Regional powers drawn into Iraq civil war

Chris Marsden
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Reports of the fighting in the civil war in Iraq are contradictory, especially on the outcome of a government offensive in the northern city of Tikrit. However, all reports demonstrate a further descent of the country into a nightmarish conflict for which the United States bears chief responsibility.

Over the weekend, the Iraqi army launched what was hailed as its largest counter-offensive since the Sunni insurgency began. According to state television, thousands of government soldiers, backed by warplanes, tanks and bomb disposal units had recaptured Tikrit, which fell to an insurgency including forces aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Preparations were underway for government forces to move north towards Mosul.

A spokesman for the Sunni insurgents fighting against the mainly Shia forces backing the government of Nouri al-Maliki claimed the attack had failed, and other sources reported continued fighting to CNN and the BBC. Insurgents still control large swathes of territory to the north and west of Iraq, and fighting was reported Saturday near a major military airbase to the south of the capital Baghdad.

More than 40,000 Christians were forced to flee villages near Mosul after insurgents attacked the settlements of Hamdaniya, Karakosh and Karamlaish. They sought refuge in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, now functioning as an independent entity.

US policy is in disarray. Washington is attempting to reassert a military presence in Iraq, after President Barack Obama's withdrawal in December of 2011. It presently has only 500 troops there and is flying 30 to 35 armed drone reconnaissance missions daily, according to Rear Admiral John Kirby.

The Obama administration has made a belated move against Maliki, its one-time political protégé. It has called upon his State of the Law coalition and his opponents to form a government of national salvation embracing Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties.

This equates to a demand for Maliki to go—a move considered essential in securing a shift by the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, against ISIS. Sheikh Ali Hatem al-Suleimani, the head of Iraq's largest Sunni tribe, the Dulaimi, has also made Maliki's departure a precondition for ending the insurgency.

The US has succeeded only in driving Maliki closer to both Iran and Russia, as well as to President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Iran has control of significant military forces in Iraq, such as the Asa'ib ahl al-Haq militia, and Maliki has consulted with Major General Qassem Suleimani, the leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, on the military campaign against ISIS.

Maliki has also begun negotiations for the return of more than 100 Iraqi planes seized by Iran from Iraqi pilots who sought refuge during the 1991 Gulf War. Iran was refurbishing a number of jets, according to Ammar Toma, a member of the Iraqi parliament's defence and security committee. A top Iraqi intelligence official told the *Guardian* that Iran was secretly supplying weapons, including rockets, heavy machine guns and multiple rocket launchers.

Al Jazeera noted the growing influence of Iran in Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region, including relations with Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, who has travelled to Tehran for discussion. It speculated whether, with the Kurds representing "a stronger ally in the fight for Iraq than Maliki," Tehran would be prepared to ditch Maliki in return for concessions from Washington.

Maliki has also secured planes from Russia and Belarus to counter the failure of the US to as yet honour contracts for F-16 fighters and Apache helicopters. In bitter comments to the BBC Thursday, Maliki complained, "I'll be frank and say that we were deluded when we signed the contract [with the US]."

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Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov spoke from the Syrian capital Damascus on Saturday, stating that his country "will not remain passive to the attempts by some groups to spread terrorism in the region."

"The situation is very dangerous in Iraq and the foundations of the Iraqi state are under threat," he added, a development that could have "catastrophic repercussions" on the entire region.

When asked about Washington's decision to support "moderate rebels" in Syria, Ryabkov said, "We reject this US policy. It is in everybody's interest, including the Americans, to act responsibly on Syria."

The US response to the unravelling of its previous Middle East policy seems incoherent, and nowhere more so than in Syria, where for years it backed ISIS and other Al Qaeda-linked forces such as the Al Nusra Front against Assad. Washington has officially provided $287 million to the Syrian opposition since 2011 and has trained its fighters in camps in Jordan.

Washington is attempting to counter its embarrassment over ISIS by funding supposedly "moderate" Syrian insurgents to the tune of $500 million. But this is illusory.

Even as these proposals were mooted, Ahmad Tomeh, prime minister of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), ordered the disbanding and complete restructuring of the Supreme Military Council, which oversees the Free Syrian Army (FSA), alleging embezzlement and corruption. The council's military chief, Brig. Gen. Abdullah Bashir, had been fired, he said.

Only hours later, SNC President Ahmed Jarba, who is in a leadership struggle with Tomeh, said the SNC would address the prime minister's "abuse of power at its next meeting."

There is no way to determine where US weapons to the Syrian "rebels" would end up, especially as the FSA is a much less effective and influential force than the Islamic Front coalition made up of al-Nusra and ISIS.

On the ground, there is evidence of a degree of US cooperation with Iran that has led some within foreign policy circles to urge an accommodation with Assad in Syria as well. The *Observer* noted yesterday that Syrian strikes on ISIS targets were part of a possibly more far-reaching rapprochement "to deter a common threat… rewriting the distinction between friend and foe…"

"Old enemies are now sharing intelligence," a senior Iraqi political figure told the *Observer*. "Even the Iranians are seeing some of the CIA work on Da'ash [a name used for ISIS]."

"I see communications channels being reformed between the Americans and Iranians," Theodore Karasik of the Dubai-based Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, told the *Financial Times*.

Zvi Bar'el, Middle Eastern affairs analyst for *Haaretz*, came out strongly for a policy shift. "Some Washington figures are calling for a diplomatic coalition of the United States, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Russia against ISIS," he wrote. "The question is whether Washington will have the will and the wherewithal to shift its strategy, and will pivot from pinning its hopes on Syria's 'moderate opposition' to initiating a new dialogue with the Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian regimes."

Events in Iraq are a devastating indictment of the role played by US imperialism in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. Whatever unprincipled and desperate adventure Obama decides upon next—whether or not yesterday's enemies become tomorrow's allies—the predatory aims of US imperialism risk an escalating conflict that could engulf the entire region.

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