

Mosul Security Crisis: A Chance to Break Iraq's Political Logjam

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Brief Analysis

The loss of government control in a major city may be just the wakeup call Iraqi politicians need to embrace a more ambitious reconciliation agenda.

Over the past week, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, a U.S.-designated terrorist group, has seized control of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. ISIS and its antecedents have long maintained a covert presence in the city, including major fundraising via organized crime networks, but the current breakdown has witnessed open terrorist control of the streets to an extent not seen since 2005.

Beginning with powerful probing actions by Sunni militant convoys at the city's northern and western edges on June 6, the ISIS offensive quickly snowballed. At present, hundreds of militants are openly contesting control with government forces in the predominantly Arab neighborhoods west of the Tigris River. The provincial council and governor have been forced to withdraw from their offices, which were overrun on June 9; they are reportedly sheltering under Kurdish protection in eastern Mosul. ISIS forces are now within the perimeter of the city's international airport and military air base; worse yet, over 200 U.S.-provided armored vehicles and masses of weaponry have been lost to the group, greatly strengthening its capabilities in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, over 150,000 people have reportedly left the city, and streams of displaced people are visible on outbound roads.

Alongside the calamity in Mosul, ISIS has undertaken offensives in a range of other areas this month:

- On June 5, hundreds of ISIS fighters mounted a major raid on eastern portions of Samarra city, where the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite Hadi al-Askari shrine helped spark a sectarian war several years ago. This time, only prompt security force counterattacks -- including by the Shiite militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq -- prevented the shrine from being overrun, with all the negative sectarian scenarios that might have entailed.
- Fallujah remains under insurgent control, and ISIS has been mounting local counteroffensives to maintain its lines of

communication to rural areas in Ramadi and the southern Baghdad suburbs.

- ISIS has been attacking all along the Arab-Kurdish disputed line in northern Iraq, exploiting the tensions between federal security forces and the Kurdish *peshmerga*.
- Baghdad continues to be pounded by waves of car bombs.

UNITED AGAINST ISIS?

Every major faction in Iraq has a stake in defeating ISIS in Mosul and elsewhere. For Shiite factions, including opponents of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, ISIS is the prototypical Sunni supremacist movement, seeking to kill, expel, or suppress Shiites. For Sunni Arabs, even those bitterly opposed to Maliki, the ISIS threat is an existential issue -- to a greater extent than any other faction, their survival as a political class depends on defeating ISIS. The group's growing strength in Iraq has come primarily at the expense of the Sunni Arab political, tribal, and religious establishment. In Mosul, the ISIS takeover directly threatens the interests of the most prominent Sunni political family, Gov. Atheel al-Nujaifi and his brother Usama al-Nujaifi, speaker of the parliament and Iraq's foremost Sunni Arab politician.

The Kurds, meanwhile, have seen ISIS grow stronger and bolder on the doorstep of their Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north and in the Kurdish areas of Syria across the border. On September 29, 2013, ISIS attacked the Kurdish capital of Erbil with a suicide car bomb and shooting rampage. The KRG is now at full alert in anticipation of new attacks on Kurdish cities and potential ISIS raids on exposed Kurdish communities in disputed areas.

The potential silver lining to the crisis is that it could spur Iraqi factions to refocus on national stability. Politicians are currently debating two issues of critical importance: the composition of the next government following April's parliamentary elections, and the ongoing revenue and oil-licensing disputes between the federal government and the KRG. Regardless of the exact balance of seats in the new parliament, all major ethnosectarian groups are needed to form a government. Moreover, at a time of escalating violence, the Kurds control the only reserve of uncommitted military forces in Iraq, the *peshmerga*. Yet Baghdad has proven quite troublesome to the KRG in terms of withholding its budget allotment and interfering with its independent oil sales using legal threats.

The ISIS problem and the need for parliamentary compromise offer potentially fertile ground for a national unity effort in which Baghdad could give ground on several issues: to the Kurds regarding near-term oil export ambitions, and to Sunni Arab factions regarding political and security reforms and federalism for the areas they represent. Indeed, the available compromise options are well known and could be implemented if the political will were present on all sides. Although the Kurds and the federal government continue to argue over important oil and revenue details, there is considerable overlap between their positions. Baghdad now accepts that the Kurdish region will sell its oil to world markets, receiving the revenues (minus Kuwaiti reparations) as a form of advance on the monthly block transfers from the federal Finance Ministry to the KRG. Only details such as exact bank accounts and marketing arrangements stand in the way of a deal. Yet the infighting continues -- when tankers of Kurdish-administered oil left Turkey on May 22 and June 9, Baghdad issued warnings to potential buyers and launched arbitration against Ankara.

Such brinksmanship should cease in light of the calamitous loss of control in Mosul. In fact, Baghdad may need to buy Kurdish support for stabilizing the city and other besieged areas, namely with concessions on oil marketing and revenue management.

Likewise, the Mosul crisis and the growing ISIS threat create a moment of strong mutual interest for Maliki and the Nujaifi-led Sunni political class. Committing to appoint a fully empowered Sunni Arab defense minister in the next government could go a long way toward mobilizing Sunni resistance against ISIS and hastening the next

government's formation. Similarly, quashing the questionable federal terrorism indictments against former finance minister Rafi al-Issawi would greatly facilitate a new cross-sectarian front against the group. Announcing a strong Maliki-Nujaifi compact on de-Baathification and counterterrorism reforms is eminently possible -- indeed, Maliki already attempted to pass such reforms in 2013, lacking only Shiite support that might now be available given the deepening crisis. And as mentioned above, constructive dialogue on the legally permissible option of forming one or more administrative regions (akin to the KRG) in majority Sunni Arab provinces would be a wise step if the practical challenges were honestly debated.

U.S. ROLE

The United States is still uniquely positioned to be an honest broker in Iraq, and given this week's events, it should reconsider whether a change in tone on Kurdish oil exports and state centralism is justified. Washington once again has a powerful voice in Baghdad due to its provision of security assistance, particularly if Iraq can tap into President Obama's new \$5 billion counterterrorism training fund. But with U.S. arms falling into terrorist hands at an alarming rate, Washington is well within its rights to make security cooperation contingent on Baghdad's willingness to make painful sacrifices and forge a national consensus. Iraq clearly has bigger problems than bank accounts, oil marketing rights, and self-defeating sectarian squabbling. Washington should support a bold new formula to break the current downward cycle in security: the Iraqi center may have to loosen its grip if it is to survive.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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