

Global Security Briefing

## The Iraq Crisis (Part III): Is Baghdad at Risk?

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*Following the capture of the northern Iraqi province of Nineveh and its capital Mosul on 10 June by Sunni jihadist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Iraq continues to slide into crisis as the group advances throughout the country. This week, following the declaration of a caliphate in the territories currently held by ISIL, Paul Rogers assesses whether the jihadist group will now set its sights on Baghdad or choose to consolidate positions in other parts of Iraq.*

In the [briefing note of 23 June 2014](#), the following points were made:

- a. Paramilitary ISIL operations in Iraq have been hugely aided by Ba'athist, clan and other paramilitary groups, but while ISIL has been a catalyst for a more general anti-regime revolt it may not be fully in charge of captured territory
  - b. ISIL's position would be aided by any direct western military intervention by enabling it to propagandise "Islam under attack".
1. In the past seven days US Special Forces have begun aiding Iraqi government forces in their operations against ISIL. The US is operating numerous reconnaissance flights, both drone and manned, across much of Iraq, but focused on territory controlled by ISIL. Armed drone patrols are also mounted, the stated aim being to protect US personnel.
  2. The Iraqi government is taking delivery of a small number of old Sukhoi strike aircraft. The claims about their capabilities and likely impact on the conflict are exaggerated.
  3. ISIL forces have paraded large quantities of US-made arms and equipment in Mosul and elsewhere, indicating that they have acquired substantial materiel.
  4. Government forces launched a series of concerted attacks on the key city of Tikrit, which is strategically important because of its location on the route north to Mosul and also with a symbolic value as the former centre of the Saddam Hussein regime power base.
  5. The attacks on Tikrit will almost certainly have benefited from US intelligence and planning support and appear to have involved some of the most professional of the Iraqi Army's forces. The government would have had confidence in their likely success, as it would not have wanted to risk failure
  6. As of early 30 June, though, the attack on Tikrit **had** failed and Iraqi government forces had withdrawn. If there is not a successful further attempt this will be a serious reversal for the Malaki regime, leading to a decrease in the morale of the armed forces
  7. The combat abilities that the ISIL forces have demonstrated in the past three days strongly indicate that they have a significant conventional warfare capability in addition to their main focus on paramilitary and irregular operations.
  8. This indicates that there is a substantial element of ongoing Ba'athist professional military support, much of it originating from the Saddam Hussein era.
  9. If ISIL continues to hold Tikrit, it will gain further support from anti-government groups across Sunni districts of Iraq. It is also being strengthened by well over a thousand

- dedicated supporters that it has freed from prisons, many of whom will have been reinforced in their determination to support ISIL through their experience of detention.
10. ISIL is also gaining support in Syria by the defection of commanders from other Sunni paramilitary groups, including the al Nusrah Front.
  11. **Overall, ISIL may have a substantially greater potential for advancing further in Iraq.**
  12. The conclusion of the previous two assessments (14 and 23 June) may therefore be premature - ISIL may seek to gain control of substantial parts of Baghdad in the coming weeks rather than consolidate its recent gains elsewhere in Iraq.

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**Paul's previous briefings on the current Iraq Crisis are available here:**

Part I: [On ISIL Advances and Potential Military Intervention](#)

Part II: [ISIL: Catalyst for Anti-Regime Revolt and Paramilitary Coalition](#)

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