

War in Iraq and Implications for India

ALOK BANSAL

The manner in which the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq with a population of 1.8 million, and followed it with Tikrit, Tal Afar and vast swaths of territory in the north and west of Iraq, has left the global community stunned. The subsequent establishment of an Islamic Caliphate less than 100 years after the last one ended in Turkey with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, is a far-reaching development, with global implications. By establishing an Islamic Caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq under their control, the ISIL has blurred the national boundaries, which were, in any case, a legacy of colonial rule. The outfit has also dropped Iraq and Levant from its name, retaining just the “Islamic State” and its *Shura* has ‘elected’ the elusive Dr Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the *jihadi* leader of ISIL as the new Caliph. The proclamation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim, the Caliph of all Muslims, has made him even more powerful than Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. It has also asked Al Qaeda and other related militant Sunni factions operating in the region to immediately pledge their allegiance. According to reports, many members of the Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front have sworn allegiance to the new Caliph. In the days to come, many more Islamic outfits across the world might transfer their allegiance and if that happens, it might emerge as an extremely powerful entity at the cost of Al Qaeda and its Amir-ul-Mumineen (Commander of the Faithful) Mullah Omar of the Taliban.

The recent developments have created serious concerns about the future viability of a unified Iraq. Many analysts have seen the role of the Iraqi Army as a replication of the disintegration of Saddam's Army during the Gulf War, and have raised serious questions about its professional competence and fighting abilities. It is undoubtedly a fact that the Iraqi Army, though well-armed, has not been trained well, but that has been the case with most Asian Armies trained by Westerners in the post-colonial era, as the Occidental mind often fails to grasp the intricacies of the Oriental ethos. However, the Iraqi Army's disastrous performance is not only on account of its poor training, but more significantly on account of low morale and rising sectarian polarisation, which could possibly be attributed to some of the policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, which has alienated its Sunni minority. The reports from Mosul indicated that Sunni soldiers and Generals just did not want to fight the ISIL and Shia soldiers in an overwhelmingly Sunni city, and unsure of their Sunni colleagues' loyalty, just panicked after the initial reverses and deserted. As a result, an ISIL force of some 1,300 soldiers captured Mosul being defended by a force many times larger. The shock and awe that the ISIL managed to create was reminiscent of the Mongols of yore, who had ransacked Baghdad almost eight centuries earlier. Around 90,000 Iraqi troops are believed to have deserted their posts under the ISIL onslaught.

In places where the Iraqi troops felt confident of local support, like in the Turkman dominated Tal Afar, they acquitted themselves much better and gave a tough fight. More significantly, Peshmerga, the armed forces of Kurdish autonomous region, managed to capture Kirkuk from the ISIL, showing that the ISIL's performance was not spectacular against motivated forces, especially where it did not have the advantage of local support. Subsequent reports emanating from Mosul also indicated that a large number of former Baathists had joined the ISIL in capturing the city. However, nothing can diminish the enormity of the ISIL victory. After capturing Mosul, it captured Tikrit, Tal Afar and came as close as 60 miles from Baghdad, thereby capturing territory many times the size of Lebanon. More significantly, its war booty has been enriched by the vast reserves of gold held by various banks in Mosul and cash reserves of around \$ 429 million. This makes the outfit richer than many countries in the world. It also captured large quantities of sophisticated military hardware, which included US-made Humvees and tanks and possibly one Black Hawk helicopter. The conduct of the ISIL cadres after the victory, when they killed thousands of captured security personnel and civilians have shown them as members of the most brutal terrorist organisation in the world. The brutality of the ISIL has created awe amongst the

Iraqis; more significantly, its pronouncements, asking its fighters not to yield territory won to Shias except over their dead bodies, have aggravated the sectarian divide. The ISIL's avowed objective of marching on to Baghdad and the Shia holy places of Najaf and Karbala, has raised anxieties among Shias worldwide.

The ISIL has also attacked the largest oil refinery in Iraq located at Baiji, 130 miles north of Baghdad. The refinery has been under seige and though Iraqi forces are giving a tough fight, it could eventually fall.

After its disastrous performance initially, the Iraqi Army appears to be making some headway. Bolstered by the acquisition of second-hand Sukhoi-25 ground attack aircraft from Russia, Iraq's armed forces have captured Samaara and are fighting on the outskirts of Tikrit. The military advisers from the US are advising them and are helping them to select military targets for aerial bombing. However, with the pronouncement of the new Islamic Caliphate, it is not going to be cakewalk for the Iraqi Army. As the Caliphate gets more and more theocratic validation, Sunni youths from across the globe could be landing up in Iraq to fight the holy war! As it is, the outfit is not short of funds and even without augmentation of current resources, can continue the war for over one year. Now that its name and objectives are no longer confined to Iraq and Levant, it could spread its influence to Turkey and other parts of West Asia, thereby making the entire region unstable.

De facto independence of the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq is one unintended consequence of this conflict, which appears to be heading for a long haul. Not only have the Kurds captured Kirkuk, which they always considered as their capital, they have since then consolidated their position. They already enjoyed considerable autonomy and had their own armed forces, but with the new Caliphate jutting between the Kurdish region and Baghdad, they are going to become progressively more independent. Consequently, the Kurds have refused to return Kirkuk or the region around it, and are strengthening their position militarily. Iraqi Kurdish leader Massud Barzani has said that Baghdad could no longer object to Kurdish self-rule in Kirkuk and other areas which the Iraqi forces abandoned when confronted by ISIL militants. The Kurdish region is rich in oil and has enjoyed long periods of stability and prosperity. Consequently, like the Islamic State, they are not short of funds; it is just a matter of time before they also link up with the Syrian Kurds. This could cause consternation in Turkey and Iran, but both countries are more likely to be concerned about the pressing challenge of confronting the radical ISIL onslaught than the Kurdish autonomy.

Recent developments have created serious concerns about the future viability of a unified Iraq.

As an emerging global power, India should take an active part in resolving the crisis in Iraq.

The threat of attacks on Shia shrines have also raised the concerns of Shias worldwide, including in South Asia. Already, a Pakistani Shia has died while defending Shia religious sites in Iraq and the registration of volunteers to fight in Iraq has been started by some Shia organisations in India. Thousands of Indians, including some Hindus as well, have registered to defend the holy sites. On the other side, members of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are already fighting with the ISIL and there is a strong ideological connect between the two. Iran, which finds itself hemmed in by an Islamic Caliphate with an avowed anti-Shia agenda in the west, and an Army of the faithful led by Mullah Omar and his Taliban in the east, is justifiably concerned about the developments, as the Taliban is also guided by Al Qaeda, which, considers Shias as apostates. Consequently, Iran has moved troops to defend the Shia holy places in Iraq. Similarly, with the emergence of the new Caliphate, there is serious concern in the United States that a modern and secular Iraq that was created after paying a heavy cost in terms of American men and material appears to be floundering. Iraq, with its democratic institutions and pluralistic character was supposed to be a role model for other states in West Asia and its break-up would amount to a gross failure of the US policies in West Asia. This mutual concern is bringing the erstwhile enemies, Iran and the US, closer.

India is dependent on Iran not only for its energy security, but also for crucial access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, but it has been circumspect in reaching out to it, as it does not wish to antagonise the US. India needs to seize this opportunity to establish closer relations with Iran and Iraq. At a time when the Shias find themselves cornered globally, India must reach out to them. It must assure Indian Shias that it will help the Iraqi government in protecting Shia shrines and there is no reason for them to go and join the war. While talking to the Iranian President or Iraqi Prime Minister may be desirable, a visit or a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei or more significantly to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Iraq could create tremendous goodwill. It will also have an impact on Indian Muslims and will acquaint them about the perils of radicalisation.

The conflict would restructure the region permanently, and independence of the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq appears to be a *de facto* reality. The establishment of a secular left leaning state in this part of the world must be appreciated by India, which must take the initiative to open up channels of communications with this oil rich region.

India also needs to educate the international community about the feasibility of incidents, similar to Iraq, replicating in Pakistan. There have been instances in the past when 200 armed soldiers in Pakistan had surrendered to 20 militants. Already, massive recruitment is going on in Pakistan to seek volunteers to fight in Syria and Iraq. Significant sections of Pakistan's armed forces have been radicalised and this raises serious questions about the safety and security of Pakistan's cities as was shown in the attack on Karachi international airport. There are similar concerns vis-a-vis military installations and the nuclear stockpile of Pakistan. The Chinese, who have genuine concerns about Islamic terrorism after Kunming, must be made aware that more nuclear plants in Pakistan will only produce more enriched uranium and whether they are under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards or not, they will be susceptible to capture by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It is, therefore, significant that China realises that it is in its own interest not to go ahead with Chashma III or IV, as well as big nuclear plants in Karachi, as the militants could take away radiological material to be used as 'dirty bombs' against China itself.

A large part of Indian oil imports come from Iraq and the huge turbulence there, will send the price of crude skyrocketing. More than 10,000 Indians are working in Iraq and send back precious remittances. Already, 39 of them are believed to have been taken hostage by the ISIL, while many others are stuck in the war zone. If the conflict spreads, the entire Gulf region could be in flames, and the Indian economy, which is the largest recipient of global remittances, could face the heat. There are reports of a large number of Pakistanis having been recruited by the ISIL; this could further aggravate the safety of Indians working there. The Caliph has already talked of India in his address and this should be taken seriously.

As an emerging global power, India should take an active part in resolving the crisis in Iraq. It has sent a naval task force to the Persian Gulf, which must be augmented, and could be used to evacuate Indian citizens. More significantly, it could be used by Indian Special Forces, should an operation become necessary to get the Indian hostages out of the ISIL's clutches or to protect other Indian interests. This will send a strong message across the globe that India is willing to use force outside its frontiers to defend its key national interests and citizens. This will also be an extremely comforting thought for the huge Indian Diaspora.

Capt (IN) **Alok Bansal**, former Senior Fellow, CLAWS, is presently Executive Director of the South Asian Institute for Strategic Affairs (SAISA).