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Obama broods over an Iraqi odyssey

By M K Bhadrakumar

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At the end of a week of fierce criticism of his foreign policies in the Middle East, the US President Barack Obama broke his silence late Friday in a formal statement at the White House in Washington, DC, regarding the dramatic developments in northern Iraq resulting in the fall of Mosul and other places to the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) early last week.

The best part of the statement has been that Obama didn't repeat his favorite refrain that "all options are on the table" with regard to the crisis situation in Iraq.

One option at least is ruled out as of now - "boots on the ground". Obama was categorical he wouldn't dispatch combat troops to Iraq. He was clear this isn't America's war. On the other hand, he also took note of the need to support the Iraqi armed forces and pledged that the US intended to render assistance.

However, that bit of clarity is small consolation. Great ambiguities remain in Obama's statement, which put a question mark on US intentions.

For one thing, Obama alluded to "selective actions by our military", which would go hand in hand with a "challenging international effort to try to rebuild" Iraq. In sum, a long-term US military engagement could be on the cards.

When will the intervention begin? Obama clarified: "It is going to take several days", after making sure "we have good eyes on the situation there ... [and] we've gathered all the intelligence that's necessary" so that the operations are "targeted, they're precise and they're going to have an effect".

Washington has entered into consultations with other countries and by this week Obama hoped to have "a better sense" as to how they might "support an (international) effort". He stressed that "this is a regional problem and it is going to be a long-term problem." In other words, a cardinal principle of the so-called Obama Doctrine holds here - the US won't go in as lone ranger; a coalition of the willing becomes necessary.

The Iraqi Spring

Obama singled out the ISIL as the sole protagonist threatening Iraq and "eventually" American interests as well. But it becomes difficult to believe that with all the intelligence inputs at his command, Obama is unaware of what is almost universally understood by now, namely, that there are many fish in the Mosul pond and ISIL is only one of them.

The point is, erstwhile Ba'athist factions, army officers who had served under Saddam Hussein, disaffected Sunni tribal-sectarian groups, and others have been converging for sometime politically, and they have taken help from the Takfiri groups like the ISIL and Ansar al-Sunna which have well-trained fighters.

Eyewitness accounts from Mosul spoke of "foreign fighters" as having led the initial assault, who were soon replaced by Iraqi militias. If only Obama were to scan through the print media, he could have had a better picture of what really happened. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki wasn't really far off the mark to say there has been "deception".

Former Iraqi vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi, who has been living in exile in Turkey and Qatar, even hailed the fall of Mosul as the "Iraqi Spring". Quite obviously, the coup in Mosul has powerful foreign backers, too, and it so happens that they could be countries that financed, aided and abetted the Syrian conflict as well.

It will be the mother of all ironies if Obama invites these very same regional states to join the "challenging international effort" to stabilize Iraq and to try to rebuild that country.

Yet, Obama sees only the ISIL on his sights. This is the most intriguing part of his statement insofar as once a US military intervention in Iraq begins in some form in the coming days, the ISIL might well become the perfect alibi to extend that operation into Syria at some stage.

A US military operation in the Sunni heartlands of northern Iraq would most certainly mean the disruption of Iran's communication links with Syria.

Significantly, Obama said in his statement that the ISIL "could pose a threat eventually to American interests as well"; that there has been a spillover from Syria; and that the ISIL is "part of the reason" why the US remains engaged with the Syrian opposition.

Secondly, Obama repeatedly harped on a failure of leadership in Baghdad by calling attention to the rise of sectarianism in Iraq as the underlying factor of instability. No doubt, he is spot on by underscoring that "in the absence of accommodation among the various factions inside of Iraq, various military actions by the United States, by any outside nation, are not going to solve those problems over the long term and not going to deliver the kind of stability that we need."

Having said that, the hydra-headed beast of sectarianism in Iraq was created only by the US - in much the same way that Imperial Britain promoted Hindu-Muslim animosities in the Indian subcontinent in a

strategy of divide-and-rule - as the antithesis of the pluralism and diversity of Iraqi society with the intent to uproot the entrenched Saddam-era Iraqi nationalism, which the occupation forces dreaded.

Of course, there is nothing like it if a way could be found for genuine reconciliation in Iraq by delivering that country from the shackles of its present constitution resting on its present confessional foundations (which is also a legacy of the US occupation) and declaring the country to be a truly secular state.

But, alas, the probability of that happening is low, since the sectarian political process today is so far advanced and the sectarian and ethnic polarization is so very exacerbated - not only on Sunni-Shia lines but also in terms of the Kurdish identity, thanks to the US policies since the Iraq War in 1991.

The Iraqis may well find some degree of political equilibrium eventually in their confessional politics - as happened in Lebanon - but the danger today lurks somewhere else. The hard reality is that the coup in Mosul opens the door wide to outside intervention - not only in terms of projection of power by regional powers but also interference by the US, Western powers and even Israel.

Permanent interests

Mosul is an extremely complicated jigsaw puzzle that history bequeathed to the region. For Turkey, Mosul is the gateway to Diyarbakar, and its loss signifies the "unfinished business" of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and complicated the Kurdish question.

That dozens of Turks are being held hostage, including the Turkish consul-general, after last week's upsurge in Mosul is no accident.

Curiously, taking advantage of the fall of Mosul to the ISIL, the Kurdish Peshmerga owing allegiance to Massoud Barzani occupied Kirkuk (where the great oil fields of northern Iraq lie.) It is simply out of the question that the Peshmerga would willingly vacate Kirkuk.

Nor is it likely that in the foreseeable future, a superior Iraqi military force would be capable of dislodging from Kirkuk the Peshmerga, who number anywhere around a quarter million battle-hardened fighters.

In short, Kurdistan, which is politically the most cohesive region of Iraq, has just landed a fantastic bounty that promises to make it a very rich country. Now, there is no gainsaying the fact that Kurdistan is also a playpen for many foreign powers, starting from the US and Turkey. Enter geopolitics.

Simply put, Obama has consciously sidestepped the real issues that have surged in last week's happenings in Iraq. The bitter truth is that Iraq as a nation state is inexorably disintegrating into sectarian and ethnic mini-states.

What is unfolding is the culmination of what President George W Bush's hand-picked hatchet man Paul Bremer (who headed the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad 2003-2004) perpetrated on the Iraqi people by developing with chicanery and implementing with deliberation the present constitution based on a political system that represents confessional affiliations with a view to snuff out Iraqi nationalism.

On June 28, 2004 Bremer said in his farewell speech as he formally transferred to the Iraqi interim government the country's limited sovereignty, "A piece of my heart will always remain here in the beautiful land between the two rivers." He spoke for America.

Iraq's dysfunctional democracy virtually guarantees a comeback by the US to that country. For sure, the US is on a comeback trail within five years of the Iraqi people evicting the American occupation forces. But there are the "known unknowns" in the evolving situation, which explain the caveats in Obama's statement.

Principally, the fall of Mosul becomes one more fault line in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. And Obama is treading warily, given both the recent slide in the US-Saudi ties as well as the present delicate stage of Washington's engagement with Tehran over the nuclear issue.

Again, it is unthinkable that Turkey could remain impassive in a geopolitical flux where Mosul's future - and the Kurdish question - is being choreographed once again. The British were the arbiters a century ago while the US may have replaced it today, but the Turkish interests remain constant.

According to Turkish media reports, when Prime Minister Recep Erdogan tried to speak to Obama regarding the Iraq situation, it was Vice-President Joe Biden who returned the call.