



DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ **IMPLICATIONS & POLICY OPTIONS FOR INDIA**



Amb Ranjit Gupta
Distinguished Fellow, IPCS

The situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq is very complex but the reasons why this is so are relatively straightforward. Unfortunately however prospects for solutions are not bright as the main actors seem unwilling or unable to move away from their hard line policy approaches despite all indications that these have proved singularly counterproductive.

Iraqi history affirms the self-belief of the Sunni segment of its population that despite being a minority it is the 'natural'

ruling element of the country. In the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, developments in the country turned this historical reality on its head – for the first time in centuries Iraq has been under Shia rule and that too in an unabashedly sectarian manner. The Shia Sunni divide was never as poisonous as it has become in the last few years. A Sunni backlash was inevitable. This is what we are witnessing today in Iraq as manifested in the lightning takeover of the Sunni dominated provinces of Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the ISIS, an extremist militant group even more radical and brutal than Al Qaeda.

The author is also a retired Indian Foreign Service officer. He was a member of the Prime Minister's National Security Advisory Board for the term 2009-2010. He had served successively in Cairo, New York (at the Permanent Mission of India to the UN), Gangtok (at the time of Sikkim's merger with India), Jeddah (Deputy Chief of Mission), Frankfurt (Consul-General) and Kathmandu (Deputy Chief of Mission). Later he was successively India's Ambassador to Yemen (North), Venezuela, Oman, Thailand and Spain.

Views expressed are author's.

I **THE CRISIS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ: A SHORT INTRODUCTION**

The seeds of today's scenario were sown



by the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The US Governor of Iraq, Paul Bremer's first two decrees ordered the wholesale dismantling both of the Baathist Party, which was virtually synonymous with the State, and of the Iraqi Army. Demobilized and suddenly and sullenly unemployed Iraqi army personnel, including skilled Saddam-era officers, joined insurgent militias, greatly strengthening newly sprouting anti-government forces, while simultaneously the government was stripped of its military capabilities.

This also inevitably led to the outbreak of Sunni insurgencies spearheaded by the newly formed Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), also called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), leading to Anbar province and parts of Baghdad descending into anarchy between 2005 and 2008. At its peak level of influence in 2006, the AQI controlled significant chunks of Sunni Iraq, and even set up a quasi-government along harsh Islamic lines in some of the land it controlled. This led to the Sunni population at large revolting out of anger with AQI's brutal rule.

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former Sunni insurgents and the general Sunni populace partnering with the American and the new Iraqi military to uproot the AQI. The fall of AQI illustrated clearly that extremism will fail if it does not have the support of common Sunni Iraqis. The Iraqi government failed to grasp the clear implications of this simple, common sense message that was sent out. Had the Maliki government not gratuitously alienated the Sahwa, as the Sunni or Anbar Awakening Movement was called locally, almost 100000 strong, Iraq may have remained relatively peaceful.

Meanwhile, defeated then, the AQI mutated into the ISIS, regrouped in Syria and has now come back very considerably stronger.

Even before the Americans left in 2011, Nuri al-Maliki - Prime Minister since May 2006 with American support - had been brazenly implementing a progressively enlarging sectarian agenda, gradually politically sidelining all credible Sunni leaders. Competent and experienced Sunnis were also purged from government and the Army and replaced by Shia toadies. Sunni participation in Iraq's governance was systematically marginalized inevitably forcing Sunnis to shun, resist and finally fight it.

All Sunni violence was dubbed "terrorism" but Shiite militias were given a free run except episodically when they directly threatened the government. Shia dominated central Army and security forces were deployed in Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods as well as in Sunni-populated governorates to exercise control and vigilance over local Sunni populations. The multi-denominational Al-

Iraqiya, the political movement to which Sunni Arabs most readily related, slowly came apart partly due to internal rivalries but largely due to Maliki resorting to both legal and extra constitutional measures to neuter it. All this has contributed to the near total alienation of the Sunni population of the country.

Meanwhile, by 2013 the ISIS had become a major force in Syria having taken over considerable sections of the eastern part of the country, bordering Iraq, including oil fields and other sources of revenue. With new high profile prestige from victories in Syria, superior weaponry and huge financial resources, the numerically relatively small, not more than 10000 or so, but ideologically committed, brutally efficient and superbly well organised, the ISIS once again turned its attention to Iraq sending back battle hardened, well armed contingents. They had begun infiltrating Anbar Province last year in a big way and Falluja fell in January 2014 but the government failed to see that these developments in Anbar could be the bridgehead for similar assaults in other Sunni areas.

Just five months later, less than 1500 ISIS fighters took Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, without a fight. Despite being vastly superior in numbers and weaponry, the Iraqi Army and other security forces in Mosul abandoned their posts and weapons and fled as did local administration officials from the Governor downwards mainly because they had no local support amongst the largely Sunni population. New sophisticated weaponry including Black Hawk helicopters, uniforms, food and other supplies and cash in the hundreds of millions of dollars from local banks fell into the hands of the

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ISIS making it even stronger than it already was. Other towns in western and north western Sunni dominated Iraq fell in rapid succession. The Sunni provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Ninevah and Salahedin are now largely under the control of ISIS as well as contiguous territory on the Syrian side of the border.

In early July 2014, the ISIS announced the establishment of an Islamic Emirate to be ruled strictly in accordance with the Sharia and its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi has been declared the new Caliph Ibrahim, the leader of Muslims everywhere, since his real name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai. He was a detainee of the US at Camp Bucca from 2005 to 2009 when he was released and was thereafter a part of the Al Qaeda hierarchy until expelled by Zawahiri. The ISIS has been renamed as the Islamic State – this will stand both for the organisation and the territory that it controls. The Ottoman Sultans had been the last caliphs - Kemal Ataturk had abolished the caliphate in 1924. One silver lining of this dark cloud is that this will intensify the rivalry between the ISIS and Al Qaeda for control of the global jihadist movement and cause intra jihadist infighting to escalate throughout the region.

Second, it may finally persuade the regional rivals—Iran and Saudi Arabia and their allies to work together in common and shared interests of fighting Islamic extremism. A third and potentially very important consequence is that this will help promote disenchantment of the average common Sunni in particular, but even of the average Shia, with Islamic extremism as has happened in Afghanistan.

ISIS depredations will continue and overall violence is likely to escalate very sharply in the short and medium term for three reasons:

first, because the 'Islamic State' will seek to push its boundaries further particularly towards Baghdad;

second, because of the Iraqi government's attempts to dismantle it - government assaults on Tikrit, the road to Samarra and the outskirts of Baquba have already started;

and, thirdly, due to resistance as it enforces strict Islamic codes in the areas it controls.

The ISIS cannot take over significantly more territory than it already controls.

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There is no possibility of its being able to gain control of Baghdad where government forces are far larger and far more competent than in the areas that were overrun. Newly mobilized Shia militias are also entrenched in Baghdad and cities hosting Shia holy places. It makes no sense for the ISIS to try and move into Shia inhabited southern Iraq.

The situation can still be salvaged. In the past century of its existence in its current borders an overarching Iraqi identity has been forged which subsumes the subsidiary Shia and Sunni identities of its people. In the major urban centres such as Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, even Basra there is considerable intermarriage between Shia and Sunni. There is a widespread national belief in the sanctity of Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. The current tacit collaboration of broad swathes of the Sunni population with the ISIS is simply a force majeure marriage of convenience in the absence of alternatives and, as the Sunni population exhibited between 2005 and 2008, they will almost surely again reject the medieval ISIS ideology and brutal rule as long as they are given their rightful stake in the governance of their country, which is an absolute must.

The first necessary and unavoidable step is that Maliki must step down or be removed. There are many able Shias one of whom could be PM; a government of national unity must be formed urgently. The current Iraqi Army will have to be restructured and early indications to that affect must be given by the new government though substantive action in this regard can wait until the situation starts to stabilize. It is a particularly positive development that both Grand Ayatollah

Ali Al Sistani and radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr have publicly called for this including recognition of the legitimate rights of Sunnis; also that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has called upon Sunnis to join a national unity government. US military advisers have arrived in Iraq and US drones are patrolling over Baghdad. Russia has provided Sukhoi fighters. Unconditional help has been and will be available from Iran. However, ultimately, it is only the Iraqis that can bring about a long term and permanent settlement of domestically contentious issues.

Having taken Kirkuk, a bone of contention for the past 70 years, even declaring independence is in sight for the Kurds which has been a haven of peace and good order; in any case, they will now not settle for anything less than full autonomy in a loosely federal Iraq. Any new central government in Baghdad should put this issue on the backburner for the present and seek the active cooperation of the Kurds in rolling back the ISIS. After all it is also in the interests of the Kurds that Islamic extremism is defeated. The Peshmerga corps, some 350000 strong, of the Kurdish Regional Government consists of hardened, well equipped and well trained fighters; they have units specially trained for urban warfare. Peshmerga forces could be very effective in attacking the ISIS in close by Mosul to begin with.

Iraq's territorial integrity must be maintained at all costs; otherwise regional stability will be gravely undermined. A meeting of countries that can influence outcomes on the ground in Iraq - EU, China, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US must be convened urgently under UN auspices to provide

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international support to a new government and encourage and incentivize it to undertake badly needed political and economic reforms. As a major power located in the immediate neighborhood India must ask to participate in any such conference.

Syria

There are four aspects of the Syrian imbroglio: First, what was originally a struggle for internal political reform progressively mutated into a devastating civil war to a very considerable extent due to the escalating involvement of foreign countries - France, Iran, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UK and the US.

Second, those fighting against the Assad regime have, over time, fragmented into many distinct and mutually hostile groups - they are now spending greater time and effort fighting the ISIL, considering it a more detestable and dangerous enemy, than the Assad regime.

Third, in the past year Assad has regained a lot of lost ground. He is much stronger today vis-a-vis both his domestic and international adversaries than in June

2012 when the first Geneva conference “agreed on guidelines and principles for a political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people”. He has recently been reelected as President. However unpalatable it may be to those who want him out, it is highly unlikely that Assad can now be defeated on the battleground. Therefore, he is hardly likely to agree to give up power in a conference room. Any solution predicated on regime change is simply not going to happen.

After very wisely holding back on continuing supply of weapons to rebels in Syria and military involvement in Syria even after the use of chemical weapons - this commendable restraint had directly enabled the peaceful dismantling of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal - the United States has announced that it would supply \$500 million worth of arms to the moderate Islamist opposition. There is simply no way to ensure that much if not most of this will ultimately land up in the hands of extremist elements – which remain the strongest component of rebels fighting the Syrian regime. This is a retrograde step.

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Those advocating regime change need to seriously ponder over the fact that the internal situation today in both Iraq and Libya is far worse than it was when Saddam and Gaddhafi were in power; this is directly due to intrusive foreign military interventions. These are examples to be shunned not emulated. Indeed, externally encouraged efforts towards regime change in Arab countries must stop forthwith. If not, Syria is in for a prolonged civil war – in my considered assessment this is the most realistic prognosis for Syria.

II IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR INDIA

Syria has been a very good and politically supportive friend of India. However, India has no significant let alone vital national interest stakes in Syria. Having said this India should follow the broad principles of its foreign policy, while continuing to call upon all parties to desist from violence and strive to arrive at solutions through negotiations. Any solution should ideally be Syrian-owned and one that respects Syrian national sovereignty and territorial integrity. India should reiterate that it fully supports efforts by the United Nations to help achieve a solution in Syria and participate in UN-convened conferences on Syria as and when they meet. It should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to internally-displaced people and Syrian refugees in neighbouring

countries.

Iraq has been a particularly good and politically supportive friend of India. Iraq is currently the second ranked oil supplier to India and in the past has periodically been even the top source.

The takeover of Mosul had sparked global panic resulting in a sharp spike in oil prices which have since come down because no oil producing areas or oil exporting ports were affected. Even if oil supplies had been disrupted there was nothing that India or any oil importing country, say the US or China, could have done except look for alternative sources. What can and should be done is that the India should try and firm up contingency arrangements from now, in advance, for additional supplies from other current suppliers such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE or, even from outside the region, in the event of sudden supply disruptions instead of doing this when or after the disruptions take place.

There was nothing that the Indian government or Embassy could have done to prevent the abduction of 40 Indian workers. Not even one of the directly and intensively involved neighboring countries of Iraq had anticipated the lightning blitzkrieg of the ISIS in taking over the Sunni provinces of Iraq. The Turkish Consul General in Mosul and 23 other Consulate personnel have also been abducted and they are yet to be rescued. Suggestions that they could have been evacuated in anticipation of events made in hindsight completely ignore how the real world functions.

The government is seized of the matter at

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the highest possible levels and is doing everything humanly possible to find out where they are, to have them released and brought back. All kinds of contingency arrangements have been made, the government is in touch with all potential parties that could help in their release, a Special Envoy been dispatched, the Embassy is being reinforced with personnel from neighboring missions, the MEA Spokesman is keeping the country and the media informed of developments on a continuous basis, EAM has herself twice met the families of victims, etc. Evacuation of Indians from various towns of Iraq is already under way.

However, what the abduction and oil price hike issues highlight is the dire need for a revamped overall policy approach to the Gulf region. No past Indian government has paid the attention and given the importance to the Gulf region that it deserves. While the new government has taken some commendable initiatives it seems to have further downgraded the region's importance, hopefully inadvertently, judging by the fact that for the first time in decades there was not a single sentence about West Asia in the President's Address to Parliament.

In contrast to the enormous play given to the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister and it being highlighted as the first visit of a foreign dignitary, the reality is that first foreign dignitary to visit India after the new government assumed office was the Foreign Minister of Oman specially sent by the wise and visionary Sultan of Oman – India was notified of this almost a week before the visit actually took place. In strong contrast to China, Oman is and has been a particularly friendly country. There was a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm about this visit which seems to have got little more than proforma attention.

To help determine the foreign policy priorities for the new government one simple question needs to be asked - which country or countries impact most on the daily lives of Indians. The experience of the past week provides the answer – more than 7 million Indians live and work in the Gulf region, which is the most volatile region of the world. In a democracy like India, their safety and welfare is of overriding importance as the outcry in the country after the kidnapping of 40 Indians in Iraq has shown. India is dependent for over 70% of its oil and gas supplies on the Gulf region. The Gulf region is also India largest trade partner by far - \$181 billion in 2012-13. Islamic extremism has been surging in the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided excellent anti-terrorism cooperation.

Unfortunately, volatility in the Gulf region is going to continue increasing for the foreseeable future. Any disruption of

normalcy in the GCC countries may result in hundreds of thousands of Indians needing to be rescued, an absolutely massive spike in oil prices leading to a cascading effect sharply increasing prices of items of daily life, increasing our the current account deficit, disrupting our trade balance even more, doing without huge remittances on which the welfare of some 35 million people is dependent, weakening the rupee further, etc.

It is a given that superpowers like the United States and China are important; the immediate South Asian neighbours are inevitably very important. Countries such as Israel, Japan and Myanmar are also very important. The government has quite rightly given them the importance they deserve. It will seem very strange but not one of these countries individually has the potential of greater impact on the daily lives of Indians for the immediate future than the Gulf region.

In the light of the current crisis, the considerations and facts, hopefully will persuade the government to accord to the GCC countries in particular and the Gulf region in general the top priority foreign policy attention that they deserve in Indian national interest.

