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Iran squashes IS, US scrambles for cover

By M K Bhadrakumar

March 3, 2015

Fierce fighting has erupted around the Iraqi city of Tikrit to the north of Baghdad, best known the world over as the home town of Saddam Hussein and regarded to be the spiritual heartland of the Baathist regime. The Iraqi government forces launched an operation on Monday to recapture the city from the Islamic State [IS] militants. This hugely important development has three dimensions.

First, of course, if the operations succeed, it will constitute a big blow to the IS. Tikrit is not only a big trophy by itself but the Iraqi government will be carrying the war into the IS' territory. Most likely, the next target will be Mosul, straddling Iraqi Kurdistan, where the IS' dramatic surge first appeared last June. It is tempting to surmise that the IS faces a near-term prospect of extinction in military terms.

The second dimension is with regard to the crucial role that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards [IRGC] are reportedly playing in the Tikrit operation under the Iraqi flag. The BBC has reported, citing Shi'ite militia sources, that the charismatic and legendary commander of the IRGC Gen Qasem Soleimani has been seen in the frontline and is "personally taking part in leading the operation." There is delightful irony that Soleimani is leading the liberation of the hometown of his old enemy Saddam. That apart, Shi'ite Iran is leading the fight today against a Sunni Islamist

enemy who poses existential threat to the Sunni Arab regimes of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, which has otherwise no love lost for Iran.

Finally, the fighting raging around Tikrit raises a big question: Where on earth is the US-led international coalition hiding? Iran has put the US and its coalition partners to shame by single-handedly taking the war into the IS tent. Iran is relentlessly exposing the IS as a pest that is easily squashed if gone about seriously, than the 10' tall enemy with mythical prowess that the Western analysts made it out to be.

Meanwhile, the spin doctors are already at work, claiming that the US is deliberately steering clear of Tikrit as a matter of policy, since the fighting in Tikrit is spearheaded by the Shi'ite militia and there is a tacit 'division of labor' with Iran – a laughable proposition, to say the least.

Tehran alleges, on the other hand, that the US is actually dissimulating when it claims it is fighting the IS, and that in reality Washington has a nuanced approach that anticipates a future role for the IS as an instrument in its regional strategies. The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian literally ridiculed the US claims of fighting the IS, when he alleged in a speech in Tehran on Monday, “The US has created the anti-ISIL coalition with the participation of 60 countries, but the coalition’s main practical measure is confined to controlling and administering the ISIL.”

Abdollahian disclosed that the US military aircraft are ferrying supplies for the IS in Syria and Iraq by flying great distances. He asked, “How can one make a 900-kilometer mistake in distance?” Good question, indeed.

In Afghanistan too the US intervened militarily in 2001 on the pretext of vanquishing the Taliban, who have in a curious role reversal today become Washington’s key interlocutors — and, maybe, are being groomed to become tomorrow’s catalysts of change in the vast Central Asian steppes still under Russian influence, or China’s restive Xinjiang Autonomous Region which is struggling with Islamist militancy.