, (March 26, 2009), <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2414/>

²⁴ Michael Knights, 'How to Secure Mosul: Lessons from 2008-2014', The Washington Institute, (October 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014>

²⁵ He cited constitutional provisions suggesting that the governor controls ISF troops within governorate borders. See: Iraqi Government Report Investigating the fall of Mosul, P. 39. The report is available at: <http://www.almasalah.com/ar/News-139592/الموصل-سقوط-لتقرير-الرسمية-الوثيقة-الأولى>

²⁶ The national level power struggle was mainly between Maliki on one hand and his opponents Muqtada Sadr, Masud Barzani, and Usama Nujaifi on the other. Governor Nujaifi sided with his brother and used his position as Nineveh's governor to attack Maliki for his authoritarian and centralising tendencies. The Nujaifi brothers also accused Maliki of suppressing the Sunnis based on their sectarian identity.

²⁷ Aljazeera.net, 'Curfew in Mosul and threats towards escalating the protests', (March 8, 2013), <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/3/8/الاحتجاج-بتصعيد-تهديد-بالموصل>

²⁸ Iraqi Government Report Investigating the fall of Mosul, op. cit..

severely depleted. Services suffered as a result, and Nujaifi lost much of the goodwill that brought him to power in the first place.²⁹

Hadbaa started to grow desperate. Sensing his vulnerability in the rivalry with Maliki, Nujaifi made the fateful step of establishing a political alliance with the Kurds. Based on an agreement with Barzani, Kurds were re-integrated into the local governing institutions, a move that alienated many elements within the already fragile Hadbaa coalition.³⁰ Hadbaa lost its internal cohesion by the local elections of 2013, as several key Sunni Arab fractions broke off and entered the election separately.³¹

Unsurprisingly, Hadbaa fared poorly in the elections. The party entered the vote as part of Usama Nujaifi's Mutahidoon alliance and was also joined by the IIP, both of which formed part of a new local bloc called the Nahda coalition. Despite Nahda's backing Nujaifi won only 8 seats, compared to 19 seats just four years earlier. The fragmentation of Hadbaa served the interests of the Kurdish list, which secured 11 seats (PUK 3, and KDP 9). Lacking sufficient seats to control his own destiny, Nujaifi's only pathway to the governorship was to further solidify his controversial agreement with the Kurds. In return for supporting his candidacy, the Kurds gained key positions within the local government including the deputy governor and the head of the provincial council.

With the fracturing and weakening of the Sunni Arab bloc, by the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 the influence of insurgents such as the Islamic State widened to levels not seen since before Operation Mother of Two Springs in 2008. The Naqshbandi army and ISIS were well aware of the local political turmoil, and they successfully took advantage of the factionalism in the city.³² Furthermore, they exploited the years of anti-ISF rhetoric, which in part had been propagated by Nujaifi himself. The continuing reports of abuses of the ISF against Sunni Arab residents further strengthened the sway of the wholesale anti-government discourse of the

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ When Athil allied with the Kurds in 2012, he angered and alienated many of his allies within Hadbaa including the heads of tribal blocks who hold positions within the local government (Abdullah al-Yawar, from the Shammar Tribes and Dildar Zebari, from the Zebari Kurdish tribe) and other local figures such as Nineveh's former Governor al-Baso. Maliki approached these groups and personalities and eventually co-opted some of them. See: Ahmed Ali, 'Iraq's Provincial Elections and Their National Implications', Institute for the Study of War, (March 19, 2013), <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iraq%E2%80%99s-provincial-elections-and-their-national-implications>

³¹ The United Nineveh Alliance (UNA), led by Abdullah Yawar, The Iraq Construction and Justice Party (ICJP), led by Dildar Zebari, and Loyalty to Nineveh Alliance (LNA), led by Ghanim Baso withdrew from Hadbaa and participated in the election separately. The UNA and ICJP won 3 seats respectively. Both rejected Hadbaa because of Nujaifi's alliance with the Kurds. The LNA won 4 seats and had the backings of outside Nineveh Sunni parties such as Salih Mutlag's National Dialogue Party and Jamal Karbuli's al-Hal Party. The coalition received indirect support from Maliki.

³² Iraqi Government Report Investigating the fall of Mosul, op. cit. , p.60

Islamic State. The extremists simultaneously consolidated economic power, demanding rents of up to 15% across the city.³³

By the summer of 2014, the political and economic conditions were set for a broader and more complete takeover of the city. Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, fell to the Islamic State in June 2014. While it is indisputable that the ISF folded in the face of the advance, this was a catastrophe that reflected the province's ongoing political factionalism as much as it pointed to blatant security failures.

The anti-ISIS campaign and the era of external political influence

The campaign to retake Nineveh from ISIS was never solely about restoring security and stability to the province. The campaign had far-reaching political implications from the start, as the various electoral blocs within and outside the province sought to secure post-liberation spoils. The fight with ISIS radically shifted the balance of power in Mosul in favor of the powerful national Shia blocs and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), dealing a severe and perhaps permanent blow to the traditional local Sunni Arab power brokers such as the Nujaifis. Post-ISIS Mosul has become a battleground for control among new local and national actors, furthering the dynamic of systemic neglect and hindering the reconstruction of the city.

The struggle over the position of Nineveh's governor during the ISIS period was a key mechanism through which external political parties divided and conquered the local Sunni blocs. Upon then Prime Minister Hayder Abadi's request in May 2015, the Iraqi parliament voted Athil Nujaifi out of Nineveh's governorship position for his alleged role in the fall of Mosul to the hands of ISIS.³⁴ Nofal Agub was then appointed as Nineveh's governor by a fragmented provincial council in May 2015,³⁵ a move that solidified an already growing split between Nujaifi supporters and detractors in Mosul.

But Agub soon proved to be a profoundly flawed governor. As early as 2016, he lost the backing of nearly half of the members of the Nahda coalition. By October 2017, three months after the liberation of Mosul, the provincial council voted to remove the governor on allegations of incompetence, failure to address the IDP crisis, rampant corruption, and the abuse of public funds allocated for reconstruction.³⁶ As a sign of

³³ Nawzat Shamdeen, 'Al Qaeda's Secrets blackmailing the government in Mosul', Niqash, (January 25, 2012), <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2915/>

³⁴ Aljazeera.net, 'Iraqi Parliament removes Ninewa's governor Athil Nujaifi from his position', (May 28, 2015), [https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/5/28/https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/5/28/](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/5/28/https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/5/28/https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/5/28/)

³⁵ Agub was a provincial council member from al-Nahdha coalition, which again was originally formed by Athil Nujaifi in 2013. Nahda removed Athil from its party leadership in November 2014, five months after the politically catastrophic fall of Mosul. After Nujaifi was then forced from the governorship in 2015, Nahda in alliance with the Kurds succeeded in mobilising enough vote for Agub, appointing him as Nineveh's governor over and against the objections of Athil's supporters. See: Alhayat.com, 'Struggle inside Nineveh provincial council intensifies', (June 06, 2015), <http://www.alhayat.com/article/873481/>

³⁶ Awajelpress.com, 'An MP from Nineveh: the Nahdha coalition nominates Walid Juhaisy for the post of Nineveh's governor', (13/11/2017), <http://awajelpress.com>

the growing influence of the Shia blocs in Baghdad –who had already formed a strategic alliance with Agub – his dismissal was summarily rejected by the administrative court in the national capital. (The court justified this decision on the rather dubious grounds that the provincial council had held the removal proceeding in the town of Qosh, rather than in the council headquarters located in Mosul city.)³⁷

Agub thus maintained the governorship, and now he was even further incentivized to align with the Shia parties and the ascendant PMF-backed groups. Reports alleged that he either kept a blind eye or actively supported the extra-legal economic activities of the PMF-linked groups as well as the local economic offices of powerful Shia parties.³⁸ Agub evidently sought not only political security but also personal enrichment. He allegedly empowered his own brother to operate as the “governor in the shadows,” demanding kickbacks from reconstruction contractors.³⁹ Sources within UNDP indicated that Agub regularly refused to sign off on development projects, forcing the UN to create bureaucratic workarounds via the federal directorates and/or the Prime Minister’s Office.⁴⁰

Despite damning findings from a parliamentary fact-finding commission that discovered widespread corruption in the city in connection to Agub and the PMFs, Agub maintained his position through strong backing from Baghdad-based political forces.⁴¹ Paradoxically, it was likely Agub’s immense lack of popularity locally that secured him support from Baghdad parties, who did not want to see the rise of another local Nujaifi-like figure in the run up to the 2018 national elections. Abadi and his Nasr coalition saw Mosul as a significant voting bloc, and he framed the liberation of the city from ISIS as the cornerstone of the campaign platform. Indeed, many Sunni figures and politicians from Nineveh joined Nasr.

It was not until after the elections and the now infamous March 21, 2019 ferry incident that Baghdad was forced to respond to local political pressures clamoring for Agub’s ouster. On March 24, 2019 Iraq’s Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi called upon the Iraqi parliament to dismiss Nineveh’s governor, finally bringing the era of Nofal Agub to an end. According to civil society activists and politicians we interviewed, the damage was already done. The preceding two years of political turmoil had created total disarray in the local government, eliminating any chance that the post-ISIS reconstruction and reform process would proceed coherently.⁴²

³⁷ Rudaw.net, ‘Federal court returns Agub to his position as Nineveh’s governor’, (November 29, 2017), <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/291120176>

³⁸ The final report of the fact finding committee-Iraqi parliament, (January 2019), <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/263485/ني-بشأن-الحقائق-تقصي-لجنة-تقرير-تنشر-نيوز-السومرية-ar>

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Interview with a UNDP official. Erbil, June 19, 2019.

⁴¹ Interviews with several local politicians, civil society activists, and journalists from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

⁴² Interviews with several local civil society activists and journalists from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

Name of Coalition	Number of Seats	Number of Votes
Nasr	7	168144
KDP	6	139093
Al- Wataniya	4	103924
Ninawa Hawiyatona	3	83097
Al- Fatih	3	75017
Al- Karar Al- Iraqi	3	67093
Al- Jamaheer Al- Wataniya	2	54111
Al- Nahj Al- Democracy	1	37083
PUK	1	32845
Tamadon	1	28543

Table (1) 2018 election results in Nineveh (only parties with seats listed)

The struggle to secure Agub's replacement brought an even wider array of political actors into the competition for local control, including Sunni parties and factions from other Sunni Arab dominated governorates, such as Jamal Karbuli's Al-Hal party; Muhammed Halboosi, a former governor of Anbar and the current speaker of the Iraqi parliament; Khamis Khanjar's Mashroo' Al-Arabi Party; and Abu Mazin, a former governor of Salahuddin and currently a member of the Iraqi parliament.⁴³

These factions saw immense electoral opportunity in the precipitous decline of the Mutahidoon bloc in Mosul following Athil Nujaifi's ouster, in addition to the weakened position of the Kurds following the failed referendum of 2017 and the loss of the disputed territories in Nineveh.⁴⁴

Rather than leading a coherent political movement in Mosul with popular appeal locally, these external Sunni Arab parties have formed fluid alliances with one another based on achieving short-term goals. Furthermore, they have relied on additional alliances with the ascendant Shia blocs. After the May 2018 elections, for instance, Khamees Khanjar's party along with Karbuli's faction allied with the Shia-led Binaa party, headed by Hadi Ameri's Fatah alliance and Nouri Maliki's State of Law Alliance. Meanwhile, Usama Nujaifi's Al-Qarar Al-Iraqi Party has allied with the Shia-led Reform and Construction bloc, comprised of Muqtada Sadr's Sayroon coalition, Hayder Abadi's Nasir alliance, and Ammar Al-hakim's Hikma Trend.

These Shia parties were in many respects more powerful and engaged locally than the external Sunni Arab actors. Falih Fayadh, the formal head of the PMF and Iraqi government's National Security Advisor, used his position within the security apparatus to develop ties with powerful Sunni tribes and personalities across Nineveh. Fayadh, a Shia politician and the head of Atta party, was able to secure 6 parliamentary seats during the May 2018 elections in Nineveh. (Fayadh's Atta party

⁴³ Interviews with several Nineveh provincial council members and civil society activists and journalists from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

⁴⁴ Based on interviews with local journalists and political observers from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

entered the elections as part of Abadi's Nasr coalition but departed the alliance shortly after the elections, effectively gutting Nasr of its Mosul presence)

When it came time for the selection of the new governor in the spring of 2019, it would be Fayadh who would win the day with the support of key Sunni Arab allies Khanjar and Abu Mazin.⁴⁵ He outmaneuvered Speaker of the Parliament Muhammed Halboosi, who supported Hussam Abar, a Nineveh council member.⁴⁶ Halboosi's candidate never received the support of Khanjar and Abu Mazin even though the two were members of the same National Front Alliance with Halboosi. Instead, Khanjar and Abu Mazin allied with Fayadh's candidate, Mansour Murid, who also received the backing of the KDP. Khanjar and Abu Mazin, both wealthy individuals, entered into extensive negotiation with provincial council members with the aim of obtaining their loyalties and votes.⁴⁷

In sum, the appointment of Murid as Nineveh's governor was a product of a deal among Fayadh, Khanjar, Abu Mazin, and the KDP at the expense of Halboosi, the Nujafis, and other local groups.⁴⁸ (Halboosi was so miffed by the loss of the governorship that he threatened the dismissal of Nineveh's provincial council through the powers of the Iraqi parliament. Ultimately he left the National Front Alliance in opposition to Khanjar.)⁴⁹ Positions were doled out accordingly.⁵⁰ In return for backing Murid, the KDP secured the position of Nineveh's first deputy governor, restoring the Kurds to a position of considerable influence over the local government.⁵¹ The deal allowed Khamis Khanjar to appoint one of his affiliates as Nineveh's second deputy governor.⁵² And more recently, the current governor Najm al-Jebouri came to power under a similarly fraught set of compromises among the factions.⁵³

The Politics of Reconstruction in Mosul

While it is encouraging to hear reports that al-Jebouri enjoys a higher degree of local support, still the overall sentiment among Maslawis is one of widespread malaise and confusion about the city's and the wider governorate's future. Instead of substantive reforms and infrastructure projects, interviewees anticipate a huge build-up of rhetoric and competition among the various national and local factions in the months prior to

⁴⁵ Interviews with provincial council members and local journalists from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

⁴⁶ Almadapress.net, '5 leaders support 4 personalities for the position of Nineveh's governor', (April 20, 2019), <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=218028>

⁴⁷ Based on interviews with local journalists and political observers from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Alarabiya.net, 'Iraqi parliament requests investigating the election of Nineveh's governor', (May 12, 2019), [https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq](https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/05/12/https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq)

⁵⁰ Interview with Ahmed Hussein, political activist from Nineveh. Mosul, August 22, 2019.

⁵¹ Interview with Sirwan Muhammed, Nineveh's deputy governor. Mosul, August 21, 2019

⁵² Interview with Hassan Luhaibi, Nineveh's second deputy governor. Mosul, August 21, 2019.

⁵³ Saleem, Zmkan Ali, Prisoner of the Deal: Nineveh's governor and local state capture, *LSE/Middle East Centre*, (March 2020)

the next round of elections. One civil society activist noted: “They’ll say ‘we promise to release the political prisoners’ to show us that they’re with the Sunni Arabs, but we know it won’t materialize.”⁵⁴

Officials, administrators, and civil society leaders across all political persuasions are pessimistic about the future of reconstruction in Mosul. The assignment of blame for this state of affairs depends on political affiliation. For the Kurds, minorities (Christians and Yazidis), and the faction of Sunni Arabs aligned against the PMF, it is widely believed that Governor al-Jebouri is beholden to the very parties that brought him to power.

A Sunni Arab council member noted: “The PMF dominates the government administration and offices in Nineveh. The heads and managers of government offices and directorates are supported by the PMF and no one can hold them accountable. As a provincial council member, I cannot request managers and directors in the local administration for questioning. If I do so, the PMF would intervene on their behalf and if I insist on questioning managers and directors in the local government then I would be threatened by the PMF.”⁵⁵

Whether one regards the holder of the governor’s position as collaborative or co-opted, it is undeniable that placing all the blame on the shoulders of the governor’s office would be unfair. Reconstruction funds are controlled by several government agencies that do not coordinate closely with each other. Most of the local government officials and observers stated that the reconstruction agencies including the Reconstruction Fund, the service provision federal ministries, and the governor’s office operate in Mosul without coordinating with each other and with the local provincial council.⁵⁶

A provincial council member from Mosul commented: “Reconstruction effort is fragmented and there is no clear vision and aim among the implementing parties. For instance, the central government ministries implement projects without coordinating with the local government and the local provincial council. This has meant that Baghdad authorities, who are less informed about the needs and the priorities of Nineveh, have determined which projects are prioritized and where.”⁵⁷

Of course the government is not the only actor involved in reconstruction. UNDP officials emphasize that the media’s fixation on government corruption and failure in Mosul has resulted in an overly gloomy narrative towards all reconstruction actors, including those representing the international community. One UNDP official noted that the Mosul city team has rebuilt all the water treatment plants and electrical substations, 3 maternity hospitals, 144 schools, 40 colleges at Mosul University, and

⁵⁴ Interview with Ahmed Hussein, political activist from Nineveh. Mosul, August 22, 2019.

⁵⁵ Interview with Hussam Abar, A Sunni Arab member of Nineveh’s provincial council. Mosul, June 24, 2019

⁵⁶ Interviews with provincial council members and local journalists from Mosul. Mosul, July 20-September 20, 2019.

⁵⁷ Interview with Owayd Ali al-Juhaishi, member of Nineveh’s provincial council. Mosul, June 24, 2019.

9 police stations across Mosul “from zero,” including the police headquarters. As for housing they, have completed over 2000 houses, with the aim of completing 15,000 in total. ⁵⁸

However, he lamented, “the media is not interested at all in good news stories...So people keep saying that nothing is happening...On the other hand, the media all show up when a mass grave is discovered, or a story about corruption.” In the view of UNDP, one technical reality that drives the perception of non-progress is the geographic distribution of the large reconstruction projects along the edge of the city because, as the same UNDP official noted, “you do not build a water plant in the middle of the city.” Moreover, the structures that are close to the road are often municipal shops. “We do private houses, so you have to get back further [to see the progress on housing].”⁵⁹

This is not to say that UNDP and the other major international organizations involved in reconstruction such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) minimize the pervasiveness of politics and corruption and the impact this has on projects, particularly during the period of Nofal Agub. One official noted that Agub and his brother had control or influence over all the PMF-run checkpoints coming in and out of Mosul, such that no product or equipment could enter or exit without their blessing. This enabled them to demand payments and kickbacks from companies who had received contracts from the government and/or international organizations. In addition to this form of extortion, Governor Agub made every effort to obstruct and assert his control over the formal tendering and procurement side of the reconstruction process, often refusing to sign off on projects that had already been specked and approved by both UNDP and the relevant directorates (e.g., directorate of electricity, water, etc.).⁶⁰ This dynamic forced UNDP to seek approvals by other means: “There are a couple of cases when we had at least 30 projects on his desk for months, so we just went to Mahdi Al-Allaq, the chief of staff [in the Prime Minister’s Office], and he just basically signed them for us and sent a letter to Agub saying this is hereby approved.” When the governor finally received formal charges of corruption and was forced to spend time in Baghdad, this period away enabled international actors to push more projects through via agreements with the directorates. But even while away, the governor tried to pressure the local director generals to refuse compliance without his approval.

Concerns over the potential for corruption has injected huge delays in the procurement and implementation processes. UNDP is forced to go through several layers of checks and vetting before a project can be approved. First, a team of UNDP engineers along with engineers from the relevant directorate visit the facility in need of repair (e.g., a water treatment plant) and assess all the parts and equipment required to do a successful rebuild. Then, this results in the directorate composing a bill of quantity (BOQ) listing all the needed items and their quantity. Importantly, the BOQ is unpriced so as to avoid collusion between people in the directorates and potential bidders. Once the BOQ is signed off by the directorate general, it is transferred over to the

⁵⁸ Interviews with 6 senior UNDP and IOM officials, July 19-26, 2019.

⁵⁹ Interviews with 6 senior UNDP and IOM officials, July 19-26, 2019.

⁶⁰ Interviews with 6 senior UNDP and IOM officials, July 19-26, 2019.

procurement office at UNDP, which checks and rechecks the specifications. Then bidding begins. The procurement division is required to rigorously vet each company, checking bank details, technical qualifications, and ensuring that there is no connection between the contractor and any political/military entity. Some of the blacklisted companies reapply under new names, adding another layer of complication. The relevant director general finally selects a company and composes a notification letter, which must be signed by the governor. In theory an obstructionist governor can delay the process at this point for as long as he or she likes. If approval is received, the project is formally handed over to the company, and payments are only made when specific benchmarks are achieved, verified by UNDP engineers. Even in the best case scenario in which UNDP prevents any and all corruption from entering into a project, the whole procurement process alone takes 3 months due to the need for all of this vetting.

There was a distinct difference in the level of interference between Mosul city and the surrounding smaller towns and rural areas comprising most of the province's geographic area. The UNDP teams in these areas noted far less interest on the part of the governor, mostly working with the directorates for approvals and secondarily the local mayors. One official analyzed this hands-off approach as a question of scale: "A school we do in the rural areas costs \$30,000 and in Mosul city it'd be 2 million dollars, so there's less to gain from a corruption scheme."⁶¹ The major problem facing reconstruction in the rural areas is the degree of government neglect. Many rebuilt schools, for instance, are standing empty, and the government has shown no signs of re-opening them for students. They also have to contend with the politicization of aid from the international community, particularly the United States, which is often more concerned with directing aid towards minority populations such as the Christians rather than achieving holistic humanitarian development. One official reflected, "This policy of favoritism doesn't help anyone, not even the Christians. Nothing exists in isolation, so if you want to fix a water network, it is going to cut across different areas, and it is like a tree, so you have to start at the bottom to find the root and follow it. So if you say you are only going to work in the Christian towns, you are basically against the technical aspect. They are interconnected. And the same thing goes with the water and the electricity grid."⁶²

CONCLUSION

In Mosul a chaotic, dysfunctional political competition was set in motion from the very first days of the invasion. Despite talk of consensus among the various local groups, the struggle over power was not an equal one. The military takeover of the city by Kurdish forces and the persistent sidelining of local Sunni Arabs in governance/security (largely due to the US policy of de-Baathification) eroded local trust in government. After years of Kurdish dominance and Sunni Arab neglect, in 2009 the push from Baghdad and the Americans to form a local Sunni Arab bloc led to the rise of Hadbaa under Athil Nujaifi. The newly formed Sunni Arab coalition

⁶¹ Interviews with 6 senior UNDP and IOM officials, June 19-26, 2019.

⁶² Interviews with 6 senior UNDP and IOM officials, June 19-26, 2019.

immediately moved to force the Kurds out of all levels of government, effectively reversing the order of the previous years. Yet, from the beginning Hadbaa was internally fractured and quickly fell apart as soon as Nujaifi found himself isolated by both Maliki on the one hand and the Kurds on the other. The rivalry between Nujaifi and Maliki created an anti-government and anti-army discourse among local residents, a discourse that insurgents and eventually ISIS would capitalize upon in extending influence over the city and province. The ISIS period and aftermath marked a new era in Mosul's politics, as a host of external actors were ushered into the local political arena – both powerful Shia political blocs and external Sunni Arab parties. These external forces are themselves fractured.

In Mosul, the persistence of an enormous IDP crisis, lack of housing, and a destroyed infrastructure has dampened the hopes of Maslawis for post-ISIS development and reconstruction. Local fears over the potential for a return of extremist groups have little to do with doubts towards the security apparatus. Rather it is a matter of governmental neglect of basic needs for housing and services. This neglect is not a unique product of the post-ISIS era. It is a reflection of successive administrations since 2003.

Any announcements of new infrastructure projects, job programs, or reform agendas must be viewed in light of a long-standing pattern of incompleteness. Projects are announced in proximity to elections and/or in response to political unrest but then ultimately fall to the wayside. Regardless of whomever holds the position of governor or controls the directorates, all of these major governmental projects are routed through a local bureaucracy that is co-opted by functionaries beholden to political parties, thereby injecting nearly limitless blockages into the process. A coherent reconstruction program in Mosul simply cannot be managed under such conditions, and the same holds true across Iraq. The protestors who took to the streets in Baghdad during October of 2019 were all too aware of the structural flaws in the post-2003 governance system, prompting their demands for a new political order.

