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The Globalization of Misery

By Tom Engelhardt
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The closest I ever got to Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was 1,720.7 miles away – or so the Internet assures me. Although I've had a lifelong interest in history, I know next to nothing about Mosul's, nor do I have more than a glancing sense of what it looks like, or more accurately what it looked like when all its buildings, including those in its "Old City," were still standing. It has – or at least in better times had – a population of at least 1.8 million, not one of whom have I ever met and significant numbers of whom are now either dead, wounded, uprooted, or in desperate straits.

Consider what I never learned about Mosul my loss, a sign of my ignorance. Yet, in recent months, little as I know about the place, it's been on my mind – in part because what's now happening to that city will be the world's loss as well as mine.

In mid-October 2016, the U.S.-backed Iraqi army first launched an offensive to retake Mosul from the militants of the Islamic State. Relatively small numbers of ISIS fighters had captured it in mid-2014 when the previous version of the Iraqi military (into which the U.S. had poured more than \$25 billion) collapsed ignominiously and fled, abandoning weaponry and even uniforms along the way. It was in Mosul's Great Mosque that the existence of the Islamic State was first triumphantly proclaimed by its "caliph," Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi.

On the initial day of the offensive to recapture the city, the Pentagon was already congratulating the Iraqi military for being "ahead of schedule" in a campaign that was expected to "take weeks or even months." Little did its planners – who had been announcing its prospective start for nearly a year – know. A week later, everything was still "proceeding according to our plan," claimed then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. By the end of January 2017, after 100 days of fierce fighting, the eastern part of that city, divided by the Tigris River, was more or less back in government hands and it had, according to *New York Times* reporters on the scene, been "spared the wholesale destruction inflicted on other Iraqi cities" like Ramadi and Fallujah, even though those residents who hadn't fled were reportedly "scratching out a primitive existence, deprived of electricity, running water and other essential city services."

And that was the good news. More than 100 days later, Iraqi troops continue to edge their way through embattled western Mosul, with parts of it, including the treacherous warren of streets in its Old City, still in the hands of ISIS militants amid continuing bitter building-to-building fighting. The Iraqi government and its generals still insist, however, that everything will be over in mere weeks. An estimated thousand or so ISIS defenders (of the original 4,000-8,000 reportedly entrenched in the city) are still holding out and will assumedly fight to the death. U.S. air power has repeatedly been called in big time, with civilian deaths soaring, and hundreds of thousands of its increasingly desperate and hungry inhabitants still living in battle-scarred Mosul as Islamic State fighters employ countless bomb-laden suicide vehicles and even small drones.

After seven months of unending battle in that single city, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that Mosul has receded from the news here, even as civilian casualties grow, at least half a million Iraqis have been displaced, and the Iraqi military has suffered grievous losses.

Though there's been remarkably little writing about it, here's what now seems obvious: when the fighting is finally over and the Islamic State defeated, the losses will be so much more widespread than that. Despite initial claims that the Iraqi military (and the U.S. Air Force) were taking great care to avoid as much destruction as possible in an urban landscape filled with civilians, the rules of engagement have since changed and it's clear that, in the end, significant swathes of Iraq's second largest city will be left in ruins. In this, it will resemble so many other cities and towns in Iraq and Syria, from Fallujah to Ramadi, Homs to Aleppo.

The Disappearance of Mosul

At a moment when Donald Trump makes headlines daily with almost any random thing he says, the fate of Mosul doesn't even qualify as a major news story. What happens in that city, however, will be no minor thing. It *will* matter on this increasingly small planet of ours.

What's to come is also, unfortunately, reasonably predictable. Eight, nine, or more months after this offensive was launched, the grim Islamic State in Mosul will undoubtedly be destroyed, but so will much of the city in a region that continues to be – to invent a word – rubblized.

When Mosul is officially retaken, if not "ahead of schedule," then at least "according to plan," the proud announcements of "victory" in the war against ISIS will make headlines. Soon after, however, Mosul will once again disappear from our American world and worries. Yet that will

undoubtedly only be the beginning of the story in a world in crisis. Fourteen years have passed since the U.S. invaded Iraq and punched a hole in the oil heartlands of the Middle East. In the wake of that invasion, states have been crumbling or simply imploding and terror movements growing and spreading, while wars, ethnic slaughter, and all manner of atrocities have engulfed an ever-widening region. Millions of Iraqis, Syrians, Afghans, Yemenis, Libyans, and others have been uprooted, sent into exile in their own countries, or fled across borders to become refugees. In Mosul alone, untold numbers of people whose fathers, mothers, grandparents, children, friends, and relatives were slaughtered in the Iraqi Army's offensive or simply murdered by ISIS will be left homeless, often without possessions, jobs, or communities in the midst of once familiar places that have been transformed into rubble.

Mosul now lacks an airport, a railroad station, and a university – all destroyed in the recent fighting. Initial estimates suggest that its rebuilding will cost billions of dollars over many years. And it's just one of many cities in such a state. The question is: Where exactly will the money to rebuild come from? After all, the price of oil is at present below \$50 a barrel, the Iraqi and Syrian governments lack resources of every sort, and who can imagine a new Marshall Plan for the region coming from Donald Trump's America or, for that matter, anywhere else?

In other words, the Iraqis, the Syrians, the Yemenis, the Libyans, the Afghans, and others are likely, in the end, to find themselves alone in the ruins of their worlds with remarkably little recourse. With that in mind and given the record of those last 14 years, how exactly do you imagine that things will turn out for the inhabitants of Mosul, or Ramadi, or Fallujah, or cities yet to be destroyed? What new movements, ethnic struggles, and terror outfits will emerge from such a nightmare?

To put it another way, if you think that such a disaster will remain the possession of the Iraqis (Syrians, Yemenis, Libyans, and Afghans), then you haven't been paying much attention to the history of the twenty-first century. You evidently haven't noticed that Donald J. Trump won the last presidential election in the United States, in part by playing on fears of a deluge of refugees from the Middle East and of Islamic terrorism; that the British voted to leave the European Union in part based on similar fears; and that across Europe pressures over refugees and terror attacks have helped to alter the political landscape.

Where Is Globalization Now That We Need It?

To frame things slightly differently, let me ask another question entirely: In these last years, haven't you wondered what ever happened to "globalization" and the endless media attention that was once paid to it? Not so very long ago we were being assured that this planet was binding itself into a remarkably tight knot of interconnectedness that was going to amaze us all. As Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* put it in 1996, we were seeing "the integration of free markets, nation-states, and information technologies to a degree never before witnessed, in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and countries to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever." All of this was to be fed and led by the United States, the last superpower standing, and as a result, the global "playing field" would miraculously "be leveled" on a planet becoming a mosaic of Pizza Huts, iMacs, and Lexuses.

Who of a certain age doesn't remember those years after the Soviet Union imploded when we all suddenly found ourselves in a single superpower world? It was a moment when, thanks to vaunted technological advances, it seemed blindingly clear to the cognoscenti that this was going to be a single-everything planet. We were all about to be absorbed into a "single market for goods, capital, and commercial services" from which, despite the worries of naysayers, "almost everyone" stood "to gain." In a world not of multiple superpowers but of multiple "supermarkets," we were likely to become both more democratic and more capitalistic by the year as an interlocking set of transnational corporate players, nations, and peoples, unified by a singularly interwoven set of communication systems (representing nothing short of an information revolution), triumphed, while poverty, that eternal plague of humanity, stood to lose out big time. Everything would be connected on what was, for the first time, to be a single, "flattened" planet.

It won't surprise you, I'm sure, to be told that that's not exactly the planet we're now on. Instead, whatever processes were at work, the result has been record numbers of billionaires, record levels of inequality, and refugees in numbers not seen since much of the world was in a state of collapse after World War II.

Still, don't you ever wonder where, conceptually speaking, globalization is now that we need it? I mean, did it really turn out that we weren't living together on a single shrinking planet? Were the globalists of that moment inhabiting another planet entirely in another solar system? Or could it be that globalization is still the ruling paradigm here, but that what's globalizing isn't (or isn't just) Pizza Huts, iMacs, and Lexuses, but pressure points for the fracturing of our world?

The globalization of misery doesn't have the cachet of the globalization of plenty. It doesn't make for the same uplifting reading, nor does skyrocketing global economic inequality seem quite as thrilling as a leveling playing field (unless, of course, you happen to be a billionaire). And thanks significantly to the military efforts of the last superpower standing, the disintegration of significant regions of the planet doesn't quite add up to what the globalists had in mind for the twenty-first century. Failed states, spreading terror movements, all too many Mosuls, and the conditions for so much more of the same weren't what globalization was supposed to be all about.

Perhaps, however, it's time to begin reminding ourselves that we're still on a globalizing planet, even if one experiencing pressures of an unexpected sort, including from the disastrous never-ending American war on terror. It's so much more convenient, of course, to throw the idea of globalization overboard and imagine that Mosul is thousands of miles away in a universe that bears next to no relation to our own.

What It Really Means to Be on a "Flattening" Planet

It's true that in France last week extremist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen was defeated by a young, little known former investment banker and government minister, Emmanuel Macron, and the European Union preserved. As with an earlier election in Holland in which a similar right-wing candidate lost, this is being presented as potentially the high-water mark of what's now commonly called "populism" in Europe (or the Brexit-style fragmentation of that

continent). But I'd take such reassurances with a grain of salt, given the pressures likely to come. After all, in both Holland and France, two extreme nationalist parties garnered record votes based on anti-Islamic, anti-refugee sentiment and will, after the coming parliamentary elections in France, both be represented, again in record numbers, in their legislatures.

The rise of such "populism" – think of it as the authoritarian fragmentation of the planet – is already a global trend. So just imagine the situation four or potentially even eight years from now after Donald Trump's generals, already in the saddle, do their damndest in the Greater Middle East and Africa. There's no reason to believe that, under their direction, the smashing of key regions of the planet won't continue. There's no reason to doubt that, in an expanding world of Mosuls – the Syrian "capital" of the Islamic State, Raqqa, is undoubtedly the next city in line for such treatment – "victories" won't produce a planet of greater ethnic savagery, religious extremism, military destruction, and chaos. This, in turn, ensures a further spread of terror groups and an even more staggering uprooting of peoples. (It's worth noting, for instance, that since the death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of U.S. Special Operations forces, al-Qaeda has grown, not shrunk, gaining yet more traction across the Greater Middle East.) So far, America's permanent "war on terror" has helped produce a planet of fear, refugees on an almost unimaginable scale, and ever more terror. What else would you imagine could arise from the rubble of so many Mosuls?

If you don't think that this is an ever-more connected planet still being "flattened" (even if in quite a different way than expected), and that sooner or later the destruction of Mosul will reverberate in our world, too, then you don't get our world. It's obvious, for instance, that future Mosuls will only produce more refugees, and you already know where that's led, from Brexit to Donald Trump. Destroy enough Mosuls and, even in the heartland of the planet's sole superpower, the fears of those who already feel they've been left in a ditch will only rise (and be fed further by demagogues ready to use that global flow of refugees for their own purposes).

Given the transformations of recent years, just think what it will mean to uproot ever vaster populations, to set the homeless, the desperate, the angry, the hurt, and the vengeful – millions of adults and children whose lives have been devastated or destroyed – in motion. Imagine, for instance, what those pressures will mean when it comes to Europe and its future politics.

Think about what's to come on this small planet of ours – and that's without even mentioning the force that has yet to fully reveal itself in all its fragmenting *and* globalizing *and* leveling power. We now call it, mildly enough, "climate change" or "global warming." Just wait until, in the decades to come, rising sea levels and extreme weather events put human beings in motion in startling ways (particularly given that the planet's sole superpower is now run by men in violent denial of the very existence of such a force or the human sources of its power).

You want a shrinking planet? You want terror? You want globalization? Think about that. And do you wonder why, these days, I have Mosul on my mind?