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Isis Faces Likely Defeat in Battles Across Iraq and Syria – But What Happens Next?

PATRICK COCKBURN
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Isis is under attack in and around the last three big cities it holds in Iraq and Syria – Fallujah, Mosul and Raqqa. It is likely to lose these battles because its lightly armed if fanatical infantry, fighting from fixed positions, cannot withstand air strikes called in by specialised ground forces. They must choose between retreating and reverting to guerrilla war or suffering devastating losses.

It is two years since Isis launched itself on the world by capturing Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, though it had already taken Fallujah 40 miles west of Baghdad at the start of 2014. In its first campaigns, its ability to achieve surprise by using mobile columns of vehicles packed with experienced fighters was astonishingly effective.

It had developed these military techniques in the years of warfare that followed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, first fighting the Americans and later the Iraqi army. Its menu of tactics combined ideological fanaticism with a high degree of expertise and rigorous training, and was distinguished by the mass use of suicide bombers, snipers, IEDs, booby traps and mortar teams.

Atrocities highly publicised through the internet terrified and demoralised opponents even before Isis fighters appeared and go a long way to explaining why an Iraqi army, far

superior to Isis in numbers and equipment, broke up and fled when Isis attacked it in Mosul in 2014.

But these tactics no longer work as well as they once did. All the armies battling Isis are trained to eliminate suicide bombers before they get close enough to kill. Isis can still recruit young men – and occasionally women – willing to die, but these days they seldom inflict mass casualties among enemy soldiers as they used to do.

Last weekend, six suicide bombers attacked the front line between Mosul and the Kurdish capital, but although they all died blowing themselves up or were killed before doing so, they only succeeded in wounding a single Kurdish Peshmerga. Like the Japanese Kamikaze pilots who attacked US and British ships in 1944-45, suicide bombers are achieving diminishing returns against better prepared defences.

Peshmerga advancing towards Mosul in the past few days are accompanied by excavators to dig trenches immediately in front of their forces as soon as possible so bombers cannot reach them with vehicles full of explosives. Unfortunately, suicide bomber are still able to slaughter civilians in great numbers by attacking undefended targets such as markets, pilgrimages, checkpoints and hospitals.

Isis is not the all-conquering military force it once was, but the war in Iraq and Syria is as much about politics as military success. At issue for all involved in the conflict in its present phase is not only the breaking Isis control of territory, but determining who will rule there in place of Isis.

So, if the Shia paramilitaries of the Hashd al-Shaabi, whom the US says are under Iranian influence, play the leading role in capturing Fallujah, this will help secure their long-term power and prestige in Iraq. It will be seen as a success for Iran rather than the US and its allies. Equally important in shaping the future political geography of the Middle East will be the relative roles of the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi army and the US in driving Isis from Mosul or, in Syria, of the Syrian Kurds, their Arab allies, the US and the Syrian Army in taking Raqqa from Isis.

“It all depends on who liberates Fallujah, how it is liberated and when it is liberated,” says Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to the Kurdish President Massoud Barzani, in an interview with The Independent. He believes that the balance of power has shifted decisively against Isis compared with a year ago, but warns that nobody should imagine that the fall of Isis will bring peace and stability to the region.

He notes that Isis is suffering defeats but has also shown great powers of revival and reorganisation, citing as an example a recent attack by 400 Isis fighters and 20 armoured vehicles in which they penetrated the Peshmerga front line at an abandoned Christian village called Teleskof, 14 miles north of Mosul. What is different today compared with a year ago is that they were not able to exploit their local success before they came under air attack and lost between 200 and 250 fighters.

Mr Hussein says that if the caliphate falls, “Isis will transform from a terrorist state into a terrorist movement”. It will be weakened by not having secure bases for training but it will

not evaporate or be replaced by moderate Arab Sunni politicians who claim great influence on their own community and are well-financed by foreign powers.

In Syria, a more likely successor to Isis would be the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, which has been growing in popularity among Sunni Arabs. Though ideologically similar to Isis in its Salafi-jihadi fundamentalist beliefs, Nusra is presenting itself as a less maniacal alternative to Isis and one that can probably count on a measure of support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Sunni Arabs as a whole have every reason to feel under threat. The great majority of the five million Syrian refugees come from Sunni Arab opposition areas. In Iraq they were reduced to holding a few enclaves in Baghdad in the 2006-7 sectarian bloodbath – “islands of fear” in the words of a US diplomat the time, a description that now fits almost every Sunni population centre in the country.

The governor of Kirkuk, Najmaldin Karim, told The Independent that there were 500,000 Internally Displaced Iraqis (IDPs), mostly Sunni Arabs who have sought refuge in his province. He ticks off why they cannot go home: they are banned from Diyala province north-east of Baghdad for sectarian reasons by the authorities there, from mixed communities in Salahudin province though they can go to districts that are wholly Sunni while Anbar is still too dangerous.



It may be that the enemies of Isis are dividing the lion’s skin before checking that it is truly dead or close to dying. The territorial losses of Isis may look impressive on a small scale map of Iraq and Syria, but what is impressive when driving outside the borders of the caliphate is how big it remains.

It has the advantage that its enemies are wholly disunited and detest each other almost as much as they hate Isis, if not more so. Turkey has failed to close Isis’s last access to the

outside world west of the Euphrates and has prevented the Syrian Kurds doing so. Isis may be weakened, but its opponents are also fragile. The latest limited offensive by the Kurds to take back villages on the Nineveh Plain east of Mosul showed that these days they have the upper hand, but in reality the attack was delayed several days because some of the troops taking part had not been paid their salaries. The economy of the Kurdistan Regional Government area is in ruins.

Isis is good at selecting vulnerable targets, in this case rebel groups backed by the US and Turkey in the north of Aleppo province who control the towns through which the rebel side of Aleppo used to be supplied. Isis fighters have been driving them backwards in recent days, gaining control over a larger section of the border and reinforcing their hold on the fertile and heavily populated countryside of north Aleppo province.

The Syrian army does not look as strong as it did when it was getting greater support from Russian air strikes and drove Isis out of Palmyra. Isis has been fighting back, capturing an important gas field and targeting civilians in cities famous for their loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad on Syria's Mediterranean coast.

In both Iraq and Syria, Isis is responding to military pressure by the mass slaughter of civilians, killing some 148 and injuring in the Syrian coastal cities of Tartus and Jableh and another 198 in a week of bombings in Baghdad. The purpose of these massacres is to show that Isis has not lost its strength and can still strike anywhere, while at the same time hoping to force Syrian and Iraqi regular forces to leave the front line to defend their civilian populations. It is an effective strategy that has generally worked in the past.

One of the many problems about ending the war is that many of the players have an interest in seeing it continue. Why, for instance, are there offensives against Isis by the Kurdish authorities and the Baghdad government this week? There are many reasons, but one important motive is that President Barzani and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi are presenting themselves as fighting Isis while their local political opponents are demanding reform of corrupt and dysfunctional governments. "The main reason people here in Kurdistan are quiet and not protesting about the collapse of the economy and in their standard of living is that they are afraid of Daesh [Isis]," said a Kurdish businessman this week. President Assad benefits from having an enemy so monstrous as to rule it out as an alternative to himself and therefore secure him in power. Isis is a very convenient enemy for many of those fighting it, which may be one reason why it is so difficult to defeat.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of 'Chaos and Caliphate: Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East', published by OR Books, £18. Readers can obtain a 15 per cent discount by using the code: INDEPENDENT