

THE SUMMER CRISIS IN IRAQ: CAUSES AND TRIGGERS

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the current conflict taking place in Iraq by analyzing some of the structural and immediate causes, or triggers, that led to the events unfolding in Iraq. In addition, our article tries to establish how the conflict in Iraq constitutes an international crisis, and the relations between conflict and crisis for this particular case study.*

Keywords: *Middle East, Iraq, ISIS, Shia Islam, Sunni Islam, crisis, conflict, war, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia.*

Introduction

The events currently unfolding in Iraq since early June, when a violent extremist group launched an all-out offensive against the Iraqi Security Forces, capturing large swathes of land in the western and northern parts of the country, have surprised the entire world.

Numerous fears of break-up of Iraq along ethno-sectarian fault lines increased sectarian violence, regional escalation of the conflict to Iraq's neighbors, hundreds of thousands of refugees, threats of disruption of Iraq's oil supply, all seem to converge simultaneously upon an international community awash with troubles in Eastern Europe, the South China Sea, Libya and so on.

In this paper, we are trying to present an overview of the current events taking place in Iraq, by looking at some of the structural and immediate causes (or triggers) that have paved the way for the current armed

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conflict. Understanding the troubles that are currently haunting this Middle Eastern country is the first step in any attempt at creating a lasting peace. It is also worth to take a look at the triggers that have initiated the current conflict, in order to prevent them from ever occurring again in the future or to be better prepared should they occur again.

The causes of the conflict are only a part of the current problems which Iraq and the world are facing. The ISIS offensive in Iraq and its lightning speed advances are more than just a simple military offensive or a daring raid across the sands of Iraq. The group has allied itself with various other opposition movements and is taking advantage of the terrible relations between the Iraqi government and the Sunni Muslim minority, trying to achieve what was called a “Sunni revolution” in Iraq.

As such, it is attacking the very fabric of the Iraqi society and statehood, while at the same time it presents a formidable challenge for the entire region, as well as for the international community in refusing to acknowledge long-accepted realities, such as the region frontiers.

In this article we shall explore the way in which the current conflict in Iraq represents a crisis not only for the country of Iraq, but also at an international level, one that could have dire consequences for the entire Middle East region, as well as for the world.

Timeline of ISIS

The current events in Iraq cannot be fully understood without a thorough look at the group’s history and actions before the June 2014 offensive.

Initially under the name of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), it emerged in the country after the 2003 US-led invasion, fighting the coalition soldiers and the Shiite population of the country, with two major aims: to free the country of the Western military presence and to incite Iraqi population to a sectarian war, in which it would raise to prominence within the Sunni minority. Its methods of choice for attacks were terrorist bombings, often by suicide, and kidnapping and murder of foreign workers in Iraq.

In 2006 it changed its name into The Islamic State of Iraq, with the aim of seizing power and establishing a Sunni Islamic state in the country, but its extreme Islamic fundamentalist doctrine and the violent methods used, including against the Sunni minority, prevented it from gathering enough supporters and the attempt was generally unsuccessful.

By late 2007, the indiscriminate attacks against Iraqi civilian population led to further loss of support and it became isolated. Driven out of Baghdad in early 2008 and from Diyala and Anbar provinces in the following months, it was eventually attacked and defeated in Mosul, its last foothold in Iraqi cities, and forced to go underground.

As the US-led coalition began to withdraw from Iraq in 2009, ISI reappeared as a terrorist threat and began attacks against the new Iraqi government institutions and attempt-

ing to sabotage the Iraqi 2010 political elections (Reuters, 2009). In this resurgence it appeared to have become more “national” by losing the core of foreign fighters and its leadership being comprised an Iraqi majority. During 2010-2011 it focused mainly on attempts of undermining the Iraqi government and trying to provoke sectarian tensions and violence. But these attempts were also largely unsuccessful, and ISI continued to remain at the fringes of Iraqi society, without enough popular support.

But ISIS benefited by the eruption of the Arab Spring throughout the Middle East and North Africa and the subsequent turmoil in which the countries in the region descended. The group’s most notable successes were achieved in the Syrian Civil War (2012-), where it became the most powerful opposition group in Northern Syria, and conquered large swathes of the country, including the Ar-Raqqah province and its capital, in March 2013.

In April 2013, the group released an online message in which announced that the other Al-Qaeda in Syria affiliated group Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as al-Nusra Front) was but an extension of ISI and that the groups were thereby merged under a single name, that of the “Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham” (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or Greater Syria – ISIS) (MEMRI, 2013). The merger was later rejected by both Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the al-Nusra Front leader al-Joulani. Despite this rejection, the group retained its new name. ISIS main objective, of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq, was now extended also to Syria.

During 2012-2014 the group kept an operational presence in both countries. While in Iraq it continued to undermine the Iraqi government by numerous suicide bombings, it focused its main strength in Syria, where it increased in strength by recruiting both Syrian nationals and foreign fighters to its cause.

In the war-ravaged Syria the group achieved two successes. Firstly, it rose to prominence among the opposition factions, both by severe discipline and fighting skills and by brutality. In Northern Syria it is considered to be the most powerful among the widely fragmented Syrian Opposition (CNN, 2013). Secondly, the group successfully managed to restore basic services in the territory it holds in Syria and honed its administrative skills, in preparation for the moment when it will attempt to declare its Caliphate (Al Monitor, 2014).

While ISIS continuously worked towards the completion of its goal, the legacy of brutality which undermined its actions in Iraq also followed it in Syria. Enraged by various excesses committed by ISIS, other opposition groups allied themselves against ISIS and fought it throughout Northern Syria between December 2013 and March 2014, until they forced the group to withdraw from Idlib and Aleppo regions in Northwest Syria. ISIS managed to retain a presence only in Raqqah and Deir Ezzor provinces, in the Northeast (Al Jazeera America, 2014).

In late December 2013 it profited by the unrest in the Anbar province in neighboring Iraq and when the Iraqi Army withdrew from Anbar cities on December 30th, ISIS swiftly moved in and occupied Fallujah and Ramadi by December 31st.

During the spring of 2014, efforts by both Iraqi Army and Sunni tribes in the Anbar governorate to expel the group from the region were largely unsuccessful, the group maintaining a presence in the region, especially in Fallujah.

In early June 2014 it went on offensive and captured Samarra to the north and again Ramadi to the west of Fallujah. On June 7th they began launching attacks on the city of Mosul, in Northern Iraq. After skirmishes during June 9-11, the city fell to the ISIS control in the early hours of June 11th, much to the dismay of the entire international community.

In Mosul ISIS militants captured large quantities of military equipment, including small arms, combat vehicles and helicopters, together with around \$430 million from the Mosul branch of the Iraqi National Bank. The Iraqi Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the regional capital, was largely occupied by ISIS, threatening the Iraqi northern oil fields and the Kurdish Regional Governorate (KRG).

The capture of Mosul also generated large numbers of refugees, about 500,000 fleeing to the north and east (BBC, 2014).

Following the dissolution of the Iraqi Army units facing them, ISIS militants pushed south towards Baghdad, capturing Samarra again, then Tikrit, Jalawla, Saadiyah, closing to less than 100 kilometers from the Iraqi capital by June 15th. The news of their advances generated extreme emotions throughout the world, given the group's aura of combat effectiveness and brutality.

By the 16th of June, though, their advance was gradually halted, with fresh units of the Iraqi Security Forces attacking the group's positions north of the capital.

Although the ISIS advances towards Baghdad was checked, the group continued its attacks on various Iraqi objectives, of both military and civilian importance. In the north it pushed towards the town of Tal Afar, in which heavy fighting took place in the last few days, with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) managing to hold their positions. In eastern Iraq, though, various border crossings between Iraq and Syria fell under ISIS control, most notably al-Qaim. In central Iraq, ISIS is currently (June 17-22nd) battling for the control of the largest oil refinery in the country in Baiji.

The threat of ISIS advances was perceived to be so great, that by June 18th Iraq officially requested the United States to provide air strikes against ISIS positions (BBC, 2014). US president Obama postponed the air strikes, but sent instead 300 military advisers to further train the Iraqi Army (CNN, 2014). Also, it is believed that Iran sent a small force to protect various Shiite shrines in southern Iraq (Al Arabiya, 2014).

Methodology

Our paper aims to identify some of the main causes and triggers of the current crisis in Iraq, while trying to achieve a comprehensive overview of the events that led to the current emergency situation. The research method used in our paper was document analysis, attempting to produce a detailed examination of various news articles for the time period selected, followed by analysis of specialized reports, opinion articles and various official international reactions.

Further, we have used the crisis definition model created by Michael Brecher from the databases of International Crisis Behavior (ICB), applying it to the events currently unfolding in Iraq. The model was fully applied, modification as to fit the case study being unnecessary.

In addition, the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) model of conflict analysis was also used, in order to achieve a better identification of some of the structural causes that led to the course of events currently unfolding in Iraq, and also some of the triggers that led to the recent outbreak of violent conflict between the Iraqi government and the ISIS. Furthermore, following the INEE model, we looked at the possible trends of escalation from the current level of violent conflict and their potential consequences.

Iraq's strategic importance

The role of Iraq in the Middle East region is of extreme significance for a plenitude of reasons: geopolitical position, strategic resources, impact upon neighbors, to name just a few.

In the second half of the twentieth century Iraq used to play a pivotal role between the Near and Middle East or, in other words, between the eastern Mediterranean coast, with its Arab-Israeli conflicts, and the Persian Gulf, with its long geopolitical rivalry between the Shia Iran and Sunni Gulf Cooperation Countries.

Since the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, though, the two sub regions have even more interactions with one another. The increasingly acute religious struggles in Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and recently Iraq are more and more in tune with the Sunni-Shia divide across the Persian Gulf.

But the religious identity struggles between the Sunni and Shia Muslims, which is constantly pushing and pulling Iraq to and from Iran, is only one of the many rifts criss-crossing the region. The ethnic "Kurdish problem" opposing the Arab identity is also significant.

Iraq is also an important country because of its measurements. With 31.9 million inhabitants Iraq dominates its southern and western neighbors. Although in the last two

decades its GDP was minimal, if given the opportunity it can skyrocket, based upon the hydrocarbon resources within its soil.

With around 143 billion barrels (bbl) of proven oil reserves, Iraq has the world's fifth largest reserves (around 9%). In 2012 Iraq was the world's sixth largest exporter of crude oil. Equally important, Iraq has 126.7 trillion cubic meters of gas, the 12th largest in the world (EIA, 2013).

In the Gulf region, between 1950 and 2003 Iraq divided Iran from the Arab Gulf States, and played the role of a strategic bulwark between Iran and the rest of the Middle East countries. But in 2014 Iraq's Shiite government has had more important links with the fellow Shia Iran, rather the neighboring Sunni Arab states. Equally, its military might is reserved for the history books for the foreseeable future and no longer plays the role of a military buffer.

The Iraqi Shia majority is slowly, but constantly pushing the country towards Iran, making it a very important piece in the "Shia Crescent" stretching between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Efforts by the United States and its allies to isolate and contain Iran during 2003 to 2013 were based in no small part on the importance of Iraq as a springboard towards the Mediterranean coast. Iranian efforts to provide aid to the embattled Assad regime in Syria since 2011 made full use of this springboard.

In a region which is increasingly unstable and consumed by tensions and civil war, a weakened Iraq is also a threat to its neighbors, should it implode and break up along sectarian and ethnic lines. If civil war occurs, Iraqi Shiites will be further pushed towards Iran and Syria, Iraqi Kurds will make a bid towards independence threatening Iran, Syria and Turkey, while Iraq Sunni neighbors will increase their efforts to provide aid to the Sunni minorities or majorities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and at the same time further oppressing their Shia minorities (Cordesman, 2013).

Structural causes of the current conflict

For a comprehensive understanding of the events currently unfolding in Iraq it is important to analyze some of the underlying causes that contributed to their development. Among the most important such structural causes are the weakness of Iraqi government, the profound disaffection of Iraqi Arab Sunni minority with the policies of Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, recent memories of the terrible sectarian violence that ravaged US-occupied Iraq between 2006 and 2007 and which left profound and yet unhealed scars in the Iraqi population, the increasingly sectarian nature of the politics and policies in the country, the weakness of the Iraqi state institutions such as the Iraqi Army, and last but not least, actions by Iraq's neighbors in providing large aid to the non-state actors involved in the current course of events, namely ISIS.

The first of these causes, the weakness of the Iraqi government, is due in large part to the very recent and rather new constitution and political system. The current constitution was approved only in October 2005, and since then the country has held elections only three times, latest round in April 2014, with the new Parliament originally scheduled to convene in late June. By the time of the first parliamentary elections, in 2006, the country was ravaged by sectarian civil war, which killed more than 1,000 people a month (Iraq Body Count, 2014).

Although the violence subsided in the following years, it made a powerful mark upon the political spectrum of Iraq, with political parties aligned more along religious and ethnic fault lines, rather than common political ideologies. Also, it is important to understand that the sudden introduction of democratic principles of government in a country ravaged by a despotic dictatorship and four major wars in three decades was unlikely to offer so soon a stable and functioning governing system. The partially democratic political structure that emerged, dominated by the Shia majority in the country, is still searching for an appropriate balance between the religious and ethnic components of the country (Kissinger, 2010).

During 2012 and 2013, the Sunni Arab minority of Iraq rose and led countrywide protests against the Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Maliki. The main reasons for discontent were the claim of their marginalization in the post-Saddam Iraq, government abuses of the anti-terrorism law with many arrests and harassments against the Sunni minority, abuses in the implementation of the de-Baathification laws with illegal confiscation of property of former Baathists (Al Arabiya News, 2013).

The Maliki government repressed these protests with a heavy hand, thousands of Iraqis being killed in clashes with the Iraq Security forces (ISF) throughout 2012-2014. While the government claimed that the protest camps in the Anbar province cities were becoming a hotbed of Al-Qaeda supporters, the general lack in addressing the legitimate grievances of the population led many to eventually really grant their support for violent measures. This can be measured by the number of suicide attacks occurring in Iraq between 2012-2013, which saw a spike in the number of deaths, approaching the 2006-2007 levels (Iraq Body Count, 2014).

After initially disbanding the Saddam-era Iraqi Army in 2003, the United States rushed to recreate it during the insurgency years of 2004-2007. The rapidly rising level of violence led to an equally rapid effort to rebuild an Iraqi Army that would take on some of the burden of maintaining security. The hurried attempt led to a rapid recruitment process, most likely without sufficient background or qualification check, with its own set of problems. The increased sectarian and ethnic divisions present after 2003 were also present in the new army, affecting the promotion process, for example. The emphasis on speed also led to an insufficient training process, and to an underdeveloped, or rather poorly developed, military doctrine (International Crisis Group, 2010).

The battles in the Iraqi political arena after 2006 also translated to the new Iraqi Army. The officer corps actively searched for political patronage in order to obtain promotions, turned to profiteering and neglecting their responsibilities, while generally lacking in moral integrity (Nasser, 2014).

Also, outside political meddling in the Iraqi Army by the Prime Minister Maliki did not help. One of his main fears was of a coup by former officers of the Saddam-era. In order to protect himself from such a threat, he took control of the office of the commander in chief of the army and tried to build it on loyalty, rather than professionalism (IISS Voices, 2012).

Given these realities, it is no surprise that the Iraqi Army dissolved when it confronted the ISIS in Mosul.

Last, but not least, the question of ISIS and its sources of support must be addressed. In this respect, the connection to the Syrian Civil War raging in the neighboring country since 2012 is paramount.

The support given by the kingdoms and sheikhdoms of the Gulf Cooperation Countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for the Syrian Insurgency since 2012 is by now an open secret. What is less known is the preference of these powerful and rich states to direct their aid to the religious extremist end of the opposition spectrum (Kenner, 2013). For example, in December 2013, Saudi Arabia used its influence among the Syrian Opposition in order to coagulate a number of factions under the banner of the Islamic Front, an organization which is different from ISIS only by the fact that is not yet affiliated to Al-Qaeda (Ali, 2013).

Regarding the direct aid, the situation of September 2013 can be presented, when Saudi Arabia stepped up its efforts to deliver weapons towards the Syrian rebels, in expectation of US strikes against Syria (Barnard, 2013). But, since the very beginnings of the Syrian Insurgency, it was revealed that opposition groups cooperated with one another, either trading weapons, or by joint actions (Farwell, 2013), which left no doubt that there was no real option of arming *only* the “moderate Syrian rebels” (Reuters, 2014).

In addition to these underground arms transfers, which were known since the early days of 2012, the rise of the extremist factions of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS to prominence among the other factions in the Syrian Civil War shows that they were, deliberately or not, the main recipient of the aid that the US, Great Britain, France and Gulf Cooperation Countries gave in money, weapons, and training (Fisk, 2014).

In this respect, one important structural cause of the current situation developing in Iraq can be undoubtedly traced to Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s efforts to undermine Iran’s influence in the neighboring countries of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (Rogin, 2014). We believe that ISIS could have had the role of an intelligence asset which was probably

used against Iraq (Henderson, 2014). We should not forget that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar twice for funding and aiding ISIS, both in March (Reuters, 2014) and again in June 2014, after the latest ISIS offensive (Reuters, 2014).

Furthermore, it should be noted that in its assault on Mosul during June 7-9, ISIS allied with an extensive underground network of former Saddam-era army officers, members of the disbanded Baath Party. The leader of these Baathists is a former strongman of Saddam Hussein, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, who became the leader of the Baath underground in 2007. The aid of this network was essential in staging the capture of Mosul in such a short time and was the prime cause of the dissolution of the Iraqi Army units defending the city (Arango, 2014).

In early January, 2013, a YouTube video was released depicting al-Douri encouraging the Anbar protests against the Iraqi government and asking them to oppose Iranian influence in Iraq (The Daily Star, 2014). Analysis of the message also revealed al-Douri praising Saudi Arabia for its actions throughout the Middle East, especially those directed at undermining the Iranian influence (al-Fass, 2014).

Triggers

There are a number of immediate causes that we believe have determined ISIS to engage in the current military offensive operations in northern Iraq. Although no direct evidence exists for any one of them, we believe that they could be ranked among the ones with the highest probability.

First of all, the current Prime Minister Maliki's political coalition won the largest number of seats in the Iraqi Parliament, 94 compared to his rivals who obtained 28 and 29, following the recent general elections in April, and he will most likely obtain a third term as Prime Minister (Rasheed, 2014). The election results were published on May 19th, and the new Iraqi Parliament would have had a few weeks to officially begin its session and to elect the new Iraqi Prime Minister. The ISIS offensive began on June 5th, with the attack on Samarra (Ghazwan, 2014), a few days just before the beginning of negotiations for the formation of Parliamentary majority and designation of a new Prime Minister (Benraad, 2014).

Secondly, for the purpose of its latest military offensive in northern Iraq, ISIS has allied itself with a number of other organizations, among which the most prominent is the Naqshbandi Army, comprised of former Saddam-era military officers, former Baath Party members, organized in underground networks, and other obscure Islamist groupings present in Iraq (Hamas of Iraq, Islamic Army in Iraq etc.) (Sherlock & Malouf, 2014). This alliance was probably concluded for both a better military and administrative cooperation in the recently conquered territories, as well as for creating a broader image of an Iraqi Sunni Insurgency, rather than that of a simple conquest by ISIS. (Hassan, 2014).

We believe that another trigger for the recent offensive operations by ISIS is the successful completion of these alliances, which allowed the coalition to increase its support base among the Iraqi population.

The Crisis in Iraq – the threat of escalation

The events that are currently unfolding in Iraq have all the characteristics of a crisis, according to Brecher (1997), from the perspective of the highest level of individual actors involved:

1. The offensive that ISIS, together with its allies, is pursuing is a threat to the basic values of the various leaders involved in managing the course of events: the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the President of the United States Barack Obama, the President of Iran Rouhani, the Grand Ayatollah Sistani etc.

Given that ISIS and its allies are attempting to break the state of Iraq, destroy its frontiers and divide its population along sectarian lines, it is a very real threat to any modern statesman, regardless of their country, religion, etc. The concepts of national state sovereignty, self-determination of people, or various freedoms (of choice, to worship etc.), which are basic tenets of our world, are threatened by a religious extremist group renowned for its violence and brutality.

2. This offensive has a very high probability of future involvement in military hostilities, either by Iraqi attempts to defeat ISIS and its allies, or by the prospect of the state of Iraq to break-up into three distinct parts: a Shia Muslim south and center, a Sunni fragment to the west, and a Kurdish part to east and north.
3. The attempts by ISIS and its allies to portray their actions as a Sunni Revolution carry the risk that the crackdown on such a revolution by Iraq's legitimate government would be seen as revenge or reprisals by the Shia majority, further dividing the Iraqi population.

In addition, there are risks of the current conflict of engulfing Iraq's neighboring countries like Iran, Jordan or Turkey. Besides Iraq's neighbors, the recent redeployment of a US Navy aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf and the request by Prime Minister Maliki to the United States to aid with targeted air strikes against ISIS militants may very well draw in the United States and its allies.

Given the developments in the international arena in the recent months, the fact that Russia's President Vladimir Putin has expressed its support for Prime Minister Maliki, while the United States have made overtures for his resignation also contains the risk of Iraq becoming a pawn in a proxy war between Great Powers.

4. All the actors involved are fully aware of the very limited time they have at their disposal to manage the current situation.
Should the solutions be found after great or time-consuming debates or negotiations or should there not be enough speed in their implementation, the risk of a wider

ethno-sectarian conflict within Iraq is very real. This includes the even greater risks of foreign actors, such as neighboring countries being involved into the existing conflict, escalating it even further.

Given the assumptions presented above, we believe that according to Brecher's model of international crisis definition, Iraq is currently in a crisis that it has not created, but the emergence of which have been facilitated by its own state actions. The current crisis has a very high probability of engulfing Iraq and eventually its neighboring countries into an extremely violent and protracted conflict.

Conclusions

Our paper attempted to explain some of the structural and immediate causes that facilitated the current armed, violent conflict in Iraq.

A majority of the structural causes can be traced back to the 2003 US-led invasion that took power away from Saddam Hussein, and its aftermath. The Iraqi population did not have enough strength, resources, or willingness to create a pluralist society in which both religion and ethnicity would be in equilibrium. Instead it rebuilt Iraq along ethno-sectarian fault lines that today are wider than ever.

Concerning the immediate causes, or triggers, that led to the current conflict between ISIS and its allies on the one side, and the Iraqi government on the other, we did not have enough information available. As such, we tried to present to the reader a few assumptions on the possible motives that could have been considered by ISIS in launching their military offensive in the last few days.

We also tried to see if we could apply a theoretical model of international crisis definition to the conflict currently taking place in Iraq. We believe that this is an important part in understanding the situation in Iraq and the risks that it carries for the country itself, for the Middle Eastern region or for the world. The definition of international crisis from Brecher's model was successfully applied to our case study in all three of its steps.

Although the two concepts of crisis and conflict seem to be different and not entirely related, their direct connection in international relations is not only assured, but one might say there is an almost symbiotic relation between the two. International crises are almost always carrying the threat of international conflict, while, at the same time, international conflicts can escalate to regional or global crises, threatening the entire world.

We believe that this is the case of Iraq, where a rather non-threatening mix of internal discontent and bad governmental policies was set ablaze by the intervention of a third party, and now threatens the entire Middle East.

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