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Iraq Crisis: Fears of Partition Grow

Islamists seize border crossing with Jordan and sweep towards Baghdad

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

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The US Secretary of State John Kerry sounded upbeat after a 90-minute meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki at the end of which he said: “That was good.” But if Mr Kerry is optimistic about the situation then he is about the only person in Baghdad feeling that way as news comes of fresh rebel victories and of sectarian massacres. Iraq is beginning to resemble India at the time of partition in 1947 when massacres propelled demographic change.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) has swept through the giant, overwhelmingly Sunni province of Anbar west of Baghdad without meeting much resistance. The Iraqi army abandoned the border with Jordan where Sunni tribes took over the Turaibal border crossing on the highway built by Saddam Hussein as a crucial supply route during the Iran-Iraq war. Tribes are negotiating to hand over Turaibal to Isis which captured the two main border crossings to Syria over the weekend. A tribal leader said he was mediating with Isis in a “bid to spare blood and make things safer for the employees of the crossing. We are receiving positive messages from the militants.”

The Jordanian army says its troops have been put in a state of alert in recent days along the 112-mile border with Iraq, to ward off “any potential or perceived security threats” in this scantily inhabited desert area. The Iraqi army spokesman said that troops have redeployed from towns and cities in Anbar for “tactical reasons”.

President Obama and Mr Kerry have called for a genuinely inclusive government with Sunni leaders as well as Shia and Kurds getting a share in power. They have implied that Mr Maliki cannot stay in power if such a government is to be created, but it may already be too late for a power-sharing solution since the Sunni have already displaced the government as the main authority in provinces where they are the majority. The Sunni politicians who met Mr Kerry, the parliament’s Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi and Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq, have little authority in their own community. Events have passed them by and a bigger role for Sunni politicians like them is unlikely to break the momentum of the revolt.

Iraqi officials say Mr Maliki asked the US to launch air strikes against Isis positions in Iraq and Syria, targeting training camps and convoys. Mr Kerry replied that care had to be taken to avoid civilian casualties. Mr Obama earlier said Mr Maliki and the Iraqi leadership face a test as to whether “they are able to set aside their suspicions, their sectarian preferences for the good of the whole”.

Hopes of a power-sharing government seem out-of-date as Isis closes in on the capital and has made it clear that it does not want to talk to Shia but to kill them or drive them out of Iraq. Isis regards Shia as apostates or heretics who have betrayed the faith and deserve death. Where Shia cannot defend themselves they have fled, in places such as Tal Afar, with a population of 300,000 Shia Turkoman, west of Mosul where fighting is still going on. Isis is primarily an anti-Shia movement in Iraq and Syria, its violent sectarianism so extreme that it was one of the reasons why it was criticised by al-Qa’ida. There are reports the few Shia who lived in Mosul and stayed have been given 24 hours to convert to Sunni Islam or die.

Iraq has gone a long way down the road towards a Sunni-Shia sectarian civil war over the last two weeks. In Salahuddin province insurgent fighters helped by local Sunni have advanced to drive out thousands of Shia Turkomans from three villages. “You cannot imagine what happened, only if you saw it could you believe it,” Hassan Ali, a 52-year-old farmer, told AP as he sat in the al-Zahra Shia mosque, which is used to distribute aid in Kirkuk 50 miles to the north. He said: “They hit us with mortars, and the families fled, and they kept hitting us. It was completely sectarian: the Shia out.”

The attacks took place on 16 June in the neighbouring villages of Chardaghli, Brawchi and Karanaz, as well as in a fourth village, Beshir, some 30 miles to the north, refugees told the agency. The aim seems to be to create Shia-free zones in which Isis can establish its fundamentalist Sunni caliphate. Between 15 and 35 villagers were killed and the bodies dumped on the roadside for collection. “They called and said, ‘Send somebody to collect your dogs’,” a policeman from the village said. Survivors say Shia mosques were blown up, their houses burnt and their sheep stolen.

Unlike other massacres of Shia by Isis this one is well-authenticated. The Shia villagers say their Sunni neighbours took part in the attack. The inhabitants of Sunni villages nearby have already fled because they expect revenge attacks by the Shia.