The Islamic State and the Iraqi State: A Guide to the Perplexed

Ronen Zeidel

Background

August 2015 was oppressively hot in Iraq, with temperatures in Baghdad rising to 51°C (124°F). The heat wave sparked widespread popular protests, directed primarily against the Minister of Energy, who is responsible for the faltering supply of electricity, and indirectly against the political leadership and its corruption. The police did not suppress the demonstrations; in fact, they distributed bottles of water to the demonstrators. Significantly, the spirit of protest extended to all sections of the Iraqi public, including politicians, public figures, and the Shiite militias. Even Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi joined the protest, and thanks to the support he received from the leading Shiite religious figure in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, managed to escape the threat of being overthrown.[1]

At the time, it seemed as if the battlefront against the Islamic State received only minor attention in news broadcasts; the attack on Mosul appeared remote, certainly under the prevailing summer conditions; and a routine was established reminiscent of the daily reports about the Iran-Iraq War. This routine, of course, can be misleading.

This article describes the situation in Iraq, and indicates the principal trends on the two sides – the Iraqi state and the Islamic State – in the short and medium terms.

The State of Iraq

Faced with the most serious threat to its existence, the state of Iraq has managed to assemble a substantial force, including its regular security forces (army, internal security, police), well established popular militias (al-Hashd

a-Shaabi), regional security forces in the Sunni governorates, and Sunni tribal organizations. Since the summer of 2015, the United States has tried to renew the activity of the Sahwa groups – Sunni semi-military tribal forces that operated mainly in western Iraq. Kurdish Peshmerga forces operating in northern Iraq are expected to be senior partners in the campaign to take control of Mosul.

It is still premature to say that the state of Iraq is doomed. The impressive rate of volunteers for the militias indicates internal power and extensive patriotic and ethnic enthusiasm. No less important, the Iraqi state enjoys a number of prominent advantages over its enemy, the Islamic State: in the military sphere, it has an enormous edge in manpower, arms, and ammunition, as well as exclusive control of the air. The Iraqi government also enjoys active international and regional support. In other aspects as well, the Iraqi state is far more of a state than its rival: it is a highly centralized state, with the capital Baghdad of great significance. The Islamic State in Iraq is forced to use Iraqi currency printed in Baghdad. Furthermore, the residents of Baghdad, who are under the control of the Iraqi government, enjoy a supply of electricity eight hours a day, while the city of Mosul, occupied by the Islamic State, was hooked up to electricity only in the spring of 2015, through the Mosul dam under Kurdish control: until then, it was cut off from the central electricity grid. Even today, it has a supply of electricity only two hours a day.

The state of Iraq's main weakness, which prevents a breakthrough in its struggle with the Islamic State, is the abysmal lack of coordination between the elements of its various forces, and between them and the regional players – Iran, Turkey, the Kurds, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia – and the international coalition headed by the United States. As a result, simple operations take more time than expected, and the various forces are incapable of dealing with the Islamic State on more than one front at a time.

In addition, every achievement by the Islamic State, such as the re-conquest of the city of Ramadi in western Iraq in May 2015, undermines the Iraqi state system's self-confidence and disrupts its plans. The reoccupation of Ramadi prompted sharp criticism of the Iraqi forces by US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter.[2] It is possible that it was this American pressure that led to the sudden decision to switch the effort from an offensive to liberate Mosul, which was delayed repeatedly, to an offensive in western Iraq. This offensive highlighted the lack of coordination between the various Iraqi

forces, especially between the army and the al-Abadi government and the Shiite militias, which enjoy Iranian backing and support al-Abadi's rival, Nouri al-Maliki. For example, while the Iraqi army and government were calling for the recapture of Ramadi as the highest priority target in the western Iraqi governorate, the militias demanded that the city of Fallujah be captured first.[3]

The main battlefield of the Iraqi state is in the area between Fallujah and Ramadi in western Iraq. For Iraq, control of this area will protect Baghdad on its vulnerable western flank, and prevent the arrival of Islamic State forces in the direction of the holy Shiite cities in the south of the country.[4] The Iraqi forces lay siege to Fallujah and Ramadi in July 2015. Fallujah, which fell into the hands of the Islamic State already in February 2014, is expected to be a more difficult objective for conquest.

The second main battleground is the Salah al-Din governorate north of Baghdad. After the city of Tikrit was recaptured in April 2015, the Iraqi forces continued northward toward the town of Baiji, near the site of the country's largest oil depot. The forces penetrated into the village, but were unable to completely suppress the Islamic State forces there. The oil depot, which was rendered unusable, was surrounded, but was not captured from the Islamic State.[5] In October 2015, the Iraqi forces recaptured the refinery and claim to have liberated most of the town of Baiji.

In order to advance its forces near Mosul, the Iraqi state needs further northerly progress, which has meanwhile ground to a halt. An initial batch of Iraqi forces was advanced with Kurdish and American cooperation toward the area of Hawija, east of Mosul, now still under the control of the Islamic State. Fighting in this area erupted in October and it is believed to be the precursor of a future operation on Mosul.

Another effort by the government forces is to strengthen control of the desert area between the city of Samarra north of Baghdad and the western governorate of al-Anbar. Several important air bases are in this area, and the American advisors are also located there.[6] At the same time, it is doubtful whether the government will be successful in this effort; the region consists mostly of desolate desert, and the nearby border crossing, Abu Kamal, is controlled by the Islamic State.

The Islamic State

The re-conquest of Ramadi in May 2015 (in parallel to the conquest of Palmyra in Syria) was the first significant territorial accomplishment by the Islamic State since the summer of 2014. The organization does not pose an immediate threat to Baghdad, as it once did. It has lost control of the eastern Diyala governorate and Tikrit, and has retreated from the territory it captured in the Kurdish north. Its main achievements are therefore the fact of its survival and its ability to organize for new conquests.

The "project" of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is based on the simultaneous goals of establishment of a state with institutions and jihad. In places held by the Islamic State, its control mechanisms have improved, with alternatives and challenges eliminated. In Mosul (the capital of the Islamic caliphate), Tal Afar, Fallujah, Hawija, Sharqat, and other cities, a rigorous Islamic regime has been instituted, together with enforcement measures. The public systems, such as the municipality and the educational system, continue to function and provide the public with services in all of these places. Note that the Islamic State does not operate these professional mechanisms; it merely oversees their functioning. And in contrast to the prevailing opinion, the Islamic State is not a terrorist organization that has been retrained in order to manage a country; it is an entity that continues to operate the public institutions while using terrorism against a submissive population.

Most of the Islamic State's efforts are in the military sphere, and divide into two types of missions: offensive and defensive. Prominent offensive operations included the prolonged siege of the city of Haditha, west of Ramadi.[7] The city is in the heart of an area completely controlled by the Islamic State, but nevertheless has not yet fallen into its hands. This situation supports the already proven assessment that the Islamic State has difficulty in conducting sieges. The capture of Haditha will strengthen the Islamic State's control of the western part of the al-Anbar governorate, and create a homogenous area there. Such a conquest will also provide the Islamic State with a major source of money and weapons; the city's location on the highway stretching from Syria into the depth of Iraqi territory will likewise render this conquest significant.

As part of its defensive operations, the Islamic State is preparing for an attack on Mosul, and its forces are trying to prevent the advance of the Iraqi forces in the Baiji area and to protect Fallujah and Ramadi, where the siege

against them is tightening. In addition, Islamic State operatives are continuing to sow fear and destruction in other places in Iraq, especially in Baghdad.

Fighting against a number of armies on several fronts, the Islamic State suffers from many weaknesses. It must cope with difficult challenges of control, manage a country, and wage war at the same time. It suffers from shortages of manpower, income, and recently also weapons and ammunitions.[8] All these problems are likely to worsen, and require the Islamic State to make difficult decisions and take practical measures.

The Islamic State does not possess a single contiguous territory. It has a number of governmental centers, including empty spaces where the organization has a certain presence and nothing more. Indeed, a military analysis of the fighting highlights that the Islamic State in Iraq is not a single unit. There is no link between the control centers in Mosul in the north and those in the al-Anbar governorate to the south. Communication between these two regions can take place only through Syria. Moreover, the Islamic State in Iraq is connected to areas under its control in Syria. Another weakness of the Islamic State is that despite the mobility of the field vehicles it possesses, it is very dependent on the network of roads. This renders its convoys vulnerable, and makes it difficult for the Islamic State to exercise effective control of territories in which there is no road system.

Finally, the Islamic State might well be disturbed at the possibility of a change in Turkey's policy toward it. If it is thinking strategically, the Islamic State should be aware that Turkey is its second most important strategic asset, after Syria. A real change in Turkey's stance toward it will harm the Islamic State's main channel for foreign volunteers joining the organization, greatly restrict its sources of income from trade and its supply of weapons, and is liable to pose a dangerous military threat to the territories controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The permission granted by Turkey in the summer of 2015 to American warplanes to operate from the Incirlik base against Islamic State targets is a bad omen for the group.

Future Efforts

Ab al-Lahab ("blazing August") made it necessary to suspend operations on the various fronts. The attack on Mosul has been delayed, and Iraqi Minister of Defense Khaled al-Obeidi hinted at this when he said on August 15, 2015, "The Iraqi army is aiming for victory at al-Anbar and Baiji," but did not mention Mosul.[9] It appears that the Iraqi government is concentrating

on regaining control of the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, while the Islamic State is concentrating on the conquest of Haditha. The new offensive of the Iraqi state in the fall of 2015 occurred successfully on two fronts, the west (Ramadi) and the north (Baiji). Significantly, the United States, the Iraqi army, and Abadi prevailed in their decision to take Ramadi first and not Fallujah, as the militias suggested. The recent successes hasten the preparations to advance on Mosul.

As of now, the many weaknesses of the forces on both sides cancel each other out, thereby creating the impression of a standoff. For the Iraqi government, the key to success is better coordination between the elements of the coalition in the various theaters of the struggle against the Islamic State. This is ostensibly a simple task, but in practice, the dispute between the security forces and the militias is a reflection of the dispute between the government and the ethnic Shiite forces – between al-Abadi (who is behind the security forces) and al-Maliki (favored by the militias), and between the Shiites (the militias) and the Sunnis, and even between the United States, which has called for reducing the presence of the militias in the field, and Iran. Successful coordination between these parties, as occurred in the capture of Tikrit and the killing of Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, is apparently an exception that does not prove the rule. In addition, the Iraqi forces suffer from an almost total absence of field intelligence.

The role of the United States in the battles should be much greater. The option of using the Incirlik air force base in Turkey should significantly increase the number of missions. Apache helicopters in the area can increase assistance to the fighting forces. The United States has already supplied four F-16 warplanes to Iraq, and continues to train Iraqi pilots to fly them. Warplanes of this type, however, are needed less than combat helicopters. The United States would also do well to supply defense equipment against suicide terrorists and roadside bombs, such as robots for dismantling bombs and anti-tank missiles for use against truck bombs. In addition, the US should continue training Sunni tribal militias, especially in areas under the absolute control of the Islamic State, in other words, western al-Anbar and the area around Mosul. The Shammar, al-Jubour, and al-Ovaidi tribes – very large Sunni tribes living and operating in a region under the control of the Islamic State or near it – are fighting against it, and are in great need of American aid. The United States should continue strengthening Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraq security forces against the militias and Iran,

and avoid unnecessary criticism through the media. The United States focus would best be on the battles, while taking into consideration what is liable to happen in Iraq when they are over: a possible strengthening of the militias and what amounts to their takeover of the Iraqi state.

The Islamic State is a dogmatic Salafi jihad entity. As a Sunni group, it attaches enormous importance to the principle of the "unity of God" (*tawhid*) and the war on polytheism (*shirk*); it is not suited to compromise, especially not compromise with bitter ideological enemies – first and foremost the Shiites. Jihad, in the sense of active warfare to spread the ideology and expand the state, is fundamental in its theory. Its achievements in Iraq do not satisfy it, and in the future, it is likely to attempt to conquer Baghdad or invade and damage the Shiite holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.

The Islamic State has not yet attempted to bypass the settled region along Iraq's two rivers by way of the southwestern desert. The reason for this may be logistical, but it cannot be ruled out that it will try such a maneuver in the future. Success in such an attempt will bring it to the area of the border with Saudi Arabia. To be sure, not much is known about the decision making processes among the Islamic State leadership. Nonetheless, assuming this is its intention and the Islamic State continues to adhere to the policy formulated by al-Baghdadi, it is likely that the future of Iraq will be decided by military, not political, means. Even if the Islamic State is defeated in Iraq, however, and is forced to withdraw from all the territories it has conquered in the country, its presence in Syria will continue to threaten Iraq. Establishing a real and concrete border between Iraq and Syria will be an essential step in this state of affairs.

Notes

1 Mustafa Habib, "The Hero of Baghdad's Protests: Senior Iraqi Cleric 'Saves' the Government – and Iraq from Iran?" *Niqash*, August 12, 2015, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5077.

2 Barbara Starr, "Carter: Iraqis Showed no 'Will to Fight' in Ramadi," *CNN*, May 24, 2015, http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/24/politics/ashton-carter-isis-ramadi/.

3 Karim 'Abd Zair, "The Militias Lay Siege to Fallujah from Three Directions and Daesh is attacking al-Khalidiya," *al-Zaman*, July 10, 2015.

4 Muhammad al-Salihi, "The Units are Preparing to Break the Siege on Haditha and Enter Fallujah," *al-Zaman*, July 7, 2015.

5 'Ali al-Musawi, "The Joint Forces Take Baiji and Prepare for the Taking of Sharqat and Enter Mosul," *al-Zaman*, June 29, 2015.

6 Ronen Zeidel, "Fighting in Iraq: The Military Aspect," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9, no. 13, July 23, 2015, http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes-vol-9-no-13-july-23-2015#_ftn7.
7 See note 4.
8 Muhammad al-Salihi *al-Zaman*, June 16, 2015.
9 Muhammad al-Salihi, *al-Zaman*, August 17, 2015.