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ISIS on the Rampage

What the Fall of Ramadi and Palmyra Means

by DEEPAK TRIPATHI

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The capture of Ramadi in central Iraq on 18 May by the Sunni-dominated fundamentalist group Islamic State, and only three days later the fall of the ancient city of Palmyra in the heart of Syria, have shocked Arab and Western governments alike. Taking control of Ramadi and Palmyra, cities more than 400 miles apart, and in different countries, so quickly is no mean feat.

Subsequent reports indicated that the Syrian government's last border crossing between Iraq and Syria had also fallen to Islamic State forces, giving them control of the entire border between the two countries. This frightening new reality means that the frontier is now open to Islamic State, who can move from one country to the other at will.

The radical Islamic militia continues its murderous campaign elsewhere, too. It claimed that one of its suicide bombers blew up a Shia mosque in Saudi Arabia's eastern town of Qadeeh, killing and wounding scores of people.

Events like these belie claims of success in recent military operations by the United States and allies against the Islamic State's command structure and fighters on the ground. America's strategy, often repeated, has been to "degrade and destroy" Islamic State, just as Washington's

aim was to deal with al-Qaida. That strategy continues to be in a state of failure, because Washington is unable to prevent the phenomenon of one extremist organisation morphing into several splinter groups which are far more dangerous.

The causes of Islamic State's growth are multifaceted. So is the significance of its dramatic advances in the battlefield. Ramadi in Anbar province, barely 70 miles from the capital Baghdad, was where the American-sponsored "Sons of Iraq" (Sahwa) militia started in order to counter al-Qaida nearly a decade ago. Born out of expediency, that alliance was forged between the US occupation forces and members of the overthrown Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussain and Sunni tribes.

Now that Iraq is under Shia rule, the alienation among Sunnis is strong for two main reasons. The sense of loss of identity, depersonalisation and lack of opportunities, and the perception of abandonment by the United States, add fuel to the fires burning in the region. Both in Iraq and Syria, government authority is absent in vast areas, leaving a dangerous vacuum. The void is filled by fanatics who have sectarian zeal, appetite to settle matters by violence and weapons in abundance.

A strategy whose objectives are mixed up, and which is based on sheer opportunism, lacks consistency and is likely to fail. In Iraq, Saddam Hussain, leading a Sunni minority and secular dictatorship, was deposed. Saddam's overthrow released soldiers of his Ba'athist army and alienated Iraq's Sunni tribes. But then, many of the same were enticed by the United States with money and weapons to fight al-Qaida. With that phase over and a Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad, the Sunnis were out of favour again. They turned from allies to enemies.

The nature of war between government forces and Islamic State in Iraq is full of irony. The Iraqi military is heavily equipped with American weapons and is supposedly well trained, but clearly lacks the will to fight. IS forces, too, have plenty of weapons, originally supplied by Washington to the "Sons of Iraq" militia to fight al-Qaida, or captured from the Iraqi military.

The US strategy in Syria has been to overthrow the Assad regime and thus eliminate an old rejectionist challenge to American–Israeli supremacy in the Middle East. Again, expediency drove the United States and anti-Assad forces closer. Western arms supplied to anti-Assad groups that are described as "moderate" have often been seized by more fanatical and trigger-happy groups like Islamic State.

Events in recent years have demonstrated again and again that alliances with extremist groups to destabilise countries tend to produce a boomerang effect. From Libya to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the effects have been devastating. The region is destabilised. Human misery is indescribable. External powers are eager to intervene when it is least helpful and display withdrawal symptoms when the going gets tough or it does not suit them.

Accounts of the fall of Palmyra, site of two-thousand-year-old Roman-era ruins and artefacts, speak of large-scale evacuation of nearby communities by Syrian troops as they withdrew. There was no intervention by US aircraft which have been deployed in recent months to target Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Residents left behind face atrocities from IS militants.

North of Palmyra lie oil and gas fields under Syrian government control. Does the US goal to depose President Assad in Syria explain why American air power did not intervene in the battle for Palmyra, and may not do so in the battle for the oil fields nearby? After all, the loss of those oil fields would be a big setback against the Syrian regime whereas a US intervention against Islamic State in that battle would help the Assad regime.

So, in Iraq as well as Syria, contradictions in American policy abound. Islamic State poses a serious threat to the Iraqi government which Washington does not want to collapse. In Syria, on the other end, the American agenda is the exact opposite – to engineer the end of the Assad regime. Just as the United States helped raise a Sunni tribal militia called "Sons of Iraq" to counter the threat of al-Qaida some years ago, opportunism now requires Washington to sustain a Shia regime in Baghdad. To protect that regime, the US is now supporting a predominantly Shia militia, described as the "Popular Mobilisation Units". In Iraq, America and Iran are in tacit alliance with each other. In Syria they support opposite sides.

With such contradictory motives in Iraq and Syria, America's strategy against Islamic State cannot succeed.