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5 on 45:  
On Mosul and the war on ISIS

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

(Music)

ALAALDIN: Hi, I'm Ranj Alaaldin and I'm a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. I specialize in the modern history of the Middle East and intrastate conflict, and I'm currently focusing on the war on ISIS. The war on ISIS is currently focused on liberating Mosul, which is where ISIS declared its so-called caliphate. It therefore has significant military but also very significant symbolic importance.

The war on ISIS will not end with the liberation of Mosul. Iraq has substantial political challenges. It has challenges related to governance, security, and these challenges will still be there even after Mosul is liberated. The conditions that gave rise to ISIS are still there. They'll still be there for many years to come. Now, all that means—so far as Western and U.S. foreign policy is concerned, insofar as the foreign policy of the current administration is concerned—what that means is we need to focus on the structural problems that Iraq has and that could potentially give rise to another ISIS-like organization in the immediate but also medium future. That means building or strengthening Iraq's institutions. That means reconciling the differences between the various factions.

All this is possible without diverting too much U.S. resources into the Iraqi state. There are actors and local factors which can help the U.S. achieve its long term political and security interests in Iraq and the region. There are moderate actors that are willing to embrace the US, that are willing to accept U.S. support and direction and leadership,

not necessarily just resources, in their efforts to challenge the hardline groups, extremist groups, whether that's ISIS, whether that's jihadist groups, whether that's Shia militia groups.

And I think there's a way for the Trump administration to engage in Iraq in a more constructive fashion, in a way which doesn't necessarily have to devote too much military or political or financial resource to the country. And by that, I'm talking about the need to empower those actors that I've just described, but also the local civil society environment. There are significant and influential civil society actors that just haven't had the support that they should be getting from the international community. What the Trump administration could be doing is directing international resources, and not necessarily U.S. resources alone, towards these actors. It can use its status, its international clout, to ensure international organizations—whether that's charities, whether that's the U.N.—are doing a better job in rebuilding the places that have been destroyed under ISIS control and revitalizing local economies. The current administration is also keen to get businesses more involved in rebuilding post-conflict zones like the one we have in Iraq. That's also another way this current administration can play a role in rebuilding Iraq and reconciling the differences between the local communities.

These areas need investment. They need leadership, and that's where I think international organizations and businesses can come together. But for that you need the commitment of the U.S., not just in the short term but also in the longer run. Thank you.

(Music)