المركز العربي للأبحاث و دراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Crisis in Iraq: Is It al-Maliki's Policies and Miscalculations or Is It ISIS?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2014

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Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

A number of interpretations have arisen in response to the rapid collapse of the Iraqi military and police in Mosul and their refusal to fight. These include a conspiratorial reading that sees a well-orchestrated plan by al-Maliki to ensure a third term in office with the backing of the United States and Iran; another that places the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at the center of events as an ascendant terrorist force; and one that sees the events as the natural outcome of the popular protest movement in the Sunni provinces. None of these interpretations, however, suffices to explain the events in Iraq over the last few days.

Al-Maliki and the United States: Limits to Conspiracy

The conspiracy reading of events is based on the belief that al-Maliki wants to ensure a third term by imposing a state of emergency. The chances of a political solution have dwindled following his coalition's less than overwhelming victory in the elections held on April 17, 2014, and in light of the escalation in violence in the country. Following the dawn assault on Mosul on June 10, 2014, and the announcement by the governor of Nineveh, that Mosul had fallen into the hands of ISIS, al-Maliki asked parliament to "declare a state of emergency in the country" as per Iraqi Emergency Law. This would allow al-Maliki to suspend the constitution and rule of law, and impose martial law on the grounds of restoring security.

Conspiracy theories are also fueled by the recent accusation made by the prime minister of the Kurdish regional government Nechervan Barzani, claiming that al-Maliki's government did not respond to his calls to coordinate protection for civilians two days prior to the fall of Mosul. Theories are further spurred by statements made by Iraq's minister of justice, Hasan al-Shamri, who had previously stated that senior Iraqi officials were aware of the arrangement for the escape of hundreds of prisoners, mostly al-Qaeda affiliates, from Abu Ghraib and al-Taji prisons on July 29, 2013. Such a move was allegedly made in a bid to convince Washington to drop its plan to strike against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by magnifying the role of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Proponents of the conspiracy theory also rely on the fact that the US and Iran still prefer al-Maliki to lead, to the detriment of Sunnis, who have been marginalized, isolated, and treated as a minority.

The US and al-Maliki are united by the fight against terrorism, a partnership based on a military-security approach that deals with the results of the corrupt and authoritarian system, as well as the lack of transparency and justice, without heed for the causes and underlying conditions creating this violent extremism termed terrorism. Al-Maliki has used the anti-terror law to get rid of his political opponents and bolster his dictatorial power. He has also manipulated the law for accountability and justice, which replaced the de-Baathification law in order to marginalize and exclude prominent Sunni politicians on the pretext of supposed links between them and senior figures in the former Baath party.

The US chose to disregard the clear sectarian marginalization and exclusion carried out by al-Maliki under the pretext of fighting terrorism to ensure its interests and guarantee security. Following the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in mid-March 2011, the appearance of Sunni jihadi groups, and the rising influence of al-Qaeda, fighting terrorism began to dominate thinking. This encouraged al-Maliki to persist with his reckless policies in dealing with the non-violent Sunni protest movement at the end of 2012, when he resolved to avoid responding to the demands of the peaceful sit-ins, but chose to forcefully disperse them. The protests led to the deaths of 50 demonstrators and more than 110 injured in Hawija, located in Kirkuk province, on April 23, 2013. Before this, security forces twice clashed with demonstrators, in Fallujah on January 25, 2014, when seven people were killed, and in Mosul on March 8, 2014, when one person was killed. Al-Maliki dismissed these incidents, describing them as rebellions led by "Saddamists, Baathists, and terrorists". He also resorted to riskier tactics in dealing with non-violent protests by claiming that the protestors were sponsored by Turkey and Gulf states, and that they were harboring terrorists from the former Baath party or were driven by sectarian hatred toward Shiites. The result was a radicalization of the Shiite community, which only convinced the protestors that non-violence was ineffective. ISIS capitalized on this by recruiting more widely and intensifying the scope of its armed operations.

The leaders of the Sunni tribes warned al-Maliki of the consequences of an attempt to retake al-Anbar, but he did not listen. It seemed that al-Maliki felt that acceptable politicians were those who acquiesced to Shiite political dominance and served its interests. The Sunni population expressed their exasperation and despair at the political process, as well as with their representatives' weakness, who lost their popular base as a result.

During al-Maliki's visit to Washington in November 2013, despite al-Maliki's sectarian policies, the US agreed to sell his government large quantities of advanced weapons, including reconnaissance planes and hellfire missiles, on the grounds of counterterrorism and the prevention of chaos spreading to neighboring states. Washington was also negotiating with Baghdad over training joint Special Forces and setting up drone bases on the pretext of confronting al-Qaeda.

When the non-violent protests took up arms, starting in Ramadi and culminating with control over Fallujah, the tribes and the population at large formed military councils. Al-Maliki dealt with these as terrorists led by al-Qaeda and ISIS. The United States backed this approach, and then on January 11, 2014, the UN Security Council expressed its support for the efforts of the Iraqi government in al-Anbar against violence and terrorism, and condemned the attacks by ISIS, failing to acknowledge the just demands of the people from these areas.

ISIS as an Ascendant Force

The second reading is based on the belief that the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011—coinciding with the beginning of the revolutionary protest movements in the Arab world and their ripple effect into Syria in mid-March 2011 and then in Iraq at the end of 2012—worked to give rebirth to al-Qaeda, inject life into ISIS, and form a new, more deadly generation of jihadists. ISIS proceeded to exploit the Syrian Revolution and the protest movements in Iraq's rebellious Sunni provinces, including Mosul, al-Anbar, Diyala, Salaheddin, and various parts of Baghdad and Kirkuk.

The birth of ISIS came about with the rebellion of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda against al-Qaeda's central leadership under al-Zawahiri. The Syrian Revolution highlighted a number of ideological and historical organizational differences between central al-Qaeda and its regional offshoot. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, emir of the Islamic State in Iraq, declared on April 9, 2013 that the al-Nusra Front in Syria had been incorporated into his state—officially known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria from that point on. This was the final culmination of the differences between the two, differences that had been contained under Osama bin Laden's leadership. On April 10, the day after the declaration of ISIS, the dispute evolved when al-Nusra's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, issued a statement refusing its incorporation into ISIS. Al-Jawlani declared his loyalty to al-Qaeda, and affirmed his allegiance to al-Zawahiri, who failed to contain the

dispute and annulled the fusion of the two groups, maintaining the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq as two separate al-Qaeda affiliates.

The dispute between the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda and the central core goes back to the allegiance pledged by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden, and extends to the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq. Since the establishment of the World Islamic Front for Combat against the Jews and Crusaders in 1998, al-Qaeda has aimed at fighting the west in general, and the US in particular, seeing it as the defender of tyrannical Arab regimes and the sponsor of its strategic ally Israel. It also seeks to enforce Sharia law and establish the caliphate.

ISIS, however, prioritizes the confrontation with Iranian influence and expansion in the region and the fight against the "Safavid project," as it terms it, especially after the departure of US forces from Iraq. Sunni-Shiite identity is the group's foremost concern, whereas geopolitical interests drive al-Qaeda central (AQC). Empowering Sharia is common to both, although the timing of the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq exposed differences that were overlooked at the time. Bin Laden's efforts helped manage the divergence, however, and allowed for a cautious co-existence, despite the incessant criticism of the Iraqi branch and its practices linked to fighting tactics in terms of increased use of suicide attacks and the nature of targets.

Despite the incorporation of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch into al-Qaeda Central, and its pledge of allegiance to Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadeel al-Khalayleh), founder of the Iraqi group, worked to found his own independent network stretching from Jordan and the Allegiance to the Imam organization, through Afghanistan and the creation of the Herat Camp, and into Iraq. He worked to expand his circle of influence following the US's occupation of Iraq in 2003, and declared the formation of the Tawhid and Jihad group in September 2003. Then, following his oath of allegiance to Bin Laden on October 8, 2004, he created al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

After al-Zarqawi was killed on June 7, 2006, the Islamic State in Iraq was declared on October 15 under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (Hamid Dawoud al-Zawi). Following al-Baghdadi's death on April 19, 2010, alongside his minister of war, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, the position of emir was taken by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Abu Duaa, Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri) on May 16, 2010. This period saw a transformation in the organizational structure of the Iraqi branch once a number of military figures who had worked in the armed forces under Saddam Hussein took control. These figures include General Mohammad al-Nada al-Jaburi, known as "the Shepherd," who assumed

command of the state's military upon his appointment as chief-of-staff by al-Muhajir. He appointed General Samir Abid Mohammad al-Halefawi, known as Hajji Bakr, as his deputy, and went on to take command following the death of "the Shepherd".

ISIS took control of large areas of western Iraq, particularly in al-Anbar province, and in eastern Syria, particularly in al-Raqqa province. The group was no longer acceptable to al-Qaeda and the armed Islamic groups because it dealt with them using lethal force, describing them as *infidels* and part of the old, tribal Awakening forces. This was especially true after ISIS fighters entered Fallujah and Ramadi in early January 2014.

The group numbers some 15,000 fighters, and attracts a large proportion of foreign fighters. It has large material resources at its disposal that it has gained from extracting tribute in the areas of its influence in Iraq, and from organizational donations. Its resources have grown considerably following its entry into Syria, where it has taken control of raw materials that are primarily concentrated in the east, such as oil—having seized a number of oil and gas fields in al-Raqqa, al-Haska, and Deir az-Zor—and the agricultural sector—having seized the grain silos in al-Haska and taken control of the management and investment of agricultural produce. Taking hostages for ransom is a traditional source of funding, and the group has kidnapped many Syrians and foreigners whom they have released upon payment.

Whatever the strength of ISIS internally, there are real, external reasons for its power. The political and economic problems in Iraq and Syria provide a nurturing environment for extremism. The authoritarian and sectarian character of the Iranian-backed al-Assad and al-Maliki regimes, combined with the descent of the conflict into a sectarian-identity conflict between Sunni and Shiite, has also provided an ideal environment for recruitment and boosted the group's ideological appeal.

The Sunni Opposition: The Resurgence of Armed Movements

The third explanation for the fall of Mosul and the collapse of the military and security system is that this is a natural outcome of the popular protest movement in the rebellious Sunni provinces. Al-Maliki's flagrant sectarian policies have led Sunni politicians, who did not join the protests, to lose their credibility, and transformed the non-violent protest movement that began at the end of 2012 into armed movements. The identity-based, authoritarian, and corrupt policies of the state since the start of the

occupation have worked to humiliate the Sunni population, whose participation in the political process has only brought further marginalization and feelings of oppression and discrimination. Resentment grew stronger after the protest tents on the Baghdad-Amman-Damascus highway were stormed by al-Maliki's forces. Al-Maliki has used all possible means under the cover of law and legitimacy to exclude his political opponents and consolidate his own authority by taking over all the vital issues of the state. In addition to being prime minister, he is responsible for the ministries of defense, interior, and national security, and controls the interpretation and enforcement of all laws. Anti-terror legislation has become a weapon to get rid of his political opponents and support his dictatorial rule. This happened with vice president Tariq al-Hashimi, who was accused of being a terrorist; finance minister Rafie al-Issawi, whose bodyguards were detained; parliamentary speaker Osama al-Nujaifi and some of his supporters; and MP Ahmad al-Alawani, who was arrested and whose brother was killed. The law for accountability and justice, which replaced the de-Baathification law, has been used to marginalize prominent Sunni politicians, and exclude them on the grounds of supposed high-level links with the former Baath party. Al-Maliki's forces were also provocatively deployed in Baghdad's remaining Sunni neighborhoods and in the Sunni provinces of al-Anbar, Salaheddin, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala.

Once the situation exploded in al-Anbar and the tribal forces took control of Fallujah and Ramadi, resulting in the formation of military councils made up of members of the former Iraqi army, armed tribal elements, and the remnants of the Iraqi opposition groups—such as the Islamic Army, Iraqi Hamas, the Brigades of the Twentieth Revolution, the Mujahedeen Army, and the Partisans of the Sunna—the popular component of the formerly non-violent, currently violent Iraqi uprising cannot be ignored.

Summary

These one-sided readings touch upon aspects of the truth, but remain incomplete for that very reason. A multiple-cause and compound reading helps to draw a more accurate picture. Al-Maliki's authoritarian narrative and his ambitions for a third term suggest that he is confronting al-Qaeda and that ISIS alone is in control of al-Anbar and Mosul. Al-Maliki wants others to see that he is fighting terrorism from Iraq to Syria, and is, thus, going along with American policy on counterterrorism and stability in its interests. Undoubtedly, these US and Iranian backed security policies have convinced the non-violent Sunni forces currently demanding justice, democracy, freedom, and

moves against corruption and authoritarianism that such demands are useless and that the only solution to stem the onslaught of al-Maliki's violence is militarized resistance. ISIS has exploited this situation to expand its influence, and enter into objective, implicit alliances with armed Sunni forces in the confrontation with a common enemy represented by the al-Maliki-US alliance. The more important question, however, is whether these alliances will endure or start to fragment in the search for alternatives once al-Maliki's failure becomes clear. Also, will the Sunni forces, which have suffered terribly since the occupation, come to realize that ISIS in the end is an impediment to democracy and civil rights in Iraq as in Syria? They may also realize that it is imperative to pose Arab demands in a democratic formulation, and that the stance against sectarian politics must be against all forms of sectarian politics in Iraq and the Mashreq as a whole.