

# ISIS advance reveals more than a crumbling regime

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The world was astonished on 10 June, when just a thousand or so fighters from ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (?Greater Syria? or ?The Levant?), took Iraq?s second city Mosul with barely a shot being fired. Two Iraqi army divisions comprising nearly 30,000 soldiers fled, stripping off their uniforms and leaving their weapons behind. Half a million of Mosul?s 1.5 million people have fled the city, 300,000 towards the Kurdish autonomous zone nearby.

However, the speed and scale of the ISIS victory does not only herald the arrival of a dynamic new military force but also reveals how the shifting balance of international forces is destabilising the entire Middle East.

Certainly, the military significance is colossal; two Iraqi army divisions, nearly 30,000 soldiers, fled, stripping off their uniforms and leaving their weapons behind. Amongst these were large stocks of U.S. combat uniforms with body armour, night vision goggles, M16 rifles, M4 carbines, M203 grenade launchers, M60 and M240 machine guns, RPGs, and Humvee vehicles, MRAPs, M113 Armoured Personnel Carriers and a number of T-55 tanks.

In the captured Mosul Airport, ISIS found several UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and cargo planes. The treasure trove included more than US\$466 million and a large quantity of gold bullion in the city?s central bank.

The ISIS forces and their allies rapidly headed south, taking Baiji and Tikrit, Saddam Hussein?s hometown, on June 11. They were joined by ex-Baathist fighters from a number of organisations including the Naqshabandi Army, which is headed by Saddam Hussein?s former deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri.

On 15 June, having captured the city of Tal Afar in the province of Nineveh, 40km from Mosul, ISIS claimed it had executed 1,700 surrendered Sunni soldiers and released images of the mass killings.

On 21 June, they took control of the important Al-Qa?im border crossing between Iraq and Syria, pushing out fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jabhat al-Nusra, the rival claimant to ISIS for the role of al-Qaeda?s Syrian franchise.

North American conspiracy theorists (on the Counterpunch and Global Research websites) put recent ISIS successes down to a US-Saudi Arabia plot to oust the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and thus weaken Iranian influence in Iraq, Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is certainly possible that the US and its Saudi allies are playing a double game. These allies, including Israel, certainly do not look favourably on any ?solution? that includes large numbers of Iranian Revolutionary Guards helping al-Maliki to crush another Sunni uprising and cling onto power.

While the US conspiracy scenario itself may be far-fetched, US patience with al-Maliki clearly has its limits. US Secretary of State John Kerry, on a visit to Baghdad, is continuing to play hardball with al-Maliki, refusing any immediate help until he forms an inclusive government, that is, a Sunni-Shia coalition or, better still, makes way for someone who will. Al-Maliki, in turn, is playing the 'either me or catastrophe' card. We will soon see who blinks first.

Whatever the truth is in such theories, it is clear that ISIS fighters alone, even with their bloodthirsty reputation, could not account for their rapid advance. More important is the crisis of the government of al-Maliki and the widespread hatred it has evoked from Sunnis and, indeed, a large part of the Shia population, too, especially the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, former members of the Mahdi Army

Al-Maliki has plainly now lost the confidence of the Americans as well. This is because, after the string of disasters of the past two weeks, he has lost control over most Iraqi politicians and generals and is no longer a viable ally. An army of 350,000 men, on which his Western allies have spent \$41.6bn (£24.5bn) since 2011 alone, disintegrated. Some 230,000 soldiers are reported to have deserted their units and he has been forced to call up the Shia militias to block ISIS's road to Baghdad.

Obama, who does not want to be dragged back into serious 'boots on the ground' troop commitments when he is busy with his Ukrainian adventure and his 'pivot to Asia' does indeed want to find a replacement for al-Maliki, or put together a new coalition. It seems he is even willing to draw Iran into helping, though full scale involvement by that country's armed forces would risk great friction with the US' allies in Saudi Arabia, not to speak of Israel.

In return, al-Maliki has blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for funding ISIS and disloyal former Ba'athist generals, and even the Kurds, for 'losing' Mosul.

### A Sunni Uprising?

The speed and scale of the ISIS advance certainly indicates that this is more than the actions of a single jihadist group, no matter how effective and motivated (or 'fanatical' as the media put it) their fighters.

Fleeing Iraqi soldiers reported that their commanders and officers ordered them to stop fighting and themselves led the flight southwards towards Baghdad. Indeed, some commanders and their soldiers went over to the rebels and others may have colluded or at least offered no resistance. ISIS is best understood, therefore, as the spearhead of a coalition of Sunni tribal and former Ba'athist militias that has been building up over the last six months or more.

Maliki and the record of his government since 2011 are certainly part of the reason why ISIS has been able to forge such an alliance with a variety of Sunni armed groups and a more secular and Islamic Sufi-based force. However, while Sunnis have certainly suffered discrimination, they do not constitute an oppressed nation and the goal of the alliance is the restoration of Sunni power, that is, a regime as sectarian in its own way as al-Maliki's.

As a matter of principle, no support can be given to such a force. In this sense, the situation is very different from Syria. Although ISIS is ostensibly engaged in the fight against Assad, as a whole, the Syrian rebels are the genuine product of the Arab Spring uprising whose goal was not (and is not) a reactionary caliphate but democratic rights. The ISIS offensive and the 'Sunni uprising' have never been a revolutionary mass popular upsurge. That is why revolutionaries should still support the Syrian uprising (whilst resisting a takeover by forces like ISIS) whereas, in Iraq, they should side neither with al-Maliki nor with al-Baghdadi but should work for popular forces.

The ISIS-led alliance certainly has the potential to win the support of Iraq's five or six million Sunnis. After his election, al-Maliki stubbornly refused to integrate Sunni, and even rival Shia, political forces and to share the spoils of office with them. As well as holding the office of prime minister, he became acting minister of defence, minister of the interior and national security adviser to himself.

His regime has treated Sunnis as second-class citizens, crushed their unarmed protests, jailed as many as 100,000 of them, often without charge and with many convicted on confessions extorted by torture. The regime has been incredibly corrupt. A recent vote by MPS to give themselves \$8,000-a-month salaries and enormous pensions caused widespread anger against the political elite.

There are also socio-economic aspects to this development. In an article for the BBC on 21 June, the Deputy Director of the Royal United Services Institute, Michael Stephens, observes; 'To dismiss what is happening in Iraq as the product of the maniacal whims of a few radical fanatics is to ignore the very real social inequality that exists in Iraq. Travelling around the country in recent days, I have been shocked at the levels of deprivation that some of Iraq's citizens have endured. It is a more general uprising by large groupings of disaffected communities throughout north-western Iraq and a product of years of social exclusion, poor governance and corruption by the Iraqi government.'

However, the ISIS alliance with forces like the Naqshabandi Army, NA, which has a Sufi ideology, could be a shaky one. As takfiris (fundamentalists who treat Muslims who do not follow their teachings as apostates, liable to be killed) ISIS forces regard Sufis, who venerate saints, as unislamic and demolish their shrines. Nor are they normally tolerant of Ba'athism. When NA fighters put up posters of Saddam in Mosul, they were forced to take them down.

Though ISIS commanders are reported to be restraining their followers in this respect, sooner or later they will try to impose their harsh interpretation of Sharia law in the areas they control. During the resistance war against the occupation in 2004-06, the al-Qaeda predecessors of ISIS alienated the local Sunni population and ruptured the alliance with more secular forces.

Meanwhile, the Sunni sectarianism of ISIS; its threats to attack and demolish the Shia holy places of central and southern Iraq, has provoked a Shia communalist response. Iraq's senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has called on his supporters to volunteer for the Iraqi army to defend the holy places.

In addition, Muqtadr al Sadr, who only months ago claimed he was retiring from politics and even called on his supporters to disband, summoned a huge demonstration of thousands of heavily armed fighters in Sadr City, Baghdad on 21 June. He is believed to be able to call on up to twenty thousand militiamen, but has said they will only defend the Shia holy sites in Samarra, Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf. In other words, his hostility to al-Maliki continues. Since he is a long term enemy of the Americans, Obama, as well as al-Maliki, has good cause to fear the reemergence of the Mahdi Army, a major participant in the sectarian civil war between 2006 and 2008.

## ISIS in Iraq and Syria

ISIS (known as al-Dawlah or D??ish in Arabic) was founded in April 2013 from the expansion of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) with affiliated organisations such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Its leader is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, originally a minor cleric but who became a respected battlefield commander and tactician, who was held in detention in camp Bucca by US forces between 2005 and 2009, where he suffered torture.

ISIS has spread rapidly across both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border, and seeks to establish an Islamic

caliphate, as its name suggests, in the whole of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. ISIS is able to operate on both sides of the Syrian-Iraq border, and controls Raqqa, the only provincial capital.

When al-Baghdadi declared the expanded organisation would be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Mohammed al-Jolani, rejected the merger. In this he was supported by al-Qaeda's chief, Ayman Zawahiri.

ISIS may spearhead the fighting but it is now plain that they are heading what is approaching a general Sunni uprising involving as many as eight factions, some led by former Ba'athists and experienced officers from Saddam Hussein's army and security services.

ISIS launched attacks in 2013 including a successful assault on the notorious Abu Ghraib prison to free battle-hardened cadres. In January 2014, they occupied Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, the scene of the two bloodiest battles of the Occupation, in April and November 2004, and have held the city since then.

Beginning in January this year, the FSA and its mainstream Islamist and Salafist allies, Ahrar ash-Sham (Free Men of the Levant) and the Islamic Front, had been turning against ISIS in Syria, where ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have waged an intermittent struggle for control of the 'liberated zones' outside of the control of the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

This bloody civil war within Syria's revolutionary civil war, combined with the shady military and financial dealings with the Assad regime of both 'al-Qaeda' militias, have led most of the Syrian armed opposition to accuse ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra of in fact being Syrian regime proxies or stooges. It is certainly the case that ISIS has proved to be as determined an enemy of the democratic goals of the Syrian revolution and those fighting them.

Indeed for supporters of the Syrian revolution in Syria and in the region, the advance of ISIS will be met with extremely mixed emotions. In the very short term, it weakens the Shi'a sectarian Iraqi regime of Nouri al-Maliki, which has allowed Iraq to be used as a base for supplying the Assad regime's brutal war against the Syrian people. It also embarrasses Maliki's Iranian sponsor, although this must be set against the fact that Iran now has a pretext for even more open interference in Iraq, which the USA is finding it difficult to provide an alternative to.

In the medium and long term, however, it strengthens precisely those forces in Syria that a clear majority of Syria's revolutionaries had resolved to purge and isolate, and whose sectarian and takfiri politics directly aid the Assad regime by making all minority religious communities and secular forces see it as a lesser evil than an ISIS caliphate. In fact Assad has cynically fomented sectarianism in order to divide the opposition to him.

The USA - between a rock and a hard place

President Barack Obama has announced he will send up to 300 US military advisers to Iraq but has not ordered air strikes against ISIS forces. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has ordered an aircraft carrier (appropriately the USS George H.W. Bush), from the North Arabian Sea to the Arabian Gulf. The huge ship will be accompanied by a guided-missile cruiser and a guided-missile destroyer

When Obama came to power on a programme of withdrawing US combat troops from Iraq and finally withdrew in Dec 2011, he hoped to be able to continue to control the government of al-Maliki, whom he had supported in the Iraqi elections. Maliki refused to grant the remaining US advisors immunity from Iraqi legal prosecution for any crimes they committed against civilians, and this led to an estrangement from the US and closer ties with Iran.

Today, things seem to be going from bad to worse for the US. In Afghanistan, the US occupation has been unable to destroy the Taliban or find an effective replacement regime to rule for the Americans when they leave. Pakistan is riven with conflict between the army, the Pakistan Taliban and the warring politicians. Libya is wracked by conflicts between the regional militias, Egypt has returned to a military dictatorship; Syria has been in a bloody civil war for three years.

Obama is truly between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Should he reach out for an alliance with Iran to defeat ISIS and enrage the Saudis and Israelis? Should he send in the bombers and drones and alienate the Sunni population even more? Which Sunni politicians does he wish to include in a new Iraqi regime? Yet, if he does not intervene effectively, then either al-Maliki will fall or a full-scale Sunni-Shia civil war could erupt. The US would be revealed as, what many are now thinking, an ageing superpower, overstretched and unable to police the world any longer.

However, when in doubt, US presidents invariably resort to bombing and airstrikes, with the inevitable collateral damage of heavy civilian casualties. And Obama has a Congress of howling chauvinist war mongers like Senator John McCain accusing him of being weak in the face of terrorism and losing Iraq or, indeed, the whole Arab world, of letting down Israel etc.

Socialist and anti-war activists around the world need to mobilise against any US intervention in Iraq. In Britain, they will be helped by the intervention of Tony Blair, who claims that the carnage and chaos in Iraq is due not to his and George Bush Jr's 2003 war but to the premature withdrawal of US and British forces in 2011. The outburst of hatred against the arch-warmonger (laughably now a UN peace envoy) indicates that people have not forgotten the great international antiwar movement of 2003-04. It can, and must, be revived.

The Iraqi Labour movement and the left.

Falah Alwan of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq has issued a statement saying:

"We reject US intervention and also stand firmly against the brazen meddling of Iran, against the intervention of Gulf regimes and their funding of armed groups, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar. We reject Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian and reactionary policies. We also reject armed terrorist gangs and militias' control of Mosul and other cities. We agree with and support the demands of people in these cities against discrimination and sectarianism. Finally, we reject the interference of the religious institution and its call for indiscriminate warfare."

For the Worker-Communist Party of Kurdistan, "the main issue is to keep Kurdistan separate from this war. We say there should be a referendum and independence for [Iraqi] Kurdistan".

By contrast, the statement of the Political Bureau of the Iraqi Communist Party, 11 June, gives near unconditional support to the government.

"We in the Iraqi Communist Party, while condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, renew our full support and unlimited backing for the military and security forces, and call upon all the political blocs and parties, whether in power or outside, to meet immediately and conduct an urgent national dialogue. This should consider ways of confronting effectively the forces of evil, aggression and crime, defeating the terrorists, and providing political, material and moral support for the armed forces in the ongoing battle, in addition to sound management of the overall security policy."

What is to be done?

Workers, trade unionists, secular youth and women must address al Maliki and al-Baghdadi with, "a

plague on both your houses?, on Sunni or Shia political Islamism. They must give no support either to the ISIS coalition's offensive or to the Iraqi government and its US ally's counter-offensive. The victory of either would be disastrous for all the ordinary people of Iraq, whatever their religion.

The present states of the region were carved out of the Ottoman Empire by Britain and France as League of Nations Mandates. They were utterly artificial, as their ruler-straight lines on the map suggest. The whole Arab west (Mashriq) thus suffered a disruptive and undemocratic balkanisation, whose borders were reaffirmed after independence in the post-1945 period. Overcoming this was the goal of pan-Arab nationalism but its bourgeois and military champions failed in this project. The Islamists' project of a caliphate to unite the region will fail too, not least because of its oppressive and reactionary character.

The further division of Iraq into a Kurdish state in the northeast, a Sunni state or Islamic caliphate in the centre and northwest, and a Shia state in the south, would continue this reactionary subdivision where what is desperately needed is unity. This can only be achieved by the working class taking a leadership role on the basis of class independence from all religious or capitalist forces, rallying to its side all progressive democratic and socialist forces. In the here and now, this means fighting for:

? The self-defence of all communities by workers' and popular militias under the control of delegate councils elected from workplaces, cities, towns and villages.

? US troops, airbases and warships out of Iraq and the Gulf ? no bombing or drone attacks to prop up al-Maliki's corrupt tyrannical and sectarian regime.

? No ISIS caliphate with its inevitable persecution and pogroms against Shia, Christians, Kurds and secular Iraqis and the social enslavement of women.

? No to a Shia confessional state, whether under al-Maliki, the Mahdi Army or the Iranians, this would lead to pogroms against Sunnis and the persecution of secular Iraqis.

? For the right of Kurdistan to self-determination, including complete independence if the people so wish.

The only long term solution to the agony of Iraq is to renew the revolutions being crushed by counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt and Syria, as well as in Iraq, and to bring the working class youth and women to the head of the struggles for the rights of workers, women and the national and religious minorities in a democratic and secular state. The only social force that can lead the establishment of such a state is the working class. Therefore, Iraq and all the states of the Arab world, divided by the colonialists and imperialists in the twentieth century, need to become workers' states, united in a socialist federation of the Middle East.

To aid this in Europe, North America and across the world, we need to revive the antiwar movement to halt US aggression in the Gulf. We can start with the Nato conference due in South Wales in September. A large and militant turnout there could send out a message to mobilise as we did in 2003 but this time with effective direct action to get all imperialist forces out of the Middle East.

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**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/isis-advance-reveals-more-crumbing-regime>