

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian policies backfired dramatically last week as, confronted with just a few thousand jihadist fighters, his army fell apart. The sudden collapse of military units defending three key cities - Mosul, Iraq's second largest city; Tikrit, the late Saddam Hussein's hometown; and Kirkuk, the oil-rich capital of semiautonomous Kurdistan — is reminiscent of the swift disintegration of Saddam's army at the gates of Baghdad in 2003.

Latest reports indicate that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a Sunni militant group controlling territory in the two country's northern regions, is making rapid advances towards Baghdad. Kirkuk, the oil capital of Iraq has been secured by military units from Iraqi Kurdistan. Nehad Ismail asks How and Why?

David Ignatius, writing in the Washington Post 12th June: "Maliki's U.S.-trained army has suffered a series of crushing defeats, as Sunni insurgents from an offshoot of al-Qaeda ... swept toward Baghdad. Already the Sunni extremists control most of western Iraq". A baffled Maliki, in a televised address on 11th June, asked : "The existing forces of al-Qaeda and ISIS are not enough to face the army and police forces but what has happened? How did this happen? How did some military units collapse?"

Divided country, divided army

The collapse of the Iraqi army was swift and shocking. The fall of Mosul was catastrophic. No one expected that the Iraqi army would disintegrate so fast after ISIS launched its offensive. The world witnessed Iraqi military melt away before an enemy a fraction of their strength, leaving behind tanks, vehicles and equipment; their status as a disciplined modern fighting force in serious doubt. Iraqis, speaking on Arab satellite TV channels, blamed Maliki's sectarian policies, and the corruption of military institutions.

Maliki's army is of a different class than Saddam's. Its weaponry is modern and sophisticated, from U.S-made Apache helicopter gunships and F-16 fighter jets to Abrams tanks and Humvees. U.S. occupation authorities alone spent an estimated \$16 billion to rebuild the Iraqi

army, which, they had envisioned, would form the backbone of a modern Iraq. Some estimates put the cost of years of training, arming, and equipping the Iraqi army at \$25bn.

Despite the heavy investment, Maliki's military has failed to withstand a ragtag of armed jihadists who have seized, in very short space of time, city after city across Iraq. The Washington Post, on June 14th, compared it to the fall of South Vietnam. The London Daily Telegraph 13th June interviewed a group of Iraqi military deserters: Speaking from the Kurdish city of Erbil, the defectors accused their officers of cowardice and betrayal, saying generals in Mosul "handed over" the city over to Sunni insurgents, with whom they shared sectarian and historical ties."

Eye-witness accounts from the soldiers reveal how sectarian enmity has, in the space of mere weeks, destroyed the new Iraqi national army. Corporal Muammer Naser, 35, said that "his superiors had sympathised with remnants of the regime of Saddam Hussein, and that the generals essentially passed control of the city to them. Organised militias of Saddam sympathisers are said to have participated in the takeover of Mosul and Saddam's birthplace Tikrit, this week". Cpl Naser added: "The war now is definitely sectarian. In Mosul, the Sunni soldiers didn't want to fight against the Sunni insurgents."

As the militants approached Mosul, many of the top army commanders there fled to the autonomous Kurdish region. Many in the Iraqi felt betrayed. With their generals gone, the ranks saw no reason to stay.

Maliki purged the commanders he suspected of disloyalty, replacing them with officers whose qualifications were not military experience but sectarian affiliations and personal loyalty. The alienation of the Sunni element of Iraqi society, a third of the Iraqi population, has helped anti-government insurgents and made the collection of human intelligence in the Sunni areas extremely difficult.

Internal problems in the army persist. Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations, Hamid al- Bayati: "They haven't been trained and imbued with a sense of professionalism." Widespread corruption in the awarding of military contracts results in troops receiving shoddy supplies and

bad food. It has never enjoyed a good reputation among the Iraqi public. Sunnis are not keen to fight on behalf of al Maliki. Some years ago, Sunni fighters from the tribal "Sahwa" or Arab "Awakening" confronted al Qaeda and fought against Sunni terrorist groups. They are no longer prepared to help the Iraqi government which alienated them.

Al Arabiya News reported that Maliki blamed a "conspiracy" for the collapse of army units, which are dominated by his Shiite co-religionists. But an Iraqi political analyst told Al Arabiya that the military failure was the result of "the lopsided political process since Maliki took office in 2006...Military commanders are given their jobs not on the basis of competency or experience but rather on their sectarian affiliation".

Poor intelligence, politicisation, corruption, low morale; all have weakened the Iraqi army. Everyone is blaming Nouri al Maliki for the debacle. An Iraqi Sunni politician said recently that "Sunnis in the army are not happy fighting to protect Nouri al Maliki or his Shiite government." This kind of talk has been seized upon by ISIS, which sensed an opportunity to promote itself as the champion of Sunnis against the Shiites led government of Nouri al Maliki.

The enemy, the allies

Robert Ford, former U.S. ambassador to Syria, explained on 12th June how ISIS has been able to conduct its offensive. The group is well organized and has cells of fighters in cities and provinces from Mosul to Salah al-Din to Diyala to Anbar. It even has a presence in Baghdad, where it conducts a car bombing campaign. Ford stressed "that Sunnis are much less inclined to fight, leaving a space for ISIS to again gain ground".

The manipulation of fear through crude but effective propaganda is another factor behind the stunning collapse of Iraqi security forces. A 61-minute video of beheadings was recently posted online by ISIS, to terrorize Sunnis in Iraq's army and police forces and destroy their already low morale. Among forces in the western province of Anbar, Iraq's Sunni heartland, desertion over the last six months has been heavy.

Some Arab commentators say that Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden must be laughing in their graves at Nuri Al-Maliki, who has a reputation for arrogance and insolence. Over the course of his term in power Maliki has, on the pretext of fighting terrorism, settled his political accounts, describing those who disagreed with him as terrorists, forcing them to flee the country or submit. The battle lines are being drawn. The Shi'ites are mobilising to defend Baghdad and their holy places of Najaf and Karbala. Meanwhile, Iran sent 2,000 advance troops to Iraq to help fight ISIS.

News reports say the Obama administration has ruled out American boots on the ground. He is considering other options, such as drone attacks and air-strikes, clearly unhappy about involvement with direct military action. The difficulty for Obama was summed up neatly in the Sunday Times, 15th June 2014: "Where are you going to get the intelligence from to drop the weapons? Who are you dropping them on? What are the security forces supposed to do after that?"

Iran is said to be offering assistance to fight what it calls Sunni terrorism. The US could begin direct talks with Iran to try to resolve the Iraq crisis, which would have long term strategic implications. The Iraqi government should be supported in defeating the ISIS insurgency. But its supporters in this crisis must insist on a price: Iraq's poisonous sectarian politics must change.

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