

ISIS in Iraq

A Regional Crisis With Global Implications

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I. Introduction

The active sectarian rivalry and conflict in Iraq – long exploited by successive governments in Baghdad – has reached crisis proportions. Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and a primary oil centre, was overrun and occupied June 12th 2014 by the Sunni militant group the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) (ISIS) which formerly fought under the al-Qaeda banner. ISIS are making gains on their previous successes in taking large parts of the central city of Fallujah in December 2013¹, and have since declared a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria². The Iraqi military has since launched a counter-offensive against ISIS in Tikrit and elsewhere, though reports vary as to which side is making gains³.

It is speculated other groups, and perhaps some level of popular support, have contributed to the rapid gains made⁴. Most recently, the Sunni militants and the Iraqi military have battled for control of the country's largest oil refinery at Baji⁵, while ISIS have advanced through Iraq's western desert, and captured four towns and three border crossings⁶. The latest military gains

considerably expanded territory under ISIS control.

Meanwhile Kurdish Peshmerga fighters have occupied⁷ Kirkuk and have fought alongside Iraqi troops against ISIS⁸ - though for how long this alliance holds remains to be seen. This sectarian strife is pushing the second-largest oil producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) closer to a Syria-like civil war, three years after the U.S. withdrew its forces from Iraq.

Whilst the Iraqi government has bolstered its defences around Baghdad since the events in Mosul, a series of explosions⁹ have rocked the capital and Iraqi military helicopters have engaged¹⁰ ISIS militants to the north of the city. Iraqi Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, on June 16th¹¹, called on his followers to volunteer to repel the advancing militants, which has increased the risk of more widespread sectarian fighting. Iran, the Iraqi government's key Shia ally in the region, has reportedly sent¹² its Revolutionary Guard forces to aid the Iraqi military and has opened the door to collaboration with United States to return the country to 'stability'¹³.

¹ The Washington Post, January 3, 2014. [[Link](#)]

² CNN, June 30, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³ Al-Jazeera English, June 30, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴ The Telegraph, June 29, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁵ NBC News, June 24, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁶ The National Post, June 25, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁷ BBC News, June 12, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁸ The Wall Street Journal, June 15, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁹ CBC News, June 15, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹⁰ Bloomberg, June 15, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹¹ BBC News, June 13, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹² The Guardian, June 14, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹³ BBC News, June 16, 2014. [[Link](#)]

Despite the threat posed to regional and global security, a rush to action could very well exacerbate the problems on the ground if there is no political solution.

II. Political Context

Political power in the modern history of Iraq, from the time its borders were created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) until the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, was dominated by minority Sunnis. However, with the introduction of democracy in Iraq in 2003, the Shia majority has been able to secure the Prime Minister's office at the ballot box, leaving the former Sunni governing class out in the cold. Meanwhile, the Kurds – with the backing of the United States, Operation Desert Storm, and the no-fly zone – have been able to carve out and maintain a semi-autonomous zone in the north.

Iraq's current Prime Minister, Nouri Al-maliki, has been in office since 2006¹⁴. He spent years exiled in Iran and Syria, and has overseen the exclusion and at times repression of the Sunni minority¹⁵. There have long been reports¹⁶ that Maliki and the Shia-led government have used the US-trained Iraqi Special Operations Forces as a sectarian force as this political situation has deteriorated¹⁷.

While Sunni and Shia populations have quarrelled

¹⁴ BBC News, June 13, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹⁵ Al-Jazeera English, March 13, 2013. [[Link](#)]

¹⁶ National Interest, December 31, 2013. [[Link](#)]

¹⁷ Reuters, March 7, 2014. [[Link](#)]

with each other, the Kurdish population in Iraq's north have been able to function relatively independent of Bagdad, even signing oil export deals with international companies to export crude oil via pipelines into Turkey – to which Bagdad has objected¹⁸. It has used the power vacuum created by the Iraqi military's withdrawal from Kirkuk to claim the oil hub, further strengthening its internal position¹⁹.

The West now finds itself in a position where Ba'athists and ISIS are wreaking havoc in two countries. The Sikes-Picot borders are fading, and there are multiple outcomes which could emerge from this crisis.

Given the international community's inaction in Syria and now Iraq, it is very likely that Iraq will splinter into 'enclaves'²⁰. In such a scenario, Iraq could lose long-term de-facto control over territory to ISIS, and the US will utilize drones to combat ISIS much in the same way it has engaged al-Qaeda in Yemen or Pakistan. This could have dramatic effects on regional stability and world oil markets – something that could bring more calls for action.

III. Strategic Implications

As the recent situation in Iraq unfolds, calls for action – and inaction – have emerged. The emerging humanitarian crisis, as witnessed in Syria, is unlikely to serve as sufficient justification

¹⁸ Bloomberg, June 13, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹⁹ Bloomberg, June 16, 2014. [[Link](#)]

²⁰ Washington Post, June 19, 2014. [[Link](#)]

for the West to invest more blood and treasure in the region²¹. However, the international security implications associated with this fluid situation should serve as impetus for western governments to act – though what form intervention takes will have dramatic effects on realities – and local perceptions – on the ground. How the West responds, and how those responses are interpreted, will dramatically affect how the situation unfolds locally, regionally, and internationally.

The Status Quo

General anti-war sentiment in the West²² – exacerbated by the results of what military reporter and historian Thomas Ricks, in his 2006 book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, called “the worst war plan in American history” – has pushed the Obama administration to adopt policies that limit the United States’ involvement in crisis’ abroad²³. These conflicts have not been localized. Extremists from Europe, North America, and Eurasia have flooded to conflicts in foreign lands and have swelled the ranks of groups such as ISIS²⁴.

This represents a further security crisis, as it is feared these individuals have brought the skills they have acquired in conflict zones back to their

countries of origin²⁵. While many have balked at Bashar al-Assad’s claims that the Syrian opposition are merely foreign terrorists, the opposition’s ranks have undoubtedly been swelled by an influx of foreign fighters²⁶. Indeed, many of these groups have themselves been directly and indirectly bolstered by the Assad regime, further complicating the changing alliances on the ground²⁷. This, in part, has resulted in other Syrian opposition factions actively fighting against ISIS in Syria – ultimately to the advantage of Assad.

While large-scale sectarian conflict may seem unlikely in the west, as 9/11 and the 2005 London train bombings showed, it takes only a handful of dedicated individuals to wreak large-scale havoc.

Military Action in Support of the Maliki Government

While conflict related²⁸ deaths and displacements in Iraq increase, it must be recognized that the sectarian divide that exists in Iraq – and throughout the region – complicates the decision making process of western and regional governments²⁹. As General David Petraeus, who served as the top commander in Iraq, has recently said, “[t]his cannot be the United States being the air force of Shia militias” in a Shia on Sunni Arab

²¹ The National Post, June 18, 2014 [\[Link\]](#)

²² The Hill, June 17, 2014. [\[Link\]](#)

²³ Ricks, T. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. The Penguin Press: HC

²⁴ Reuters, June 20, 2014. [\[Link\]](#)

²⁵ BBC News, June 16, 2014. [\[Link\]](#)

²⁶ France 24, March 7, 2012. [\[Link\]](#)

²⁷ The Telegraph, January 20, 2013. [\[Link\]](#)

²⁸ The New York Times, June 15, 2014. [\[Link\]](#)

²⁹ The New York Times, June 17, 2014. [\[Link\]](#)

fight³⁰. Any action by the West must be viewed, gauged, and weighed in the context that exists on the ground. Backing the PM in his fight against ISIS has become more complicated in recent days as reports claim that the Syrian air-force attacked ISIS militants on Iraqi soil³¹.

The reality is that ISIS – a Sunni organization with Sunni financial backers from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and elsewhere – is fighting against what many view as an Iranian-backed, Shia-led government of Iraq³². Any intervention on behalf of the Iraqi government will be seen – by some segments of the Sunni population of Iraq and the region – as western powers backing of Shia over Sunni.

Iraq's recent parliamentary election resulted in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-centric coalition once again gaining a plurality of votes³³. While it can be argued that this is the wish of the majority of the Iraqi population, there is undoubtedly a large – militarized – portion of the populace staunchly opposed to his rule.

Due simply to the sectarian nature of Iraqi politics, it is likely that another Shia would emerge as PM if elections were held today – though that does imply that all Shia leaders would follow the same policies that are in place today. In all likelihood, Nouri al-Maliki has created a situation in which he cannot be a

³⁰ Business Insider, June 18, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³¹ The Guardian, June 27, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³² The Washington Post, June 18, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³³ The New York Times, May 19, 2014. [[Link](#)]

constructive stakeholder in Iraq's future. He has alienated Iraq's Kurdish³⁴ and Sunni³⁵ population, and has put Shia lives at risk by fostering an environment that tolerates and supports those who have planned and implemented the ISIS campaign³⁶.

The west has long backed the Shia in Iraq and Maliki's hold on power, but any military action must be on behalf of the Iraqi people and not Maliki. The removal of Maliki from power should likely be a top priority of the West, and that message should be communicated to the Iraqi people. While Maliki has asked for the United States to reverse the ISIS advance, the US cannot blindly support the Maliki government – a sentiment echoed by President Obama³⁷.

IV. Policy Issues and Options for the West

1: 'Boots on the Ground'

President Barack Obama announced June 19th that he was sending 300 military advisors to Iraq, a move that has drawn criticism and praise³⁸. The force will be used for, as described by Secretary of State John Kerry, "planning, advising, some training and assisting"³⁹.

The small number of soldiers will unlikely have effect on the ground – Iraqi government forces

³⁴ Reuters, January 12, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³⁵ Reuters, January 20, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³⁶ Vox, June 30, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³⁷ The Guardian, June 21, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³⁸ The Washington Post, June 19, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³⁹ The Guardian, June 24, 2014. [[Link](#)]

have thus far largely been unable to stop ISIS's advance, and their capitulations⁴⁰ and surrender at multiple locations suggests low morale⁴¹. However, the move signals US support for the government in combating ISIS and could help the Iraqi's tactically in the planning phase of their operations.

2: Airstrikes and the Use of Drones

One of the most common options forwarded to combat ISIS in Iraq, such as by Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, is to support Iraqi ground forces with drone (or manned aircraft) attacks⁴². The West has successfully utilized its aerial advantage in multiple operations, however, as even General Petraeus – who served as the top commander and oversaw the 2007 surge in Iraq – has warned, the United States cannot be seen to be supporting on faction over another. Moreover, ISIS has been able to position itself in civilian areas, making strikes inside any occupied city very difficult.

Airstrikes may be useful when ISIS ventures outside of their occupied cities and are moving to their next targets – most notably Bagdad. The West has the capabilities to stop such advances, as was recently demonstrated in Libya⁴³. However, if such a path is chosen, then a decision

⁴⁰ The Guardian, June 12, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴¹ CBC News, June 13, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴² Politico, June 13, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴³ Hebert, J. (2011). Libya: Victory Through Airpower. *Air Force Magazine*. 94 (12) Air Force Magazine. [[Link](#)]

must be made as to whether to follow ISIS into their Syrian enclaves. If the West's campaign against ISIS stops at the Syrian border, then ISIS will be able to continue its campaign much in the same way that the Taliban has continued to wreak havoc in Afghanistan from sanctuaries in Pakistan.

3. Engaging Regional Stakeholders

Regional governments and private backers have long been rumoured to be playing significant roles in both the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts⁴⁴. If stability is to return to the region, then stakeholders on both sides of the conflicts must recognize that their support of authoritarian regimes and militant Islamists has led to the disintegration of both countries.

To be successful, any Western action in Iraq must be done in conjunction with regional actors that have the ability to affect the situation on the ground.

There has been much speculation on what role, if any, Iran should play in the current crisis. Undoubtedly, as the Iraqi government's most important regional ally and the dominant Shia power in the Middle East, it has an interest in ensuring that militant Sunni's do not gain a permanent foothold on its border. For many years, the West has ignored Iran's interests, which has contributed to its government's meddling in

⁴⁴ The Guardian, June 19, 2014. [[Link](#)]

the region⁴⁵. Iran has reportedly already sent forces to Iraq, something which could potentially contribute to the brewing Sunni-Shia schism in Iraq⁴⁶.

Whilst some have called for the US to partner with Iran to combat ISIS, this partnership would drastically complicate the scenario in Syria⁴⁷. Indeed, Iran has fervently supported Bashar al-Assad in his fight against revolutionaries supported by the West, and arguably more fervently than against groups like ISIS. Though Iran and the United States share the same short-term intent in Iraq, both have very different long-term interests in the region.

While it is important to engage with Iraq's Shia partners in the region, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League should also be engaged and can potentially serve as political stabilizers in Sunni-dominant areas in Iraq. When the West intervened in Libya, they sought the participation of Arab League members in the coalition, and the same should be done with whichever option the international community decides to adopt to mitigate the security threat posed by ISIS in Iraq⁴⁸.

Engagement with regional Sunni stakeholders – while essential – could have a similar effect on the ground as partnering with Iran. As the situation

in Iraq continues to develop, we have seen militias loyal to Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr mobilize⁴⁹ in large numbers and volunteers have eagerly heeded the call of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani⁵⁰. If ISIS is to be defeated, then Sunni powers in the region must step up and ensure that moderate Sunni in Iraq emerge as leaders – or ISIS will fill that role, much like Hezbollah has in Lebanon for the Shia population.

4. Pushing for Leadership Change and a Diffuse Power-structure

Considering that the state crafted by the Anglo-American occupation, Ba'athist dictatorship, and the Premiership of Nouri al-Maliki, has led to the ongoing sectarian divide in Iraq; a diffuse power structure is required after the disaster of centralized control. This would be the best long-term solution for Iraq to resolve a path forward, but at present identity divisions are merely being exacerbated through violence.

It is evident that the Prime Minister has lost the support of large swaths of his country, and all efforts should be made to convince him to resign in favour of a unity government. Indeed, even Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was seen to have rebuked the Prime Minister at Friday prayers. However, thus far, the Prime Minister has resisted calls for his resignation, complicating all policy options at the west's disposal.

⁴⁵ TIME, May 7, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴⁶ The Wall Street Journal, June 12, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴⁷ Politico, June 16, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁴⁸ The New York Times, March 12, 2011. [[Link](#)]

⁴⁹ CTV News, June 21, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁵⁰ Al-Jazeera English, June 14, 2014. [[Link](#)]

V. Summary

Iraq has adequate natural resources to support a vibrant welfare state that allocates wealth through federal transfers and equalization payments to provincial governments, who in turn can focus on the health, education, and well-being of their populations. In the long-term, this is Iraq and the West's best hope for stability and security. Iraq is a diverse country whose politics have been dominated by sectarian affiliation, dictatorship, war and privation. Diffused power centres will allow the various segments of Iraqi society to benefit most from the resources that their country possesses.

Militarized action by the West risks 'mission creep', being drawn into the Syrian conflict, and potentially supporting one side in the broader Sunni-Shia rivalry. The United States has proven itself incapable of successfully stabilizing Iraq in the long term through military force, and there is little evidence to suggest that there is the political will or a strategy in place to once again occupy Iraq with a large US-led force.

The West would be best served by pushing for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's resignation in favour of a unity government, however, it also cannot allow ISIS to overrun Bagdad or other major centres in Iraq. If needed, military action should be limited in its scope and should be pursued in combination with pushing for internal political change. Without a change in government, Iraq will continue to be plagued by violent

sectarianism – a situation that western military power alone cannot overcome.

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Cite this article as:

Curwin, D. (2014). 'ISIS in Iraq: A Regional Crisis with Global Implications' *Human Security Centre Policy Brief*, Issue 6, No. 2, 30th June 2014.