



RECONSTRUCTING  
**MOSUL:**  
OCCUPATION,  
DESTRUCTION  
AND REBUILDING

**COURTNEY BONNEAU**  
**STELLA MARTANY**  
**KIKI SANTING**

University of Groningen Press



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Nineveh  
Governorate

Mosul

Erbil

Baghdad

Iraq

Basra

0 100 200 km





# INTRODUCTION

Mosul is Iraq's second largest city after Baghdad and the country's biggest Sunni-dominated city. Home to about 1.7 million people and situated in the Nineveh Governorate, Mosul is predominantly Sunni Muslim, whereas people living in the surrounding Nineveh plains are more diverse in terms of religion and ethnicity. In general, Sunni Muslims are a minority in Iraq, where about two-thirds of the population is Shia Muslim and one-third is Sunni Muslim. Politically, Iraq is organized along sectarian lines in a federal parliamentary representative democratic republic and governorates, such as Nineveh, are given broad autonomy.

Mosul has great historical and cultural significance and is home to countless historical and archeological sites. People settled in Nineveh as early as 6000 BC, on the Tigris river, which still runs through the city today. In the first century AD, Christians settled in Mosul, where they coexisted with the old Mesopotamian religions. Islam made its entrance in the seventh century. The city was captured by Muslims during the rule of the second Islamic caliph Umar (634-644). In the sixteenth century, it came under Ottoman rule, under which it would remain until after the First World War.

During the war, the Ottomans sided with Germany. When the Ottomans were defeated, the British occupied Mosul and installed a monarchy in Iraq. A coup in 1958 ended the monarchy and Iraq was proclaimed a republic. Another coup in 1963 brought the Baath Party to power, which was headed by Saddam Hussein between 1979 and 2003. Under Saddam, Iraq waged multiple wars, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Anfal Campaign against the Kurds (1988) and the Gulf War (1990-1991).

Saddam changed Iraq's sectarian landscape significantly. Coming from a Sunni family in Tikrit, he increasingly favored Iraq's Sunni minority at the expense of the Shia majority, which was marginalized and underrepresented in the security apparatus, as well as the political and economic arena. After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 and overthrew Saddam, a new democratic system was established hastily, which was organized along sectarian lines and consequently led to growing influence of the country's Shia population at the expense of the Sunni minority that had been in charge for many years.

A policy of so-called de-Baathification was carried out, which resulted in massive redundancies in the government apparatus. Public employees affiliated with the Baath Party were dismissed and banned from future employment in the public sector. Sunnis used to be overrepresented in government institutions and the security sector under Saddam Hussein, resulting in Sunni marginalization and dissatisfaction following the de-Baathification.

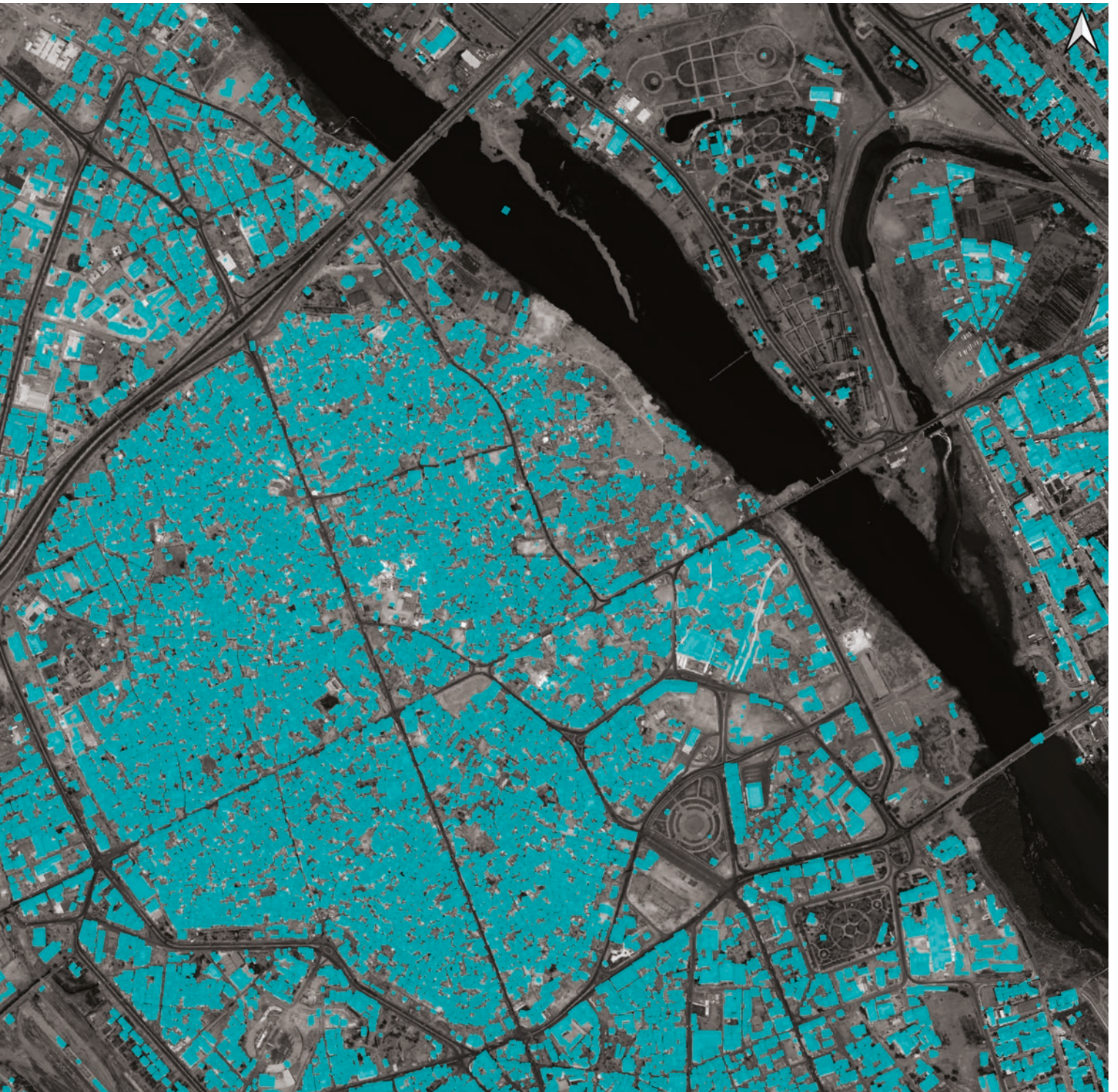
Consequently, a civil war broke out in Iraq and for many years the country was plagued by sectarian tension, violence and terrorism. Mosul was affected significantly by the war. The city functioned as an operational base for the American army, and Saddam's two sons, Uday and Qussay, were killed there. Soon, al-Qaeda made its entrance in the city, sparking years of violent incidents, including many suicide attacks. Not only Americans were targeted; many of the city's minority groups, such as the Christians, were also attacked and fled the city.


Islamic State captured the city between June 4 and June 10, 2014. Security forces were poorly prepared, disorganized, and short on manpower and ammunition. They were overrun by the highly organized Islamic State within mere days, after which its reign of terror started in the city. Three years later, in July 2017, after months of fierce fighting, the city was liberated by a coalition of, among others, Iraqi government forces, militias from the Popular Mobilization Forces, Kurdish fighters and international

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Destruction and reconstruction  
of the Old City of Mosul 2013





 Buildings

0 250 500 m



forces. The final days of the battle of Mosul were fought in the so-called Old City on the western side, where the historic heritage houses and narrow streets provided the ultimate final hideout for the last remaining Islamic State fighters. Coalition forces went door to door and eventually declared the defeat of Islamic State.

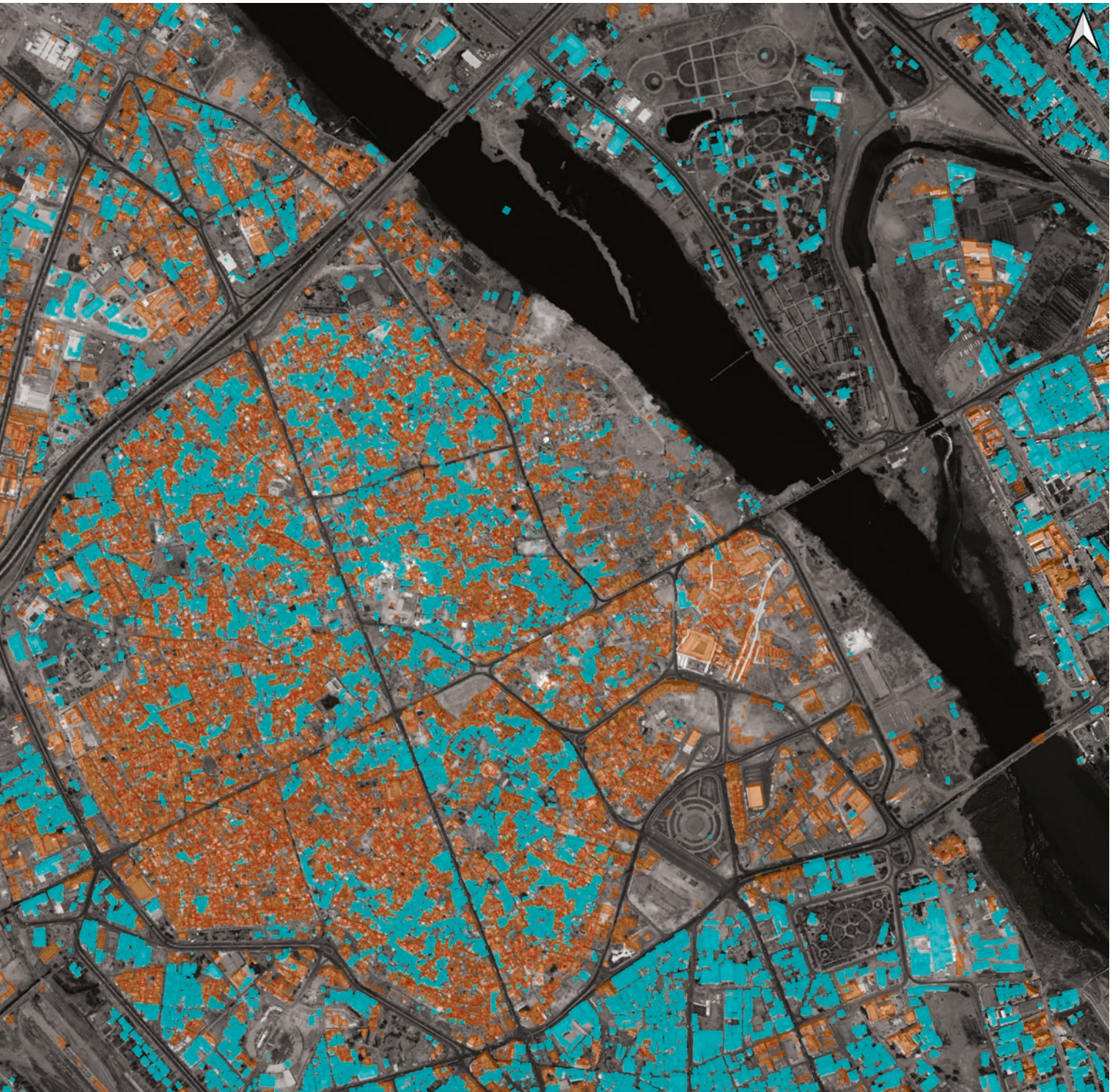
The rule of Islamic State and the liberation left the city destroyed on a massive scale. During their reign, Islamic State had destroyed many heritage sites and carried out suicide attacks, while coalition forces had used considerable force during the liberation, including airstrikes, leaving the city in ruins. Vital infrastructure was gone, residential areas were heavily affected, especially on the west side of the city, and Mosul has been trying to recover ever since. About 65 percent of the Old City was lost, almost 140.000 houses were damaged or destroyed (more than 50.000 of which in western Mosul), the university was in ruins and the main library was burnt.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, there was rubble everywhere, riddled with unexploded ordnance and human remains. Thousands of people remain missing and many still live in camps outside the city. Nevertheless, the city has been relatively quiet since 2017 and the focus has been on rebuilding what once was.

Mosul provides a unique case study of a post-conflict reconstruction project. The extent to which the city was destroyed was unprecedented and yet, seven years since its liberation, many sites have been reconstructed in a challenging context. From a practical perspective, the sites need to be cleared of rubble, explosives, human remains and everything else that could lead to unsafe situations and living conditions. This reconstruction is conducted in coordination with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, both local and international, such as local police, intelligence services, militias, local authorities responsible for heritage preservation, international NGOs such as UNESCO, construction companies and, of course, the owners of the sites. This may present another complication, as in some cases the owners

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Destruction and reconstruction  
of the Old City of Mosul 2017





 Standing  Destroyed

0 250 500 m

of the sites are deceased or hard to track down, missing, internally displaced or they have fled abroad. On the other hand, thorough reconstruction also offers the opportunity to make timeworn sites more sustainable and attractive for tourists, for example.

Nevertheless, a significant part of the city remains in ruins. Mosul's reconstruction exemplifies the resilience of its people, as well as the challenges provided by the corrupt and sectarian political system in which the reconstruction projects were, and still are, carried out.

This book focuses on three key elements of Mosul's reconstruction: cultural heritage sites, residential areas and the Khazir camp outside of the city, in between Mosul and Erbil. The heritage sites and residential areas that were photographed for this project are situated in the Old City, the part that was most severely damaged during the liberation of Mosul. In this part of the city, residential houses closely neighbor heritage sites such as the famous al-Nuri Mosque, from which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the caliphate in July 2014; al-Aghwat Mosque; al-Tahera Church, and many more. All photos were taken between 2019 and 2023 and show the progress (or lack thereof) of the reconstruction.

This book aims to paint a picture of people's resilience, even in exceptionally difficult circumstances, while at the same time reflecting on the role of the international community in reconstructing the city and prioritizing certain projects over others. Additionally, it aims to give a voice to the forgotten victims of this war, many of whom still remain in camps where life is full of hardship and future perspectives are bleak. Lastly, it offers a glimpse into the challenges that arise in the process of rebuilding a city heavily damaged by war. Unfortunately, Mosul does not stand on its own, and cities like Aleppo, Gaza City and Rafah will face similar challenges in the future.

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Destruction and reconstruction  
of the Old City of Mosul 2022





■ Standing ■ Destroyed ■ Rebuilt

0 250 500 m



Fish market Mosul pre-reconstruction 2019



- CHAPTER 1 -

# RECONSTRUCTION OF HERITAGE SITES

Mosul's Old City has been a UNESCO heritage site since 2018.<sup>2</sup> Under the rule of Islamic State and during the battle to liberate Mosul, the Old City was severely damaged; about 65 percent was destroyed.<sup>3</sup> More concretely, an estimated 5,000 buildings in the Old City were either destroyed or severely damaged.<sup>4</sup>

In this book, we distinguish between heritage sites and residential sites. This requires some further explanation, as the entire Old City is officially a UNESCO heritage site. However, some buildings are nonresidential, such as the al-Nuri Mosque and its famous leaning al-Hadba Minaret, the al-Sa'aa Convent, al-Aghwat Church and al-Tahera Church. When we talk about heritage sites, we mean nonresidential buildings. UNESCO is largely responsible for the reconstruction of the heritage sites, but many other local and international NGOs are also active in the reconstruction process.

The prioritization of certain projects is not undisputed. As the reconstruction of the heritage sites is progressing and some of the sites are regaining (some of) their former elegance, they rise up amidst the rubble of those sites and houses that have not yet been reconstructed, or are impossible to rebuild at all. Rubble that is, in some cases, still littered with unexploded ordnance and human remains. On the other hand, these heritage sites are also an important part of Mosul's DNA. By rebuilding the al-Nuri Mosque and its al-Hadba Minaret, for example, the city reclaims its history, which was to a large extent hijacked by the Islamic State. These landmarks matter to Mosul's residents, as they are part of their history and identity. Yet, one does not live in a mosque, church, or monastery and money spent on heritage reconstruction cannot be spent on, for example, vital infrastructure, residential buildings, hospitals, parks, et cetera.





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Wreckage of car bombs at the  
end of the fish market 2019



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Reconstructed fish market  
entrance 2022



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The end of the road at the newly renovated fish market with a view of the Hanu al-Qadu Mosque 2022

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Wreckage of a car bomb next to the fish market 2023



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The remnants of The Iraqi Maqam House, containing a mass grave full of human and animal remains 2019



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The son of the caretaker of the al-Masfi Mosque site rides his bike in the rubble 2022







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The remnants of The Iraqi Maqam House. It is still not cleaned up and it is rumored that teenagers use the space to have parties 2023



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The view of the al-Nuri Mosque reconstruction site from the window of a house on Jameh al Kabeer Street, which was formerly occupied by Islamic State 2019



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Renovated home next to the  
reconstruction site of the  
al-Nuri Mosque 2022



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Construction workers from the Mosul Heritage Group renovating the area around the al-Nuri Mosque 2023



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A look inside the  
UNESCO  
reconstruction  
site of the al-Nuri  
Mosque 2022



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Construction  
workers from the  
Mosul Heritage  
Group renovating  
the area around  
the al-Nuri  
Mosque 2023



A UNESCO sign describing the Revive the Spirit of Mosul campaign 2023







- CHAPTER 2 -

# RECONSTRUCTION OF RESIDENTIAL AREAS

When we talk about residential areas, we mean residential areas within the Old City. These residential areas are also considered UNESCO heritage sites. The biggest part of the Old City's architectural monuments consists of "private houses and palaces from the late Ottoman period (18th-19th centuries)."<sup>5</sup> This used to be a place where people lived, whereas nowadays it remains largely uninhabitable due to unstable buildings and enormous amounts of rubble, often still littered with unexploded ordnance and dead bodies. Still, life has returned to the Old City and attempts are being made to clean up the sites and start rebuilding.

Some of the major issues for the reconstruction progress are local and national administration and bureaucracy, which are notoriously cumbersome, in combination with corruption. Another obstacle is establishing the ownership of those buildings that require reconstruction. Some owners are still missing or displaced. Some were Islamic State members who have either fled, died, or are in camps. The remaining explosives form another obstacle. Although the US-based company Tetratex is working in the Old City to clear the sites, this is a time-consuming and expensive project. Perhaps most challenging is the state of some of these buildings. Some residential buildings are damaged beyond repair, and some are completely destroyed, with nothing but rubble remaining. Cleaning this up requires permission from the owners and (local) authorities, as well as a lot of time, money and manpower. Reconstruction of cultural heritage sites, such as the al-Nuri Mosque, is, from an administrative perspective, easier to conduct, but this does not solve the problems for people who used to live in the Old City, or still/again live there under dire conditions.





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The sleeping  
area in a  
residential  
building  
formerly  
occupied by  
Islamic State  
2019



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Bullet casings  
found in the  
bathroom of a  
residential  
home facing the  
al-Nuri Mosque  
2019





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Pictured on the right is what remained of The Iraqi National Insurance Company Building. The 50-year-old, 7-story building was used by Islamic State to carry out executions. The building was badly damaged during the coalition offensive and was subsequently torn down. 2019



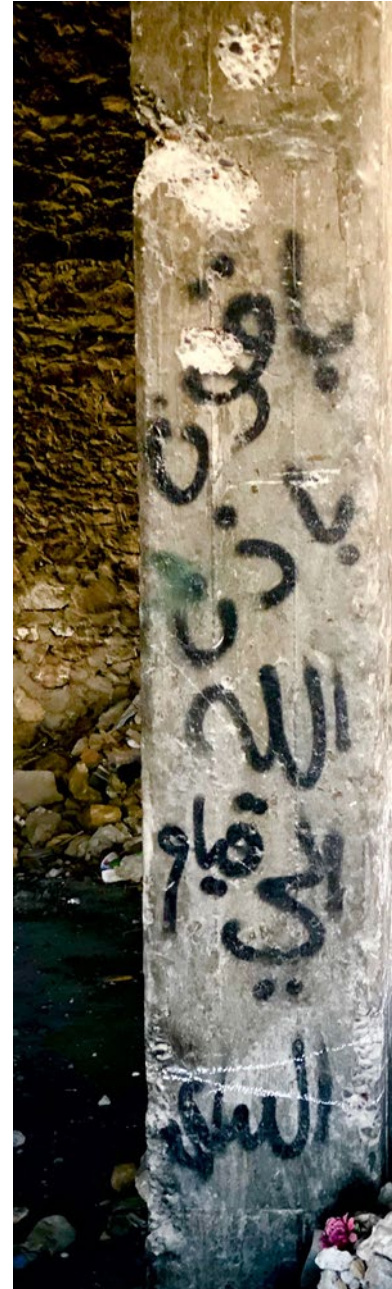




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A lifelong resident of Mosul walks down the street where he used to live. He was unable to rebuild his home because of unexploded ordnance, poor road conditions and the presence of human and animal remains.

2019



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Islamic State graffiti in the rubble of Mosul: "We are here with permission from God" 2019



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A partially destroyed residential/  
commercial space 2019



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A destroyed residence 2019



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Muddy, impassable roads 2019



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A room full of women's clothing and discarded makeup in a room of a home formerly occupied by Islamic State. Possibly where sex slaves were held 2019



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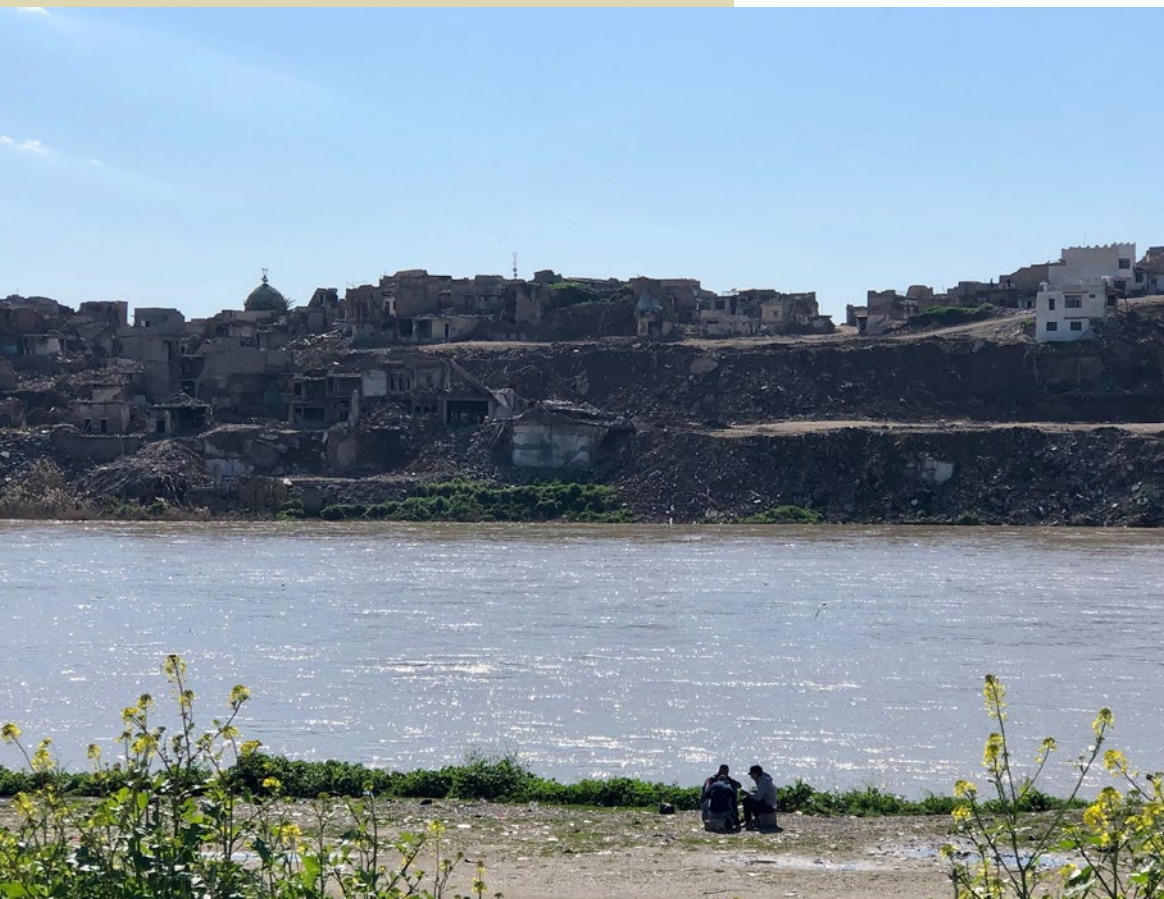
Garbage strewn around in a house formerly occupied by Islamic State 2019



An unexploded mortar on the roof of a residential building  
2019

Residential area  
2019

A view of the Old City from the  
opposite bank of the Tigris 2019







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Human remains just outside of  
a mass grave 2019



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Residential area 2022

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Partially destroyed building in  
the vicinity of the  
reconstruction site 2022





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The view from the window of a reconstructed home directly next to the al-Nuri Mosque reconstruction site 2022



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Restored building next to the al-Nuri Mosque reconstruction site 2022



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Still destroyed residences  
outside of the al-Nuri Mosque  
reconstruction site 2022



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Rooftop of a renovated  
residence directly next to the al-  
Nuri Mosque reconstruction site  
2022



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Many of the old residential areas of Mosul along the Tigris are still destroyed 2023



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Playground in rubble, close to the remains of the al-Masfi Mosque 2023

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Previously an historical residential area that has been flattened by the government. Rumors are there is a boardwalk area planned. 2023

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Still walking back and forth to school in the rubble of the outskirts of the Old City 2023



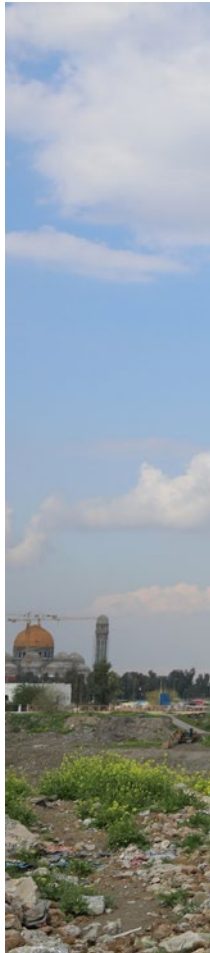






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Children still playing in the rubble seven years after the coalition offensive 2023



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New this year, flags to indicate  
safe areas that have been  
cleared of mines 2023





Completely destroyed building  
about a block away from the  
fish market 2023



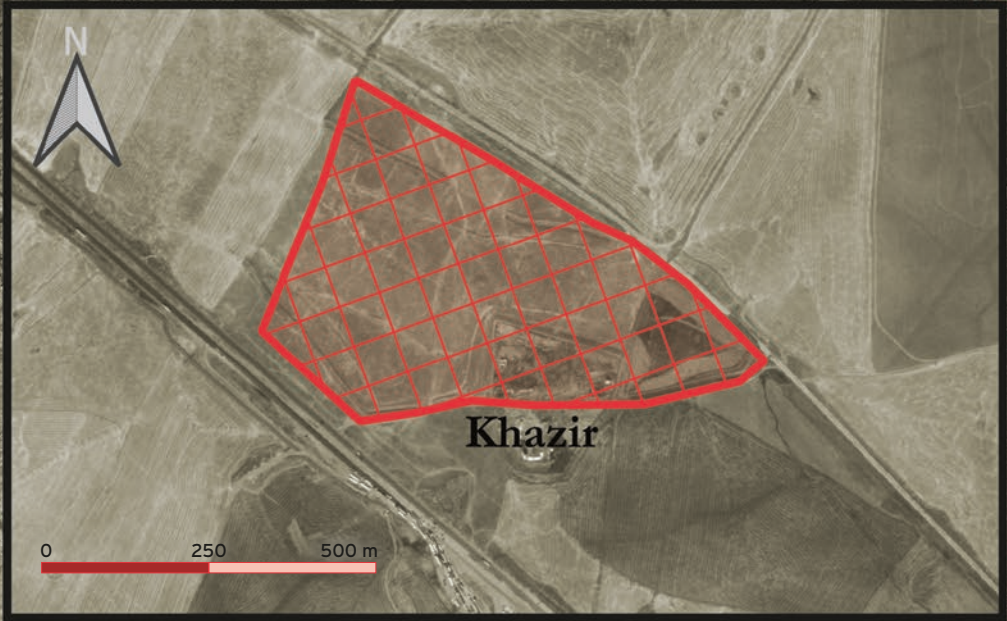
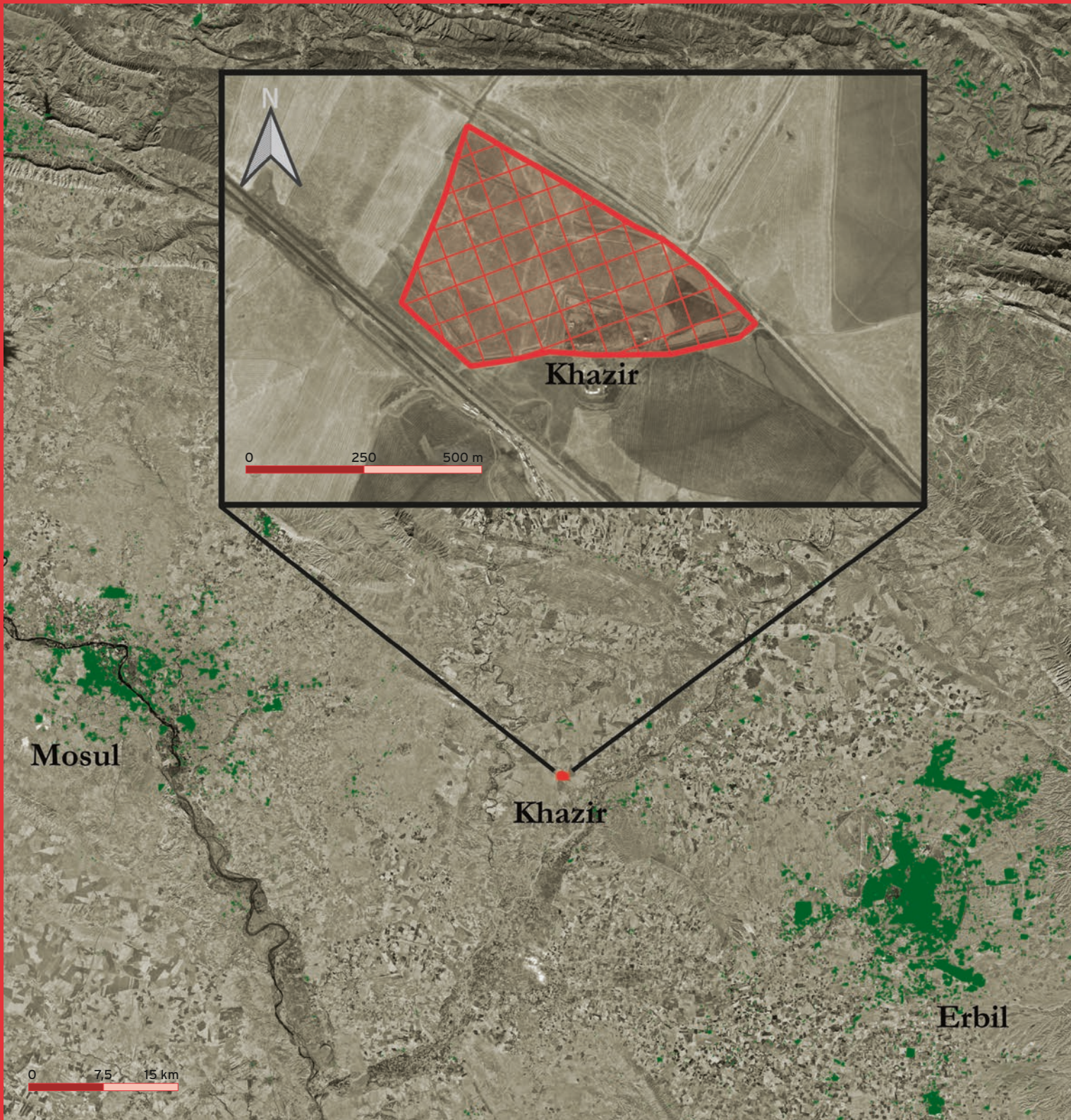
Remains of a mass grave 2023





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Renovated residential area  
directly next to the al-Nuri  
Mosque 2023



Mosul

Khazir

Erbil

0 7.5 15 km



- CHAPTER 3 -

# KHAZIR CAMP

Khazir is a camp for Internally Displaced People (IDPs), about an hour from Mosul or Erbil by car. The site is situated in the disputed territory between Kurdistan and the Nineveh Governorate, which falls under the control of the central Iraqi government. Officially, the camp is situated in Nineveh, but overseen by Erbil.<sup>6</sup>

Still home to thousands of people,<sup>7</sup> Khazir was originally established in June 2014 as a transit site for IDPs fleeing the conflict in Nineveh. Various NGOs were involved, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Programme and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 2023, Iraq still hosted around 300,000 refugees, over 90% of whom live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). About 260,000 of these refugees are Syrians. Additionally, over one million Iraqis remain internally displaced after the Islamic State insurgency. There are still 25 IDP camps in the KRI, home to about 180,000 people. Many IDP families cannot return safely, for example due to lack of documentation or perceived affiliation to Islamic State.<sup>9</sup> Khazir is one of these IDP camps that houses both Islamic State and non-Islamic State affiliated families,<sup>10</sup> many of whom are originally from Mosul. Although scheduled for closure in 2020,<sup>11</sup> it still functions to date. The camp is managed by the Kurdish NGO Barzani Charity Foundation. When the Government of Iraq decided in 2020 to close all IDP camps and withdraw funding to the camps managed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the people living in the camps were left in an uncertain position; the KRG refuses to forcibly evict them, while at the same time struggling to support the IDPs financially.<sup>12</sup>

Living conditions in the camp are dire. Allegedly, over 80% of the population experiences restricted movement, over 40% of households lack civil documentation, and more than 80% have difficulties accessing healthcare.<sup>13</sup> Serving as a grim reminder of Iraq's most recent war, life in the camp nevertheless continues and people fall in love, get married, die and children are born.







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**Life of Mohammad**

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Mohammad,  
former child  
soldier of Islamic  
State 2022



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Mohammad,  
former child  
soldier of Islamic  
State 2023





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Mohammad, who was recently married to the widow of a former Islamic State fighter, and his step-children 2023



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Mohammad's step-children 2023



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A widow and  
neighbor of  
Mohammad at the  
camp 2023



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Another former  
child soldier of  
Islamic State 2022

A small kitchen area in a tent  
2022







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Demolition of a structure 2022



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A widow and  
her child 2023

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A young  
mother sitting  
outside her  
tent 2022



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Living  
conditions  
2022



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Dilapidated tent city 2023





Living conditions 2022

---

Children playing inside the  
camp 2023



---

Young boys hanging  
around 2023







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A widow and her daughters 2023





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**Collecting  
fuel in Khazir**



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A family transporting fuel back to their tent after waiting in the hot sun to collect it at the gate of the camp 2023

A young girl carries canisters  
to fill with fuel 2023





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Waiting for fuel 2023









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Young boys  
collecting fuel  
for their families  
2023

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Children waiting  
in line for fuel  
2023

Young boys  
collecting fuel  
for their  
families 2023



# EPILOGUE

**R**econstructing a city that has been damaged as severely as Mosul is challenging in many ways.

Practically, this takes a lot of money, manpower, coordination and time. Historically, going back to its pre-Islamic State glory is difficult. Not all sites were properly documented, for one. The more prominent heritage sites are, of course, documented more thoroughly than privately owned heritage houses. Nevertheless, the Old City has considerable significance for the people living in Mosul and forms an important part of the city's DNA. People are proud of their past and this history is important for the identity of the city and the people living there.

Socially, the question remains which projects are to be prioritized. Which projects are carried out, which are not, and which are postponed? The al-Nuri Mosque and the al-Hadba Minaret, for example, are important landmarks for the city and have an important historical, cultural and also social value; rebuilding these sites that were destroyed by the Islamic State (and where the Islamic State was declared) also means, in a way, reclaiming the history that Islamic State took from Mosul. On the other hand, people do not live in a mosque, church or minaret and reconstructing heritage sites does not solve the pressing issue of Iraq's many internally displaced people.

The Islamic State has officially been driven out of Mosul seven years ago and the city has seen significant improvements in the post-Islamic State years. However, even reconstructing the entire city would not solve all of Mosul's problems. Some people cannot return to their former homes, whether they have an actual house to live in or not. Some simply cannot bear to return to the place where so many terrible things happened. Others cannot return because they, or their families, used to be members of the Islamic State. Returning could result in arrests or acts of revenge. In these cases, the camps are the only places they can live and no real solution for these people is available to date. Additionally, few NGOs and local authorities are interested in making a significant effort for these people who (allegedly) supported a group whose rule caused so much hurt and damage. Yet, in the end, this book shows that no matter how difficult the circumstances, life goes on in different shapes and forms.

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A photograph of a window with a view of a city, overlaid with a semi-transparent teal text box. The window frame is dark, and the view outside shows a cityscape with buildings and a clear sky. The text box is centered on the page and contains a paragraph of text.

Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, has great historical and cultural significance. The city was captured and occupied by the Islamic State in early June 2014 and one month later Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi used Mosul's al-Nuri Mosque to declare the formation of the caliphate. After a fierce battle, the city was liberated in 2017, however, large parts of the city, including most of the old city, were completely destroyed. Currently, the city is undergoing reconstruction. This book focuses on that reconstruction by zooming in on the cultural heritage sites, the residential areas and the camps outside of the city where former residents now live, awaiting their return to the city. This book shines a light on how certain projects are prioritized, how other projects are neglected or postponed, and the consequences for the city's residents.



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