

The Latest Debacle in Iraq Black Flags Over Mosul

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Global Research, June 12, 2014

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"The whole of Mosul collapsed today. We've fled our homes and neighborhoods, and we're looking for God's mercy. We are waiting to die." – Mahmoud Al Taie, resident of Mosul, Wall Street Journal

An army of Sunni fighters affiliated to al Qaida crossed the Syrian border into Iraq on Tuesday, scattering defensive units from the Iraqi security forces, capturing Iraq's second biggest city of Mosul, and sending 500,000 civilians fleeing for safety. The unexpected jihadi blitz has left President Barack Obama's Middle East policy in tatters and created a crisis of incalculable magnitude. The administration will now be forced to focus its attention and resources on this new flashpoint hoping that it can prevent the makeshift militia from marching on Baghdad and toppling the regime of Nouri al Maliki. Events on the ground are moving at breakneck speed as the extremists have expanded their grip to Saddam's birthplace in Tikrit and north to Baiji, home to Iraq's biggest refinery. The political thread that held Iraq together has snapped pushing Iraq closer to a full-blown civil war. Here's an excerpt from the New York Times:

"The militants freed thousands of prisoners and took over military bases, police stations, banks and provincial headquarters, before raising the black flag of the jihadi group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria over public buildings. The bodies of soldiers, police officers and civilians lay scattered in the streets."

"Having consolidated control over Sunni-dominated Nineveh Province, armed gunmen were heading on the main road to Baghdad, Iraqi officials said, and had already taken over parts of Salahuddin Province."

The Iraqi security forces—whose training by the US military cost an estimated \$20 billion—dropped their weapons and fled at the first sign of trouble. Now the streets, government buildings, schools, hospitals, airports and military installations are in the hands of the al Qaida-splinter group called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS. The group is now in possession of helicopters and tanks that were left behind by al Maliki's soldiers.

Tens of thousands of civilians have left the city in cars and on foot carrying whatever they can in small trunks and plastic bags. Iraqi news stations report that the roads and checkpoints are clogged with people fleeing for safety to Kirkuk or Baghdad. According to Bloomberg: "Dead bodies are scattered around western Mosul due to the fighting. The city is empty and most shops are closed."

In a desperate attempt to reverse developments on the ground, "Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki took to the airwaves to urge all men to volunteer to fight, promising to provide weapons and equipment. The Prime Minister also urged parliament to declare a state of

emergency as part of an effort “to confront this ferocious attack that harms all Iraqis.”

“We will not allow for the remainder of the ... province and the city to fall,” he said in a live speech broadcast on Iraqi state TV.” (CNN) Al-Maliki has subsequently asked the US for “airstrikes with either drones or manned aircraft targeting the Al-Qaida offshoot militants on Iraqi territory”.

As of Thursday morning, Obama had not responded to the beleaguered president’s request. The United States has not experienced such a spectacular foreign policy debacle since the Saigon withdrawal in April 1975. The fall of Mosul is not a minor setback that can be corrected by deploying special ops and lobbing a few bombs on targets in Mosul. It is a complete policy collapse that illustrates the shortcomings of the abysmal War on Terror. The American invasion and occupation of Iraq is entirely responsible for the problems that plague Iraq today. There were no bands of armed terrorists roaming the countryside and wreaking havoc before the US invasion. All of Iraq’s troubles can be traced back to that bloody intervention that has left the country in chaos.

Will Obama send US combat troops to Iraq to fight the jihadis and reverse events on the ground. If so, he will need Congress’s stamp of approval, which may not be forthcoming. Also, he should prepare his fellow Democratic candidates for a midterm walloping like they’ve never seen before. The American people have never supported the Iraqi quagmire. The prospect of refighting the war in order to beat the radicals which the administration-itself created through its own disastrous arm-the-terrorist policy is bound to be widely resisted as well as reviled. Americans have washed their hands of the “cakewalk” war. They won’t support a rerun.

The media finger-pointing has already begun with gusto. This time the villain of choice is not “Hitler” Putin, but the Iraqi security services who cut and ran at the first smell of grapeshot. More objective-minded observers will see this for the farce it is. The explosion of armed radicalism in the Middle East is the inevitable result of US meddling, intervention and occupation. The chickens have merely come home to roost as the opponents of the war had predicted. Obama and Bush have achieved what bin Laden only could have dreamt of, a city of two million people falling into the hands of his extremist spawn while Washington gazes helplessly from the sidelines. That’s what you call failure with a capital “F”. Here’s a clip from Bloomberg:

“Fighters from a breakaway al-Qaeda group are in position to seize Iraqi energy infrastructure after taking control of Mosul in a strike that highlights Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s weakening grip on the country. ...A day after guerrillas drove police and soldiers from the nation’s second-biggest city, there were conflicting reports on the situation in Baiji, north of Baghdad and home to Iraq’s biggest refinery.”

Let’s face it: If the ISIS starts taking out pipelines and oil installations around Mosul, it’s Game-Over USA. Oil futures will spike, markets will crash, and the global economy will slump back into a severe recession. Obama has a very small window to reverse the current dynamic or there’s going to be hell to pay. According to a June 10 report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW):

“The ISIS is no longer merely a terrorist organization. It is a conventional

military force that holds terrain and claims to govern some of it. The Mosul campaign was well planned and required years to set conditions.....The operations allowed it to cut off media from the city, limit the Iraqi Security Forces' activities there, and gain freedom of movement within it..... (The) ISIS laid the groundwork for the seizure of Mosul, its areas of control on the morning of June 10, 2014 EDT, its assessments of its own attacks, and its aspirations to govern a state in Iraq and Syria."

The report suggests that the ISIS is not a ragtag amalgam of rabid fanatics, but a highly-motivated and disciplined modern militia with clearly outlined political and territorial objectives. If this is the case, then it is likely that they will not march on Baghdad after all, but will tighten their grip on the predominantly Sunni areas establishing a state within a state. And this is precisely why the Obama administration may choose to stay out of the conflagration altogether, because the goals of the ISIS coincide with a similar US plan to create a "soft partition" that dates back to 2006.

The plan was first proposed by Leslie Gelb, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, and then-senator Joe Biden. According to the New York Times the "so-called soft-partition plancalls for dividing Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions...There would be a loose Kurdistan, a loose Shiastan and a loose Sunnistan, all under a big, if weak, Iraq umbrella."

And this is why the US will probably not deploy combat troops to engage the Sunni fighters in Mosul. It's because the Obama administration's strategic goals and those of the terrorists are nearly identical. Which should surprise no one.

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