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WHAT IS HAPPENING IN IRAQ?

BY



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The escalating crisis of recent weeks in Iraq has brought the country under new spotlight. A militant group widely described in the media as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has captured a number of cities and towns from government forces in northern and central Iraq. More territory is contested. ISIS successes include Mosul close to Iraqi Kurdistan, areas around Baghdad in the central Anbar province, Fallujah, Ramadi, Samarra and Tikrit. Some places have fallen to ISIS after fighting. Others have been lost because Iraqi government troops, depleted by low morale and mass desertions, have simply withdrawn. The Iraqi map, already fragmented, looks more divided than ever before as a result of the latest rise in militancy.

A decade after the United States invaded Iraq to overthrow President Saddam Hussein and created a new political structure, these events pose a stubborn challenge to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government. Reports in the international media put the blame squarely on ISIS. The organisation is described as an offshoot of, and more brutal than, al-Qaeda, which has actually disowned the group. Last February, a message posted on Islamist websites said the leadership of al-Qaeda had announced that ISIS was "not a branch of al-Qaeda, nor does it have an organisational relationship with al-Qaeda network." Some have also claimed that ISIS grew out of a previous militant group, the Islamic State of Iraq, whose leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a US air strike north of Baghdad in June 2006.

The names of al-Qaeda and those supposedly associated with it have a particular resonance in the American psyche. Think tanks within the Washington Beltway and the Obama administration have described the unfolding scenario in Iraq as a threat to the region and America's interests. President Obama, cautious and calculative, has ordered the despatch of special forces as "military advisors" to Iraq, but seems reluctant to go much further. He has himself quashed speculation that he may order air attacks against militants unless, he says, there is an accord on Sunni inclusion in Iraq. The experience after the 2003 invasion still haunts America. Usually reliable sources say Obama wants Prime Minister Maliki out as a price for bailing out the Iraqi government. Will Maliki step down easily? Or if he is forced out, what will be the repercussions?

A complex picture

The situation in Iraq is a lot more complex than reports in the media convey, and the local reality does not get the attention it deserves. That fighters from outside, including Syria, are infiltrating Iraq's porous borders is not in doubt, but Iraqi Sunnis, too, are part of the rebellion. ISIS is known to be well entrenched in Syria, fighting against President Bashar al-Assad's forces, as well as more moderate anti-government groups. From northern and central Syria, militants can move to Ramadi, Fallujah and areas around Baghdad along the Euphrates with relative ease. Mosul, north of the Iraqi capital, is within reach.

ISIS has made some effort to win the hearts and minds of local residents where the group dominates, but its strict application of Sharia law has also alienated communities. The conduct of ISIS brings mixed results for the group. ISIS tends to harness discontent in areas of Sunni population that has become alienated because of the central government's discriminatory policies. However, the sentiment is different in secular Sunni and Shia communities.

Maliki's sectarian policy

In many ways, the crisis for Prime Minister Maliki is of his own making. For the rebels could not have achieved such military successes in a wide area of Iraq without local support. Sunni communities in many parts of the country, once dominant in Saddam Hussein's power structure, have found themselves increasingly side-lined under Maliki's rule. Within days of America's military withdrawal in December 2011, ending eight years of occupation, Iraq's Sunni vice president Tariq al-Hashemi was accused of organising murder squads and terrorism and fled to Turkey. Hashemi was later sentenced to death in absentia.

Maliki's increasingly sectarian approach, since America's withdrawal, has caused deep alienation in the Sunni minority. To say that the challenge to Iraq's Shia-dominated government is from ISIS alone, is a partial truth. The reality is that not only does ISIS enjoy local support, there are rebellions by Iraqi Sunnis across the country. This explains why Mosul fell without much fighting. The Iraqi army withdrew after a period of tension and uncertainty. Mosul's Sunni

residents, who resent Maliki's rule, were left behind. There was hardly any resistance from the Sunni population of Mosul.

No plain-sailing for rebels

The Iraqi government's authority was already weak because the country is a much reduced entity. The alienation of Sunnis caused by Maliki's policy has further eroded his control to the extent that questions are being asked about his future. Nonetheless, predictions in the western press that Baghdad could soon fall to Sunni rebel forces are exaggerated.

ISIS has no doubt made dramatic gains in a short time, but its victories have been limited to Sunni areas. Baghdad today is overwhelmingly Shia except a few neighbourhoods. Shia militias operate with Shia-dominated security forces. Baghdad is hit by suicide bombings from time to time, but a physical takeover of the capital by Sunni rebels seems a far-fetched idea for now. A more likely scenario is continuous weakening of central government control over large parts of the country, thereby making the Iraqi government even more vulnerable and prone to foreign pressure.

America's return to Iraqi theatre

Events have come full circle in Iraq for the United States. When American forces invaded the country in 2003, they supported the Shia population and pulverised Sunni areas in Baghdad and elsewhere. When the American military subsequently encountered fierce Shia resistance, the Bush administration switched sides. With American help, Sunni tribal militias were created under the umbrella of Sahwa (Sons of Iraq) in 2005 to counter Shia opposition.

Prime Minister Maliki has persistently refused to integrate Sunni tribal militias into the state security forces while packing the Iraqi military and police with Shia loyalists across all ranks. By the end of 2013, the Sahwa militias had become non-existent. Most militiamen were unemployed or had joined ISIS, contributing to the deep Sunni resentment against Maliki's government and causing the problems he faces today. Now, the United States is again supporting the Shia-dominated Iraqi government, by despatching special forces to begin with, to quell the

Sunni rebellion spreading across northern and central Iraq. These alliances are little more than marriages of convenience between disgruntled Sunni communities of Iraq and some foreign fighters on one hand, and the beleaguered Iraqi government and President Obama on the other.

Will these marriages last and Iraq be stabilised? There must be serious doubts. Assassinations of suspected militants with special forces' help, or high altitude bombing, do not have a good record of success. Maliki, or his successor, will need to adopt an inclusive policy. Even then, there will remain competing interests of Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries and Turkey on one hand, and Iran and Syria on the other. Major powers, the United States and Russia, will continue to vie for influence in the Middle East. Iraq is likely to remain unstable.

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