

Policy Briefing

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Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box

I. Overview

The jihadi surge is the tragic, violent outcome of steadily deteriorating political dynamics. Instead of a rash military intervention and unconditional support for the Iraqi government, pressure is needed to reverse sectarian polarisation and a disastrous record of governance.

Within days, the jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) conquered parts of north-western Iraq and revealed the fragility of a country ruined by sectarianism, hollowed-out institutions and high-level, pervasive corruption. Accumulated grievances of Sunnis in the area meant that ISIL pushed against a house of cards. But its possibilities are limited and a kneejerk international military intervention risks stoking the conflict instead of containing it. ISIL's advance has highlighted all that has been wrong with the Iraqi government's Sunni strategy, which sacrificed political reforms in the interest of fighting "terrorism" – a term it has used for all forms of Sunni violence but not for Shiite equivalents. This strategy enhanced polarisation and prepared the ground for the successful jihadi push in the north. International actors collectively failed to exert the necessary pressure on the Iraqi government to change its policy.

Despite their recent conquests, jihadis are not on the verge of storming Baghdad. Nor is an all-out civil war inevitable; it could, however, be triggered by a disproportionate Iraqi Shiite and Iranian response that would cause Sunni ranks to close around the jihadis.

Iran and the U.S. should avoid a precipitate military response. The deployment of Iranian troops, who would be seen as a Shiite-Persian occupation force in Sunni-Arab territory, would bolster the jihadis' standing further. The U.S., instead of rushing to send advisers, special troops or air power, should lay out plainly what it is willing to do to help Iraq address the ISIL challenge militarily but base its help on the premise that Prime Minister Maliki's government immediately implements overdue political reform.

II. The Jihadi Surge

The spectacular drive through northern Iraq of jihadis fighting under the banner of the al-Qaeda splinter group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) took the world by surprise. The high-tempo takeover of major urban centres, including Mosul, seemed to fundamentally challenge the prevailing narrative on Iraq.

Hadn't Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and his "Rule of Law" bloc just been re-elected with a comfortable margin?¹ Wasn't he criticised not for weakness but for building an authoritarian state, based on his thorough control of a vast security apparatus? Didn't he have strong backing from both Iran and the U.S., the latter seeing him as a necessary evil, nominally representing the majority Shiite population and commanding enough clout to keep the state together and push back on a violently-inclined rebellious fringe of Sunni malcontents? And wasn't the "war on terror" a bloody but business-as-usual affair in which ISIL-attributed bomb attacks occurred almost daily in Baghdad, and towns like Falluja were callously shelled by regime troops without any obvious political fallout?

A widely-shared perception in policymaking circles and the media had been that Iraq was painfully but slowly and surely progressing on the state-building process initiated after the 2003 U.S. invasion and destruction of its institutions. In particular, with President Barack Obama having designated the withdrawal from Iraq one of his signal achievements, the U.S. continued to invest in Maliki as the lynchpin of the country's fragile stability. That Iraq looked increasingly like an Iran-allied police state wracked by high-level corruption was seen as regrettable, but as long as it remained moderately stable and the oil flowed, few cared to take a closer look, much less to seek to change the situation. When Maliki's rivals – also his partners in a "national unity" government – tried to oust him through a parliamentary no-confidence vote in 2012, they failed to attract U.S. support, and their move failed.

When whole swathes of the north west fell to the insurgency, the extent of the state's deterioration became apparent to all. Army and other security forces in Mosul abandoned their posts and weapons, leaving unguarded thousands of prisoners held – in many cases without charge – in prisons and other detention facilities. Maliki's local allies failed to muster any popular support when they tried to rally the city's defences. Ninewa Governor Atheel al-Nujeifi left for the neighbouring Kurdistan region, and many inhabitants also fled,² either fearing the jihadis or anticipating indiscriminate retribution from the regime, which had established the model for its military response in Falluja.³ Some of those who stayed enthusiastically celebrated "liberation", an astounding development given the nightmarish memories left by al-Qaeda militants after they last held sway in western and north-western Iraq, in 2007.⁴ Local armed groups jumped on the jihadi bandwagon, later claiming a (probably exaggerated) role in the takeover and hailing it as the beginning of the end of the Maliki era.

To craft an effective response, basic questions must be addressed. What explains the insurgents' success? What are its likely limits? What can be expected from the Maliki government and interested foreign parties? Doomsday scenarios, including jihadi conquest of Baghdad, renewed all-out civil war, Iraq's break-up, even creation of an Islamic Emirate straddling the Iraqi-Syrian border, help create a frenzied climate conducive to damaging political moves more than clarity. In Iraq and the region, the

¹ The 30 March 2014 elections gave the prime minister's "State of Law" bloc 92 seats out of 328, placing him in the lead to form a coalition government.

² See www.unrefugees.org.au/news-and-media/news-headlines/erbil-unhcr-responds-to-massive-displacement-of-iraqis-from-mosul.

³ See, for instance, "Thousands flee Iraq government assault on rebel-held Falluja", Reuters, 16 May 2014.

⁴ "Inside Mosul: why Iraqis are celebrating Islamic extremists' takeover of their city", *Niqash*, 12 June 2014. For background on Mosul, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°90, *Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa*, 28 September 2009.

pro-Maliki camp feverishly speculates that it has been victimised by a conspiracy either of Saddam-era Baathists (unlikely given their weakness) or Gulf states seeking to empower ISIL (implausible, given their recent efforts, in coordination with Turkey and the U.S., to roll-back the group in Syria). Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, traditionally discreet and cautious in politics, was said to have called for Shia to take up arms. The U.S. and Iran began to move in support of Maliki, with the former deploying two aircraft carriers, the latter reportedly sending ground troops.⁵

Amid the drama, a simple question has been overlooked: how could large portions of Iraq be conquered, thousands of security forces routed, the capital endangered and foreign intervention required due to an insurgency whose numbers pale in the face of one of the largest security apparatus in the world?

III. Destructive Politics in Baghdad

The fall of Mosul and other towns in western Iraq has a relatively simple explanation: the insurgents pushed against a house of cards, a state structure weakened by accumulated Sunni grievances, suppressed by what is experienced locally as an “occupation” army of Shiites influenced by Iran next door.⁶ Crisis Group has long warned against the continued marginalisation and repression of Sunnis at the hands of the current government, forecasting a crisis that would deepen predictably.⁷ The corollary is equally simple: the advance will likely stop at any hard obstacle, such as cohesive and effective security forces in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran-backed Shiite militias or a Shiite-dominated army fighting on home ground, in eastern and central Iraq.

The events should not prompt a rash response based on fear of a rapid jihadi expansion: that likely would worsen the situation by creating even deeper long-term grievances. Well-known, longstanding malfunctions within the country's institutions must be addressed if Iraq is to stabilise. The takeover of a major city⁸ must prompt rethinking of past policies and a strategic reset, not a kneejerk military response that would further inflame the open sores of sectarian polarisation.

The events of mid-June are less a dramatic departure from previous dynamics than a tragic continuation of them. These include:

- consolidation of Maliki's personal power at the cost of the coherence and effectiveness of state institutions. This includes the security apparatus, which he has reorganised as a source of patronage, purged of more competent elements in favour of individuals loyal to him, politicised in pursuit of personal adversaries and supplemented with sectarian Shiite militias. Disregard for state institutions extends to political bodies. Parliament has been rendered toothless, independent state agencies shorn of their powers. Ministries, to an unprecedented extent, have be-

⁵ “US sends aircraft carrier to Persian Gulf as Obama considers air strikes in Iraq”, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2014; “Iran sends troops into Iraq to aid fight against Isis militants”, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2014.

⁶ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°126, *Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis*, 30 July 2012; and N°144, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, 14 August 2013.

⁷ For example, Crisis Group Report, *Make or Break*, op. cit.

⁸ There are no trustworthy recent estimates; Mosul is either Iraq's second-largest city, or, more probably, its third after Baghdad and Basra.

come bastions of nepotism and other forms of corruption; the severely politicised judiciary represents anything but the “rule of law”, with even the Supreme Court doing the government’s bidding;⁹

- ❑ use of the “war on terror” narrative to distract from this political dysfunction and the failure to govern and deliver services throughout the country;
- ❑ securitisation of politics, including excessive use of security forces for social control and perpetuating the government’s rule. Restoration of security and establishment of efficient security forces were the top U.S. priority as it prepared to withdraw at the end of 2011; Maliki did not deliver, but deployed the army in cities across the country, both to satisfy Washington and pressure political foes;
- ❑ manipulation of state resources and other forms of patronage to prevent a unified opposition from coalescing. A diverse array of figures share the language of rejection but have accepted state positions and used them to leverage personal wealth and clout rather than make common cause and posit workable alternatives. Other players see benefits in Maliki’s combination of rhetorical grandstanding and institutional shallowness: the Kurds use him as a bogeyman, while having little reason to fear his government will construct a functioning and therefore threatening centralised state; Shiite militias expand their room for manoeuvre under the veil of statehood;
- ❑ increasing alienation from the state of Sunni constituencies across Iraq, whose views on Baghdad are shaped by excessive repression and a profound sense of neglect from the state. This has been exacerbated by the opportunistic behaviour of local Sunni elites, who have largely cut themselves off from their social base by accepting state sinecures and/or aligning with the prime minister;
- ❑ constant reinforcement provided to Maliki by Iran and the U.S., both of whom seem to take a “devil-you-know” approach to a tough leader who, despite glaring deficiencies in governance, can win elections and, until this month, was able to contain jihadi violence from Sunni quarters; and
- ❑ collective international failure, including by the Baghdad-based UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), to press the Iraqi government effectively to implement urgently-needed political reforms that have been sacrificed in the interest of fighting “terrorism”, conveniently defined to encompass all forms of Sunni violence and insurgency, but not Shiite equivalents – an ill-conceived strategy that has produced the result it was seeking to prevent.

Within these dynamics, several precedents and pattern are worth highlighting:

- ❑ this is not the first time Maliki’s security apparatus has collapsed in the face of militias running rampant. In 2008, Shiite armed groups asserted themselves in Basra, prompting the army’s dispatch to reassert central control. The U.S. intervened on Maliki’s behalf, on the understanding he subsequently would undertake major reforms to ensure long-term stability. However, the prime minister pock-

⁹ For background, see in particular Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°99, *Loose Ends: Iraq’s Security Forces Between U.S. Drawdown and Withdrawal*, 26 October 2010; and N°113, *Failing Oversight: Iraq’s Unchecked Government*, 26 September 2011.

eted the victory and over the next six years consolidated his power at the expense of the state's integrity;

- in 2009 and without credible evidence, a “Baathist conspiracy” about to take control of the capital was invoked to justify arbitrary arrests.¹⁰ Maliki since repeatedly has used the argument of Baathist plots to justify repression; and
- when militants rose up in Falluja in early 2014 following more than a year of protests ignored by the central authorities, the government responded militarily, rallying supporters with the claim that “terrorists” soon would march on Baghdad, something the Falluja insurgents were in no position to do. Meanwhile, the government did nothing to address the conflict's underlying political causes; nor did Iran and the U.S. apply any significant pressure on it to do so, offering military support instead.¹¹

Generally speaking, Maliki has neither outlined a unifying vision for Iraq, nor governed in the interest of all its citizens. Instead he has invited discord through sectarian discourse and policies and authoritarian rule, while allowing oil companies to operate and trade to flourish. This divisive and inept governance has done little to bring internal peace or hold the country together.

Beyond stirring up sectarian fears and giving yet more space to Shiite militias, the government's response to the current crisis has been to make major concessions to the Kurds (who seized the disputed city of Kirkuk, exploiting Baghdad's weakness);¹² play on the Western obsession with “terrorism” by using the term as a catch-all for diverse Sunni political grievances and forms of insurgent violence; and invite military intervention from both the U.S and Iran. The prime minister shows no intention of reversing a bankrupt approach by addressing the underlying political issues that enabled the insurgents' push. Nor, beyond nice words, is there a concrete sign from Iranian and U.S. backers that they expect him to do so.

IV. The Syrian Staging Ground

The growing integration of the Iraqi and Syrian arenas has been crucial to ISIL's rise. An effective response to its gains on one side of the border must account for dynamics on the other. The expansion of the insurgency's base within Iraq since mid-2013 – thanks largely to Baghdad's policies – enabled it to project more forcefully into Syria, and its acquisition of oil and arms there has in turn empowered it to escalate in Iraq, first in Anbar province, now in the north west. ISIL's role in Syria has given it unprecedented resources and territorial consolidation but also exposed familiar weaknesses. Several dynamics stand out.

- ISIL's superior organisation and battlefield prowess render it a valuable ally, so long as immediate interests coincide, for local rebels who reject its ideology and long-term goals. But its political agenda means that this is unlikely to last beyond an initial phase of rebel territorial expansion. In Syria in 2013 as in Iraq in 2007, ISIL's push to establish unilateral dominance over “liberated” territory – via often-

¹⁰ See “Maliki to IraqiNews.com: We fear Baathist conspiracy”, *Iraqinews*, 13 May 2009.

¹¹ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°150, *Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, 28 April 2014.

¹² See “Kurdish forces take full control of Kirkuk”, *Al Arabiya*, 12 June 2014.

brutal means – forced local rebels (and even rival jihadis) to choose between subordination and confrontation. Most who were capable chose the latter.

- ❑ Armed opposition factions across the ideological spectrum drove ISIL from north-western Syria in early 2014 but currently lack the organisation, manpower and resources to seize its strongholds between the eastern Aleppo countryside and the Iraqi border. ISIL's decisions to redeploy within more defensible lines and largely withdraw from the fight against the Assad regime proved crucial, freeing up manpower that it has redirected toward consolidating control over eastern Syria. This is critical for a movement whose dismal reputation among pro-opposition Syrians makes its fighters (in particular its foreign cadres) an especially prized commodity. By contrast, some of its most powerful adversaries (including fellow jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra and components of the Islamic Front rebel alliance) are too bogged-down engaging the regime to deploy the resources necessary to defeat ISIL in eastern Syria, where battles are raging over oil and territory contiguous to Iraq.
- ❑ ISIL has further benefited from the Assad regime's decision to ignore its expansion. Its strength and ambition serve short-term regime interests, providing a bogeyman (to which Damascus markets itself as the lone alternative) while also forcing more threatening foes – the mainstream armed opposition – to fight on costly additional fronts. That regime planes began striking ISIL headquarters a week after the fall of Mosul highlighted the fact that they had not previously been doing so.
- ❑ Recent modestly improved coordination among the U.S., Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to strengthen more pragmatic strands within the armed opposition could, if sustained and expanded, raise pressure on ISIL inside Syria. Effectively confronting it would likely require exploiting its manpower constraints by forcing it to fight on multiple Syrian fronts. Giving other rebels the necessary resources and organisation could help in this respect. It would also risk escalating and prolonging the Syrian civil war, but it could be worth that risk if done within a political framework that in parallel to stepped-up efforts against ISIL included negotiations between the regime and the moderate opposition toward a genuine compromise.
- ❑ Weapons, money and volunteers acquired in Iraq will likely cross the border, helping ISIL in its war against rebel opponents in Syria. The extent to which ISIL is able to deploy recruits gained in Iraq to Syrian fronts could prove an important variable, particularly in the event rebels can escalate on additional fronts in Aleppo or Raqqa provinces while ISIL is focused on battles in Iraq.
- ❑ ISIL's freedom of movement between Syria and Iraq means that pressure in one country increases its assertiveness in the other, while opportunities it seizes on one side of the border brighten its prospects on both. An integrated approach is thus needed to devise an effective response to it in either theatre.

V. Putting Jihadis Back in the Box

While the insurgents' lightning advance in Iraq's Sunni areas has highlighted all that has been wrong with Baghdad's sectarian strategy, these fighters, many foreign, appear to have no workable blueprint of their own beyond the shallow call for establishment of an Islamic state. They have shown themselves time and again to be their own worst enemies. They have only a limited popular base, given the stringent mores and rules they tend to impose forcefully. Their utopian philosophy of governance may be compelling to some but is in perpetual conflict with the constraints and requirements of reality. Their instinct to try to bend reality to fit their narrative frequently locks them into self-destructive behaviour.

Failed jihadi projects litter the Arab world, most notably and disastrously in Algeria in the 1990s and Iraq in the 2000s. A recent case in point is the Syrian city of Raqqa where, thanks largely to surprise, jihadis pushed out a residual regime presence and took over in March 2013. Non-jihadi armed groups initially jumped on the bandwagon but were soon expelled by the better organised and more determined jihadi force that subjected local society to a system of governance that in no way compensated for unbearable forms of coercion. As a result, jihadis are still there, but both contained and incapable.

Mosul and other towns in western Iraq can be expected to follow a similar path, unless the Iraqi government and its Iranian and U.S. backers decide on actions that make things worse. Deployment of Iranian troops, who would be seen as a Shiite-Persian occupation force deep in Sunni-Arab territory, would be a godsend for jihadis, who could garner only fragile support otherwise and need a broader insurgency in which to flourish. The use of U.S. air power would bolster the jihadis' standing further, as it would seem to Sunnis to confirm their already strong suspicion that Washington is doing Tehran's bidding in the region.

Though Maliki bears much responsibility for the sectarianisation of Iraq's political crisis, it does not automatically follow that the solution lies in removing him. What is needed at this stage is to end the harmful course pursued by a range of players, including the prime minister. The following should be borne in mind:

- ❑ International recognition of Maliki's legitimacy, or that of any successor, should be contingent on statesmanship, namely immediate and consequential movement on the reforms expected of him for years.
- ❑ Maliki cannot fight Sunni militants while empowering Shiite ones, either those crossing into Syria with official facilitation, or those deployed as proxies in rebellious Sunni areas of Iraq to compensate for the failings of uniformed troops. Mobilisation of either sect reinforces mobilisation of the other in never-ending, lethal escalation.
- ❑ Instead of rallying civilians to join militias and fight, the prime minister should take visible measures to reconfigure the regular armed forces. With a million servicemen under arms, they are too large already, but they need to fairly represent the demographic mosaic that is Iraq at all levels and ranks.
- ❑ Shiite elites bring about the very Sunni radicalisation they fear when they take, at best, a perfunctory stance against the policies that generate that radicalisation, including arbitrary arrests and torture, which have been well-documented by local and foreign human rights organisations.

- ❑ Sunni elites cannot attain the leadership roles they seek while agreeing to co-optation by a central government that recognises few of their community's legitimate grievances.
- ❑ Iran cannot succeed in exerting wide influence in Iraq while condoning sectarian Baghdad policies that ultimately limit that influence to Shiite proxies.
- ❑ Iran will not be a responsible player in Iraq so long as it facilitates the erosion of the state. Currently, it hides behind the pretext that Maliki is his own man and relies on the U.S. to mitigate the worst effects of his reckless policies.
- ❑ Iran's implication that it will pressure Maliki to institute reforms once the jihadi threat has receded has scant credibility, as it has apparently not done so with President Assad in Syria since he pushed rebels out of Damascus in 2013 with massive Iranian backing.
- ❑ The U.S. is not supporting a fragile Iraq by unconditionally backing a prime minister who is systematically dismantling it.
- ❑ The U.S. should stop seeking quick fixes over serious engagement with a state its withdrawal, along with other factors, has left failing; any further military help should be premised, as described below, on immediate moves to redress the political system's most glaring shortcomings.
- ❑ The U.S. can achieve little through air strikes, the insertion of special forces or other light-footprint tactics without, in its counter-insurgency jargon, an effective Iraqi army to "clear"; an accepted Iraqi police to "hold"; and a legitimate Iraqi political leadership to "build".
- ❑ There may be interests in a stable Iraq that the U.S. and Iran share and can work pragmatically on common lines to achieve, but this will be much more difficult if nothing is done to address the Syrian issue, where the regime is barrel-bombing civilian neighbourhoods, Shiite militias roam the country, and there is not even the glimmer of a political plan on the table.

From a strictly U.S. perspective, a sound policy would start with rejecting the deceptive argument that time is of the essence: jihadis are not on the verge of storming Baghdad, nor is all-out civil war inevitable. Secondly, it is important to recognise that all-out civil war could be triggered by a disproportionate Iraqi Shiite and Iranian response that would close Sunni ranks around the insurgents. Thirdly, the administration should lay out plainly and publicly what Washington is willing to do to help Iraq address the ISIL challenge militarily, while spelling out what such an intervention would be designed to support, including the long list of reforms requested of Maliki over his past two terms in power; and an end to all forms of militant cross-border mobility in Iraq and Syria, possibly on the basis of a UN Security Council resolution if the Council's disunity on Syria can be reduced. Washington should be alert to the possibility of working with Iran but should also make clear to Tehran the importance of immediate signs of good-will on Syria, where it is doggedly backing up a regime that has failed to address the many underlying, domestic causes of a destabilising crisis.

Steps that the Iraq government needs to take immediately or within a precise time-frame include:

- ❑ formation of a genuine government of national unity, based on the recent election results, as the basis for national reconciliation;
- ❑ meaningful inclusion of Sunni representatives in such a government;
- ❑ the transfer of decision-making and oversight responsibilities over the military from Maliki to a credible defence minister;
- ❑ implementation of the decentralised system of appointments to key police positions stipulated in the Provincial Power Act (2008), which grants provinces decision-making powers for managing their own security;
- ❑ a detailed, actionable development plan for Sunni areas;
- ❑ investigation into human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and torture, and prosecution of those found to have broken the law;
- ❑ effort to revamp the army in a non-sectarian and non-partisan way;
- ❑ restoration and re-empowerment of independent oversight agencies; and
- ❑ closure of secret jails run by brigades that answer exclusively to the prime minister, repeal of the anti-terrorism law, and other useful human rights steps to reduce tensions.

Washington enjoys significant leverage in Iraq not solely through its longstanding relationship to Maliki, but also owing to the many ties it has developed with other key Shiite leaders, the Kurds and the Nujeifi brothers.¹³ It is time to bring these to bear.

Short of such signs of good-will on the part of the Iraq government, Iran and others, the prognosis is apparent: the U.S. cannot succeed alone, has no partners to work with, is being set up yet again to save Maliki for free and will take all the blame in the most likely event of failure.

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¹³ Atheel Nujeifi is the governor of Ninewa province; his brother Usama Nujeifi is the speaker of the council of representatives in Baghdad.

Appendix A: Map of Iraq



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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