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Civil war escalates in Iraq amid reports of sectarian massacres

By James Cogan

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The Sunni extremist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), supported by Sunni-based tribal militias, continued its offensive over the weekend to incorporate large areas of north-western Iraq into the territory it already controls in neighbouring Syria and Iraq's western Anbar province.

The events of the past week have starkly exposed the ethnic and sectarian fracturing of Iraq that the US deliberately fomented during its occupation from 2003 to 2011 and which has been further exacerbated by the instigation of a sectarian civil war in Syria by the Obama administration and its regional allies.

Heavy fighting has been underway since Sunday in Tal Afar, a city located just 60 kilometres to the east of the Syrian border and 40 kilometres west of the major city of Mosul. In a massive blow to the Iraqi government, ISIS fighters, who moved into Iraq from their bases in Syria, captured the Sunni suburbs of Mosul last week.

Tal Afar has a majority ethnic Turkmen Sunni population. It was a centre of resistance to the US occupation after the 2003 invasion and was subjected to a brutal counter-insurgency operation by the US military and Shiite government troops in September 2005. Much of the city was destroyed and 90 percent of its 300,000 citizens forced to flee. It was later rebuilt but, like most

ethnically and religiously mixed areas of Iraq, it has been wracked by continuous sectarian conflict since 2006, with the Sunni population accusing the government and the security forces of persecution.

There are no detailed reports of casualties from the weekend fighting. Reports indicate that government artillery and helicopters fired into residential areas, prompting the entry into the city by ISIS and Sunni militias. Thousands of civilians fled, joining the estimated 500,000 refugees who fled Mosul.

The predominantly Shiite Iraqi army units holding the city have reportedly mounted strong resistance, unlike the virtual disintegration of government forces when ISIS entered Mosul and advanced south to seize Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home city, and towns as close as 80 kilometres to Baghdad. Towns in the eastern province of Diyala, which borders Iran, have also been taken. By some estimates, as many as 90,000 troops and police deserted their positions in the face of the ISIS-led offensive.

The humiliating collapse of the US-trained and equipped security forces in the north provoked a panicked reaction within the Shiite ruling elite represented by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government. The leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued an appeal last Friday for men capable of bearing arms to volunteer to fight.

Thousands of Shiite militiamen, linked with either the governing parties or the movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, deployed from Baghdad to occupy Samarra. The city, 125 kilometres to the north of the capital, is the site of the one of the most important Shiite shrines, the Al-Askari Mosque.

The bombing of the mosque's historic golden dome by Sunni extremists in 2006 triggered a frenzy of indiscriminate violence against Sunnis by Shiite militias. The US occupation forces tacitly supported the mass killings that took place, as a means of terrorising the Sunni-based resistance.

Iraqi army units, reinforced by the Shiite militias, have begun counter-attacks to push ISIS and Sunni forces back toward Mosul. In blood-curdling speeches, Maliki vowed to recapture all lost territory. Leading Sunni political figures, however, including former Vice President Tariq al Hashemi, who fled Iraq under threat of arrest by Maliki, hailed the defeats suffered by the Shiite government as a "revolution" against a tyrannical regime. Scenes of popular celebration were broadcast from Mosul and Tikrit.

ISIS-linked sources claimed over the weekend to have executed 1,700 Shiite soldiers, police and government officials captured in the Tikrit area. The claims were accompanied by images of terrified prisoners standing in front of shallow trenches and facing what appeared to be a firing squad of ISIS fighters. Other images show mounds of bodies tossed into trenches.

While still unconfirmed, Shiite extremists will use the claims of such criminal atrocities to inflame sectarian passions, creating the danger of a new wave of murderous pogroms against the Sunni civilian population in Baghdad and other areas.

Open warfare could also break out between Maliki's government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which rules the majority Kurdish northern provinces as an autonomous zone. As Iraqi security forces collapsed in the north last week, Kurdish troops occupied the city of Kirkuk and Iraq's northern oil fields. Kurdish forces are also massed in the eastern districts of Mosul and may seek to control areas of the city now held by ISIS.

The Kurdish move to establish a grip over Kirkuk follows an increasingly bitter standoff over the KRG's efforts to independently export oil produced within its borders, with the assistance and support of Turkey. The KRG now has control over Iraq's entire northern oil production, either to use as a bargaining chip to insist that Baghdad bow down to its demands, or to enhance the economic foundations of a separate Kurdish state.

Iraq's descent into civil war and toward possible breakup also raises the prospect of open intervention by various regional powers.

Turkey, which has considerable economic interests in the stability of the Kurdish region and in the expansion of Kurdish control over oil resources, has threatened to send troops into northern Iraq to prevent attacks on Turkish citizens. On Sunday, it raised concerns over the fate of the Turkmen population of Tal Afar now living under ISIS rule.

Iran, which closely supports Maliki and the Iraqi Shiite parties, has already indicated it would deploy military forces into Iraq if Sunni extremists threatened Shiite religious sites. The *Wall Street Journal*, among other media outlets, has published unconfirmed claims that Iranian troops have crossed into Iraq to reinforce the Iraqi military.

The Sunni monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are the main financiers and arms suppliers of the Sunni rebels in Syria, are making little secret of their sympathy for the escalation of the Syrian conflict into a so-called Sunni revolution in Iraq against another Iranian-backed Shiite government.

The Obama administration's response to the catastrophic consequences of the US invasions and intrigues in the Middle East is to prepare to unleash more death and destruction. The aircraft carrier George HW Bush and support ships have deployed into the Persian Gulf to provide "additional flexibility should military options be required."