



BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
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Make or Break: Scenarios for the Future of Iraq

Patrycja Sasnal

For the past two years, religious extremists of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have expanded their network in Syria and Iraq. They have recently taken control of several Iraqi cities. In the near future, the disintegration of Iraq into three parts is much less likely than the full secession of Iraqi Kurdistan from Iraq. In the short term, neither the U.S. nor Iran will overtly intervene militarily in the country, although they will both train and advise central government forces and cooperate temporarily. Even though a common enemy has united the interests of many rivals, a transformation of current alliances should not be expected.

Since the beginning of 2014, ISIL fighters have captured a dozen towns in the Iraqi provinces of Anbar, Saladin and Nineveh. Their expansion has put the future of Iraq in its current form into question. Analysis of the crisis produces several, non-contradictory scenarios.

Territorial Disintegration. The ethnic-religious diversity of Iraq makes territorial disintegration possible. Arab Shias, roughly 60% of the population, live mainly in the south, while Arab Sunnis (25%) populate the centre of the country, and Kurds (15%) live in the north. Iraq has a consensual system of government—it gives all three groups representation at the highest levels, regardless of election results. Nevertheless, it has been the Shias who have been tasked with forming the government three times in a row (2005, 2010, and 2014). The current prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has had a policy of minimising Sunni interests, which has inflamed sectarian divisions, repulsed the Sunnis and caused their trust in central government to dwindle. The feeling is amplified by the government's inefficiency and corruption. It has facilitated the ISIL extremists' territorial gains and revealed the weakness of the central government in the Sunni provinces.

For now, however, a disintegration of the country into Sunni and Shia parts should not be expected, particularly if there is a change of government in Baghdad. First, Iraqi oil fields are located outside the Sunni-populated territory. Secession would deprive them of a part of the income that they are now constitutionally entitled to. Second, the current political system already allows provinces to apply for autonomous status similar to that of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Formally, if they so decide, provincial authorities can become largely independent of central government. Third, the future depends on the notorious Nouri al-Maliki. His resignation would signal a reversal of policies of the next government vis-à-vis the Sunnis, and could reduce tensions. Furthermore, territorial disintegration runs against the interests of most neighbours. It is also possible that the alliance between Sunni Iraqis and the jihadists is tactical and temporary. The mass flight of Iraqis from the territories under ISIL control attests to a fear of them, rather than a trust that would be necessary for the formation of a new territorial unit with a Sunni government. What is problematic however is the widespread distribution of weapons to mainly Shia volunteers, as this may lead to a serious escalation of the sectarian conflict.

The Creation of an Independent Kurdistan. A more probable scenario is that the KRG decides to proclaim independence, *de facto* or even *de iure*. Despite the historical Turkish–Kurdish conflict, Turkey would probably not block such a move. KRG has much better political and economic relations with Turkey than with the government in Baghdad, with which it has been in dispute over the scope of its autonomy for the past three years. The bulk of KRG's trade is conducted directly with or via Turkey.

The Kurdish region, with more than six million inhabitants, is largely self-sufficient economically and militarily. On 11 June Kurdish forces took control of the oil-rich Kirkuk, and, helped by Turkey, the KRG has recently managed to sell its first load of oil produced without Baghdad's consent. If the conflict with the jihadists persists, Iraqi Kurdistan will not have much incentive to remain in the destabilised Iraq. However, this would not be a positive scenario for the Iraqi state, as it would deprive it of part of its oil fields, undermine the federal basis of the state, and could hence invite a later Sunni secession.

Foreign Military Intervention. There are two main possibilities of foreign military intervention in Iraq. If ISIL's influence grows, Iran can send in its troops in order to protect the Shia population and their holy places. It is highly probable that the Iranian authorities will only decide on such a course of action as a last resort. After all, such an intervention would amount to an intense, costly and long-term commitment, and an opening of an additional front, as well as the one in Syria, in Iran's battle for its sphere of influence. Instead of outright armed intervention, Iran has sent a couple hundred Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel to train and advise the Iraqi army.

A similar tactic is being applied by the U.S. despite a request from the Iraqi government to use the American air force against ISIL. For now, President Barack Obama will only send a maximum of 300 military advisers. In the current circumstances, an American military intervention would only help the Iraqi government and Maliki himself. He would thus cede his own responsibility to fight the enemy to the United States, and that would lessen his motivation to resign or to create a national unity government and to conduct a policy above the ethno-religious divide, necessary for the long term stabilisation of the country. The United States still may intervene militarily if ISIL captures the capital or makes a territorial division imminent. Such scenarios contradict American vital interests by giving extremists a permanent safe haven to develop and expand terrorist activity not only in the Middle East but also in Europe or the United States, and by directly threatening allies in the region (Jordan and Saudi Arabia). For the time being, Turkey, a NATO member, does not look directly endangered by the activity of ISIL in Iraq, thanks to the buffer zone in Iraqi Kurdistan.

A Grand Coalition against Jihad? The advancement of ISIL in Syria and Iraq threatens the interests of neighbouring countries—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey—and those of the United States and the European Union.

Despite having used Iraq to counter Iranian interests and support Sunni Iraqis, Saudi Arabia suffers from an image of a country that supports extremism. More than that, the ultimate jihadi goal is to create a theocracy—a caliphate—and fight those authorities (such as the Saudi and the Jordanian monarchies) that collaborate with the “infidels.” A powerful ISIL is in the interests of neither Saudi Arabia nor Jordan, even though in Iraq they still perceive the main threat to be from Iran.

Syria is in a very particular position. ISIL is fighting with Bashar al-Assad on Syrian territory, but their success in Iraq may prove beneficial for him in the short term. With the new offensive in Iraq, ISIL must have slightly diminished its presence in Syria. In the long term, however, Iranian support for the Syrian regime may diminish, especially if the crisis in Iraq becomes aggravated. Also, if ISIL's presence in northern Syria declines permanently, it could give the more moderate opposition to Assad an upper hand militarily and politically.

Even though the common enemy has united the interests of many conflicting countries, a thorough reformulation of alliances should not be expected. Rather, a temporary cooperation between Iran and the U.S. will probably amount to the unobstructed and simultaneous work of advisers in Baghdad. In the coming weeks, bilateral contact will also increase, as negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme are ongoing. However, the antagonism between Arab countries, the closest regional allies of the United States, and Iran, is so extensive and deep-rooted that a temporary commonality of interests in Iraq is not capable of debilitating it in the short run.

The possibility of defeating ISIL depends primarily on the policies of the Iraqi authorities. Central government needs to change this substantially, so that the Sunnis feel that they do have a representation in Baghdad. In order to achieve this, the United States and the EU, Member States need to adopt a difficult two-pronged policy. On the one hand, they must put pressure on the current Iraqi government, rather than accept requests unconditionally. On the other hand, only the Iraqi army can fight ISIL credibly and efficiently. In order to be able to do that, the Iraqi government and armed forces will need the support of the international community, particularly cooperation between Iran, the United States, and, most of all, Saudi Arabia. The strength of ISIL comes from its ability to form local alliances with the Sunnis, who have been getting full political and media support from Saudi Arabia. Out of all neighbouring countries, the Saudis have the greatest influence on them.

The greatest challenge for the U.S. will be to convince Saudi Arabia that a certain degree of cooperation with Iran is necessary for success in fighting ISIL. It is also in the interest of EU Member States, because ISIL's growth directly threatens their security. One of two major routes of refugee and immigrant influx to the EU—through Turkey and Greece—is in the nearest vicinity of ISIL's operation area. More than 2,000 Europeans are already fighting in their ranks (in June, an ISIL recruitment cell was raided in Spain). There is a risk that those radicalised Europeans will be able to conduct terrorist attacks in Europe with greater ease once extremist forces have consolidated in Syria and Iraq. There has already been such a case, in May, when a man said to have spent several weeks with ISIL in Syria killed three people in the Jewish Museum in Brussels.