



IRAQIS PREPARE TO FIGHT MILITANTS

LOVEDAY MORRIS AND KAREN DEYOUNG 22 June 2014

BAGHDAD. Iraqi military facing 'psychological collapse' after losses, desertions. After militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria took Mosul and other Iraqi cities, the government issued a call for volunteers to join the army. Many Iraqis answered.

The 300 U.S. advisers authorized to assist the Iraqi security forces will find an army in crisis mode, so lacking in equipment and shaken by desertions that it may not be able to win back significant chunks of territory from al-Qaeda renegades for months or even years, analysts and officials say. After tens of thousands of desertions, the Iraqi military is reeling from what one U.S. official described as "psychological collapse" in the face of the offensive from militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The desperation has reached such a level that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is relying on volunteers, who are in some cases receiving as little as a week's military training, to protect his ever-shrinking orbit of control.

"Over time, what's occurred is that the Iraqi army has no ability to defend itself," said Rick Brennan, a Rand Corp. analyst and former adviser to U.S. forces in Iraq. "If we're unable to find ways to make a meaningful difference to the Iraqi army as they fight this, I think what we're looking at is the beginning of the disintegration of the state of Iraq." The U.S. government has sped up the supply of reconnaissance equipment since the Iraqi military's rout in the key northern city of Mosul this month, but the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government has expressed frustration at the pace and scope of assistance.



ISIS on the march. The government's dire situation was evident Sunday at the Baghdad Operations Command, the nerve center of the capital's security operations, run jointly by the Interior and Defense ministries. Standing in front of an illuminated map, spokesman Brig. Gen. Saad Maan gestured toward the broad swaths of land outside the city's boundaries that are now considered hostile territory.

"We treat all these areas surrounding us as hot zones," he said. Though Maan claimed that security forces were taking the offensive in some areas, advances by the Sunni insurgents in the western province of Anbar over the past few days have raised concerns that the armed forces may crumble further. Even before tens of thousands of troops disappeared into the night two weeks ago, Iraqi generals complained that they were outgunned by an enemy hardened by years of fighting in Syria and in possession of more advanced weaponry.

In recent weeks, ISIS has seized hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of military equipment from the Iraqi army, much of which has been smuggled back across the border to Syria, according to Iraqi officials. The frontier is now largely in the hands of ISIS, which seeks to create an Islamic caliphate stretching across Syria and Iraq. Much of that equipment came from the United States. While ISIS militants have posted videos flaunting their use of seized weaponry and vehicles, Pentagon officials said they had no accurate accounting of what had ended up in ISIS hands. Among the tasks of the U.S. advisers, expected to arrive in small units, with only a few dozen initially, is to assess the state of the Iraqi army and its equipment.

Lt. Gen. Rasheed Fleih, head of the Anbar Operations Command, in the critical western province bordering Syria, put on a stoic front Sunday, claiming in a televised statement that "security forces are reviving" and that volunteers are being deployed to the area. But the addition of tens of thousands of volunteers to the security forces has been chaotic. Sec. of State John Kerry and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki met in Baghdad Monday. Kerry is in Iraq urging the government to share power before an insurgency seizes more cities. (/ AP) Many are joining under the banners of militias, though Maan argued that they will not be able to function as such. When they sign up, they will be given a "week or less" of training and be deployed where they are needed, he said.



"The basic problem with the Iraqi military is that it's a sectarian force," said James Jeffrey, a former U.S. ambassador to Iraq. "That's combined with the fact that you have sycophantic generals, you have low morale and a Shiite volunteer force. They didn't do very much training. They don't have the equipment or skills of the [ISIS] guys."

The crisis in the armed forces is a result of corruption, poor leadership and intelligence, and severe inattention to training, said a former U.S. adviser to the Iraqi armed forces who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation. Those problems have turned what was a functioning military when U.S. troops withdrew in 2011 into an "empty shell that is resorting to a call to arms of men and boys off the street," he said. He added that the scale of the reverses this month has been "catastrophic."

Accusations against officers. Members of the security forces who were serving in Mosul when the Iraqi army's 2nd Division disintegrated this month complained that the leadership vanished in the face of the ISIS offensive. The speed of the collapse has led to accusations from some soldiers that their leaders were in some way complicit. Maliki is sending 59 officers to court for fleeing their posts. "It's the fault of the people higher up. They should have done something," said an Iraqi police officer who fled Mosul for the Kurdish territories when ISIS swept in. He gave his name only as Taha. Taha, who had been a police officer for eight years, said commanding officers in the Iraqi security forces had ignored a surge in extremist violence in Mosul in the months leading up to the city's fall.

The bleak situation in the Iraqi military looks unlikely to change soon. U.S. military advisers will filter in gradually, working first with a few units in Baghdad, American officials said. Some may be deployed to the battalion level. They will initially take on an assessment role, reporting back on the state of the Iraqi military and its needs. With Iraq's armed forces in a shambles, only with substantial outside assistance will Baghdad be able to turn the tide of the war, analysts and officials say. Iraqi officials say their needs are wide-ranging and start with U.S. airstrikes.

Some of the most effective tools in the Iraqi arsenal are propeller planes and helicopters mounted with U.S.-supplied Hellfire missiles. But two Iraqi officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media, said Sunday that they have run out of missiles, although a delivery is expected within days. Hamid al-Maliki, an air force commander, said intelligence-sharing has improved as the U.S. government has increased surveillance and reconnaissance. Ten ScanEagle surveillance drones are expected to be delivered in the next 10 days, he said. The army is attempting to regroup, though it will probably take years to restructure.

Troops and police officers who have sought to return to the security forces are quietly being organized on the border of Iraq's Kurdish region, said Maan and Maliki. "We are opening new bases and reconstructing units that collapsed in occupied areas," Maliki said. Maan said the new forces include army, police and local volunteers. "Now is not a time to distinguish between army and police, anyone who is willing to work will work," he said. But Jabar Yawar, a spokesman for the Kurdish pesh merga security forces that control the front line between the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan and ISIS-occupied Mosul, denied that Iraqi forces were reconstituting units in that area.

"In Mosul and Salaheddin provinces, there is no Iraqi army or police or anything," Yawar said. And each day, ISIS appears to be capturing more ground, expanding its control to the villages at the margins of its burgeoning state, and along Iraq's border with Syria. "There is no resistance from the Iraqi army because it has no nationalism, no leadership," he said. "There is no sense of protection for the nation." DeYoung reported from Washington. Liz Sly in Baghdad and Abigail Hauslohner in Irbil contributed to this report.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraqi-military-facing-psychological-collapse-after-losses-desertions/2014/06/22/88ed659a-fa4a-11e3-8176-f2c941cf35f1_story.html

CAN THE ISLAMIC STATE OF SYRIA AND IRAQ EVER BE STOPPED?

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ISIS militants control every Iraqi-Syria border outpost. Militants seize more Iraq towns. Sunni militants have advanced through western Iraq after seizing a strategic Syrian border crossing. ISIS militants have seized control of every major border crossing from Syria into Iraq — as well as four critical towns in Iraq's western province. The radical group now controls large areas of both countries, and there are concerns that the Iraqi government could collapse.

The four towns fell in close succession, opening the Syrian border and areas in Syria controlled by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) to areas in western Iraq also held by the group. After a lightning offensive that began in the northern city of Mosul — Iraq's second-largest city — most of central and northern Iraq's Sunni Muslim-populated areas fell in 10 days. The militants have now refocused their efforts on western Iraq.

On Saturday evening, a large force of ISIS fighters came out of the Syrian desert to attack the last major border crossing in Iraq government hands at the town of Qaim, taking control of it late Saturday night in what local residents described as a vicious battle that destroyed the government forces in the area. Meanwhile, jihadists fighting in Syria's war on Sunday put to use for the first time American-made Humvees that they seized during a lightning offensive in Iraq this month, a monitor said.



An image tweeted by radical Islamic group ISIS publicising mass executions



Defenders: A show of force to warn off ISIS. Armed Iraqi Shiite militiamen, the followers of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, parade in the oil rich province of Kirkuk, northern Iraq. Source: AP



Iraqi armed Shiite militiamen during a parade in the northern oil rich province of Kirkuk, Iraq. Source: AP



Militants stand with a captured Iraqi Army Humvee at a checkpoint some 250 kilometres north of Baghdad, Iraq. Source:AP



Peshmerga military direct traffic at a Kurdish Check point on June 14, 2014 in Kalak, Iraq. Picture: Getty Images Source:NewsComAu



Smoke billows from an Iraqi oil refinery north of Baghdad after an ISIS attack. Picture: USGS/NASA/Getty ImagesSource: Getty Images



Young jihadi: A child is pictured on an ISIS-supporting Twitter feed wearing a balaclava and holding a sign saying 'God is greatest'. Source: Supplied.



Terror: Refugee families huddle at a relative's house after they fled from the Shiite village of Beshir in northern Iraq. Source: AP

ISIS used the armoured vehicles to capture the villages of Eksar and Maalal in Aleppo province, which borders Turkey, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It came after heavy fighting against the Islamic Front and its al-Qaeda-affiliated ally, the Al-Nusra Front, said the Observatory, a Britain-based group that gets its information from a network of sources on the ground.

The two villages are located near the town of Azaz, which ISIS militiamen abandoned at the end of February under attack from rebels fighting to oust Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. ISIS, which espouses a radical interpretation of Islam and aims to set up a state stretching across the Syria-Iraq border, is now expected to launch a bid to retake Azaz. ISIS seized the Humvees and sent them to Syria after Iraqi soldiers abandoned them during a surprise Sunni jihadist offensive that claimed Iraq's second city of Mosul and swathes of other territory in mid-June.

Also on Sunday, ISIS gunmen abducted 20 Kurdish students on the road between Hasakeh and Qamishli in north-eastern Syria, said the Observatory. It comes three weeks after ISIS kidnapped 145 Kurdish students in Aleppo, as well as 193 Kurdish civilians at Qabasine village in the same province. Parents of five students who managed to escape said the jihadists demanded that they join them in the fighting. Kurdish militias, who are also trying to expand their autonomous region, have fought for months with ISIS, which has been seeking to seize from their control oilfields in northern and eastern areas.

<http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/can-the-islamic-state-of-syria-and-iraq-ever-be-stopped-isis-militants-control-every-iraqisyrria-border-outpost/story-fnh81ifq-1226963390724>



INVISIBLE SHEIKH: ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI, LEADER OF ISIS, IS THE HEIR TO OSAMA BIN LADEN

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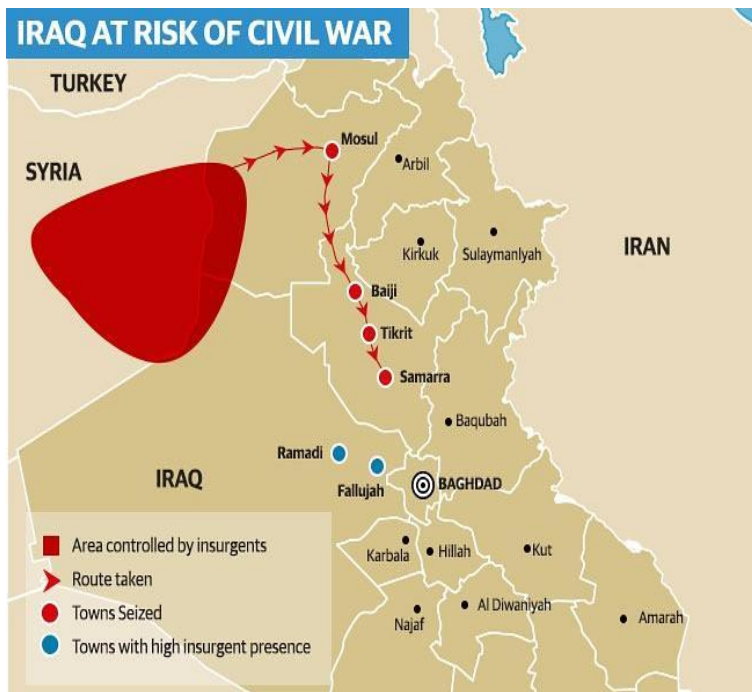
He is the heir to Osama bin Laden's mantle as the world's most notorious terrorist. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the nom de guerre (war name) of the commander of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the fundamentalist organisation that has dramatically seized two of Iraq's biggest cities over the past two days. Released by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior on January 29, 2014, the photograph is purportedly of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Picture: AFP Source: AFP.

In an extraordinary tactical success, his jihadist followers are in striking distance of Baghdad, the nation's capital. Baghdadi has grand ambitions. ISIS promotes his Messianic visions of a Middle East ruled by fundamentalist Islamists. Baghdadi wants an Islamic state (caliphate) that spans from Syria to Iraq and maybe even further, all while claiming to be a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. But, compared to Bin Laden, he brings a very different personality to his mission. He is a man of mystery, sometimes referred to as the "Invisible Sheikh".

THE FACELESS MAN OF TERROR. Baghdadi is not the kind of terrorist mastermind who sits in a cave and taunts the world with video messages, as Bin Laden lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda's core organisation, is known for. Far from it. Footage of the elusive terrorist is non-existent. There are only two photographs widely circulated of him.

One released by the United States — which has a \$10 million bounty on his head — another, below, circulated by the Iraqi government this year. He is known by several names, including Abu Du'a and Dr Ibrahim. But while the outside world might not hear much from him, there is a reason al-Baghdadi has garnered so much jihadist support. Counter-terrorism experts attribute his extensive support base to his action-man persona.

Richard Barrett, a former counterterrorism chief at MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, said: "For the last 10 years or more, (Zawahiri) has been holed up in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area and hasn't really done very much more than issue a few statements and videos. "Whereas Baghdadi has done an amazing amount — he has captured cities, he has mobilised huge amounts of people, he is killing ruthlessly throughout Iraq and Syria." "If you were a guy who wanted action, you would go with Baghdadi."



Picture: News Corp Australia Source: News Com Au

HORROR CRIMES. And Baghdadi has certainly achieved things. Just take a look at the broad swath of land ISIS has claimed across Iraq and Syria. His brutal tactics are notorious. And according to the Brookings Institution, that's one of the reasons why al-Qaeda's core organisation disavowed ISIS in February. Yes, the organisation is even too brutal for al-Qaeda (plus there's some testy internal political matters). Life under the ISIS regime can be cruel.

In the parts of Syria under its reign, beheadings are a common punishment and unveiled women are harassed on the streets, according to a dossier by The Economist. Its car bombs have killed scores of Iraqi civilians. "(ISIS) has even opened fire on Syrian civilians protesting against its behaviour," the newspaper wrote earlier this year. It is little wonder an estimated half a million people fled their homes out of fear when ISIS took over Mosul this week. They may not be the last who run for their lives, chased by the warriors of a mystery man.

<http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/invisible-sheikh-abu-bakr-albaghdadi-leader-of-isis-is-the-heir-to-osama-bin-laden/story-fnh81ifq-1226952214891>