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The Collapse of Iraq: Strategic Implications

Oded Eran and Yoel Guzansky

The fall of major Iraqi cities to Sunni extremists belonging to the Sunni group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) may well have implications beyond the borders of Iraq. The evolution toward the dissolution of the country, which began following the US invasion in 2003 and the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, will intensify. The independent Kurdish region is an established fact, recognized by most of the actors in the region. If the Sunni takeover of central Iraq is not stopped, it could lead to the establishment of a semi-independent Sunni area, with southern Iraq falling easily into the hands of Iran. In such a situation, Iraq would become an exporter of terror, with the various groups that operate there exploiting Syria's weakness to expand their operations in the Middle East.

All of Iraq's neighbors, as well as the United States, have cause for major worry about the immediate and long term implications of the recent developments. The weakening of the central Iraqi government's hold on the various parts of the country may serve Iran's interest in extending its influence and potentially create an Iranian-controlled land link with Syria and Hizbollah. However, this victory by Sunnis, who did not rely on Iranian aid, will not be seen as an achievement in Tehran. Indeed the fall of important Shiite cities such as Najaf and Karbala into ISIS hands would be an Iranian nightmare.

Turkey will also view the developments in Iraq with concern. The terrorist takeover of areas near its borders increases its fear that a security problem will be created to the south, extending over parts of Syria and Iraq, and that situations could develop that would force Ankara to take military action, a move it has avoided until now. Turkey, with its Sunni Muslim character, will be forced to monitor the movement into its territory of elements identified with ISIS.

Jordan, which has already been flooded with over one million Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war, is also anxiously watching the developments in Iraq. The war in Iraq in 2003 prompted more than half a million Iraqi citizens to cross the border into Jordan. While some returned to Iraq within a few years, the Iraqi diaspora in Jordan still numbers some quarter of a million. It will undoubtedly grow soon, given the mass exodus that has already begun from areas conquered by ISIS. However, this is only part of the anxiety in Amman. Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq are creating heavy pressure on the Jordanian army and security

forces. Even if the Iraqi refugees use only Karama, the sole Iraqi-Jordanian border crossing, and the Syrian refugees use Ramtha and Jabir, the crossings on the border with Syria, and do not attempt to cross illegally, Jordan's security forces will find it difficult to block entirely the infiltration of sleeper cells and operatives into the kingdom. Indeed, the border crossing with Iraq is in al-Anbar Province, where ISIS has had considerable success since early 2014. Thus far, the government in Jordan has successfully coped with the risks stemming from domestic, political, and economic problems, but the developments in Syria and Iraq could alter the internal balance that has been maintained until now.

The Gulf states will also view with concern the deterioration of the situation in Iraq and the territorial entrenchment of radical organizations that lack any commitment to the conservative regimes, despite their Sunni affiliation. The weakening of the basically Shiite central government in Baghdad, which will allow greater freedom of action for sub-state terror organizations in the northern part of the Gulf, cannot but be viewed with concern in the Gulf states, which are already distressed by the diminished US interest in the region. It is too early to assess the ramifications of the ISIS seizure of major oil refineries in Iraq; over time this may impact on Iraq's ability to export oil, and in turn, on the stability of energy prices.

Paradoxically, a coalition of sorts has formed comprising countries that have an interest in nipping the ISIS territorial entrenchment in the bud. In Iraq itself, the Kurdish military force, the Peshmerga, has begun to cooperate with the Iraqi army in order to repel the advance of ISIS forces. The immediate question confronting the United States concerns the arming of the Iraqi military. That vast quantities of weapons that have fallen into ISIS hands in recent days, much of it of American origin, underscores the risk inherent in arming the Iraqi army or the "favorable" rebels in Syria with advanced weaponry.

In his May 28, 2014 speech at West Point, President Obama addressed at length the question of fighting terrorism that is not "from a centralized al-Qaeda leadership," but from "decentralized al-Qaeda affiliates and extremists." Although Obama did not reject the possibility of unilateral US action if the security of US allies is endangered, he intimated that in a case such as that developing in Iraq, he would prefer to act in partnership with others. ISIS was discussed extensively in the speech by US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Anne W. Patterson, at the US-Islamic World Forum in Qatar on June 9., 2014. Patterson stated, "I believe we can do much together to contain and roll back the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's [i.e., ISIS] aspirations to create a terrorist state in western Iraq and eastern Syria." She added that "the United States and the countries of the region need to work in concert – and overcome some differences – to develop effective policies and durable solutions to this dangerous threat."

While the United States will need to take the leading role, it must first take some decisions regarding the logic of providing the Iraqi army with advanced weaponry, given the collapse of Iraqi army units that were facing forces equipped with inferior weapons. The risk that advanced weapons will fall into the hands of irregular forces and be used immediately

against the central government in Baghdad cannot be ignored. A different but no less difficult question concerns Iran and the new situation in Iraq. Iran could attempt to sabotage a joint effort if it is not involved in any way and sees itself as deserving compensation in the nuclear realm, or at least an easing of the sanctions. Yet involving Iran, regardless of its conduct in Syria and its close cooperation with Hizbollah, appears impossible, and instead, dealing with Iran solely in the context of Iraq is highly problematic. An interesting question is whether this issue arose in the recent bilateral talks between the United States and Iran or whether these talks dwelled only on the nuclear issue. The attitude of the Gulf states on this issue is also unclear, even though they may see the Iraqi issue as another opportunity to test the possibility of turning over a new leaf in their relations with Iran.

The achievements by ISIS are a milestone in the history of the Middle East, even though they are not completely unprecedented. Hizbollah's success in becoming a leading political force in Lebanon and the Hamas takeover in the Gaza Strip are important forerunners. The danger that this will become a permanent situation is clear to all of those directly involved, including the United States. Therefore, ISIS may see its achievements become something of a Pyrrhic victory: If the states in the region, under the leadership of the United States, mobilize for the fight against ISIS, even its most zealous fighters will have difficulty withstanding what they will face in the campaign, both in the quality of the weapons and the steps that will be used to cut off the organization's supply routes.

Israel naturally has great interest in the success of the struggle against ISIS entrenchment in any area whatsoever in the Middle East. Even if the group's efforts are not directed against Israel at this point, there is no doubt of the ISIS strategic objectives, and any territorial or other entrenchment by ISIS is a potential security threat to Israel.

