

# **The Rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in the 21st Century**

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### **Introduction**

The latest development of Islamic fundamentalism took place in mid 2014 in Iraq, when a group of Sunni soldiers of the Iraqi army revolted and disarmed all their Shia soldiers, took them to a remote spot on the banks of the Tigris river, dug a mass grave for them and after lining them beside the grave opened fire on them killing about 400 odd personnel. As the hapless disarmed Shia soldiers were shot, they fell into the readymade mass grave. Luckily, one of the disarmed Shia soldiers, Ali Hussain Khadim was hit by a bullet, which did not kill him. He however fell into the mass grave dug for the Shia soldiers. Sensibly he kept his wits about him and lay wounded among the dead and dying Shia soldiers, but acted as if he was dead. After the horrifying mass murder of more than 400 Shia soldiers by their brother Sunni soldiers, the merciless murderers of their brother soldiers left the mass grave. After the murderous Sunni soldiers had left the area, and the coast was clear, Ali Hussain Khadim managed to crawl out of the mass grave and through a nullah reached the bank of the Tigris River nearby. From there he managed to drag himself to a Shia house some distance away and with their help managed to escape to a Shia dominated area and narrate his horrifying tale. Khadim was in Camp Speicher when the United States trained officers fled. He left the camp with about 200 Shia soldiers in civil dress. They had not gone far, when they ran into an ISIS convoy that rounded them up and took them to a camp in Tikrit, which became a killing ground.

This was the bloody mark of the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Earlier the Sunni soldiers of the Iraqi army had revolted and captured tanks and light, medium and heavy weapons and formed a group calling themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

At the top of the organisation was the self declared leader of the group, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, a radical Chief Executive of sorts, who handpicked many of his deputies from among the men he had met while a prisoner in the United States custody at the Camp Bucca detention centre a decade ago. He had a preference for military men and so his leadership team included many officers from Saddam Hussain's disbanded army. They included former Iraqi officers like Fadl al Hayali, the top deputy for Iraq who once served Saddam Hussain as a Lieutenant Colonel, who now heads the ISIS Military Council. Its leaders augment traditional military skills with terrorist techniques refined through years of fighting United States' troops, while also having local knowledge and contacts. ISIS is in effect a hybrid of terrorists and an army. ISIS burst into local consciousness in June 2014, when its fighters seized Mosul. The Iraqi army melted away and Baghdadi declared a Caliphate or Islamic State that erased borders and imposed Taliban like rule over large territory.

### **Roots of the Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria**

The ISIS with its small core of jihadists was able to seize so much non-jihadist Sunni territory in Syria and Iraq almost overnight, not because most Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis suddenly bought into the Islamist narrative of ISIS's self appointed Caliph. Most Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis do not want to marry off their daughters to a bearded Chechen fanatic and more than a few of them pray five times a day and like to wash it down with a good scotch. They have embraced or resigned themselves to ISIS because they were systematically abused by the pro Shiite, pro Iranian regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria and Prime Minister Nuri Kamal-al Maliki in Iraq and because they see ISIS as a vehicle to revive Sunni nationalism and end Shiite oppression.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge the United States faces in Iraq is trying to defeat ISIS in tacit alliance with Syria and Iran, whose local Shiite allies are doing a lot of the fighting in Iraq and Syria. Iran is seen by many Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis as the colonial power dominating Iraq to keep it weak.

### **Obsessed With Jihadism and 9/11, Are We Now Doing the Bidding of Iran and Syria in Iraq?**

What would have happened had ISIS not engaged in barbarism and declared - "We are the Islamic State. We represent the interests of the Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis, who have been brutalised by Persian directed regimes of Damascus and Baghdad. Our goal is to secure the interests of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. We want an autonomous Sunnistan in Iraq, just like the Kurds have a Kurdistan with our own cut of Iraq oil wealth." ISIS's magazine, Dabiq recently published an article, "Reflections on the final Crusade", which argued that the United States' war against ISIS only serves the interests of the enemies of the United States - Iran and Russia. It quotes strategists of the United States as a warning that Iran has created a Shia belt from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut, a threat much greater than ISIS. Why did the ISIS then behead five (so far) western hostages? They did this because they want to draw the United States into another crusade against the Muslims. ISIS needs to be contained before it destabilises islands of decency like Jordan, Kurdistan and Lebanon. But destroying it? That will be hard, because it is not just riding on some jihadist Caliphate fantasy, but on deep Sunni nationalist grievances. Separating the two is the best way to defeat the ISIS, but the only way to separate mainstream Sunnis from jihadists is for mainstream Sunnis and Shiites to share power, to build a healthy inter-dependency from what is now an unhealthy one. Are there any chances of that happening? Regrettably very low.<sup>2</sup>

In the background of all the cruel killing and maiming people in the name of religion, and the harsh treatment of men and women in the name of religion, here is a refreshing interlude from the heart of Islamic country. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a modern country in the heart of the Islamic Middle East. This rich country has a modern outlook. It also has, as a result of its progressive outlook, a modern Air Force with the latest fighter aircraft. And surprises of surprises its Air Force have lady pilots flying these combat jet fighter planes. Major Mariam al Mansouri flew in the first wave of the United States led attacks on targets of the ISIS in Syria! It is a striking image combining empowered Muslim Women, in an Arab fight back against jihadi extremism by the small but very modern Gulf State of the United Arab Emirates(UAE). Operating from the Al Dafrah air base in the desert south of Abu Dhabi, Major Mansur and other Emirate Air Force pilots have flown more combat sorties than any of the other Arab participants-Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar in the United States' campaign to destroy the ISIS.<sup>3</sup>

The Emirates has woven itself into the fabric of the United States defence strategy. UAE forces serve in Afghanistan. In August, the United Arab Emirates aircraft based in Egypt bombed Islamist targets in Libya. Its F-AE/F Desert Falcon aircraft are even more advanced than those in service with the United States.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Plan in Iraq to Counter the ISIS**

Iraqi security forces, led by the United States air power and hundreds of advisers are planning to mount a major spring offensive against the Islamic State fighters. The goal is to break the ISIS occupation in northern and western Iraq and re-establish the Iraqi Government's control over Mosul and other population centres, as well as the country's major roads and its border with Syria by the end of 2015.

Iraqi and Kurdish forces have made inroads in recent weeks in securing territory threatened or captured by the ISIS, including the Rabia border crossing with Syria, the oil refinery in Baiji, North of Baghdad, the northern town of Zumar and Jurf-al-Sakhar, southwest of Baghdad. The major push which is being devised with the help of the United States military planners will require training three new Iraqi divisions, more than 20,000 troops over the coming months. The basic strategy calls for attacking fighters from the ISIS with a goal of isolating them in major strongholds like Mosul. That could enable Iraqi troops, Kurdish Peshmerga units and fighters who have been recruited from Sunni tribes to take on a weakened foe that has been cut off from its supply lines and reinforcements from Syria, subject to the United States air strikes. A task force headed by a Lieutenant General will be based in Kuwait with a Major General in Baghdad that will supervise the hundreds of United States advisers and trainers working with the Iraqi forces. As the push to train Iraq's military gathers momentum the United States footprint is likely to expand from Baghdad and Erbil to additional outposts including Al Assad Air base in Iraq's embattled Anbar province in the West and possibly Taji, 20 miles North of Baghdad. The effort to rebuild Iraq's fighting capabilities faces hurdles including the risk that the ISIS will use the intervening months to entrench in western Iraq and carry out more killings.<sup>5</sup>

The extremists of the ISIS appeared unstoppable after their sudden blitz through Iraq this summer. Today roughly a third of Iraq is dotted by active battle fronts with instances of fighting and occasional IS victories. However the groups' momentum appears to be stalling. The international airstrike campaign against the IS has clearly played a role in slowing its advance. The air strikes have been helpful, but several other factors are important. ISIS thrives in poor Sunni Arab areas. Neglect of Sunni areas in Iraq during the tenure of the Shia Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al Maliki gave them an opportunity for the jihadists. ISIS can only expand in areas where it can enter into partnerships with the local Sunni population. It is in Iraq when the local coalition forces began bombing in August that the IS had lost most ground in recent weeks. Iraqi government units, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, Shiite militias have taken back the area of Zumar in the North and Jurf-al Sakhar South of Baghdad. For the first time since the jihadists seized Mosul and much of northwest Iraq in June, an Iraqi military vehicle can drive from Baghdad to Erbil in the North on the highway. Last month IS seized the town of Hit and has since been killing people of the Abu Nisar tribe, three hundred of whom were reportedly killed. The IS is still entrenched in Anbar province. Because of Iraq's sectarian dynamics, the Government cannot send Shiite forces to fight in Anbar province. The result is that the IS is still entrenched there.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From the time the IS broke into the headlines of international news, and stories of horrifying beheadings and mass killings were the daily headlines from the Middle East, the situation has steadily improved in Iraq. Though the United States refused to send troops on the ground, its aerial strikes has made an impact and limited deployment of troops by the Iraqi army has controlled the situation and reversed the advance of the IS. The situation in Iraq is likely to be controlled soon.

The situation in Syria is a little different and there are many complicating and competing narratives. The United States and its allies are not sure who are the enemies and which party needs to be supported and to what extent. The beheading of Western journalists and aid workers has generated additional domestic pressures on the leaders to act. A grand strategy to deal with the emerging situation is still missing. The situation in Syria will continue to stretch the military and diplomatic dilemmas of the United States and its allies in the foreseeable future.

### **Endnotes**

1. ISIS and Viet Nam. Thomas L Friedman. International New York Times, 30 October 2014.
2. Ibid.
3. The United Arab Emirates bombing of ISIS. Ian Black from Abu Dhabi. The Guardian Weekly. 7th November 2014.
4. Ibid.
5. With United States aid Iraq readies ISIS fight. Eric Schmitt, Michael Gordon. International New York Times, 4 November 2014.
6. Islamic State's momentum stalls, particularly in Iraq. Ben Habbard. Baghdad. International New York Times, 7 November 2014.

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