

Down but Not Out: How the Islamic State Could Rebound

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In the wake of the Islamic State's defeat in Mosul, the fight between the organization and its adversaries has reached an inflection point. Over the past week, credible reports from Mosul – sometimes accompanied by purported video and photographic evidence – have indicated that members of the Iraqi Security Forces are conducting mass executions of Islamic State members and their families, along with suspected civilian affiliates. In Raqqa, Syria, similar reports have appeared alleging that members of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are abusing and executing Islamic State prisoners.

In some ways, these reports are reminiscent of the videos accompanying the Islamic State's own conquest of Mosul and Raqqa in 2014, and it is no surprise that some Iraqis and Syrians are taking the opportunity to seek retribution. But while I have very little pity for the Islamic State fighters who engaged in wholesale slaughter, rape and pillaging, I must argue that mass executions are not the way to handle such criminals. Beyond the significant ethical problems, there are also a number of practical and strategic reasons that mass executions are counterproductive to the larger fight against jihadism. And if counterinsurgency forces are hoping to permanently quell the Islamic State's influence at this critical point, these executions will do more harm than good.

The Ideological Battlefield