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## Fall of Raqqa and Mosul Will Not Spell the End for Isis

Patrick Cockburn •

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When Lionel Messi scored a last minute winning goal for Barcelona against Real Madrid on 23 April, football fans in the Syrian coastal city of Tartous who had been watching the game on television rushed into the street to celebrate.

This turned out to be a mistake from their point of view because many of the jubilant fans were men of military age, whom the Syrian security forces promptly detained in order to find out if they were liable for military service. It is unknown how many were conscripted but, once in the army, they will have difficulty getting out and there is a high chance they will be killed or injured.

Military service and ways of avoiding it are staples of conversation in Syria where government, Kurds and insurgents are all looking for soldiers after six years of relentless war. Casualties have been heavy with pro-government forces alone losing an estimated 112,000 dead since 2011 according to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. In theory, men can escape conscription if they are the only son of a family or are studying at university, but even then they are not entirely safe from being arbitrarily drafted.

The conscripts eat bad food and are poorly paid, earning around \$50 a month, which gives them little option but to live off bribes mostly earned by letting people pass through their checkpoints. Iraqi and Syrian security officials say this is one reason why Isis and al-Qaeda suicide bombers driving vehicles full of explosives are able to blow themselves up and cause horrific loss of life in the heart of supposedly well-protected cities.

“Women and children are vulnerable in this war but I feel more sorry for the young men who are in much greater danger,” said a UN aid worker, who did not want her name published, working at the sprawling Hammam al-Alil camp for displaced persons south of Mosul. She said that, whether or not they had ever belonged to an armed group, the young men were always suspected of it. She had just seen a dozen of them who had fled from Mosul being taken off for interrogation and vetting “and I have never seen more terrified people in my life”. She added that they had every reason to be frightened because a few days previously she had seen two men from Mosul, unconscious and covered in blood, being taken to hospital on stretchers after a couple of hours’ interrogation.

Paranoia runs deep in Syria and Iraq and people speak continually of “sleeper cells” established by Isis that are waiting to emerge suddenly and slaughter their enemies. Despite these fears, security is generally very poor because of the saturation levels of corruption. Checkpoints act as internal customs posts: the smaller ones mulct drivers of a packet of cigarettes or their small change, but the larger checkpoints are big business with a turnover of the equivalent of millions of pounds and dollars. Huge profits are kicked back to senior officers, politicians and parties who preside over the networks of rackets that strangle the Iraqi and Syrian economies.

Lorry drivers on the 165-mile route between Kirkuk and Baghdad were on strike in March, complaining that the main checkpoint outside Baghdad had raised its illegal fees to \$1,500 per truck which was three times the previous level. “This money does not come from individual drivers, but from the owner of the goods he carries who passes on the extra cost to the consumer in Baghdad,” said a broker called Ahmed who works as a freelance freight forwarder. He explained that the drivers were on strike not because of the bribery, but because the increased delays at checkpoints that meant the Kirkuk-Baghdad round-trip, which used to take three days, was now taking fifteen.

The criminalisation of society in Iraq and Syria during the long years of war is one reason why normal life does not return even when there is no fighting. On top of the corruption by local warlords and political bosses, the number of reliable combat soldiers on all sides is limited so military successes are never as decisive as claimed. The Syrian army can only stage one offensive at a time and this makes it vulnerable on other fronts. Just as it was capturing East Aleppo in December 2016 after a long siege, it lost Palmyra to Isis for a second time and has had to fight off an Isis attack on Deir Ezzor, the largest city in eastern Syria. In Damascus, a surprise insurgent assault, using tunnels from their stronghold in Eastern Ghouta, came close to storming the centre of the capital.

The capture of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria is often presented as the death knell for Isis, but its demise is by no means so certain. The loss of the two cities means that the self-declared Caliphate will be shrunken and lose much of its population. But prior to its explosive advances in 2014, when it captured much of western Iraq and eastern Syria, it was a skilled and experienced guerrilla movement. Unable to stand against the firepower of an enemy in total control of the air, there are signs that it is moving many of its fighters and officials out of Mosul and Raqqa to rural areas where they can hide more easily.

The round-up of football fans in Tartous underlines the shortage of soldiers facing the Syrian government. It has too few troops to occupy and hold territory seized from Isis and al-Qaeda. Iraq has a similar problem because, although many men theoretically belong to its security forces, the real number of combat troops is much smaller. Most of the soldiers one sees beside the road in Iraq and Syria belong to “checkpoint armies” who exploit the civilian population but are not planning to fight anybody.