INDIAN COUNCIL OF WORLD AFFAIRS

VIEWPOINT

Imploding Iraq: Implications for the Region

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While the Arab world is still grappling with the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a new crisis erupted in Iraq in the second week of June, when a group of shadowy Jihadist called "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) swept half of the northern Iraq capturing several towns along with the cities of Mussel (Mosul) and Tikrit. The sudden onslaught on the part of ISIS prompted thousands of coreligionists to flee the region and created panic among the Shiite bases in Iraq. They not only captured the towns and looted the central bank but forced the central army of 30,000 to flee the posts without resistance leaving behind a huge cache of arms and ammunitions to be captured later by the rebels.

Thousands of civilians and fighters have been killed so far and hundreds have been held hostage including 40 Indian workers. It is very likely that the situation could escalate further as Shiite spiritual leaders have urged people to arm themselves to rescue the Shiite state of Iraq. Emboldened by the Fatwa of the leading Shiite authorities, Shiite militants are vowing to rout the ISIS fighters and their backers. The country is on the verge of collapse and the foreign intervention seems inevitable as Iraqi government is seeking US intervention, while Turkey is calling for NATO intervention.

It is difficult to trace the exact genesis of the ISIS, but it is an entrenched radical Sunni coalition of members of erstwhile Bath party and disbanded army of Saddam, Sunni tribal

leaders, Jihadist elements present across the region and those not satisfied with the exclusionist policy of Maliki-led Shiite regime. The ISIS was earlier known as ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) but after they spilled over to Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the group was renamed as ISIS. ISIS shot into prominence when they declared open war against the Free Syrian army and other Anti-Assad forces for supremacy.

The origins of the current situation lie in the US invasion of 2003 which was followed by the dismantling of Iraqi army and exclusion of Bathist members from the evolution of new national polity. The situation further worsened when new Prime Minister of the country, Nouri-al-Maliki, institutionalised the sectarian identity creating a new fault line between Shiites and Sunnis. Shia-dominated new government adopted the policy of exclusion and relied more on the laws of 'centrifugal' rather than a 'centripetal' politics. Mr. Maliki mustered the US support in his own favour and sidelined his opponents. The country's Sunni Vice President was accused of leading a death squad and has been living in exile in Turkey since 2012.

Because of the historic, cultural and geographical contiguity of the region and the heterogeneous nature of demography, the crisis in Iraq could impact the entire region. The rise of ISIS has sent a shock wave in Iran because it has put in danger the survival of its only western ally (Iraq) which might suffer a break up in near future. The rise of ISIS in Iraq is likely to instigate the belligerent Sunni groups within Iran threatening its internal security. There are reports that the head of prominent 'Al-Quds Brigade' of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Mr. Qasem Soleymani is already in Baghdad charting out the future course of action. The volatile situation in Baghdad might also drag Hezbollah into Iran which along with Al-Quds Brigade was involved in fight against anti-Assad forces in Syria.

Iraq's present vulnerability might unite the Shiite forces across the region, to indulge in a new war against Syria in order to rescue the Shiite state of Iraq. Iranian spiritual leaders are already calling people to take up arms against the 'terrorists'. The march of ISIS would re-embolden the Sunni belligerents in Syria who had receded in the last few months and they can trigger a fresh war. Their involvement would further deepen the sectarian divide as pro-

government TV channels in Iraq have been already calling for boycott of Turkey and Saudi goods indicating that they were a pro-ISIS Sunni regimes.

Prime Minister Maliki's call for US intervention and air-strikes against the ISIS would muddle the domestic politics leaving region unstable. Any intervention by the US would push the democratic clock back and the battle to achieve sovereignty would be pushed back by decades.

Turkey has been one of the earliest victims of this escalating crisis when more than eighty officials of the Turkish Consulate were made hostage prompting Turkey to seek NATO intervention. Turkey might not risk remaining uninvolved in the present developments in Iraq, given its territorial contiguity with Iraq. The present situation is likely to hamper oil supplies to Turkey as it receives its major oil supply from Kirkuk which is under the control of ISIA. Turkey has huge investments in Iraq and total volume of trade between the two is US $ 12 billion annually.

The development will further strengthen the Kurds against the fragile centre which has been fighting a long battle for autonomy and control over oil and other natural resources. The assault by ISIS has exposed the political and defence vulnerabilities of the Maliki government which would consolidate further the quasi-independence of Kurdistan.

The onslaught of the ISIS could further deepen the sectarian divide in the Arab world, already beset with sectarian division. This new deep-rooted vertical and horizontal division would dominate other socio-political issues of immediate concern rendering people's larger democratic aspirations unfulfilled. There is an acute recognition across the region of the looming Shia-Sunni tussle that is happening and its ramifications can intensify the conflict and impact on the polity of the region. It is time for convergence and unity among regional powers to forsake the sectarian plank and rescue the region from a fresh turmoil.

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