MIDDLE EAST

Sunni Militants Drive Iraqi Army Out of Mosul

By **SUADAD AL-SALHY** and **TIM ARANGO** JUNE 10, 2014



Background on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamist group that appears to be in control of the second-largest city in Iraq.

Yaser Al-Khodor/Reuters.

BAGHDAD — Sunni militants spilling over the border from Syria seized control Tuesday of the northern city of Mosul, Iraq's second largest, in

the most stunning success yet in a rapidly widening insurgency that threatens to drag the region into war.

Having consolidated control over Sunni-dominated Nineveh Province, armed gunmen were heading on the main road to Baghdad, Iraqi officials said, and had already taken over parts of Salahuddin Province. Thousands of civilians fled south toward Baghdad and east toward the autonomous region of Kurdistan, where security is maintained by a fiercely loyal army, the peshmerga.

The Iraqi Army apparently crumbled in the face of the militant assault, as soldiers dropped their weapons, shed their uniforms for civilian clothes and blended in with the fleeing masses. The militants freed thousands of prisoners and took over military bases, police stations, banks and provincial headquarters, before raising the black flag of the jihadi group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria over public buildings. The bodies of soldiers, police officers and civilians lay scattered in the streets.

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Insurgents seized military bases, police stations and provincial offices in Mosul on Tuesday, and soldiers offered little resistance. Reuters

"They took control of everything, and they are everywhere," said one soldier who fled the city, and gave only his first name, Haidar.

The swift capture of large areas of the city by militants aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria represented a climactic moment on a long trajectory of Iraq's unraveling since the withdrawal of American forces at the end of 2011.

The rising insurgency in Iraq seemed likely to add to the foreign policy woes of the Obama administration, which has faced sharp criticism for its swap of five Taliban officers for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl and now must answer questions about the death of five Americans by friendly fire in Afghanistan on Monday night.

Critics have long warned that America's withdrawal of troops from Iraq, without leaving even a token force, invited an insurgent revival. The apparent role of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in Tuesday's attack helps vindicate those, among them the former ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, who have called for arming more moderate groups in the Syrian conflict.

Heavy fighting between Iraqi security forces and Sunni militants erupted Saturday in Mosul. By Tuesday, extremists had taken over the city, freeing thousands of prisoners and seizing military bases, police stations, banks, the airport and the provincial governor's headquarters. The United

Nations estimates that 500,000 Iraqis have fled Mosul.



Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki ordered a state of emergency for the entire country and called on friendly governments for help, without mentioning the United States specifically.

In Washington, the State Department spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, said in a statement that the United States was “deeply concerned about the events that have transpired in Mosul,” and that the Obama administration supported a “strong, coordinated response to push back this aggression.” The statement said the administration would provide “all appropriate assistance to the government of Iraq” and called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria “not only a threat to the stability of Iraq, but a threat to the entire region.”

Mosul was the last major urban area to be pacified by American troops, and when they left, the United States contended that Iraq was on the path to peace and democracy.

Even as insurgents consolidated control of Mosul and surrounding Nineveh Province on Tuesday, they looked to other targets. They cut off

a portion of the main highway that links the city with Baghdad, the capital, and secured villages near Kirkuk, a major city that is in dispute between Arabs and Kurds, according to security officials.

The Growing Strength of ISIS

A broader Sunni insurgency that has been growing in neighboring Syria has shown increased audacity in Iraq.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, is an expanded version of Al Qaeda in Iraq that controls a number of cities in northeastern Syria and western Iraq. Its brutal tactics alienated it from the Syrian rebel movement, as did the fact it has emphasized the establishment of an Islamic state over the fight against Mr. Assad. It was officially disowned by Al Qaeda in February.

The Sunni insurgent group has emerged as the leading force for the foreign fighters streaming into Syria, exploiting the chaos of the civil war as it tries to lay the groundwork for an Islamic state.

Al Qaeda's central leadership cut ties with ISIS earlier this year as it rushed to build an Islamic state on its own terms, antagonizing the wider Syrian rebel movement.

For more than six months, the militants have maintained control of Falluja, in Iraq's Sunni-Arab Anbar province, a city where hundreds of Americans died trying to crush an insurgency. While Falluja carries symbolic importance to the United States, the seizure of Mosul, a city of 1.4 million with a mix of ethnicities, sects and religions, is more ominous for the stability of Iraq.

"It's a shock," said James Jeffrey, a former United States ambassador to Iraq. "It's extremely serious. It's far more serious than Falluja."

Mosul is a transportation hub for goods coming from Turkey and elsewhere. An important oil pipeline is nearby, carrying nearly 15 percent of the country's oil flow to a port on the Turkish coast.

The chaos in Mosul also illustrated how the violence in Iraq has increasingly merged with the civil war in Syria, as extremists now operate on both sides of the porous border. On Tuesday, local officials claimed that many of the fighters were jihadists who had come from the lawless frontier that divides Iraq and Syria, a region where they have increasingly operated with impunity even as President Bashar al-Assad has reclaimed ground lost to the insurgents elsewhere in Syria.



A Kurdish security officer stood guard as families fleeing the violence in the Iraqi city of Mosul waited at a checkpoint near Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan. Reuters

Osama al-Nujaifi, the Iraqi Parliament speaker, a Sunni from Mosul, called the fighting a “foreign invasion of Iraq, carried out by terrorist groups from different countries.”

The rout in Mosul was a humiliating defeat for Iraq’s security forces, led by Prime Minister Maliki and his Shiite-dominated government, and equipped and trained by the United States at a cost of billions of dollars. As the insurgency has gained strength over the last year, Mr. Maliki has been criticized for pursuing security policies that alienated ordinary Sunnis, such as sweeps that rounded up hundreds of men, innocent and guilty alike, and the arrest of the wives of suspected militants.

Referring to the security forces in Mosul, Mr. Jeffrey, now a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said, “they had lost the support of the people because they had a sectarian policy, and I saw it with my own eyes.”

Highlighting the gravity of the situation, some of Iraq’s Shiite religious authorities in the holy city of Najaf issued statements Tuesday in support of the army, which is dominated by Shiites. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the top Shiite spiritual leader in the world, emphasized his “support to the sons within the security forces.” A representative in Najaf for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, went further,

urging Shiites to join the security forces.



Thousands of residents fled Mosul in northern Iraq after the city was seized by militants belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, an extremist group.

Uncredited/Associated Press

As audacious as the assault on Mosul was, it was not entirely surprising. Fighting had raged for days there, and in recent years, analysts say, militants had raised millions of dollars a month there through extortion and kidnapping. “ISIS has been targeting Mosul for two years,” said Jessica D. Lewis, research director at the Institute for the Study of War, referring to the militant group.

Now, Mosul, which nearly became part of French-controlled Syria after World War I, when the allies redrew the map of the Middle East, could become an even more important base for the group as it pursues its stated goals of erasing the border with Syria and establishing an Islamic state that transcends both.

Ayham Kamel, director of the Middle East and North Africa for the Eurasia Group, a political risk consulting firm in Washington, said in an assessment emailed to clients that the militant group would “use cash reserves from Mosul’s banks, military equipment from seized military and police bases and the release of 2,500 fighters from local jails to bolster its military and financial capability.”

For Mr. Maliki, the violence in Mosul represents a significant political challenge as he tries to secure a third term as prime minister. His coalition won the most seats in Parliament in national elections in April, but not a majority, and he has been negotiating with other

factions to form a new government.



Families at a checkpoint west of Erbil, in the autonomous region of Kurdistan. Civilians from Mosul fled east into Kurdistan and south toward the capital, Baghdad, after Tuesday's attack. Safin Hamed/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"This will raise serious questions about Maliki's leadership," said Mr. Jeffrey, adding, "The country has to figure out if it wants Maliki to continue as prime minister."

The Mosul assault came in a week when Mr. Maliki's government has been trying to beat back a surging militant offensive concentrated in central and northern Iraq. In the cities of Samarra and Ramadi, the militants have stormed police stations, government offices and even a university. On Saturday, car bombs killed scores of people across Baghdad in one of the deadliest coordinated attacks in weeks.

After militants captured Falluja at the end of last year, the United States rushed guns, ammunition and Hellfire missiles to Iraq, but those seemed to make little difference. In some cases, the weapons were captured by insurgents in Anbar, and on Tuesday, it appeared that more American equipment had fallen into the hands of the militants, including American-made Humvees.

The army responded to the rout on Tuesday by bombing at least one

military base that had been captured by the militants, but there was no immediate sign of a broader offensive to reclaim the city. Early Tuesday morning, militants stormed the offices of the provincial governor and later in the day, dozens of army and police vehicles were burning in the streets, witnesses said.

Residents said militants started moving into the city the night before, taking positions that had been abandoned by the army. Around 1 a.m., one resident, who gave his name as Abu Mustafa, left his home and found militants in sport utility vehicles, some dressed in jeans, others in Afghan-style clothing. Some, he said, spoke Arabic in accents other than Iraqi.

“They greeted us, and when they saw that we were scared they said, ‘We are not here to fight you. Just stay away and do not interfere,’ ” he recalled. “ ‘We are here to fight Maliki’s army, not you.’ ”

By nightfall on Tuesday, the city was calm, residents said, but there was no electricity, water supplies were running low and there was little fuel to run generators. The bodies of militants had been taken away for burial, but the corpses of security forces still lay in the streets.

Suadad Al-Salhy reported from Baghdad, and Tim Arango from Istanbul. Kareem Fahim contributed reporting from Amman, Jordan, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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