

**Global Security Briefing – July 2014**

## **The Iraq Crisis (Part IV): Into the Second Month**

Paul Rogers

Following the capture of the northern Iraqi province of Nineveh and its capital Mosul on 10 June by Sunni jihadist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Iraq continues to slide into crisis as the group advances throughout the country following declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories it has captured. As the crisis moved into its second month, Paul Rogers assesses the group's continued impact and aspirations.

1. In the [note of 30 June 2014](#), the following points were made:
  - In Iraq, ISIL's actions have been a catalyst for a more general anti-regime revolt and it may not be fully in charge of captured territory.
  - Short-term compromise may therefore disguise difficulties in implementing rigorous and sustained Islamist rule in the longer-term.
  - ISIL may, though, have a capability to extend its power in Baghdad, with the potential to take over much of the western part of the city.
2. The past 10 days have seen many further developments:
  - The government's attempt to re-take the strategically significant city of Tikrit has not succeeded but there is some limited territorial control of some suburbs.
  - Elsewhere control of the Haditha Dam and power station remains contested, ISIL has not overrun the Balad air base but is preventing its use by the government.
  - There is substantial military support for the government, including Sukhoi Su-25 attack aircraft from Iran and Russia and the US drones and helicopter gunships based at Baghdad International Airport (reportedly just to protect US interests, not the government). Iranian pilots operate in Iraq and one has been killed.
  - The Iraqi Parliament has again failed to make progress on a new government.
  - The ISIL leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has declared a Caliphate which he leads.
  - Significant numbers from other rebel groups in Syria are now joining ISIL.
  - The Chair of the US Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, has stated that the Iraqi government alone does not have the ability to regain control of NW Iraq.
3. Although there are many divisions within the Shi'a element of the Iraqi political system, there has been sufficient mobilisation of Shi'a militias, not least the Mehdi Army, to make it difficult for ISIL to make further significant territorial gains.
4. One exception may be Baghdad, but even there it is probable that Iranian support in the event of an ISIL incursion into the city is likely to be enough to blunt such action. Furthermore, US forces would also be involved, if ostensibly just to protect US civilians. In short, external agencies will not allow Baghdad to fall to ISIL.
5. This may be a setback for the ISIL leadership but the extension of territorial control in Syria is significant and suggests that the leadership will remain confident even if its capability for expansion in Iraq is limited. In Iraq it will therefore seek to consolidate.

6. In the longer-term, ISIL may seek to develop a powerbase in Jordan. There is little evidence of any influence at present but Jordan is ripe for radicalisation given the substantial socio-economic marginalisation and the frustration with government.
7. Meanwhile, Israeli actions in Gaza may seem irrelevant to western observers but are of great value to radical Islamists such as ISIL - propagandists point to the “Crusader-Zionist axis” (e.g. “US warplanes and gunships in Israeli markings bombing Gaza”).
8. While much is made in the west of the threat of radical Islamists returning, this may become significant but is currently peripheral for ISIL – it is the region that counts.

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