



ISIS in Iraq: The United States in a Quagmire

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Isis was an Egyptian goddess, worshipped as a patron of nature and magic. She was an important representation of the pharaoh's powers. Today, it is the acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a group of extremists, who have with surprising speed captured territory in Iraq. Their spokesperson has already stated that the aim of the group is to capture Baghdad, establish an Islamic state based on Sharia. The rise of this group has rekindled sectarian violence in Iraq, yet to recover from the US war efforts which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein and his government.

ISIS has developed from its role as an al-Qaeda-linked organisation in Iraq, to having an estimated 15,000 fighters proclaiming allegiance to it. The group has also been able to make ample use of the social media in attracting extremist groups and individuals from Iraq and Syria. Sunni militant groups, including Saddam-era officers and soldiers, and disaffected Sunni tribal fighters have joined in its offensives. Also a large number of young British born Muslim men have joined it. The main grievance of the group is against the Iraqi government which, they complained, has monopolised power and is ignoring the demands of the minority Sunni Arab community.

The group has been in control of the provincial capital city of Ramndi and nearly all of Falluja, which is about 70 km from Baghdad. It has captured the Baiji oil refinery. The group is

reported to have seized the Turaibil crossing with Jordan and the al Walid crossing with Syria and few villages along the Syrian border such as Haditha, Anah, Rawa and Rotba. The capture of these border towns and villages is significant as it would help the group to transport weapons and other equipment and allow the free movement of men, who may join the group.

Apart from the speed with which the ISIS has captured villages and towns, what has shocked the international community and the Iraqi government is the level of training and equipment being employed by the group. Their methodical approach, use of brute force and violent justice on all those who oppose them has meant that smaller towns have lost faith in the government and are negotiating their surrender. The Iraqi armed forces have reported large scale desertion in the face of the onslaught. The Iraqi government has turned to the international community, specifically the US to help it defeat the ISIS.

The US, after the 'war on terror', withdrew its troops from Iraq in 2011. President Obama has stated in both his presidential election campaigns that his administration was committed to the goal of withdrawing troops from two war zones-Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently, the US is in the process of negotiating security treaties with Afghanistan for its planned withdrawal. In such a situation President Obama has ruled out sending US troops to Iraq. The request by the Iraqi government to conduct targeted air strikes against the ISIS has been ruled out for the present by the US. Military experts point out that without adequate intelligence, an air strike can potentially endanger civilian lives.

The US administration has announced that it would provide the Iraqi government with 300 military advisors to train the armed forces. The US has also agreed to send ammunition and weapons, but is being very cautious of how much it sends. With large scale desertion from the Iraqi forces, the US, like the local population, has lost confidence in the government forces. President Obama has made it very clear that the current situation is a result of the flawed policies followed by the Iraqi government which ignored the concerns of the Sunnis and the Kurds. Secretary of State John Kerry, during his recent visit to Baghdad, assured that the US was willing to provide 'intense and sustained aid' if 'Iraqi leaders unite to fight the militant forces'. Prime

Minister Nuri al-Maliki has time till July 01, 2014 to start the process to form a new government, which involves all sects, before the US provides assistance.

The US has the military capability and the regional support to deploy forces; however, it fears that any action taken by the US could deteriorate the situation. Given the anti-US sentiments in the region the US is unwilling to use its military force before exhausting all other means for a peaceful settlement.

The non-military option before the US is to involve regional powers, especially Iran to help negotiate a peace settlement, who has already indicated that it is willing to help. For Iran, the ISIS could, in the future, prove to be a destabilising factor in its domestic security paradigm. Iran has to ensure that its Sunni dominated pockets with the country remain peaceful. The US also wants to gain Iran's support because, as the only official Shia State, it could help the US assist the Shiite government in Iraq, to overcome the majority Sunni ISIS. It is in the interest of the two countries to collaborate and contain the present crisis which has affected oil prices in the international market. It is also causing security concerns for US allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both have expressed reservations on the US considering taking assistance from Iran.

The US has adopted a cautious approach to the situation. The Iraqi government has for long followed a policy of sectarianism, that has meant even those who do not share the goals as espoused by the ISIS feel they have no choice, but to support the ISIS. In such a situation the US engagement could act as a catalyst possibly making Iraq ungovernable or lead to a breakup of the country along the sectarian divide.

The truth that has to be accepted by the international community and Iraq is that, the US ability to steer Iraqi politics is very limited. It also needs to be understood that the US is drawing from its successes and shortcoming from Iraq and Afghanistan. It has identified that the key source of US "...strength is a growing economy that can provide opportunity for everybody..." As was stated by President Obama in his speech at United States Military Academy, West Point (May 28, 2014), "... (when) issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United

States, ... when crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us -- then the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, the US should not go it alone....”

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