

Tackling threat of the Islamist advance in Iraq



Edward Spiers

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THE REMARKABLE advance of the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Isis) through the northern and western provinces of Iraq poses challenges that could range far beyond Iraq itself.

An offshoot of al-Qaida, Isis had its origins in the Sunni uprising against the US-led occupation of Iraq. It suffered severe reverses when the Americans crushed the revolt in Fallujah, killed its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by a missile strike in 2006, and then co-opted Sunni tribes during George W Bush's second term in the so-called awakening to drive al-Qaida out.

Isis has recovered by exploiting the sectarian divisions exacerbated by the civil war in Syria, the lavish funding of Sunni resistance groups in Syria by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and by Sunni resentment in Iraq from the authoritarian policies pursued by the elected prime minister, Nouri Maliki. The fact that the Shia-controlled government of Iran has used Iraq as a staging post, and a conduit for its support for the Assad regime, has simply compounded the depths of Sunni resentment.

Directing the revival of Isis has been the brutal but inspirational leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This is the *nom de guerre* of a mysterious but dedicated jihadist. Only two authenticated pictures are known to exist of this leader, who combines a keen sense of strategic purpose with a prolific capacity to raise funds.

The organisation has also used the internet to demonstrate its vision of constructing a caliphate ruled by sharia law across much of the Middle East and north Africa, beginning with parts of Syria and Iraq, and the brutality of its methods - suicide bombings, beheadings and crucifixions - to attract thousands of followers from across the Middle East, the Somali-based al-Shabab, and some western countries, including several hundred volunteers from Britain.

Quite methodically, Isis moved first to establish a base in the eastern Syrian provinces of Ar-Raqqah and Dayr az Zawr in the spring of 2013, and then audaciously to attack Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad in the following July. It employed 12 car bombs, suicide bombers, and a barrage of mortars and rockets to liberate 500 senior al-Qaida prisoners. This proved a prelude to an assault on Anbar province, Iraq, and the capture of Fallujah in January 2014.

Despite the bombastic claims of the Baghdad authorities, and the repeated counter-assaults of the Iraqi army and air force, Isis retained control of the Sunni-dominated province. Emboldened by this success, Isis fighters have scattered Iraqi soldiers and police in the recent assaults on Mosul and Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein.

Although they liberated 2,500 prisoners from Mosul's jail, and another 300 from Tikrit's, seized over \$400m from Mosul's banks, and captured

American weapons, vehicles and helicopters, this has been the easiest part of the advance on Baghdad. Moving further south in lightly armed vehicles will stretch their lines of communication and render them vulnerable to aerial attack.

Nouri Maliki has pleaded repeatedly with the Obama administration to supply manned and unmanned aerial support, and despite a continued flow of arms, ammunition, and other forms of equipment from Washington, he has had to wait while the administration reviewed its options.

Although President Obama declared that the United States has not ruled anything out in considering its response, official spokesmen have confirmed that this would not involve 'boots on the ground'. Similarly, William Hague has stated that the British government is 'not countenancing at this stage any British military involvement'.

However reassuring to domestic audiences, the Obama administration cannot let the

“ Isis could pose a threat to the oil-rich kingdoms of the Gulf that the West could hardly ignore. ”

Maliki premiership founder after describing Iraq as a 'sovereign, self-reliant and democratic' state when US forces left the country in December 2011. It may hope that limited aerial intervention, could help thwart the Isis advance as it moves into Shia-dominated areas near Baghdad, and provide Maliki with the opportunity to reorganise his discredited army, possibly with the aid of Shia militias and Iranian support.

If the outcome falls short of defeating Isis, the *de facto* partition of Iraq may ensue, that is, an independent Kurdistan, which has just seized Kirkuk and has the formidable Peshmerga to defend its northern region; a Sunni/jihadist region dominating the western provinces of Iraq; and the Shia-dominated area south and east of Baghdad, buttressed by forces from Iran.

Such an outcome is fraught with uncertainties and dangers.

Isis is a movement, which could still spread beyond Syria and Iraq, and pose a challenge to the oil-rich kingdoms of the Gulf that even a war-weary West could hardly ignore.



“ “ ” ”

She's due to go on holiday to Spain with her husband in less than a week and is still waiting for that brown envelope to drop through the letterbox. What to do?

OBJECT OF DESIRE: The document that makes all the difference to those planning a trip abroad. Some 30,000 are caught up the backlog at the Passport Office.

Passport to frustration as system hit by shambles

IT'S A conversation being played out right now in thousands of homes around the country - what has gone wrong at the Passport Office?

A friend's passport renewal is one of the estimated 30,000 caught up in the backlog. She's not happy. She's due to go to Spain with her husband in less than a week and is still waiting for that brown envelope to drop through the letterbox. The holiday has been paid for. The time is booked off work. The new clothes have been bought. What to do? Take a day off and travel to Liverpool and attempt to secure her passport in person? Wait and see what happens and risk losing all the money she has paid for her trip? Or transfer the holiday into the name of her daughter and her friend and make alternative arrangements for a later date?

It's not a life or death situation. It's not even her honeymoon. However, it's damned inconvenient and how to solve it is taking up most of her waking hours. It's some comfort to her that extra staff are being deployed to try and tackle the backlog. Still, she doesn't hold out much hope that the emergency administrators brought in to work round the clock will be able to rescue her application from the pile. Her husband told her to stop panicking. It could arrive anyway.

If you look at it in context, the Passport Office processes 5.7 million new or renewed passports each year. At any



Jayne Dowle

EVERY MONDAY

one time, it is handling just under half a million applications. David Cameron says that just 30,000 are taking longer than the target time of three weeks to turn round right now.

Now step back from that a minute and just think. The Prime Minister has been forced to stand up and make a statement about something which should run like clockwork.

Questions have been asked in the House of Commons. Home Secretary Theresa May is under attack from her Labour opposite number, Yvette Cooper, who says that "it's a sorry shambles from a sorry department". And Ed Miliband, seizing the opportunity to make political capital, is fuelling the flames of panic at Prime Minister's Questions. He conveniently forgets that the Labour

government presided over a similar situation in the 1990s when computer problems caused queues around the block.

The Labour leader's intervention might be less than helpful, but it tells us a lot about how such a crisis unfolds and gathers speed. There's been a surge in applications since the economy picked up and a rise in the number of applications from overseas since offices abroad were closed down to cut costs. Didn't a lightbulb go on somewhere in Whitehall?

It's all very well Ministers being called to account, but surely the problems should have been anticipated months ago by the civil servants who are paid handsomely to run the Passport Office. The unions blame job cuts and reorganisation of the system, timed perfectly to hit just as the peak holiday season gets underway. Whose idea was that then? Surely it's not too much to ask to expect those in charge of running government departments to plan ahead and do their jobs efficiently? Perhaps it is.

It also tells us a lot about people. For many individuals going about their daily lives, applying for a passport is one of the few times that they will come up against the great lumbering machine which is otherwise known as state bureaucracy. If you don't claim benefits and pay your tax through PAYE, you will be pretty much spared the stress and trauma of

dealing with a so-called "helpline" or an "interactive" website which is anything but.

It might come as a shock then to find that incompetence comes as pretty much standard when it comes to government departments. You need to be patient, ruthless and prepared for a fight - and a lot of phone calls. There's an argument that people should be more organised and not leave it until the last minute to renew. I can't really take the moral high ground on that one. I'm the person who forgot entirely about the MoT for the car last year until it was a full three months overdue. In our busy lives, it's easy to overlook things. And what about those who have to travel for work or personal reasons without much notice?

It's easy to take efficiency for granted, until the system fails and reminds us that it isn't efficient at all. In our modern world, where we can book flights to the other side of the globe with a credit card and mobile phone, we might expect a passport to appear just as miraculously.

When all the shouting is over, and all the blame has blown out, this crisis will remind us that instant gratification isn't always forthcoming. I thought about saying that to my friend who is fretting over her trip to Spain. Then I realised that this would be even less helpful to the situation than Ed Miliband ranting at PMQs.

Giving women greater voice in Kenya

I'M JUST back from Kenya where I took part in a scheme inspired by the Voluntary Service Overseas programme. I spent a week supporting the Kenyan Women's Parliamentary Association (Kewopa) and visited projects supported by the Kenyan VSO organisation - VSO Jitolee.

VSO Jitolee has been working since 1959. It recognises that the unequal balance of power between men and women at all levels of society is a significant cause of poverty, and tackling this is a vital part of their ongoing development work. They focus on empowering communities to take action on unequal gender power relationships.

I left Nairobi and headed about three hours south to the Loitokitok district near the border with Tanzania where the stunning slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro dominate the landscape. During my two-day stay I saw the work of three different projects which are making a huge difference to the lives of local people.

"Ilaramatak Le Impusel", which translates as the Amboseli Pastoralist Community Development Initiative, aims to facilitate the political, social and economic empowerment of the local communities. I visited an environmental group who plant trees to stop the deforestation of the slopes of Kilimanjaro.



Meg Munn

Meg Munn is the Labour MP for Sheffield Heeley.

They work together to not only plant and grow trees but also grow food to help feed their families. Unsure of the time of our arrival - traffic is notoriously heavy and difficult to predict in Kenya - the group members had been in their communal garden for a couple of hours by the time I arrived. Working in teams, they were filling rolls of paper with compacted soil ready for small saplings to be planted in them. A keen gardener myself, I soon got my hands dirty helping out.

As an MP, I've planted a few ceremonial trees, but here I was helping a project transform not just the landscape but helping to preserve a way of life. The project also tries to ensure that future generations understand and value the

trees. Enough saplings are planted so that each child in the local school can be given their own tree and encouraged to water and tend it.

The other two groups I met are members of an informal local umbrella organisation. The Voices of the Women of Loitokitok. It brings together local women to develop their confidence, encouraging their ideas on how to tackle the issues that affect them and their daughters. These issues include economic vulnerability and dependence, early marriage, domestic violence and women's exclusion from land ownership.

The first group spoke of the training they had undertaken to develop a better understanding of their civic rights. They told me about the specific changes they had experienced. For some it was the courage to start their own micro business. Another felt that she could challenge the assumptions of male relatives that she had to care for her deceased husband's child from another relationship.

The women had celebrated their new-found confidence with an International Women's Day event and invited both men and women from the region to join them. The slogan for the day was "equality for women is progress for all".

The final visit involved travelling first

on unmade roads and then along country tracks to meet the Enduet Women's group from Rombo. On the way we stopped to see the school they have built to help increase the numbers of children in education.

This project has succeeded in promoting many cultural aspects of their life while also empowering women to challenge the negative culture that kept them silent.

The women told me that they can now stand up and speak for themselves, whereas before even to speak publicly in front of a man would have been impossible. They are developing a rescue centre for girls from forced early marriages.

Encouraging girls to stay on at school is also an important part of their activities. Anastasia, the chair of the group, told me they can persuade mothers and girls of the merit of this approach but too many fathers then say that if the girls can no longer be married quickly then the mother will have to continue to fund her at school. Anastasia wanted me to hear this message and take it back to decision-makers who can help with these issues.

What I saw was truly testament to the slogan on the back of the VSO Jitolee T-shirts - "Equality for women is progress for all".

An Evening of Clairvoyance*

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