There is a great deal of optimism in recent weeks about the global effort to dismantle the jihadist regime of Daesh. The liberation of Mosul is certainly a significant step in that direction as far as Iraq is concerned. At the same time, a reported U.S.-Russian understanding is likely to help in the battle against Daesh in Raqqa and its caliphate’s wider core in eastern Syria. That said, these developments are also likely to intensify the tumult in Syria and Iraq, creating an uneasy environment that Daesh can be expected to exploit.

What Lies Beyond the Liberation of Mosul?
After a nine-month struggle, Mosul is no longer under Daesh control. The duration of the battle for Mosul, along with the fact that three years ago Daesh seized it in a little over a week, underscores how difficult it has been to retake Iraq’s second-largest city. Holding Mosul, reconstructing it, getting its residents back to the city and developing a viable political economy will be even more difficult.

After all, the geosectarian situation that allowed Daesh to grow into the threat it has become is not going away. In fact, conditions are likely to get worse. For the first time in Iraq’s history, the Sunni-majority city of Mosul is under the control of a Shiite-dominated military force. This is the price that had to be paid to deprive Daesh of its largest urban holding.

It also points to a much deeper malaise. The Iraqi Sunni community is shattered. Iraq’s sectarian imbalance of power will continue undermining efforts to stabilize the country and to ensure that Daesh does not stage a comeback. It will not be long before Sunnis’ relief that Daesh no longer runs their lives is replaced by the bitter reality that they are now under the thumb of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.

Daesh has succeeded in expanding its footprint in Iraq over the past 14 years largely because of the Iraqi Sunnis’ disenfranchisement. This is in addition to the overwhelming influence of Iran on the Iraqi Shiite forces that dominate Baghdad. During this period, multiple efforts to integrate Sunnis into the post-Baathist republic have failed — mostly because of the Shiites’ imperative to ensure their dominance of the country. Moving forward, integrating Sunnis will be even more difficult because there is no Sunni mainstream in the country. Unfortunately, Daesh represents the only organized political force among Iraq’s Sunnis. This is why the Shia-dominated state security forces along with their Shia militia allies have had to do the heavy lifting vis-à-vis the liberation of Mosul.
Recall that Daesh took over Mosul in 2014 after the Shiite-dominated Iraqi army was forced to flee from the city. That happened because the local Sunni population viewed the Iraqi army as an occupation force. From the Sunni point of view, the situation in Mosul today is not just a return to a previous norm; it is far worse. Shiite-dominated security forces backed by Shiite militias are the ones in control of Mosul.

Domination by the sectarian “other” is not the only worry for Iraq’s Sunnis. The country’s largest ethnic minority, the Kurds, have also been trying to expand their territorial control at the Sunnis’ expense. They, too, will benefit from being a significant part of the anti-Daesh coalition. Kurdish moves to secede from Iraq – given the upcoming referendum in September – will only further marginalize the Iraqi Sunnis. The Kurds are moving to incorporate land and energy resources claimed by Sunnis in areas well south of their autonomous Kurdistan region.

These are the conditions that Daesh hopes to exploit. When the jihadists seized Mosul, they never thought that they would be able to hold onto it; quite the contrary. They knew that it was only a matter of time until their opponents would be able to deploy a superior force to dislodge them. Thus, Daesh began preparing for this inevitable outcome soon after it took control of the city.

Historically, jihadists in Iraq operate on a cycle where they go back and forth between control over urban areas and a return to the rural outskirts. Daesh has strategically retreated back to the latter. From there it will focus on exploiting the ethno-sectarian dynamics hard-wired into the fabric of Iraq since 2003. These underlying geopolitical conditions will enable the jihadists to revive themselves within the country at a future date.

*The Syrian Regime Or Daesh?*
The Syrian half of the battlespace involving Daesh is far more complicated than the one in Iraq. Even though Sunnis represent a majority in Syria, they are a deeply divided lot. A large segment of the Sunni population in Syria remains loyal to the Assad regime, which explains why the regime has not only managed to survive the civil war but has more recently revived its fortunes. Then, there is a large number of Sunnis in the ranks of the various rebel factions. Finally, there are Sunnis aligned with jihadists – some with al-Qaeda, but many more with Daesh.

This divided Sunni landscape has direct implications on any effort by external forces to dislodge Daesh from its core turf in eastern Syria, an area that runs along the Euphrates River from Raqqa to Deir-al-Zour. Currently, no Sunni Arab force can act as a counterweight to Daesh. The rebels have always been divided, and their focus has been on fighting the Assad regime. After the loss of Aleppo last December, the rebels are a spent force. The United States had long hoped that Turkey would step up and send its forces to fight Daesh. This has not happened, because Turkish and American interests in Syria diverge.

With few options on the table, Washington has resorted to backing the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Front as the main fighting force for the assault under way on the Daesh capital of Raqqa. That said, the United States realizes that a largely Kurdish force has limited utility against Daesh. The Syrian regime is the only capable military force that can help make progress in the fight against the jihadists. But given that the regime has the blood of hundreds of thousands on its hands, the United States cannot be seen as aligning with it.

Here is where the current discussion between U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration and the Russians becomes significant. Russia’s reasons for...
militarily intervening in Syria have less to do with the Levantine country than with Moscow’s efforts to gain leverage with Washington concerning Russia’s near abroad, especially Ukraine. Russia has been seeking a quid pro quo with the United States involving Syria and Ukraine since President Barack Obama was in office. The idea is built on the fact that U.S. and Russian strategic interests converge quite a bit when it comes to Syria. Both sides seek the destruction of Daesh. More important, neither is interested in seeing the collapse of the regime. These interests have aligned even further under the Trump administration, which has pledged to defeat Daesh. While Obama was not interested in a compromise over Ukraine in exchange for Russian President Vladimir Putin getting Bashar al-Assad’s regime to help fight Daesh, Trump has been far more receptive. This would explain Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s recent remarks that Russia will deal with the fate of the Assad regime. It could also explain the revelations from Trump last weekend that he is engaged in strategic discussions with Putin over Russian and Ukraine. The Russians, at the very least, seek a neutral government in Kiev to replace the current pro-Western one. For Trump, this is not a major concession if he is able to show significant progress against Daesh. Considering the controversy surrounding the dealings between Trump’s associates and Russian officials, this is not an easy deal to make. However, it is not beyond the pale. It is too early to tell whether or not the United States and Russia will reach such an understanding. What is certain is that at present, the only real force capable of undermining Daesh’s position in Syria is the Assad regime. And the only ones who can help with this effort are the Russians. But even this is a temporary solution to the more intractable jihadist problem within the country.
As is the case in Iraq, the only counterweight to Daesh in Syria are forces dominated by non-Sunnis. This only exacerbates the geosectarian divisions in the region. Therefore, what we have are only short-term options to counter Daesh and the wider menace of jihadism. A more permanent solution will remain elusive as long as Sunni Arabs remain weak and at odds with one another – as is evident from the latest crisis in the form of the Saudi-Qatari dispute. Since states in the Arab world are in a long-term meltdown, jihadists will continue to pose a threat worldwide.

* Photo Courtesy: ABC.com, DailyMail.com

**About The Navigator**

The Navigator – CGP’s latest policy product – provides objective analysis of the week’s most pressing U.S. foreign policy issue as relates to Muslim geopolitics. Every Wednesday, the Navigator will: 1) Identify a significant geopolitical development; 2) Offer a rigorous analysis of the event; and, 3) Forecast what to expect next regarding the issue.