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IS IRAQ ON THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE?

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The sudden disintegration of the Iraqi army with the “disappearance” of 14 divisions and the consequent advance of ISIS, its easy conquest of Mosul and the take over of other Iraqi key areas, may be considered a surprise to many international observers but not to the cognizant ones.

Hopefully the divisions around Baghdad and the predominantly Shia South Iraq will prove a hard nut to crack for the ruthless Sunni jihadists of ISIS.

President Obama, while ruling out any US “boots on the ground” and considering targeted air strikes as a remote last resort, has promised to send 300 military advisers to Iraq to both help its army and to protect the US embassy personnel.

But how such a failure could occur?

Background

Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom (March 2003) there was a harsh diatribe between the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (supported by his Deputy Paul Wolfowitz) and the US Chief of Army Staff, General Eric Shinseki, over how many troops the US would need to control Iraq in the post-war occupation. Shinseki maintained that a much stronger US presence of that envisaged by the two politicians was necessary following the dismantlement of the 400.000 strong Iraqi security forces and the disbandment of the civil service, which would leave Iraq in chaos and quagmire. To add insult to injury, the development from scratch of the brand-new Iraqi security forces was since treated by the US like nuclear waste (furthermore, the US approach in rebuilding the army was ineffective and dysfunctional due to lack of US expertise in institution building) : Iraqi society was profoundly shaken and demoralized as tens of thousands of humiliated soldiers (mainly Sunni Arabs) were out of work and ready to join armed militias. Shinseki was forced to retire in June 2003 : but when the insurgency developed successfully in post-war Iraq his comments were recognized as proper and forward-looking (in 2006 General John Abizaid, Central Command - CENTCOM - Commander, in testimony before the Congress said that General Shinseki was right).

The Shia Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, in charge of Iraq at the US departure in 2011, has since successfully worked to progressively reduce the Sunni and Kurd influence thus achieving a smashing Shia predominancy in both the political and

military environment to the detriment of the aspirations of the Sunni Arabs (who dominated Iraq under Saddam Hussein) , denying them meaningful representation and pursuing anti-Sunni security policies.

Meanwhile the Sunni insurgency that, thanks to a decisive US military commitment, had been temporarily tamed in 2008, was ready to react and strike again with the initial support of Al-Qaida.

ISIS

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), notwithstanding being disavowed by al-Qaida, is one of the main jihadist groups operating in Syria and Iraq. It includes thousands of fighters (a fair amount of them are foreign jihadists with around 150 fighters coming from Australia). ISIS wants to establish a caliphate, an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq: to achieve it is surpassing al-Qaida as the world's most brutal and dangerous jihadist group. ISIS relies on both donations from wealthy individuals in Gulf Arab countries and on the oil fields' revenues in eastern Syria and Mosul.

The group operates independently of other jihadist groups (and fights against them in Syria) having rejected the request of al-Qaida leader, al-Zawahiri, to focus on Iraq and leave Syria to al-Qaida.

To make sure people are scared of its deeds, ISIS has launched a sophisticated and horrific propaganda campaign made up of innovative principles of public relations and images of mass executions (with terrified and unarmed captives brutally killed after digging their own graves). What distinguishes photographs of Nazi killings 70 years ago from the images of ISIS slaughtering captured Iraqi soldiers are just landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe rather than desert sand. But ISIS propaganda is paying off in the battlefield: a few days before the attack on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, the media campaign achieved the desired outcome when demoralized and frightened Iraqi soldiers terrified of ISIS and feeling little loyalty to Baghdad, shed their uniform and fled.

For ISIS to be able to capture Baghdad and hold it would require a total collapse of morale among Shia Iraqis who perfectly know that ISIS regards them as heretics to be wiped out. No mercy can be expected by ISIS which boasts of crucifying its victims or using their heads as a football.

The Western attitude

Western military intervention to aid Baghdad against ISIS is not a solution to the crisis as ISIS could successfully exploit the situation by bolstering its propaganda efforts, for any attack would inevitably kill or injure Muslim civilians. Collateral damages would be very good news for ISIS.

The group activity relies on its ability to attribute civilian casualties to its enemies, stress the “Crusader threat” and defend the group's legitimacy.

In short, the more civilians die, the more events in Iraq can be internationalized, and the wider the appeal of ISIS can become. This effect would be widely amplified if there were deaths at the hands of the US or UK.

Furthermore: how to justify intervening against ISIS in Iraq but not against Assad in Syria thus defending the rights of civilians after Assad's use of chemical weapons? This would be read as evidence that the West will only intervene when its own economic prosperity is at risk.

The West must not play into the jihadists' hands. The option of a commitment to the disastrous and sectarian government of al-Maliki would backfire. US power could surely stop and defeat ISIS but at what price? Moreover, without addressing the root causes of Sunni discontent, any intervention would just leave behind an untreated wound. Any US support to al-Maliki will not promote a truly inclusive Iraqi state: instead, it could make things worse by alienating Sunni states, including longtime allies of the US and would further radicalize Sunni youth, who would see US actions as reflecting an anti-Sunni attitude. This could represent a timely blessing to jihadi groups and reinforce jihadi's anti-American agenda.

The US cannot resolve the conflict by itself and a political solution is required. US has to engage in diplomacy and seek, through concerted actions, to bring Iraq's neighbors together to help end the conflict and create a more fair and inclusive state.

For the time being Iraq's armed forces have regrouped with the support of Iranian forces and Shiite militias. Baghdad is not Mosul and the likelihood of its seizure by ISIS is remote: but the military threat will not disappear soon and the only chance to bring peace and calm in Iraq is a cooperative effort by the all the concerned regional and local players

Instead , the West should focus on humanitarian assistance for refugees and diplomatic pressure for profound and far-reaching reforms.

In the long term, the only solution is a political one: Iraq's economically and politically marginalized Sunnis need to participate in the Iraq's decision-making process.

The Iranian attitude

On 21 June the (closely connected to Iran) Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr, whose Mehdi Army fought US troops during the occupation, has rallied followers for a military parade across Iraq.

Iran, as the world's predominant Shia nation, has already its military personnel in Baghdad to preserve its already achieved huge influence over the government of Iraq. The fact that Washington and London are tacitly acknowledging that Iran is the sole external power able to save Iraq in the worst case scenario, demonstrates the unwillingness of US and UK to intervene militarily in the country.

But if Iran insists that al-Maliki has to stay, the chances of a settlement will be sharply reduced. A solution would require an understanding between US and Iran.

The great paradox is that that by dropping Iraq as a regional partner, the US facilitated Iran's role as the protector of al-Maliki Shia dominance over Sunni Arabs thus worsening the security situation.

The Syrian attitude

Syria and Iraq are so linked that thousands of Shia Iraqi militiamen helping President Bashar Assad defeat the Sunni-led uprising against him have returned home, reducing the Syrian military capability to retain territory from ISIS's attacks. Along the borders between the two countries ISIS is easily transporting weapons, equipment and cash. But the conquest of large parts of Iraq by ISIS offers Assad the unique opportunity to insist that the West needs to cooperate with him to stop the influence of jihadis, and that the radicals, not the divided and weaker pro-Western moderate rebels, are the real alternative to his rule.

The Syrian government is heavily reliant on foreign fighters to reinforce its ranks: they include thousands of Shia Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, Iranian

Revolutionary Guard advisers and Iraqi militiamen who went to Syria to defend what they consider an attack on the Shia regional axis comprised of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

In Syria ISIS, an attraction for international jihadists, has surpassed other less ruthless opposition militias by establishing a proto-Islamic state where women must be veiled, Christians are taxed, cigarettes are forbidden and members of rival groups murdered. Assad appears to have focused his military efforts on more moderate rebels, knowing that his regime and ISIS share a common enemy in them and sure that, if ISIS comes to dominate the rebellion against him, Western support for the rebellion will vanish.

Considerations

The heavy-handedness of Iraqi forces after US departure (a 2010 report of the International Crisis Group criticized the Iraqi army's worsening “cronyism, bribery, kickbacks, extortion”), has effectively acted as a stimulus to join ISIS.

ISIS has successfully merged religion, politics, and military expertise to form a powerful force able to impose Sharia (Islamic law) in the territories under its control and to start a social media and mass propaganda campaign based on jihadist goals.

To consider what is happening in Iraq as the consequence of a few radical fanatics' action is to ignore the social inequality existing in Iraq: this is a general uprising by disaffected communities in north-western Iraq following years of social exclusion, poor governance and corruption by the Iraqi government.

ISIS strength derives not only from the weakness of the Iraqi state, but is a revolt by tribal Sunni Arabs against what they view as al-Maliki sectarian authoritarianism.

At the very heart of the fierce struggle raging in Iraq is a broken political system based on distribution of the spoils of power along ethnic and tribal lines, and put in place after the US invasion. Sunni Arabs, particularly in the last four years, have felt dissatisfied, alienated and excluded by the al-Maliki sectarian-based policy.

ISIS has aligned itself with insurgent Sunni groups, such as officers of Saddam's dissolved army, and co-opted hundreds of these skilled fighters to its ranks, a turning point in its ability to plan and execute complex operations in both Iraq and Syria.

Conclusions

The US attempt to bring democracy to Iraq by establishing new political arrangements while seeking to unite all communities, eventually produced a state dominated by the Shia majority with the Sunni Kurds able to carve out a significant degree of autonomy for themselves and the Sunni Arabs deprived of any significant power. The Shia leadership has treated Sunni Arabs like second-class citizens and has resorted to its numerical majority as a means to monopolize power.

While the Kurdish north-east, even if notionally still a part of Iraq, is to all intents and purposes independent, the Sunni Arabs in the rest of Iraq increasingly dislike the rule by Shia politicians. Many of them are not happy that ISIS control their own towns and villages. But the danger of the present fight-back by Shia volunteers is that they will victimize ordinary Sunnis and make them feel that ISIS is the only resort that can protect them: this has the potential to turn into an all-out religious war, with the possibility of “ethnic cleansing” of civilians and brutality on large scale.

Neither reconciliation nor institution-building will occur without a new social contract based on the decentralization of power and an equitable sharing of resources to the local level so that various communities are empowered to govern themselves and feel invested in the national project. There is an urgent need to reconstruct the broken political and social system along new lines of citizenship and the rule of law.

Iraq's future depends on the willingness of the dominant social classes to prioritize the national interest over the parochial. Political reforms are important: the best case scenario is devolution of power from the centre in Baghdad to local Shia, Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurdish communities.

After eight years in office and monopolizing power, al-Maliki has delivered neither security nor reconciliation and prosperity. He has just engaged in discriminatory policies toward Sunni Iraqis, reversing the power dynamic that existed under Saddam, rather than working to achieve social cohesion between Iraq's different communities.

Prime Minister al-Maliki is not the leader Iraq needs to unify the country and end sectarian tensions caused by the marginalization of Sunni Arab and Kurd minorities.

Based on the outcome of the 30 April parliamentary election, al-Maliki remains a potential viable candidate and the frontrunner for the premiership: but due to the

Sunni and Kurd opposition to his re-election for a third term, there is a powerful logic to a change of top-level leadership.

It is imperative to avoid what happened in 1975 in Vietnam (when Saigon was easily conquered by the North Vietnam forces in just a few weeks) or in the 1970s and '80s in Lebanon (with a civil war which lasted a dozen years).

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has warned that sectarian reprisals “can only intensify the cycle of violence”, threatening to push Iraq back towards the vicious civil war that left ten of thousands dead at its peak in 2006 and 2007.

This is why the US (possibly involving Sunni moderate states like Turkey and Jordan) has to press Iran to drop al-Maliki and identify a new Iraqi leader able to make a power-sharing arrangement with Sunni Arabs and Kurds thus avoiding further bloodshed.