

## Associate Paper

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### The Iraq Crisis: What's Next for the Region?

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#### Key Points

- Despite the military successes of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) over the past two weeks, the group will not cause the collapse of the Iraqi Government or state.
- Even if ISIL is pushed back, Iraq will still be left with an ineffective government, widespread Sunni sectarian grievances, and regional turbulence from neighbouring Syria.
- Iraq's instability presents an opportunity for Iran to expand its influence there, but Tehran could face a quagmire it can ill-afford and that risks raising regional sectarian tensions.
- The biggest threat to Australia is from Iraq and Syria providing an attractive theatre for Australian extremists to go and fight, who may then return to Australia more radicalised, experienced and networked.

#### Summary

Despite the early June military successes by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the group will neither pose a fatal threat to the Iraqi Government nor cause the collapse of the Iraqi state. The security breakdown in Iraq and Baghdad's lack of political will to confront Sunni sectarian grievances will, however, continue to provide an attractive theatre for global jihadists. Regionally, a destabilised Iraq will provide an opportunity for Iran to increase its influence there, as well as for Iraqi Kurds to consolidate their control over the north of the country. The greatest threat to Australia as a result of the Iraq violence will be a new theatre

for Australians to earn battle experience – possibly returning home as experienced and networked Islamic extremists.

## Analysis

Since early June 2014, the Sunni Islamist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, has achieved rapid military successes across northern and western Iraq. As of 25 June, ISIL occupies or controls large territorial areas stretching from the ar Raqqa governorate in Syria to within 60 kilometres of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

### ***The Evolution of ISIL: Background and Leadership***

Over the last ten years, ISIL has evolved to become an increasingly powerful, violent and effective Sunni Islamist organisation. Its primary goal remains the same: to establish an Islamic caliphate spanning the Middle East, from Iraq through to Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon.

Despite the al-Qaida leadership publicly disavowing any affiliation with ISIL in February, the group continues to attract local and foreign extremists. Indeed, the strength of ISIL has been bolstered by an influx of foreign fighters and the release of detained jihadists. Today, ISIL's personnel strength is estimated at between 5,000-7,000 fighters.

ISIL is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a 'shrewd strategist, a prolific fundraiser, and a ruthless killer', according to the *Washington Post*. He is a 'zealous fighter' and a 'battlefield tactician' with 'extensive military experience in all kinds of urban warfare', and is 'more violent, more virulent, and more anti-American than al-Qaida's new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.'<sup>1</sup>

### ***Why ISIL and Why Now?***

The success of al-Baghdadi and ISIL, particularly over the last two weeks, is largely due to the conflict in neighbouring Syria and the Sunni sectarian grievances in Iraq over the leadership of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

In Syria, the uprising against the Assad regime continues to attract large numbers of foreign fighters – including Western fighters – and many choose to join the ranks of ISIL. The Syrian Government – with the help of Lebanese Hezbollah – continues to make gains against the rebel-controlled areas, pushing them further east, including along the border with Iraq.

In addition to experienced Syrian fighters joining the Iraq fight, ISIL's quick penetration through western and northern Iraq is also being assisted by Iraqi Sunnis who – due to their own sectarian grievances with Baghdad – have either tacitly allowed the movement of ISIL personnel through Iraq's Sunni heartland, or actively supported ISIL's anti-Shi'a agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> McCoy, T., 'How ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Became the World's Most Powerful Jihadist Leader', *Washington Post*, 11 June 2014.

### **What Next For Iraq?**

At the tactical level, ISIL's advance through northern and western Iraq is possibly part of its plan to quickly penetrate Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq before surrounding and then attacking Baghdad – a similar plan to that devised by its predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq, back in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Any ISIL plan to attack Baghdad is likely to be symbolic, rather than operational. As Jessica Lewis of the Institute for the Study of War explains, 'Strategically, ISIL does not need to overrun the Green Zone. They only need to demonstrate the ability to manoeuvre ground forces into the city centre, past the best that the [Iraqi security forces] can muster, and touch the flagpole.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite its recent – and impressively quick – tactical gains, ISIL is unlikely to continue its achievements and to pose a serious military threat to Baghdad or collapse the Iraqi Government.

ISIL has never launched such an expansive offensive in Iraq and, although it has demonstrated its intent to reach Baghdad and beyond, it probably does not have the capacity to hold and control its territorial gains.

Over the next three months, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), with international assistance – including possibly from the United States and Iran – will probably slowly push the ISIL militants back from their recently-gained territory.

Indeed, ISIL's advance on Baghdad has stalled at al-Baghdadi's hometown of Samarra, and the ISF has already retaken at least two northern towns that fell to ISIL, leading Iraqi military spokesman General Qassim al-Moussawi to claim that the ISF have 'regained the initiative'.

The slowing momentum of ISIL is possibly due to it meeting increasing resistance from the ISF and "volunteer" Shi'a militants groups – such as those that have recently moved into Samarra from Baghdad to help defend the Shi'a al-Askari shrine.

### **Outlook: Iraq Loses, Kurds Gain, Iran Balances**

Baghdad is, however, very unlikely to be able to eliminate all the ISIL forces inside Iraq, and will be incapable – or at least unwilling – to confront the Sunni sectarian grievances that allowed ISIL to expand so quickly in the first place.

Rather, Prime Minister Maliki will probably adopt a more hard-line, anti-Sunni approach in dealing with ISIL, possibly becoming more reliant on Iran and its Shi'a proxies. As a result, instead of diffusing the situation, such policies are likely to cause more sectarian divisions and further destabilise Iraq.

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<sup>2</sup> Roggio, B., 'Analysis: ISIS, Allies Reviving "Baghdad Belts" Battle Plan', *Long War Journal*, 14 June 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, J., 'The Battle for Baghdad: Scenarios', *Institute for the Study of War*, 13 June 2014.

Even if ISIL is pushed back from its recent territorial gains, all of Iraq's systemic socio-economic and sectarian issues will still remain: an ineffective and corrupt Iraqi political leadership, widespread Sunni resentment, and regional turbulence and spill-over from neighbouring Syria.

### ***Kurds Could Consolidate Northern Control***

Meanwhile, Iraqi Kurds will probably seek to consolidate their new-found control over northern Iraq, including the highly-sought after and strategic city of Kirkuk.

Since the abandonment of Kirkuk to ISIL militants by the Iraqi Army on 10 June, Kurdish security forces – the *peshmerga* – re-established control on 12 June and claimed the city.

While the Kurdish capture of Kirkuk will embolden Iraq's Kurdish population, it is, however, likely to increase ethnic tensions between Iraq's Arabs and Kurds, as well as to further strain the distrustful relationship between Irbil and Baghdad.

Already, politicians in Baghdad are suspicious of Kurdish motives, believing that the Kurds may have allowed contested areas in northern Iraq to fall in order to later lay claim to them. According to the *New York Times*, an unnamed advisor to Prime Minister Maliki has blamed the desertion of the Iraqi Army in north-west Iraq on the Kurds.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Iran Could Increase Its Leverage, but Challenges Remain***

Regionally, Iraq's turmoil will provide Iran with an opportunity to increase its political and military influence there, much to the annoyance of Saudi Arabia. This could inflame regional sectarian tensions between the bastions of the Sunni and Shi'a worlds, hindering any genuine rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh.

Iran is likely to adopt its tried and tested dual-track policy in Iraq: publicly supporting Baghdad through political avenues and financial assistance, while also providing deniable military assistance. Indeed, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has already offered Iraq assistance 'within the parameters of international law', but has denied reports that Iran has already sent security forces into Iraq.

There are, however, reports that Tehran has already sent Iranian security officials into Iraq, from Iranian volunteers, Shi'a proxies, Basij militia, and elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>5</sup> But perhaps the most telling evidence of recent Iranian interference in Iraq is the early-June arrival in Baghdad of IRGC Qods Force Commander Major-General Qassem Suleimani. MAJGEN Suleimani, who has been on the US Treasury Department's sanctions list since 2011 and who has been labelled by US officials as 'a truly evil figure', is probably responsible for Iran's covert operations in Iraq, including funding, co-ordinating and advising its Shi'a proxies. While in Baghdad, MAJGEN Suleimani reportedly met with Iraqi militia leaders and tribal chiefs, but not with Prime Minister Maliki or ISF

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<sup>4</sup> Nordland, R., 'Iraq May Turn To Iran For Help, Maliki Aide Says', *New York Times*, 13 June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Smyth, P., 'Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 June 2014.

generals. This was probably an attempt by Iran to maintain its denial of interfering in Iraqi security affairs.

Regardless, the situation in Iraq provides Tehran with an opportunity to raise its international profile by presenting itself as a regional authority with the ability to help its allies contain the rise of extremism and terrorism. As *Al Monitor's* Meir Javednfar explains, 'ISIL's victories will make Iran look like an attractive partner to the United States in the fight against ISIL. Should the West decide to co-operate with Iran, this would boost [President] Rouhani's position'.

Indeed, Washington has struggled with how to approach engagement with Iran over the situation in Iraq, and has even conflicted its own public messaging. On 13 June, US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf denied US discussions with Iran over the Iraq issue, flatly stating 'We're not talking to the Iranians about Iraq.' Three days later, however, it appeared that the Obama Administration was now 'open' to direct talks with Iran.

Washington's uncertainty and ambiguity plays nicely into Iran's foreign policy rhetoric, internationally demonstrating Iran's regional strength and willingness to assist its allies, while highlighting the inconsistencies in US Middle Eastern policy.

Despite Iraq presenting an opportunity for it to gain regional influence and international recognition, Tehran still faces several challenges. Like the US ten years ago, Iran could be lured into a costly quagmire in Iraq, which could also distract Tehran from its other regional and international policy pursuits, as well as inflame domestic discontent over economic grievances.

First, Iraq will cost Iran political and economic capital. Since Iran can neither accept the fall of a friendly Shi'a Iraqi Government, nor have a resurgent Sunni militancy on its doorstep, it will have no choice but to become increasingly involved with Iraq, costing it blood and treasure and distracting Tehran from its other regional priorities – such as maintaining the Assad regime in Syria. After all, the man charged with Iran's operations in Syria is the same man who recently visited Iraq: IRGC QF Commander MAJGEN Suleimani.

Second, getting deeply involved in Iraq will open Iran up to revenge attacks by ISIL or other Sunni militants – similar to what has been happening inside Lebanon due to Iran's support for Hezbollah and the Assad regime. ISIL has already publicly announced its intent to kill Shi'a all the way to Karbala in southern Iraq, and Tehran – as the self-proclaimed defender of the Shi'a faith – will feel a sense of responsibility to defend Iraq's Shi'a population.

Finally, Tehran's foreign policy objectives in Iraq – maintaining a Shi'a-led and Iran-friendly government in Baghdad, the expansion of Iran-Iraq relations, and having no foreign (Western) military intervention or presence there – will increasingly irk Riyadh. These policy objectives are likely to raise regional sectarian tensions, and counter any thawing of relations between Tehran and Riyadh.

### ***The Threat to Australia: Returning Jihadists***

The biggest threat to Australia as a result of the Iraq crisis will be the return of jihadists to this country. Iraq – and, similarly, Syria – will continue to provide an attractive theatre for global Islamic extremists to conduct jihad. The primary concern is that returning Australian jihadists will be “bloodied”, radicalised and networked.

As noted by Australian terrorism researcher Andrew Zammit, the situation in Iraq and Syria ‘has resulted in one of the largest mobilisations of foreign fighters since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan’.<sup>6</sup> Up to 150 Australians have been, or are currently, in Iraq and Syria fighting with ISIL and other extremist groups, and Australia’s intelligence agencies are deeply concerned ‘about the potential for Australians in Syria [and Iraq] to be exposed further to extremist groups and their ideology.’<sup>7</sup> Alarming, this figure already exceeds the highest estimates of Australian jihadists in any other overseas conflict.

Australian political leaders need to act quickly in response to the deepening situation in Iraq, to ensure that an effective and co-ordinated security policy is developed. Positive steps are already being undertaken, with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announcing that Canberra will cancel the passports of some Australians suspected of engaging in terrorism in Iraq or Syria. Increased information sharing among Australia’s intelligence organisations and allied partners will also help to prevent the threat of extremism spreading beyond Iraq and Syria back to Australia. The security decline in Iraq and Syria serves as a reminder that Australia must maintain vigilance and not become complacent about Middle East geopolitical issues.

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<sup>6</sup> Zammit, A., ‘Tracking Australian Foreign Fighters in Syria’, *Counter Terrorism Centre Sentinel*, 26 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, ASIO 2012-13 Annual Report.

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