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## Region-wide war threatens as Iraqi state disintegrates

By James Cogan

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The war raging in Iraq between a Sunni uprising led by the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad—and the effective disintegration of the Iraqi nation-state it has caused—has drawn in not only the United States but, inexorably, countries across the Middle East and around the world.

As 300 American special forces personnel arrive in Iraq, ostensibly to advise the beleaguered Iraqi military, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is defying the outpouring of recriminations from the Obama administration and American foreign policy establishment over the collapse of his government's control over large areas of Iraq's west and north to ISIS and the Sunni rebellion. He has dismissed Washington's accusations that his regime's persecution of Sunni political parties is to blame and rejected US pressure that he stand down as prime minister to enable the formation of a "national unity" government. Instead, he has turned toward enlisting the assistance of Shiite militias within Iraq, the Iranian Shiite regime and Russia.

Maliki's rhetoric toward the Obama administration has become increasingly bitter since he held talks with Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday. On Wednesday, he labelled the US calls for a "national unity" government as plans for a "coup." Everything points to Shiite political factions using the July 1 sitting of the Iraqi parliament to assemble another Shiite-dominated government,

whether headed by Maliki or another figure. Most Sunni politicians will not attend, and representatives of the Kurdish nationalist parties that rule Iraq's Kurdish north as an autonomous region have declared that they will most likely boycott the parliament.

Yesterday, in an interview with the BBC's Arabic service, Maliki denounced the US for failing to provide Iraq with the F-16 jet fighters that it ordered after the US military withdrawal in 2011. "I'll be frank and say that we were deluded when we signed the contract," Maliki said. "We should have sought to buy other jet fighters, like British, French and Russian, to secure the air cover for our forces. If we had air cover, we would have averted what had happened."

Maliki declared that his government has made an emergency purchase of jet fighters from Russia and Belarus and that they would "arrive in Iraq in two or three days." He proceeded to praise air strikes carried out by the Syrian air force on Tuesday against ISIS forces holding the key Iraq-Syrian border crossing of Qaim, in Iraq's western Anbar province. While Maliki insisted that the strikes had only been made on targets on the Syrian side of the border and that his government had not requested them, he stated: "[W]e welcome this action. We welcome any Syrian strike against ISIS because this group targets both Iraq and Syria .... The final winners are our two countries."

The Sunni extremist fighters that ISIS has poured into Iraq since the beginning of the year were assembled and armed in Syria, and were part of the forces that the US, the European powers, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are using to try and overthrow the Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad's traditional support base is among Syria's large Alawite minority. ISIS and other Sunni-based rebels have conducted their insurrection with the openly sectarian perspective of purging Alawites from power.

In a decision that can only fan the flames of the growing region-wide war, the Obama administration Thursday requested \$500 million in funding from the US Congress for training and arming so-called "moderate" militias participating in the Islamist-led military campaign against the Assad government.

In Iraq, ISIS has threatened to destroy the major Shiite shrines and massacre the Shiite population in the areas of the country that it is seeking to incorporate into an Islamic state that also includes much of Syria and Lebanon.

On Wednesday, Maliki couched the struggle against ISIS in no less sectarian terms, describing it as a "holy war against terror." Tens of thousands of Shiite fundamentalist militia fighters have mobilised to defend Shiite shrines in Samarra, Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala, with thousands more reportedly streaming back to Iraq from Syria, where they have been fighting alongside the Syrian Army and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement. The Iraqi Army units that are arrayed against Sunni rebels to the north, west and east of Baghdad are overwhelmingly comprised of Shiite

personnel. Iranian military advisors from the elite Quds Force are reportedly embedded with units on the frontline.

The prospect of an ever greater Iranian intervention is posed by the military situation around Samarra, the site of the Al-Askiriya mosque, one of the most revered Shiite shrines. In February 2006, it was bombed by alleged Sunni extremists, triggering a frenzy of sectarian violence. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has publicly declared Iran will “not hesitate” to defend the shrines. While the city is heavily defended, fighting is taking place on its outskirts. If Samarra fell to ISIS and Sunni forces, or further damage is inflicted on the mosque, it would make some form of large-scale Iranian military deployment into Iraq almost certain. Lebanon’s Hezbollah has also stated that it will send thousands of fighters if the Shiite shrines are threatened.

The situation overall is fraught with the danger of escalation into a regional war. The Sunni-based monarchies, which are openly sympathetic to the Iraqi Sunni uprising and have armed the Syrian Sunni rebels, including ISIS, are mobilising their military forces.

Jordan has deployed tanks and thousands of troops to its border with Iraq, on the pretext of ensuring crossings do not fall into the hands of ISIS militants. According to a report yesterday by DEBKAFfile, an Israeli military intelligence web site, the Saudi military is moving forces to its border with Iraq. Following Kerry’s visit to Egypt last weekend and embrace of the coup regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, DEBKAFfile claimed that a task force of Egyptian special forces is also being sent to the Iraq-Saudi Arabia border. The web site alleged that the Syrian airstrikes near Qaim were an attempt to destroy an airfield that Saudi Arabia used this week to dispatch planeloads of supplies to the Sunni Islamist fighters who have seized the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing.

Other regional states are also seeking to exploit Iraq’s disintegration to advance their perceived strategic interests. According to a Reuters report, Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman told Secretary of State Kerry in Paris yesterday that the separation of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government from Iraq was “a foregone conclusion” and that Israel would recognise its declaration of independence.

Since 2003, Israel has developed close military and intelligence ties with the Kurdish establishment, seeking to forge it as an ally against Iran and Syria, which both have Kurdish minorities in strategic areas of the countries. As well as a potential point of provocation, the Iraqi Kurdish region is now also viewed in Israel as a potentially lucrative source of oil supplies, with shipments allegedly beginning to arrive from the Turkish port of Ceyhan. On Wednesday, Israeli President Shimon Peres told journalists in Washington, where he met with Obama, that “the Kurds have, de facto, created their own state” and stressed the close relations that exist between the Turkish government and the Kurdish region in the exploitation and export of northern Iraqi oil.

The response of US imperialism to the utter shipwreck that its contradictory and incoherent foreign policy in the Middle East has suffered is the most unpredictable factor in the situation. Only one thing is certain. Whatever action Washington takes will only add to the tremendous death, destruction and suffering that it has inflicted over decades in the region.