

# US-backed Iraqi regime fails to retake Tikrit from Al Qaeda-linked ISIS forces

**Rosa Shahnazarian****23 July 2014**

The US-backed Iraqi regime has failed to retake the parts of the country that the *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) captured in an offensive that started last month. Instead, the Al Qaeda-linked ISIS militia is seizing large amounts of weaponry and oil infrastructure as it consolidates its hold over much of Syria and Iraq.

The Iraqi regime's attempt to retake the city of Tikrit, which fell to ISIS forces last month, ended in bitter defeat last week. Iraqi troops and allied militia and volunteer forces entered the city on Tuesday, attacking ISIS forces with bombs.

ISIS appeared to be on the retreat and Iraqi troops and their allies were preparing to raise flags over several government buildings when ISIS counterattacked, a surviving soldier told the *New York Times*. “The bullets rained on our heads from everywhere, the suicide bombers were throwing themselves from the windows and detonated themselves in the air,” he said. Iraqi forces who were able to get away had to retreat to the edge of the city.

US efforts over the past eight months to manipulate alliances on the ground to take down ISIS and save the Iraqi puppet regime—while maintaining the pressure on the Assad regime—have failed to hold the group's expanding power in check.

ISIS has captured areas of Syria and Iraq the size of Belgium, seizing control of large areas of northern and western Iraq as well as the Trabil crossing on the Jordan–Iraq border and much of eastern Syria. ISIS holds territory about 76 miles (122 kilometers) from Iraq's capital and largest city, Baghdad.

A key victory for ISIS in Iraq last month was its capture of the northern city of Mosul, the second largest city in the country. ISIS took control of the city's military and commercial resources and continued

expanding to the south along the Tigris River. The capture of Tikrit, the capital of the Salahuddin province, was a part of this southward expansion.

Over the last week, ISIS forces have proceeded to expel Christians from Mosul, demanding that they either convert, flee, or face execution. Over one thousand Christians are reportedly fleeing the city.

In addition to capturing much of the region's strategic oil industry, ISIS is also seizing large amounts of US weaponry abandoned in the country after the US withdrawal from Iraq three years ago. They have captured 1,500 Humvees, 4,000 PKC machine guns, and 52 M198 155-millimeter howitzers. This heavy artillery allows them to bombard Iraqi cities, including potentially Baghdad.

While they might not be able to aim the weapons effectively, “they shouldn't have too much trouble shelling large-area targets like a city if they have sufficient ammo,” Jeremy Binnie of British military consultancy IHS Jane's told *McClatchy News*.

The disintegration of Iraq represents an unprecedented debacle for US foreign policy. It is a disaster created above all by the policies of US imperialism, including the devastating 2003–2011 US occupation of Iraq and the ongoing proxy war waged by US-backed, Al Qaeda-linked Sunni Islamist militias in Syria. This has produced escalating sectarian war across the region and consolidated the power of ISIS, which has now spread from Syria to Iraq.

Over the past two and a half years, the US has recklessly encouraged the growth of Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria, pouring weapons and money into the country to strengthen Sunni terrorist forces opposed to the Assad regime. This led to a civil war that has spilled into Iraq, with ISIS taking progressively larger territories there in alliance with other Sunni forces.

ISIS now controls more than 60 percent of Syria's oil with a total production rate of 180,000 barrels per day and is thought to have plans to seize even more. There are frequent reports of ISIS and other militant groups smuggling crude oil out from the region.

Last week, inside Syria, ISIS launched an attack on the Shaar gas field east of Homs and captured it from forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. They are also reportedly assaulting Deir ez-Zor airport, one of the last key strategic locations along the Syria-Iraq border not currently held by ISIS.

The greatest danger posed by this situation is that the imperialist powers will use the civil war in Iraq inflamed by their intervention in Syria as a pretext for a stepped up intervention in Iraq.

On June 12, Obama declared that he did not "rule anything out" with regard to US assistance to the Iraqi regime. In other words, after carrying out a war that took the lives of over a million people in the 2003-2011 Iraq war, a section of the US ruling class is weighing the possibility of a new war.

Such a war would face deep opposition in the American working class, which overwhelmingly and correctly views US intervention in Iraq as a bloody and futile disaster.

As ISIS forces advanced in June, the US rushed six teams of American Special Forces to assess the fighting capacity of the Iraqi Army. The US invested over \$25 billion in building and training this army before US occupation troops left Iraq in 2011. The Special Forces in Iraq concluded, however, that the Iraqi army built by the US occupation forces is completely unreliable.

According to the classified assessment, the New York Times reports, "many units are so deeply infiltrated by either Sunni extremist informants or Shiite personnel backed by Iran that any Americans assigned to advise Baghdad's forces could face risks to their safety."

The assessment also warns that though Iraqi forces would be able to defend Baghdad in the event of a major attack, some parts of the city could be lost. The feared attack on Baghdad did not materialize last month. However, Sunni militias allied with ISIS targeted the city with a series of car bombs last week.

The main Baghdad airport, which serves as the US hub for sending and withdrawing troops and diplomats, was found to be vulnerable to attack by ISIS forces. Two hundred troops and six Apache helicopter

gunships as well as Shadow surveillance drones were sent to the main airport, which serves as the US hub for sending and withdrawing troops and diplomats, to buy time in case such an attack takes place.



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