Iraq

How did it come to this?

The crisis in Iraq has roots going far back in history. But recently the folly of interfering outsiders and sectarian leaders within has made matters a lot worse

Jun 21st 2014  |  CAIRO AND ERBILL  |  From the print edition

TENSION had long been mounting in Sunni-majority parts of Iraq. When it broke on June 10th, violence spread with the force of a flash flood in the desert. Within 48 hours of seizing Mosul, Iraq’s second-biggest city, Sunni rebels had barrelled down a 200-mile stretch of the Tigris river valley, scattering troops loyal to Iraq’s Shia-dominated central government and threatening Baghdad, the capital.

The surge was spearheaded by a fearsomely brutal, al-Qaeda-inspired group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), but it was bolstered by a range of other armed Sunnis and was backed by many ordinary citizens. It has wrested the Sunni quadrant in the north and west of Iraq from government control. And it has driven a Sunni wedge between the Shia-majority south of the country and the autonomous region of Kurdistan in the north and east (see article (http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604628-kurds-are-benefiting-mess-iraq-will-independence-follow) ). All but a wisp of the line of around 1,000km (621 miles) that separates the Kurds from the rest of Iraq now abuts rebel-held or -infested territory.

Baghdad itself is unlikely to fall any time soon. The insurgents, numbering at most tens of thousands and armed with light weapons, are wary of grappling with a city of 7m people, most of them, as in Iraq as a whole, Shias viscerally opposed to the rebels. Besides, despite chilling calls by ISIS for the slaughter of Shias, most of its more numerous allies within Iraq say they seek not conquest but either autonomy for Sunnis or a fairer share of power in a united Iraq. They also fear a full-blown return to the grisly sectarian warfare that erupted in 2006-07, when scores of thousands died and at least a million fled their homes.

Iraq’s poorly led but far larger and more heavily armed government forces may eventually roll
back the Sunni advance. For now they man a ragged defensive arc around the northern and western approaches to Baghdad that is 60-90km deep. Skirmishing has been continuous here in recent days, from Falluja and Ramadi in the west to Samarra in the north and Baquba in the northeast. The fall of Falluja, an often-troubled city of some 200,000, to Sunni rebels last December should have sounded much wider alarm. The army’s inability to dislodge the insurgents suggests that progress will be difficult.

How did Iraq, a country the world has happily ignored since American troops departed in 2011, come to such a pass? The signs of an accelerating slide have been obvious for months, though the rot goes back further. Some still blame the drawing of “wrong” colonial borders nearly a century ago. Others say the Americans, whose invasion in 2003 was, ironically, excused in part by empty claims of al-Qaeda penetration, wrecked what was left of Iraq’s administrative and social fabric after the sadistic rule of Saddam Hussein. Fingers often also point at Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose rivalry has helped stoke sectarian mayhem in Syria as well as Iraq, and poisons Sunni-Shia relations more widely.

Yet Iraqis themselves bear much blame. The historically dominant but minority Sunnis have never acknowledged their reduced status or indeed their numerical inferiority since Saddam Hussein’s fall. They let resistance to America’s intrusion morph into a brutal, religiously bigoted movement. They turned their noses up at Iraq’s new democracy and squabbled endlessly, failing to unite behind credible leaders, so encouraging the now Shia-dominated establishment in Baghdad to rule over them with bribes, threats and thuggery.

Iraq’s Shias, for their part, have largely flocked behind rabble-rousing, unscrupulous politicians. Those men, including the prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, during his eight years in office, have done little to build sound or just institutions. Instead they have played political games, packing offices with cronies and siphoning cash from the oil geyers that Iraq sits on top of. This system of spoils has signally failed to lessen the misery of most Iraqis.

In response to the admittedly egregious and constant provocation of attacks by Sunni terrorists, Shia leaders have countenanced or sponsored vicious militias bent on vengeance, some armed and financed by Iran. Mr Maliki himself has repeatedly displayed a paranoid sectarian streak. Ignoring American pleas, he failed to support the Sahwa, or Awakening, a 100,000-strong Sunni tribal force that in 2007-08 helped stanch civil war by hounding terrorists, including the progenitors of ISIS. With little heed to Sunni feeling, he arrested not only prominent Sunnis on
flimsy charges of terrorism, but thousands of ordinary folk. “The army was here to control, not protect us,” says Ahmed Hisham, a 22-year-old student from Mosul.

Mr Maliki not only brushed off Sunni protests that have festered for more than two years. In April 2013 his troops shot at least 50 protesters dead at a peaceful sit-in in the Sunni city of Hawija. Rather than reach out after the capture of Falluja by angry rebels, he sent his army to shell the city and helicopters to dump barrel-bombs, even as Iranian-backed militias openly recruited and dispatched Iraqi Shias to fight against Sunnis in Syria.

Mr Maliki has been equally unsubtle in trying to keep the Kurds in check. Repeatedly he has withheld the region’s share of the federal budget as punishment for Kurdish moves towards greater independence. Baghdad’s control of oil revenue made this tempting, but the payback has now come. In response to pleas for help against ISIS Kurdish leaders have smiled and shrugged.

A débâcle such as Mosul might have toppled a different prime minister. Mr Maliki has instead sought to turn it to his advantage, lashing out at Kurdish and Sunni leaders for purported treachery. Terrified by the renewed spectre of Sunni terrorism, many Shias have grudgingly fallen in behind him, accepting that now is not the time for change at the top. Thousands have also rallied to calls by religious leaders to join the army. For the time being a wary stalemate holds, but the new, precarious balance marks a shift that is portentous. The partial Sunni uprising—for this is how most Iraqis view recent events, rather than as a simple lunge for power by ISIS terrorists—presents multiple challenges.

One of these is presented by ISIS itself, with its ambition to create a medieval-style Islamic state bridging the Sunni parts of both Syria and Iraq. Few among Syria’s Arab Sunni majority of around 70% or the quarter or so of Iraq’s 33m people who are Sunni share that dream. Most Sunnis reject ISIS’s brutality, its imposition of ultra-puritanical Islamic laws, and the fact that perhaps a third of its 12,000-odd fighters is made up of foreigners. In a BBC interview, one Sunni ex-general from Mosul described his fellow rebels as “barbarians”.

But ISIS cannot be taken lightly. The group, which evolved from the most radically jihadist wing of resistance to American occupation, was indeed nearly wiped out by the Sahwa. Helped by Mr Maliki’s obtuse policies, it had bounced back even before its recent windfall in Mosul. The latest ISIS yearbook, a document not unlike a corporate report, details no fewer than 9,540 attacks, including 1,083 assassinations, in Iraq alone last year, not including its operations in Syria.

The other half of the caliphate

The war in Syria, which ISIS joined in late 2012, brought far bigger opportunities than the protection rackets and murder it already excelled at in Iraq. Jihad against the awful regime of
President Bashar Assad has attracted a flood of proclaimed holy warriors from across the world, including France and Britain. Cash has gushed from private donors in the Gulf, eager to help what they see as a noble cause, as well as from the ransoming of hostages. For the first time, too, ISIS has secured control of actual territory. It has made the north-central Syrian city of Raqqa a testing ground for its harsh brand of Islamic rule.

But as other Syrian rebels began to notice, Syria’s regime has largely avoided clashing with ISIS, sparking talk of links dating back to Mr Assad’s sponsorship of violent Iraqi resistance to America. The group’s goal of incorporating eastern Syria into a new state may have dovetailed with the Syrian government’s moves to concentrate its overstretched forces in the west, while chasing out floods of Sunni refugees.

As it increasingly dawned that ISIS was less bent on toppling Mr Assad’s regime than in creating one of its own, clashes between the rebels began to erupt. These have now expanded into a separate civil war. On June 17th the Syrian Islamic Council, a group of Sunni clerics that back the mainstream rebels’ cause, formally condemned ISIS as a stooge of Mr Assad.

This internecine bloodying within the ranks of supposed allies in Syria may be one reason that the group redirected its attentions to Iraq, though another factor could have prompted ISIS’s sudden attack earlier this month on Mosul, a city of 2m people. On June 4th Iraqi police are said to have scored a rare coup. In a raid near Mosul they killed a man believed to be the group’s second-ranking leader, capturing a trove of data on ISIS.

Perhaps fearful of new vulnerabilities, the group then seems to have hastily sealed a truce with rival Sunni groups it had been fighting only weeks before. Some sources describe a meeting of Sunni chiefs that included Izzat al-Douri, a vice-president under Saddam Hussein who is thought to lead one of Iraq’s larger underground Sunni rebel networks. Whatever the case, fierce clashes with government forces broke out in Mosul on June 5th—and five days later the city fell. Numerous reports suggest that Iraqi army and police commanders, some of them former Baathists, abandoned their posts, prompting lower ranks to flee. On June 17th Mr Maliki gave credence to such talk, dismissing four of his generals for dereliction of duty.

ISIS is riding high for the moment. The glee may not last. Syria’s regime, perhaps perturbed by ISIS’s success and suddenly keen to portray itself as an ally of the West in the fight against jihadist monsters, has for the first time mounted sustained aerial attacks on the group. In Iraq it is probably a matter of time before rival Sunnis decide that ISIS’s notoriety is bad for their cause.

This may not rescue Mr Maliki, who has pleaded for help from America and Iran. The kind of limited, tactical aid they might supply may not be enough to turn the tide decisively. Mr Maliki faces a stark choice. Either he must plunge his forces into a full-scale war of reconquest, at
untold cost in lives. Or he must embrace the remaking of Iraq into a looser, genuinely federal state. But his days as Iraq’s leader may be numbered, as the Americans began hinting heavily that they would give extra military help only if he speedily departed.

From the print edition: Middle East and Africa