



THE RESURGENCE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ DURING COVID-19

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With the entire world fighting a global pandemic, the Islamic State (IS) has not abandoned its idea to partially gain control of Iraq. Currently, the Iraqi government has concentrated most of its forces in the battle against Covid-19, issuing a nation-wide lockdown to prevent further infections. Nonetheless, the fear of illness has not pushed away IS militias who have carried on several attacks since the start of the spread.

As of the beginning of May, a suicide bomber attacked the intelligence headquarters in Kirkuk, a couple of days later a military-controlled checkpoint in northern Baghdad was ambushed in the middle of the night, and in the days following this attack many others occurred in the northern areas of Iraq where the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is settled. One may believe the nation-wide lockdown due to Covid-19 has played a fundamental role in the resurgence of IS in Iraq, as police and military officers are busy patrolling towns and many Iraqi government operations against the Islamic State have been frozen.



Though, the recent withdrawal of the United States (US) has also left an open scenario that allows IS to regain its control – as may be seen in Kirkuk, where the US has already left the territory and IS did not hesitate to attack it first. NATO, as well, suspended its operations due to the Covid-19 outbreak – though, it is believed they will resume their operations as soon as the virus is eradicated.ⁱ This brief study wants to analyze the alleged resurgence of IS in Iraq, as the organization remains weak withstanding its recent initiatives. It also wants to understand the causes of this reawakening: if Covid-19 has indeed played a central role and if there are other external or internal (as the dispute with the KRG) inputs that have challenged these attacks.

A Brief Historical Excursus on the Islamic State in Iraq

The Republic of Iraq has always been a battleground for IS militias, who have desired to gain control of the territory since the beginning of the self-proclaimed caliphate. Many battles have taken place in Iraq – mostly in the northern regions of the KRG, and at the border with Syria and Iran. Many Iraqi towns had fallen under IS control in 2014 after the militias penetrated the country through the Syrian border. However, since 2017, the country has officially defeated IS with a series of offensives carried on by the US-led coalition, the Kurdish *peshmerga*, and the Iraqi Army.

As previously stated, Iraq has been the battlefield of some of the most important operations against the Islamic State in the Middle East, as the 2015 Offensive of Mosul and its following liberation in 2017. This first offensive was launched by the Kurdish *peshmerga* who targeted IS-controlled routes in and out of Mosul to weaken their supplies. What followed was a series of US airstrikes to cut the militias off from any external communication. Initially, the coalition wanted to liberate Mosul that same year, though IS had just conquered Ramadi, one of the largest cities in Iraq, consequently postponing any foreign or internal intervention. However, two years later Mosul got liberated after one year of



intensive fights and attacks, which heavily hit the entire Iraqi and Kurdish community in the area, as well as IS militias who found themselves extremely weakened and forced to escape Iraq.ⁱⁱ

Ever since the liberation of Mosul, Iraq has had very few IS-led attacks, mostly sporadic and rudimentary. Notwithstanding this positive data, just recently the Islamic State has intensified its attacks in the country. These offensives have turned out to be highly sophisticated compared to those portrayed in 2014, when they initially entered Iraq, and surprisingly organized – since IS has lost control of several of its territories in Syria and recently saw the fall of their leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (killed by a US airstrike in October 2019). As previously stated, one could believe the nationwide lockdown imposed by the Iraqi central government, and its governates, could be the reason behind this partial new resurgence of IS offensives. However, many other factors have influenced these recent attacks, as the US withdrawal and the domestic instabilities with the KRG.

The Global Pandemic and Domestic Instabilities

In February the first case of Covid-19 was registered in Iraq and consequently confirmed to have spread throughout all the governates of Iraq hitting the KRG stronger (26% of the cases were in KRG). The Kurdish Ministry of Health, along with the Iraqi one, worked hard on testing all those entering the country and all those with symptoms, though the World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed a big disparity throughout the 19 governates in terms of testing. The KRG was the first governate that issued a region-wide lockdown following a peek in cases after many gatherings that did not respect the WHO guidelines on prevention. Following the KRG decision, many other governates imposed a lockdown, or curfew, causing the entire country of Iraq to be completely 'shut'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Iraq, as many other countries, has suffered twice during this Covid-19 pandemic: it is currently fighting the virus, but, for more than a



decade, it has been fighting a global war on terrorism and a domestic dispute based on sectarianism. When discussing sectarianism in Iraq, it is important to mention that even if the Kurdish minority now benefits of its own territory, conflicts with the central government have never eased. Just recently, this dispute has once again risen a strong domestic debate and could maybe come to an end. The dispute could ease mainly because, during the first week of May, the Council of Representatives of Iraq gave confidence to its new Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, ending a long period of political deadlock and mass protests.^{iv} Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi has appointed and nominated many Kurdish representatives within his cabinet and has publicly vowed to resolve differences between the Iraqi central government and the KRG, proposing Baghdad and Erbil to work through a new Constitution. This new 'opening' of the Prime Minister recalls when, in the 1960s, General Qasim gave Mustafa M. Barzani a position within his newly conquered Iraq to then turn his back to the Kurdish community. However, General Qasim became Prime Minister with a *coup d'état*, while Al-Kadhimi with a confidence vote winning the trust of the KRG representatives. Plus, the domestic instabilities in Iraq today are completely different than those in the past, and all aim to end a common war: IS and Covid-19.

Although the domestic dispute might seem to have found an end, the global fight on both IS and Covid-19 has not. The initial non-cooperation between Erbil and Baghdad has given space to IS, who recently began filling in void space and occupying these now-deserted areas. As previously mentioned, on April 28th the Islamic State conducted a suicide bombing in Kirkuk right in front of the intelligence headquarters, injuring three security officers.^v This was not a deadly attack, though it showed how IS still has the capability to infiltrate the population. Plus, an Iraqi official declared that the intelligence forces *"had knowledge that IS would carry out a suicide operation against the Intelligence Directorate but did not know on which day"*,^{vi} again demonstrating how IS regained partial control of the area. Consequently, this attack did not come by surprise,



especially because IS militias had carried on minor attacks always in the province of Kirkuk, as well as in those of Diyala and Salahaddin. An important consideration must be done on this attack: Kirkuk is an area in which the US had many of its bases, though due to the recent withdrawal the area is now out of its control.^{vii} Therefore, this is a major factor to consider, due to the fact that IS militias are trying to regain control of the area by filling in empty gaps left by the US and its coalition as well as by the Iraqi Army now fighting Covid-19.

A second attack carried out by IS, which is important to mention, is their offensive against an Iraqi Army-controlled checkpoint in northern Baghdad, near Mkesheefeh. This ambush turned out to be much more sophisticated than those usually used by IS militias, as it was done during the night and at the exact moment the federal police is usually absent – killing nine officers.^{viii} Again, this shows how IS has risen its activity on the ground taking advantage of the fact that Iraqi police officers are occupied patrolling towns to enforce lockdown due to Covid-19.

Notwithstanding the fact that IS has just recently regained control of some partial areas, the Chief of Staff at the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, Jabar Yawar, recently declared that *“According to our data, the group increased its activities in 2018 and 2019, especially in Kurdistan areas outside of the Kurdistan Region administration, including Diyala, Hamrin, Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, and Qarachogh. In Qarachogh, they even established, bases”*.^{ix}

Consequently, according to the KRG, the fight against IS actually resumed by the end of 2019, even if its deadliest attacks happened during the Covid-19 outbreak. In fact, the KRG has always been the target of IS attacks, as it is considered as the most vulnerable area due to the domestic dispute it has with Baghdad. The lack of Iraqi Army in the KRG has been considered as an important factor by IS militias, even if the Kurds benefit from their own fighters, the *peshmerga*. However, the US-withdrawal is much more relevant when discussing the KRG, as the US has always been an important



ally of the Kurds and its departure from the territory has left many vulnerabilities. Clearly, Covid-19 gave IS the input to resume its attacks, though the Baghdad-Erbil dispute, as well as the US-withdrawal, have indeed played a fundamental role.

Possible Scenarios

Undoubtedly IS regained activity in Iraq, and it remains an international and regional threat. However, its recent failures in Syria are proof of the fact that it has a weak organizational apparatus. The death of Al-Baghdadi has left an empty space within the militias, who now find themselves carrying out sophisticated attacks without a certain method. Both the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish *peshmerga* recently began offensives to prevent any new attacks and to avoid any further resurgence of the group.^x Though the new political administration in Iraq, which does give hope of reconciliation between Baghdad and Erbil, is still uncertain and is currently fighting a global pandemic in a country where instabilities have reigned for the past decade. Any possible scenario may vary according to the effects of Covid-19, both economic and social-wise.^{xi} The consequences of this global pandemic are clear. Iraq is collapsing under the rise of oil-prices, which summed up with a possible resurgence of IS and a non-resolution with the KRG may cause irreversible effects within the newly appointed government.

Inevitably, IS will remain a major enemy for Iraq and the Middle East, and they will have to continue to fight against it by themselves (or with future new parties, as – possibly/maybe – Russia). Both Baghdad and Erbil are torn between the fight against IS and the possible consequences of Covid-19; though, one positive factor could emerge, as the dispute between the two Iraqi and Kurdish administrations could ease as a consequence of these events. However, power-politics is an unstable game, and it is unknown, as of today, if any foreign country might (re)introduce themselves with



the geopolitical equilibrium of the region. This is a scenario that also may vary, always, according to the consequences of Covid-19.

ⁱ Kamaran Palani, "Iraq and the US Withdrawal Conundrum", *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iraq-withdrawal-conundrum-200218182253463.html>.

ⁱⁱ Myriam Benrard, "Mosul, Sunni Arabs and the Day After", found in Andrea Plebani (ed.), "After Mosul. Re-Inventing Iraq", *ISPI Report*, June 2017. Available at: https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/Rapporto_IRAQ/AFTER_MOSUL_PLEBANI_cap.4.pdf?platform=hootsuite.

ⁱⁱⁱ Worldometer Covid-19, *Country Case: Iraq*. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/iraq/> (last visited on May 18, 2020).

^{iv} Kurdistan's Weekly Brief, *The Washington Kurdish Institute*, April 28, 2020. Available at: <https://dckurd.org/2020/04/28/kurdists-weekly-brief-april-28-2020/>.

^v Asharq Al-Awsat Editorial Board, "Iraqi Official: ISIS Attacks on Intelligence Bureau Wounds 3 Security Personnel", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 28, 2020. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2257221/iraqi-official-isis-attack-intelligence-bureau-wounds-3-security-personnel>.

^{vi} Asharq Al-Awsat Editorial Board, "Iraqi Official: ISIS Attacks on Intelligence Bureau Wounds 3 Security Personnel", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 28, 2020. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2257221/iraqi-official-isis-attack-intelligence-bureau-wounds-3-security-personnel>.

^{vii} Kurdistan's Weekly Brief, *The Washington Kurdish Institute*, April 28, 2020. Available at: <https://dckurd.org/2020/04/28/kurdists-weekly-brief-april-28-2020/>.

^{viii} Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, "ISIS Exploits Iraq's Coronavirus Lockdown to Set Up Attacks", *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2020. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/isis-exploits-iraqs-coronavirus-lockdowns-to-step-up-attacks/2020/05/07/1513edee-8f98-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93_story.html.

^{ix} Lawk Ghafari, "ISIS militants kill police officer in Hawija checkpoint attack: military", *Rûdaw*, April 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/120420201>.

^x Baghdad-Fadhel al-Nashmi, "Iraq Launches Operation to Pursue ISIS Elements After Recent Attacks", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 4, 2020. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2266751/iraq-launches-operation-pursue-isis-elements-after-recent-attacks>.

^{xi} To read more about Iraq's economic collapse due to the Covid-19 outbreak, please read: Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, "Iraq's economy is collapsing under the double blow of sinking oil prices and coronavirus lockdown", *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2020. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqs-economy-is-collapsing-under-the-double-blow-of-sinking-oil-prices-and-coronavirus-lockdown/2020/05/04/61b26a3e-8897-11ea-80df-d24b35a568ae_story.html.