

Militants seize 48 Turks at consulate in Iraq's Mosul

New York Times, 11.06.2014



The Turkish government reacted with alarm on Wednesday to the seizure of the country's consul general and his staff by militants in Mosul, Iraq, vowing to retaliate if any of its citizens are wounded.

“Our primary objective is to bring our nationals home in safety,” Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said in a statement from New York. “No one should try to test the limits of Turkey's strength.” Forty-nine Turkish citizens from the consulate - staff members and their families, including three children - were being held hostage in Mosul, the Foreign Ministry said in a written statement.

Among them are diplomats, support workers and special forces soldiers. The consul general, Ozturk Yilmaz, is a former adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and an expert on the region. The consulate was raided by members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, the radical group that has been making sweeping territorial gains in northern and western Iraq in recent days. Another group of 31 Turks - truck drivers who were delivering fuel to a power plant in Mosul — was seized by ISIS militants on Tuesday, officials said. The militants attacked the consulate in the early hours of Wednesday, and at first, staff members resisted and refused to open the building's doors, according to a Turkish official who spoke on the condition of anonymity under diplomatic rules.

After a long standoff, the insurgents threatened to bomb the building, and the group inside surrendered, the official said, adding that the militants allowed the special forces soldiers to keep their weapons. The hostages were taken to an improvised ISIS headquarters in Mosul, the official said. Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States, backs the opposition in the Syrian civil war, but it is no friend to ISIS, which has now taken control of large areas in both eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq that border Turkey. In the early part of the conflict in Syria, Turkey allowed radical fighters to cross its borders freely, but it reversed that policy recently after it became clear that instead of concentrating on toppling President Bashar al-Assad, the militants were carving out their own state in Syria and clashing with more moderate opposition forces.

Turkey's relations with Iraq have been strained by sectarian tensions and by Turkey's conflict with Kurdish separatists, which have often spilled across the border into the part of northern Iraq ruled autonomously by Kurds. A person close to ISIS posted a message on Twitter denying that the group had kidnapped Turkish citizens. “Turks are not kidnapped,” the person wrote, using the Twitter handle Dawla_NewsMedia. “They are only taken to a safe location and until the investigations procedures are completed.” The authenticity of the message was verified by the Turkish prime minister's office.



Reached on his mobile phone, one of the Turkish truck drivers taken hostage Tuesday confirmed that 21 of the drivers were being held at a power plant in Mosul and had not been wounded, though some were sick with fear and anxiety. The remaining drivers were taken somewhere else, he said, speaking on the condition that he not be named. "We are trying to cooperate with hope that we will be released soon," the driver said. "We are praying that we will be saved." The Turkish news media reported late on Wednesday that members of ISIS had demanded \$5 million in ransom from the trucking company where the drivers work. Mr. Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, held a round of emergency meetings with senior figures in his government to discuss how to deal with the situation, and Mr. Davutoglu, the foreign minister, cut short his trip to New York and flew back to Ankara, the Turkish capital, on Wednesday, their offices said.

A Turkish Foreign Ministry official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that Turkish diplomats were in contact with the Iraqi government, with the regional administration in the Kurdish-controlled part of Iraq east of Mosul, and with the United States, seeking ways to free the hostages. The ministry later released a statement saying that Turkey had also been in contact with NATO and the United Nations. Sinan Ulgen, the chairman of EDAM, a research group based in Istanbul, said the government would face mounting pressure to stage a rescue operation to free the diplomats, as well as a rising risk of extremist attacks in Turkey. "Ankara is facing a serious conundrum," he said. "First objective should be to free the diplomats, which must not be easy, given the conscious and planned attack on the consulate in Mosul."

Even so, the Foreign Ministry statement on Wednesday said, "It must be understood by all that we will not remain silent in the face of these unacceptable developments and that we will do whatever is necessary." Mr. Davutoglu told a Turkish television network that "any harm to our citizens and staff would be met with the harshest retaliation." Mr. Ulgen said the seizure of the consular workers was probably in retaliation for Ankara's closing the border to the militants. "This policy has fed these groups since 2011, and the shift disappointed them," he said. "They may already have the ability to retaliate within Turkey, with already established cells and networks since 2011, which is the biggest security threat." Other analysts saw the attack as more opportunistic than vengeful.

Aaron Stein, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, a research group in Britain, said, "Essentially what the militants are doing is asserting control over the territory, and the Turkish consulate represented an easy target, so it seems that they took advantage of circumstances that were available to them on the ground." He and Mr. Ulgen both noted that modern Turkey had never before had its diplomats taken hostage. "The circumstances for the rescue operation are so daunting, and the sheer scale of what it will take to get these people is so large, that they will opt for negotiations, either directly" with the ISIS militants "or with some third party, maybe one of the Gulf states or one of the other groups on the ground," Mr. Stein said. The Turkish Foreign Ministry official said the rapid-fire developments in Iraq had grown out of the West's failure to adequately support moderate rebel groups in Syria, a complaint Turkey has long raised. "The continuation of the regime in Syria gave way to a power vacuum in several areas, which was filled by radical groups, and ultimately spilled over to Iraq," the official said.

Turkey not working on new mandate for military action in Iraq

Reuters, 12.06.2014



The Turkish government is not working on any new mandate to authorise a cross-border military operation into Iraq, where militants are holding 80 Turkish nationals hostage, Justice Minister said.

“The issue of whether the existing mandate is sufficient or a new mandate is required is among the issues being discussed. But right now there is no work being conducted for a new mandate,” Bozdag told. A parliamentary mandate allowing Turkey to conduct cross-border military operations in Iraq expires in October. It was drafted to enable Ankara to strike at bases of PKK militants in the north of the country.

Iran and Turkey want Middle Eastern stability

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.06.2014



Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, has said Turkey and Iran are determined to stand against violence and extremism in the Middle East during a trip to Ankara.

Rouhani made the statement on Monday in Turkey, where he has discussed nuclear proliferation, the Syrian crisis and trade with his Turkish counterpart, Gul. Iran is a strong strategic ally of Syrian president al-Assad while Turkey has been one of his fiercest critics, supporting his opponents and giving refuge to rebel fighters. Gul said that Ankara did not want any country to have nuclear weapons in the region. “We want a Middle East without nuclear weapons,” he said.

Both presidents supported harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Rouhani also called on all nations in the Middle East to put effort in achieving stability. Last year the election of Rouhani, whose foreign policy of “prudence and moderation” has eased Iran’s international isolation. The visit will be the first by an Iranian president to Turkey since 2008. The visit comes as Iran and six major powers prepare to hold another round of talks on a final deal aimed at ending a decade-old dispute over the country’s nuclear programme.

A preliminary deal was signed in Geneva, Switzerland, in November, under which Iran accepted to halt some sensitive nuclear activities in exchange for partial easing of sanctions. While deep divisions remain between the two countries over the conflict in Syria, the potential of an Iranian market of 76 million people with some of the world's biggest oil and gas reserves is a magnet for Turkish companies. During Erdogan's visit to Iran in January, a preferential trade agreement was signed aimed at paving the ground to boost trade to \$30bn by 2015. Reuters news agency cited Iranian officials as saying that trade between the countries stood at \$22bn in 2012, before dipping to \$20bn in 2013, and that it should reach \$30bn in 2015.

Sunni insurgents seize control of Iraq's second largest city

The Guardian, 10.06.2014



The prime minister of Iraq has asked parliament to declare a state of emergency as radical Sunni Muslim insurgents seized control of the country's second largest city, Mosul.

Militants with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an offshoot of al-Qaeda, overran a military base and freed hundreds of prisoners in a strike against the Iraqi government. The capture of Mosul follows four days of fierce fighting in cities and towns in northern Iraq. On Tuesday, 20 people were killed when two bombs exploded near a funeral procession in Baquba. The blasts in the capital of Diyala province, 60 km north of Baghdad, also wounded 28 people.

Mourners were carrying the body of a teacher, who was shot dead the previous night, to a cemetery when the blasts occurred. The fall of Mosul deals a serious blow to Baghdad's efforts to fight Sunni militants who have regained ground and momentum in Iraq over the past year and pushed into Mosul last week. Across the border in Syria, embroiled in three years of civil war between the president, Bashar al-Assad, and rebels seeking to oust him, Isis fighters have seized control of swathes of eastern territory close to the Iraqi border.

Isil militants from Iraq have joined the battle in Syria along with other foreign fighters. The jihadi group is seeking to establish an Islamist state by connecting territory it controls in western Iraq and eastern Syria. Police, military and security officials told Reuters the insurgents, armed with anti-aircraft weapons and rocket-propelled grenades, had taken over almost all police and army checkpoints in and around Mosul. "We have lost Mosul this morning. Army and police forces left their positions and Isis terrorists are in full control," said an army colonel at the local military command. "It's a total collapse for the security forces." Two Iraqi army officers said security forces had received orders to leave the city after militants captured the Ghizlani army base in southern Mosul and set more than 200 prisoners free from a high security jail. The retreating army and police forces set fire to fuel and ammunition depots in order to prevent the militants using them, Iraqi officers said.

Two police sources and a local government official said the Isis militants had also stormed a jail, allowing more than 1,000 prisoners to escape, which they identified as belonging mostly to Isis and al-Qaeda. Thousands of families were fleeing the city and moving towards the autonomous Kurdish region, which shares a border with Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital. “Mosul now is like hell. It’s up in flames,” said Amina Ibrahim, who was leaving the city with her young children. “I lost my husband in a bomb blast last year, I don’t want my kids to follow him.”

On Monday, governor Atheel Nujaifi made a televised plea to the people of Mosul to fight militants. Nujaifi himself escaped from the provincial headquarters in Mosul after militants surrounded it late on Monday. Several army officers said Iraqi forces were demoralised and do not have the fighting stamina of Isis fighters. “We can’t beat them. We can’t. They are well trained in street fighting and we’re not. We need a whole army to drive them out of Mosul,” one officer said. “They’re like ghosts: they appear to strike and disappear in seconds.”

Iraq says to work with Kurdish forces to retake Mosul

Reuters, 11.06.2014



Baghdad will cooperate with Kurdish forces to try to drive militant out of Mosul, Iraq’s foreign minister said on Wednesday, a day after an al Qaeda splinter group seized the country’s second biggest city.

“There will be closer cooperation between Baghdad and the regional Kurdistan government to work together and flush out these foreign fighters,” Zebari said on the sidelines of a EU-Arab League meeting in Athens. He did not give details about the cooperation. The Kurdish Peshmerga have long been a force in the jockeying between Shi’ites, Kurds and Sunnis for influence and control of northern Iraqi oilfields.

Describing the fall of Mosul as “dramatic”, Zebari called on all Iraqi leaders to come together to face the “serious, mortal” threat to the country. “The response has to be soon,” he said. “You cannot leave these people to stay there to entrench themselves for a long time.” Earlier on Wednesday, security sources said militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an offshoot of al Qaeda, advanced into the oil refinery town of Baiji, setting the courthouse and police station on fire.

Iraq wants U.N. Security Council to approve more military aid

Reuters 03.06.2014



Iraq's ambassador to France called on the U.N. Security Council to approve extra military aid for Baghdad, including air and drone support, when it meets in New York later on Thursday. "We need equipment, extra aviation and drones," Yasseen said.

"It must support Iraq because what is happening is not just a threat for Iraq but the entire region." Sunni rebels from an al Qaeda splinter group overran the Iraqi city of Tikrit on Wednesday and closed in on the biggest oil refinery in the country at Baiji, making further gains in a rapid military advance against the Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad.

The militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, also hold the northern city of Mosul, advancing their aim of creating a Sunni Caliphate straddling the border between Iraq and Syria. Yasseen said as far as he knew the Iraqi government had not yet asked the United States to launch air strikes on Islamist militants who appeared to be marching towards Baghdad. "The U.S. will only launch airstrikes if the Iraqi government asks them to, and if that happens it means it was necessary," he said. He said it appeared the Islamist advance had been stalled and Iraqi Special Forces were now stabilising the situation north of the capital.

"What I have heard is their advance has been stopped. Special forces have been deployed and are playing their role. They have secured Samarra and the big Baiji refinery. These two regions are stabilised." France's foreign ministry spokesman Romain Nadal told reporters Paris was consulting with regional and international powers on the situation in Iraq and would confer with its allies at the Security Council on Thursday. "The situation in Iraq is extremely worrying and poses a serious threat to the stability of the entire region," Nadal told reporters. "It is important that in the current situation all Iraqi political forces act concordantly and in unity."

Iraq Kurds take Kirkuk; Sunni militants surge toward Baghdad

Huffington Post, 12.06.2014



Iraqi Kurdish forces took control of the northern oil city of Kirkuk on Thursday, after government troops abandoned their posts in the face of a triumphant Sunni Islamist rebel march towards Baghdad that threatens Iraq's future as a unified state. In Mosul, Sunni militants of the ISIL staged a parade of American Humvees seized from the collapsing Iraqi army in the two days since the fighters drove out of the desert and overran Iraq's second biggest city.

Two helicopters, also seized by the militants, flew overhead, witnesses said, apparently the first time the militant group has obtained aircraft in years of waging insurgency.

State television showed what it said was aerial footage of Iraqi aircraft firing missiles at insurgent targets in Mosul. The targets could be seen exploding in black clouds. Further south, the fighters extended their lightning advance to towns only about an hour's drive from the capital Baghdad, where Shi'ite militia are mobilising for a potential replay of the ethnic and sectarian bloodbath of 2006-2007. Trucks carrying Shi'ite volunteers in uniform rumbled towards the front lines to defend the capital. The stunning advance of ISIL, which aims to build a Caliphate ruled on mediaeval Sunni Islamic principles across Syria and Iraq, is the biggest threat to Iraq since U.S. troops withdrew.

Hundreds of thousands of people have fled their homes in fear as the militants seized the main cities of the Tigris valley north of Baghdad in a matter of days. The security forces of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish north, known as the peshmerga, or those who confront death, took over bases in Kirkuk vacated by the army, a spokesman said. "The whole of Kirkuk has fallen into the hands of peshmerga," said peshmerga spokesman Jabbar Yawar. "No Iraqi army remains in Kirkuk now." Kurds have long dreamed of taking Kirkuk and its huge oil reserves. They regard the city, just outside their autonomous region, as their historical capital, and peshmerga units were already present in an uneasy balance with government forces. The swift move by their highly organised security forces to seize full control demonstrates how this week's sudden advance by ISIL has redrawn Iraq's map - and potentially that of the entire Middle East.

Since Tuesday, black clad ISIL fighters who do not recognise the region's modern borders have seized Mosul and Tikrit, home town of former dictator Saddam Hussein, as well as other towns and cities north of Baghdad. The army of the Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government in Baghdad has essentially evaporated in the face of the onslaught, abandoning bases and U.S.-provided weapons. The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has come under fire for failing to do enough to shore up the government in Baghdad before pulling out its troops. Security and police sources said Sunni militants now controlled parts of the small town of Udhaim, 90 km (60 miles) north of Baghdad, after most of the army troops left their positions and withdrew towards the nearby town of Khalis.



“We are waiting for supporting troops and we are determined not to let them take control. We are afraid that terrorists are seeking to cut the main highway that links Baghdad to the north,” said a police officer in Udhaim. The U.N. Security Council was expected to meet later on Thursday. Iraq’s ambassador to France said it would call for weapons and air support. “We need equipment, extra aviation and drones,” Fareed Yasseen said on French radio. The Council “must support Iraq, because what is happening is not just a threat for Iraq but the entire region.” The global oil benchmark jumped about \$2 LCOc1 on Thursday, as concerns mounted that the violence could disrupt supplies from the OPEC exporter. Iraq’s main oil export facilities are in the largely Shi’ite areas in the south and were “very, very safe”, oil minister Abdul Kareem Luaibi said.

ISIL fighters have overrun the town of Baiji, site of the main oil refinery which meets Iraq’s domestic demand for fuel. Luaibi said the refinery itself was still in government hands. In Tikrit, video footage showed dozens of members of a police special forces battalion held prisoner, paraded before a crowd by fighters who overran their base. Militants have set up military councils to run the towns they captured, residents said. “They came in hundreds to my town and said they are not here for blood or revenge but they seek reforms and to impose justice. They picked a retired general to run the town,” said a tribal figure from the town of Alam, north of Tikrit. “Our final destination will be Baghdad, the decisive battle will be there,’ that’s what their leader of the militants’ group kept repeating,” the tribal figure said.

Security was stepped up in Baghdad to prevent the Sunni militants from reaching the capital, which is itself divided into Sunni and Shi’ite neighbourhoods and saw ferocious sectarian street fighting in 2006-2007 under U.S. occupation. By midday on Thursday insurgents had not entered Samarra, the next big city in their path on the Tigris north of Baghdad. “The situation inside Samarra is very calm today and I can’t see any presence of the militants. Life is normal here,” said Wisam Jamal, a government employee in the mainly Sunni city which houses a major Shi’ite pilgrimage site. The million-strong Iraqi army, trained by the United States at a cost of nearly \$25 billion, is hobbled by low morale and corruption. Its effectiveness is hurt by the perception in Sunni areas that it pursues the hostile interests of Maliki’s Shi’ite-led government. During the U.S. occupation, Washington encouraged Maliki to reach out to the Sunni minority that lost power after Saddam’s fall.

But since the U.S. withdrawal, Maliki pushed Sunnis out of his ruling coalition, creating resentment insurgents exploit. The Obama administration had tried to keep a contingent of troops in Iraq beyond 2011 to prevent a return of insurgents, but failed to reach a deal with Maliki’s government. In Washington, an administration official said Maliki’s government had in the past sought U.S. air strikes against ISIL positions. The White House suggested such strikes were not being considered and Washington’s main focus now is on building up government forces. Iraq’s parliament was meant to hold an extraordinary session on Thursday to vote on declaring a state of emergency, but failed to reach a quorum, a sign of the sectarian political dysfunction that has paralysed decision-making in Baghdad.

About 500,000 Iraqis have fled Mosul, home to 2 million people, and the surrounding province, many seeking safety in autonomous KRG, a region that has prospered while patrolled by the powerful peshmerga, avoiding the violence that has plagued the rest of Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003. The Kurdish capture of Kirkuk overturns a fragile balance of power that has held Iraq together since Saddam’s fall. Iraq’s Kurds have done well since 2003, running their own affairs while being given a fixed percentage of the country’s overall oil revenue.

But with full control of Kirkuk - and the vast oil deposits beneath it - they could earn more on their own, eliminating the incentive to remain part of a failing Iraq. Maliki's army already lost control of much of the Euphrates valley west of the capital to ISIL last year, and with the evaporation of the army in the Tigris valley to the north, the government could be left with just Baghdad and areas south. The Sunni surge also potentially leaves the long desert frontier between Iraq and Syria effectively in ISIL hands, advancing its stated goal of erasing the border and creating a single state ruled according to mediaeval Islamic principles. Iran, which funds and arms Shi'ite groups in Iraq, could be brought deeper into the conflict, as could Turkey.

In Mosul, 80 Turkish citizens were being held hostage by ISIL after its consulate there was overrun. Turkey threatened to retaliate if any of the group, which included special forces soldiers, diplomats and children, were harmed. Maliki described the fall of Mosul as a "conspiracy" and said the security forces who had abandoned their posts would be punished. He also said Iraqis were volunteering in several provinces to join army brigades to fight ISIL. In a statement on its Twitter account, ISIL said it had taken Mosul as part of a plan "to conquer the entire state and cleanse it from the apostates", referring to the province of Nineveh of which the city is the capital. Militants were reported to have executed soldiers and policemen after their seizure of some towns.

Ambassadors of the NATO defence alliance held an emergency meeting in Brussels at Turkey's request and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan held talks with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden about the developments. ISIL, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, broke with al Qaeda's international leader, Osama bin Laden's former lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahri, and has clashed with al Qaeda fighters in Syria. In Syria it controls swathes of territory, funding its advances through taxing local businesses, seizing aid and selling oil. In Iraq, it has carried out regular bombings against Shi'ite civilians, killing hundreds a month.

The siege of Mosul: What's happening? Why is it significant?

CNN, 12.06.2014



For a while, Iraq faded from the collective consciousness. But what's happening there should make people sit up and take notice. Extremist militants have overrun Mosul, the country's second-largest. As many as half a million civilians have fled their homes to escape the violence, and the brazen incursion has highlighted all the weaknesses of the government's ability to maintain security.

Monday night into Tuesday, militants seized Mosul's airport, its TV stations and the governor's office. They freed up to 1,000 prisoners. Police and soldiers ran from their posts rather than put up a fight, abandoning their weapons.



The militants took their place in the city's boulevards and buildings. "There was no presence of any government forces on the streets, the majority of their posts destroyed and manned by (Islamist militants)," resident Firas al-Maslawi said. An audio recording purportedly from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria promises more fighting in more Iraqi cities, including Baghdad. "Continue your march as the battle is not yet raging," a voice said to be that of ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani says. Mosul is the nation's second-largest city. What's happening here doesn't bode well for Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's administration. It calls into question whether he has a handle on the country. The devastating militant advance, which had been building for some time, is proving an object lesson of much that is wrong in Iraq and the region -- growing sectarian tensions at home and a festering civil war over the border in Syria.

It also shows that the extremists are seeking to extend their influence and can strike swiftly and effectively against Iraq's American-trained security forces. Who are the militants? They're part of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, an al Qaeda splinter group. Here's how extreme the militant group is: Even al Qaeda has disowned it. The Mosul siege has made ISIS the single most dangerous, destabilizing radical group in the region. The group is also known by some as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Its members include Europeans as well as Chechens, Turks and many fighters from other Arab countries, some attracted by the conflict in Syria. What do they want? They want to establish an Islamic caliphate, or state, stretching across the region. ISIS has begun imposing Sharia law in Syrian towns it controls, like Raqqa, forcing women to wear the full veil, or niqab, in public and banning music.

Have they made such incursions before? Yes. In past months, they've wrested control of Iraqi cities like Falluja and parts of Ramadi from authorities, just as they've done with Syrian towns over the border. Militants believed to be from ISIS have also taken control of two villages in Iraq's Kirkuk province and seized parts of the oil town of Baiji in Salaheddin province, authorities said. Have they been able to keep their control? Not really. Despite the territorial advances it has made in Sunni-dominated Anbar and Nineveh provinces, ISIS still has "significant weaknesses," a U.S. counterterrorism official says. "It has shown little ability to govern effectively, is generally unpopular, and has no sway outside the Sunni community in either Iraq or Syria."

How is all this tied to Syria? ISIS grew out of al Qaeda in Iraq. In the west of Iraq, its militants were responsible for killing and maiming many U.S. troops. In 2006, their commander -- the bloodthirsty Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- was killed in a U.S. strike. In the years afterward, with American help, Iraqi tribal militias put the al Qaeda upstart on the defensive. But when U.S. troops left, the extremist militants found new leadership, went to Syria, grew stronger and returned to Iraq, making military gains often off the backs of the foreign fighters drawn to Syria's conflict. Now the group has footholds in both countries and is blamed for destabilizing both.

In Syria, where its forces have clashed with other Islamist groups, observers say the internecine fighting has played into the hands of Bashar al-Assad's regime by distracting rival factions from their campaign against the Syrian military. What's the situation in Mosul right now? More than 500,000 civilians have fled since the fighting started over the weekend, according to the International Organization for Migration. The northern city's four main hospitals are inaccessible because of fighting, and some mosques have been converted to clinics, the IOM said. There's a lack of drinking water in the western part of the city since the main water station for the area has been destroyed by bombing.

Food is running low and few areas are receiving electricity, while fuel for generators is also running out. What does this mean for Iraq? While Iraq is plagued by multiple daily car bombings and suicide attacks, the sheer scale of the attack on Mosul -- and the brewing humanitarian crisis tied to it -- bodes ill for the country's stability. According to the United Nations, last year was Iraq's most violent in five years, with more than 8,800 people killed, most of them civilians. Already this year, almost half a million people have been displaced from their homes in central Anbar province by fighting between the same extremist group and government forces. One major reason Mosul made headlines is how swiftly the city, to all intents and purposes, fell.

What does this mean for the United States and the West? The last U.S. military forces left Iraq at the end of 2011, after nearly nine years of deadly and divisive war in the country. Talks that might have allowed a continued major military presence broke down amid disputes about whether U.S. troops would be immune to prosecution by Iraqi authorities. Iraq's security forces, trained by the United States at a cost of billions of dollars, have proved unable to dislodge the militants from strongholds in Anbar province and have now been routed in Mosul. The result seems likely to be continued or growing instability in Iraq and the wider region. This, at a time when the global economy is recovering, could have an unwelcome impact on oil markets. There's also concern that foreign fighters with ISIS may go back to their native countries, in Europe and elsewhere, and carry out terror attacks there.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: ISIS chief may be next leader at Al-Qaida central

The Guardian, 12.06.2014



In the scheme of prominent jihadi leaders, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the ISIS, is among the most mysterious. And his mystique – for now at least – has only been burnished by his group's capture of the city of Mosul.

Described by some as “the new Osama bin Laden”, he has a \$10m US bounty on his head, only two pictures of him are known to exist and, despite his nom de guerre, he was born not in Baghdad but 78 miles north, in Samarra. Ambitious and violent, his reputation as a militant leader and tactician is as much a reflection of the disarray of other rebel groups in Syria and the poor showing of the Iraqi army this week.

Baghdadi is said to keep a low profile even among his own armed supporters, who amount, it is estimated, to some 7,000 fighters. He is not one for video-taped pronouncements; some reports claim – perhaps fancifully - that he wears a mask when addressing his commanders, earning him the nickname “the invisible sheikh.” What is known about Baghdadi – whose other aliases, according to US intelligence, include Abu Duaa and Dr Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai – come largely from jihadi websites that have described his career and accomplishments and his own statements.



Born in 1971 into a religious family in the city of Samarra, Baghdadi earned a doctorate in education from the University of Baghdad. There are competing versions of how he came to jihad. One version suggests that he was already a militant jihadist during the time of Saddam Hussein. Others have pointed to the four years he was held at Camp Bucca as the root of his further radicalisation. Another variation describes how, after the US invasion in 2003, he was quickly drawn into the emerging al-Qaida in Iraq under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, getting involved first in smuggling foreign fighters into Iraq, then later as the “emir” of Rawa, a town near the Syrian border. There, presiding over his own sharia court, he gained a reputation for brutality, publicly executing those suspected of aiding the US-led coalition forces – the same brutality that has become familiar to those living in Syria under his group’s control.

Baghdadi preached and taught at various mosques and apparently led several smaller militant groups before being promoted to a seat on the Majlis al-Shura (consultation council) of the mujahideen and judicial councils of the Islamic State in Iraq, who promoted Baghdadi to succeed the previous two leaders, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Perhaps learning from the lesson of one of his notorious predecessors in Iraq the Jordanian leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – who was reprimanded in a letter by Al-Qaida Central for the excesses of his violence – Baghdadi’s prominent supporters have tried to emphasise a leader open to discussions with tribal leaders. None of this is entirely consistent with his rise to power in the leadership of al-Qaida in Iraq in 2010 – and later of Isis – during which he murdered prominent Sunnis as well as Shia civilians in bombings.

Indeed, part of the problem is that Baghdadi’s character – as presented through the writings of jihadi scholars who support him – has been deliberately designed to make him more palatable and deliberately cast him, as some analysts have suggested, in the role of a “philosopher jihadi” perhaps to boost his credentials for leadership within the wider jihadi world. One measure of the success of that tactic is how Isis, under Baghdadi, has become the go-to group for thousands of would-be foreign jihadi fighters who have flocked to his banner. Late last year a unilateral announcement was made that he was creating a new group that would be merged with a rival al-Qaida affiliate active in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. It was a pronouncement disputed both by Jabhat, and Al-Qaida Central’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who ruled against Baghdadi.

Six months ago that was regarded as a moment of serious hubris. Today analysts are wondering whether, after the success of Isis in winning swathes of Iraq, Baghdadi has eclipsed Zawahiri at Al-Qaida Central. Whether that trajectory can continue will depend on the coming weeks and months. The recent careers of jihadi field commanders have tended to be short after their rise to prominence and notoriety. And, despite being from Iraq, Baghdadi and his followers will have to negotiate the same complex minefield of competing Sunni interests – including his current allies in Ba’athist insurgent groups, who are ideologically very different.

These frictions have led to the downfall of a previous al-Qaida incarnation in Iraq. That has already been prefigured in Syria where, this year, during his last big play to merge with Jabhat al-Nusra, other rebel groups complained that Isis and Baghdadi were more interested in consolidating its rule over captured towns as part of Baghdadi’s plan to establish his own rule than fighting Assad. There is at least no mystery about what Baghdadi wants. He believes that the world’s Muslims should live under one Islamic state ruled by sharia law, the first step of which is establishing a caliphate spanning Syria and Iraq.

Iran says six-month extension of nuclear talks may be necessary

Reuters, 09.06.2014



Iran's talks with global powers on curbing its nuclear program in exchange for an end to sanctions could be extended for another six months if no deal is reached by a July 20 deadline, a senior Iranian official said on Monday.

U.S. and Iranian officials held talks in Geneva on Monday to tackle ways of breaking a deadlock which has raised the likelihood that the deadline will lapse without a deal meant to head off the risk of a Middle East war over the nuclear issue. The negotiations ran into difficulty last month with each side accusing the other of making unrealistic demands, sowing doubt about prospects for a breakthrough next month.

Western officials say Iran wants to maintain a uranium enrichment capability far beyond what is suitable for civilian nuclear power stations. Iran says it wants to avoid reliance on foreign suppliers of fuel for planned nuclear reactors and rejects Western allegations it seeks the capability to make nuclear weapons under the guise of a peaceful energy program. Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi spoke of a possible extension to the talks in remarks in Geneva to Iranian media on the sidelines of meetings with senior U.S. officials and the European Union's deputy chief negotiator.

"We hope to reach a final agreement (by July 20) but, if this doesn't happen, then we have no choice but to extend the Geneva deal for six more months while we continue negotiations," Araqchi was quoted as saying by Iran's state news agency IRNA. "It's still too early to judge whether an extension will be needed. This hope still exists that we will be able to reach a final agreement by the end of the six months on July 20." The United States said on Saturday it would send its No. 2 diplomat, Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, and Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, the primary U.S. negotiator with Iran, to Geneva to meet a delegation led by Araqchi. Burns led secret U.S.-Iranian negotiations that helped yield an interim nuclear agreement between Iran and the major powers on Nov. 24, allaying fears of a wider Middle East war. U.S. State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf said the U.S. and Iranian delegations met for over five hours in Geneva for what she described as "wide-ranging discussions".

"They will reconvene tomorrow morning and expect to meet all day," she told reporters in Washington, adding that the consultations were taking place ahead of the next round of Vienna negotiations scheduled for June 16-20. "We are at a critical juncture in the talks," Harf said. "We don't have very much time left. We think we've made progress during some rounds but as we said coming out of the last one we hadn't seen enough made, we hadn't seen enough realism. "Hopefully these discussions, like the other bilateral discussions people have, can help get us to the place we want to be," Harf said. A French diplomatic source said officials from France and Iran would meet on Wednesday to discuss the Vienna negotiations. And Russian officials will have talks with the Iranians in Rome on Wednesday and Thursday, according to Iranian media.

“There are still gaps between Iran and the (six powers) in various issues and in order to bring our views closer, the other side must make tough decisions,” sanctions, gave scope for a six-month extension if needed to reach a final settlement that would end sanctions and remove the threat of war. But Obama, to avoid open conflict with the U.S. Congress, where hawkish lawmakers prefer the stick - in the form of harsher sanctions - to the carrot in dealing with Iran, is expected to seek their approval to extend sanctions relief. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton is coordinating the six powers’ talks with Tehran. Her deputy Helga Schmid is currently in Geneva for the bilateral meetings with Iran. Separately, in a shift of tone from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s scepticism, a senior Israeli intelligence officer said on Monday that Iran was negotiating seriously on a deal to limit its disputed nuclear program.

Al Sissi keeps Egyptian premier to fix economy after turmoil

Gulf News, 09.06.2014



Newly inaugurated President Abdul Fattah Al Sissi reappointed Egypt’s prime minister on Monday, signalling continuity as he sets out to fix the economy and overcome political divisions after a long period of turmoil and bloodshed.

In comments carried by the state news agency, Prime Minister Ebrahim Mahlab said the current government would stay on in a caretaker role until he forms a new cabinet. Consultations had not yet begun, he said, although officials have said many of the leading ministers such as finance are likely to be unchanged.

Al Sissi, who as armed forces chief toppled Islamist President Mohammad Mursi last July following mass protests, was sworn in on Sunday in a ceremony with low-key attendance by western allies concerned by a crackdown on dissent. While Al Sissi quit the military in March, a lower-than-expected turnout in last month’s presidential elections fell short of giving him a strong mandate to take tough measures to repair an economy wounded by three years of instability and regular violence which has scared away foreign investors and tourists. Keeping the main ministers in their positions could enable Al Sissi to move quickly in implementing reform.

Reuters reported on Friday that Western consultants were advising Egypt’s government — including top officials from the ministries of finance and trade, industry and investment — on an economic reform plan which could serve as a basis for restarting talks on a IMF loan deal. As de facto ruler since last summer, Al Sissi has driven Mursi’s Muslim Brotherhood underground with a crackdown in which hundreds of its supporters have been killed and thousands jailed, polarising the most populous Arab nation. However, Egypt’s oldest and best organised Islamist movement has survived official repression for decades. Al Sissi also faces a violent threat from militants based in the Sinai peninsula who are believed to have access to weapons smuggled from chaotic Libya.

Egypt puts Sinai's Al-Arish port under military control

Ahram, 30.05.2014



Egypt has transferred the assets of the Al-Arish port in the Sinai Peninsula from a civilian-run agency to the armed forces, citing national security reasons in an area where militant attacks have increased in the past year.

The decision was made last week by then-interim President Mansour but only announced on Monday, a day after former army chief al-Sisi was sworn in as the new head of state. The move seemed likely to reinforce critics' concern that Egypt is returning to strongman rule three years after a popular uprising raised hopes of democracy free from military influence.

An addendum to Thursday's official gazette declared that the state's assets in the Al-Arish port and its administration were transferred to the ministry of defense and war production from the Port Authority of Port Said. "Egypt's national security requires that the port be under the control of the armed forces due to its sensitive location," the head of the Port Authority of Port Said, retired major general Ahmed Sharaf, told Reuters by telephone. The military could not be reached immediately for comment on the port, a valuable installation in the Sinai Peninsula amid the militant attacks on police and soldiers there. Sharaf said the port's employees were working as usual but said he did not know if the armed forces would supplement the workers or replace them. Sisi said during his campaign that he would not hesitate to use the military to help rebuild an economy racked by three years of political turmoil, which has driven away foreign investors and tourists.

Saudi shouts support for Egypt's new anti-Islamist leader

Reuters, 07.06.2014



As al-Sisi prepares for his inauguration on Sunday, his most powerful Arab ally is deploying both threats and promises to ensure the Arab Spring cannot upset a new anti-Islamist front in the Middle East. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia urged Egyptians this week to embrace Sisi, the military man who drove Islamists from power in Cairo a year ago, and said they should to disown the “strange chaos” of the Arab uprisings.

It was Riyadh's message of support yet for Sisi, who won an election last month thanks to support from Egyptians hoping that a strong, military-backed government will bring an end to political instability in the most populous Arab country.

Sisi's win was undoubtedly a boost for Saudi Arabia, which had watched with horror as the Arab revolts toppled authoritarian leaders and brought President Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. For Saudi Arabia, Sisi's win sealed the end, for now, of the rise of the Brotherhood, the international standard-bearer of mainstream Sunni political Islam since it was founded in Egypt in 1928. Since the movement has a following in every Arab and Muslim society, the example set by the Egyptian Brotherhood's embrace of the ballot box poses a threat to the hereditary dynasties that hold sway in wealthy Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The movement enjoys substantial support from Islamist-friendly countries like Qatar and Turkey and its influence appears to have grown in countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Libya since 2011. The blunt, emotional language in the king's message - which described troublemakers in the region as “the helpers of Satan and its troops on the ground” – laid bare an underlying power struggle in the region pitting conservative, anti-Islamist governments, represented by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt against countries such as Qatar and Turkey who appear to believe that Brotherhood represents the future of Arab politics. Sisi, like Saudi Arabia, is no admirer of the Shi'ite Muslim clerical rulers of Iran, whose administration is seen by Riyadh as a expansionist power bent on exporting its Islamic revolution to the Arab world and interferences in the affairs of neighboring states.

Iran denies any such interference. Senior Saudi and Gulf officials are expected to turn out in force at Sisi's elaborate inauguration to show the Egyptian army field marshal has the backing of a new regional order that applauded his bloody removal of a Brotherhood-led government in 2013. Qatar, which poured billions into Egypt during Mursi's one year in power, was not invited. And in a sign that Western allies are not entirely comfortable with the state of Egyptian democracy since then, they only plan to send low-level representatives to the event. Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, was livid when autocratic Egyptian ruler Hosni Mubarak was toppled following popular demonstrations in 2011 which eventually led to the Muslim Brotherhood, long mistrusted by Riyadh, coming to office.



Riyadh and the UAE have joined Sisi in clamping down hard on the Brotherhood, seen by them as 'terrorists', in an effort to quell regional instability wrought by the Arab Spring. Their overriding goal is to prevent the Islamist movement leading the Arab world's most populous country once more. The message seemed meticulously orchestrated. Less than 15 minutes after Sisi was officially declared Egypt's president on Tuesday, Saudi King Abdullah issued his ringing statement of support. He also called for a donor conference to help the new president fend off economic collapse. The statement went beyond the usual, terse messages of congratulation. From his holiday home in Morocco, the king went a step further: he said the "infringement" in Egypt's affairs would be considered an infringement of Saudi's affairs.

In a thinly-veiled reference to the Brotherhood, and perhaps also to Qatar, the king said: "I warn you all against the ugliness of evil, for it has a very dark face and only works for its personal interests." Saudi Arabia regards the Brotherhood, the oldest Islamist movement in Egypt, as an existential threat since their embrace of elections challenges the Gulf tradition of dynastic rule. The king, who has long been infuriated by the support shown to the Brotherhood by Qatar, demanded non-interference in Egypt's affairs. "It is a non-bargainable and non-negotiable position under any circumstances," the royal statement read.

In an unusually public spat, Riyadh punished Qatar for its pro-Brotherhood stance by taking the unprecedented step of recalling its ambassador from Doha earlier this year. The message also signaled that Riyadh, long seen as the 'big brother' in the Gulf, expects Egypt's allies to step in and provide Sisi with the resources he needs to rescue an economy damaged by three years of tumultuous politics. Cairo's European allies, however, appear to be less amenable to the message. The EU said on Thursday it was concerned with the detention of political opponents, activists and journalists. A Western diplomatic source said there had therefore been a "collective decision" to send only ambassadors to the inauguration.

The king said that anyone who did not use their resources to help Sisi "would have no place among us tomorrow, if ever they were to suffer from ordeals and crises". Saudi Arabia could barely contain its glee when Sisi toppled Mursi, a veteran Brotherhood Islamist, after Egyptians demonstrated against his rule. It has since pumped billions of dollars, along with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, to shore up the economy. The United States, however, which has considered Egypt a close Middle East ally for decades, suspended some aid after the overthrow. While Doha was snubbed for the inauguration, the president of Iran, Saudi's regional archrival, received an invite. "I think the Saudis said that was fine because they trust Sisi. They didn't trust the Brotherhood...Sisi will clearly tell (Iranian President Hassan) Rouhani that the security of the Gulf is our (Egypt's) security," said Sultan al-Qassemi, an Emirati commentator on political affairs. "So the Saudis will be very reassured by the meeting, rather than be more alarmed by it."

Right-winger Reuven Rivlin elected Israel's president

Natural Gas Europe, 11.06.2014



Reuven Rivlin, a right-wing legislator opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state, was elected Israel's president on Tuesday and will replace the dovish Shimon Peres in the largely ceremonial post.

Rivlin, 74, is a member of Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party. He has a reputation for political independence and has had a rocky personal relationship with the Israeli leader. A former speaker of parliament, Rivlin defeated Meir Sheerit of the moderate Hatnuah party by a vote of 63-53 in a run-off in the legislature, after none of the original five candidates won an outright victory in a first round ballot.

Although Israeli heads of state are not directly involved in political decision-making, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Peres used the presidency as a pulpit for advocating peace with the Palestinians, often taking a more dovish stance than Netanyahu. Peres, 90, ends his seven-year presidential term in July. Unlike Peres, Rivlin has called for a confederation with the Palestinians rather than negotiating an independent state for them -- something Palestinian leaders have long rejected. Last month, Netanyahu floated a trial balloon on the future of the presidency, ordering his advisers to sound out cabinet colleagues on suspending the poll and evaluating the need for the position, political sources said.

Some political analysts suggested that Netanyahu was concerned that a victory by Rivlin, who once publicly accused the prime minister of showing disrespect to parliament, could make him more vulnerable in a future general election. No single party has ever won an outright majority in a national poll. That makes the president - whose duties otherwise carry little power - a key player in coalition-building. The campaign for the election of Israel's 10th president was marred by rumours of foul play and mudslinging. One leading candidate, veteran Labour politician Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, pulled out of the race on Saturday after police questioned him about alleged financial malpractice.

Ben-Eliezer denied any wrongdoing and said he had been "deliberately targeted" by enemies out to sabotage his bid. Several weeks ago, another presidential hopeful decided against declaring his candidacy after authorities opened - and subsequently closed - a sex crimes investigation against him. In the rough-and-tumble world of Israeli politics, the president is supposed to stay above the fray and promote national unity and moral values. Peres, an internationally respected statesman, restored prestige to the post after he was elected in 2007 to replace Moshe Katsav, who was convicted of rape in 2010 and is serving a seven-year prison term.

Politics poses biggest risk to euro zone endurance

Reuters, 08.06.2014



With the euro zone bond market back to irrational exuberance and economic growth returning slowly if unevenly, politics rather than economics now poses the biggest threat to the long-term endurance of Europe's single currency.

Widespread anti-EU protest votes in European Parliament elections will make it harder for many governments to deepen the integration of the 18-nation euro area. Public resistance in Germany, Europe's biggest economy, may make it impossible for the European Central Bank to go beyond last week's monetary easing measures to more radical U.S.-style asset purchases if low inflation persists or worsens.

Berlin is balking at using its own healthy fiscal position to invest more in infrastructure or spur domestic demand with tax cuts that could help balance Europe's economic adjustment. European Union leaders and the ECB have done enough to restore market confidence for now by equipping the euro zone with a financial rescue fund, stricter fiscal discipline, a single banking supervisor and a de facto lender of last resort. But the political will to complete economic and monetary union looks ever weaker, especially if it requires winning public approval for changes to the EU's governing treaties. In a book published before the elections(*), French economist Jean Pisani-Ferry argued that Europe's leaders were reluctant to give any more power to Brussels and sought to avoid controversy over further European integration.

"Fighting the euro crisis has already proved divisive domestically. The less they take initiatives, the less they risk political problems at home," he wrote. The surge in support for Eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties in the May 25 vote can only reinforce that inertia now that the acute need for action has passed. Even critics who predicted the euro zone could break up, such as U.S. economist Nouriel Roubini, acknowledge that much has improved in the last two years. "Certainly many things in the euro zone are moving in the right direction," he told a conference of the Maurice Allais Foundation in Paris, listing more sustainable fiscal policies, reforms of labor markets, pension and welfare systems and improved cost competitiveness in several countries.

Countries that received bailouts have regained full access to market funding, except Greece and Greek Cyprus, and even Athens has issued a first five-year bond. As investors pile back into Europe, yields on Spanish 10-year government bonds are now roughly level with their U.S. and British counterparts, three years after Madrid needed a 43 billion euro (\$58.7 billion) EU bailout to restructure its shattered banks. Four of the assisted countries - Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain - were among the top five performers for improving their competitiveness in the latest "Going for Growth" report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. All have substantially reduced unit labor costs, eliminated big current account deficits, shrunk the public sector payroll and made progress towards balancing their budgets.



The giant black spot is unemployment - still above 25 percent in Spain and Greece and more than half of all young people. All are also emerging from the crisis with much heavier debt burdens, although the weight of debt service is lightened by long delays before they have to repay loans to the EU rescue fund, likely to be extended still further for Greece. But optimistic EU officials say the euro zone periphery will be its most dynamic region in the coming years, comparing it with the success of bitter IMF medicine in South Korea and Indonesia after Asia's financial crisis in the 1990s. Many economists doubt that, however.

Pisani-Ferry, now head of the French government's policy planning unit, says the de-industrialization of southern Europe may be irreversible. The focus of concern is now shifting to France and Italy, the euro zone's second- and third-largest economies, which did not require bailouts and have implemented fewer reforms. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi bucked the trend in the European vote, winning a strong mandate to pursue reforms of the political system and labor markets. But given Rome's endemic political instability, the enduring blocking power of vested interests and the weakness of its legal system, he still faces daunting obstacles.

The biggest challenge may be France, where the EU election victory of Marine Le Pen's far right National Front has weakened President Francois Hollande's Socialist government just as it is finally set to ease the tax and regulatory burden on business. Hollande's 81 percent disapproval rating and back-to-back defeats in municipal and European elections may drain him of the authority to implement reforms vital to revive investment and job creation in France. Protectionist pressure from Le Pen's anti-EU nationalists and the left, including Socialist party rebels, may push Paris to obstruct EU-U.S. free trade negotiations.

Electoral gains for hard left anti-austerity parties in Greece and to a lesser extent Spain have raised pressure for a let-up in public spending cuts and unpopular economic reforms. "The social and political backlash against austerity and reform could become overwhelming," Roubini warned. Renzi is hoping to use his political honeymoon to engineer a new European bargain in which the budget deficit rules are adapted to allow more space for public investment in countries that are implementing EU-recommended structural reforms. But even if EU leaders are able to agree to tilt their economic policy mix some way from austerity towards expansion, the institutional changes needed to strengthen Europe's monetary union durably seem politically harder than ever.

Fight goes on in Eastern Ukraine, even as new president is sworn in

Newsweek, 07.06.2014



Pro-Russian separatists poured scorn on peace overtures from Ukraine's new president Petro Poroshenko on Saturday as fighting rumbled on in the east of the country. Taking the oath of office in Kiev, Poroshenko appealed to the rebels to lay down their arms, offering peaceful dialogue and immunity from prosecution to "those who don't have blood on their hands".

But rebel spokesmen in the self-styled Donetsk People's Republic, which has declared independence from Ukraine and wants to unite with neighboring Russia, told Reuters the fight would continue.

"What they really want is one-sided disarmament and for us to surrender. That will never happen," said a top separatist official, Fyodor Berezin. "As long as Ukrainian troops are on our soil, I can see that all Poroshenko wants is subjugation," he said by telephone from Donetsk. Since Poroshenko's election on May 25, government forces have stepped up what they call an 'anti-terrorist' campaign against the Russian-speaking separatists in the east. The rebels have fought back, turning parts of the east into a war zone. On Friday they shot down a Ukrainian army plane and killed a member of the interior ministry's special forces in the separatist stronghold of Slaviansk. Fighting continued around Slaviansk on Saturday and smoke could be seen rising above the surrounding forests.

Ukrainian armored personnel carriers and military transport vehicles lined the road leading into the city, and soldiers behind concrete blocks and sand bags trained their machine guns on cars and buses driving out. Inna, 38, was leaving by foot with her mother and grandmother, carrying bags with food, water and clothes. "All you hear is shelling and bombing. Yesterday entire houses burnt down. We've been hiding in the cellar for three days and we finally decided to leave. There is no water or electricity," she said. In his speech, Poroshenko said the government was prepared to talk to peaceful citizens - "clearly not with gunmen and other scoundrels" - and would offer a safe corridor for fighters who had crossed the border from Russia to go home. But his appeal appeared to fall on deaf ears. "We have reached the point of no return," said Andrei Sukhanov, commander of the separatist Kaskad (Cascade) militia, manning a road block in Slaviansk.

While the government tightens its grip around Slaviansk, now encircled by the army, it appears to be losing ground in its easternmost region of Luhansk, where border guards have fled several bases after coming under attack. Some 200 people protested against the presidential inauguration in the center of the city, some laying flowers on the sun-baked sidewalk in memory of eight people killed on Monday. Residents say they died in an air strike from a Ukrainian plane which blew a hole in the regional administration building. The Ukrainian military denied this, blaming a misfire by separatists. Broken glass and plaster crunched under the feet of the demonstrators. "Our government is doing America's bidding.

Russia would react to NATO build-up near borders

Voice of America, 10.09.2014



Russia would consider any further expansion of NATO forces near its borders a “demonstration of hostile intentions” and would take political and military measures to ensure its own security, a senior diplomat was quoted on Monday as saying.

The comments come amid a deep crisis between Russia and the West over Ukraine and days after Obama offered increased military support for eastern European NATO members to ease their concerns over Moscow. “We cannot see such a build-up of the alliance’s military power near the border with Russia as anything else but a demonstration of hostile intentions,” Deputy Foreign Minister told.

Speaking last week in NATO-member Poland, Obama unveiled plans to spend up to \$1 billion on supporting and training the armed forces of alliance states bordering Russia. The White House also said it would review permanent troop deployments in Europe in the light of the Ukraine crisis, but fell short of a firm commitment to put troops on the ground, as sought by Poland as a security guarantee. “It would be hard to see additional deployment of substantial NATO military forces in central-eastern Europe, even if on a rotational basis, as anything else but a direct violation of provisions of the 1997 Founding Act on relations between Russia and NATO,” Titov said.

Russia urges immediate ceasefire, start of dialogue in Ukraine

Reuters, 11.06.2014



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Tuesday it was necessary to seek a ceasefire between government forces and separatists in Ukraine, and the start of nationwide talks on the country’s future.

“We are convinced - and our partners share this view, as far as I understand, that regardless of various interpretations of various events that have taken place during the Ukraine crisis, today it is indispensable to focus on the unconditional and immediate ceasefire and the start of dialogue,” Lavrov told a news conference after meeting his German and Polish counterparts.

U.S. pledges millions more in aid to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia

Reuters, 08.06.2014



The U.S. pledged millions of dollars in aid to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia on Saturday, deepening American support to the Western-leaning countries on Russia's border. Biden announced the extra aid, which must be approved by Congress, during a visit to Kiev.

Washington pledged \$48 million to Ukraine, \$8 million to Moldova and \$5 million to Georgia after Biden met the presidents of the three countries. Russia's annexation of the Crimea region from Ukraine in March, after weeks of protests ousted Poroshenko's Victor Yanukovich, has provoked the most serious crisis in relations since the end of the Cold War.

As with Ukraine, there are sharp tensions between Moscow and Moldova and Georgia, where regions have formed breakaway states in reaction to ethnic nationalist regimes, aligning themselves with Russia: Transnistria in the case of Moldova, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the case of Georgia. The additional Ukraine aid follows Poroshenko's meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama on Wednesday in Warsaw and will go toward economic reforms, the White House said in a statement. In Moldova, the U.S. aid will target programs to democratic institutions and the economy as the country implements a trade pact reached with the European Union last summer, it said. The new aid is in addition to the \$2.7 million announced in March.

The collapse of a proposed trade agreement with the European Union has been at the heart of Ukraine's political crisis over the past six months as Russia and western countries compete to assert dominance in the region. The proposed aid packages follow a U.S. announcement Tuesday that it would help build the defense capacity of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, all on Russia's western border. The new aid also will support better ties between Moldova and Russian-speaking Transnistria, the White House said. Similarly, it said the \$5 million to Georgia will help people living along the border with Russia and "increase access to objective information by populations in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia".

U.S. says worried about ‘deteriorating’ situation in Iraq

Reuters, 12.06.2014



The United States on Wednesday expressed concern about the deteriorating security situation in Iraq and pledged “any appropriate assistance” to help the Iraqi government fend off a rapid military advance by Sunni militants.

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the United States believed the Baiji refinery, the country’s largest oil refinery, was still under the control of the Iraqi government after militants overran the city of Tikrit on Wednesday. “Our understanding at this point is that the refinery remains in control of the government of Iraq,” Psaki told a daily briefing for reporters.

Militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took over Iraq’s second-biggest city, Mosul, on Tuesday and overran Tikrit on Wednesday, closing in on the Baiji refinery. The threat to Iraq’s oil supply pushed global oil prices higher to \$110 a barrel, adding to concerns about a supply shortfall from Libya. Psaki said the State Department had no confirmation of news reports that militants were heading for Baghdad. “It is a very fluid situation on the ground. We are of course very concerned about the deteriorating situation but I don’t have any confirmation of those reports,” she said.

Asked whether the United States was considering helping the Iraqi government regain control of its territory, Psaki said Washington had expedited shipments of military equipment to the government this year and ramped up training for security forces. “We are working with Iraqi leaders from across the country to support a coordinated response and you can expect we will provide additional assistance to the Iraqi government to combat the threat from ISIL,” she said, adding “I’m not in a position to outline that further at this point.” She said U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry spoke by phone to his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoglu, and Iraqi officials about an attack on the Turkish consulate in Mosul, where insurgents seized diplomats and children. “We are in touch with the governments of Turkey and Iraq and stand ready to provide any appropriate assistance,” Psaki added.

U.S. focus is on boosting Iraqi forces, not air strikes

Reuters, 11.06.2014



The White House signaled on Wednesday that it was looking to strengthen Iraqi forces to help them deal with an insurgency rather than to meet what one U.S. official said were past Iraqi requests for U.S. air strikes.

An Obama administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity said Iraq had previously made clear its interest in drone strikes or bombing by manned U.S. aircraft to help it beat back the militant onslaught. Sunni rebels from an al Qaeda splinter group overran the Iraqi city of Tikrit on Wednesday and closed in on the biggest oil refinery in the country, making further gains in their rapid military advance.

The threat to the Baiji refinery came after militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL group, seized the northern city of Mosul, advancing their aim of creating a Sunni Caliphate straddling the border between Iraq and Syria. The White House, however, suggested that air strikes were not at the top of its agenda as it considers what it may do to help the Iraqi government against an insurgency that has drawn strength from the civil war in neighboring Syria. “While the national security team always looks at a range of options, the current focus of our discussions with the government of Iraq and our policy considerations is to build the capacity of the Iraqis to successfully confront and deal with the threat posed by ISIL,” White House national security council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said in an emailed comment.

The Obama administration official who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity declined to provide details on what the United States might do to help Iraq, saying only that it was “considering (a) range of requests.” The Wall Street Journal, quoting senior U.S. officials, first reported that Iraq had signaled it would let the United States strike al Qaeda militant targets in Iraq with manned aircraft or drones. Separately, the New York Times reported that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki secretly asked the Obama administration to consider air strikes against militant staging areas as the threat from Sunni insurgents mounted last month. An Iraqi official told Reuters that Iraq wanted U.S. air strikes but believed the Obama administration was not interested in getting involved. The official said such strikes would be covered under the strategic framework agreement signed in 2008.

Within this, limited U.S. forces could operate on the ground to carry out such strikes, he added. But the official said he did not think the Americans had any interest in such a deepened commitment. The Times quoted American experts who visited Baghdad this year as saying they were told that Iraqi leaders hoped American air power could be used to hit militant staging and training areas inside Iraq, and help Iraq’s forces stop them from crossing into the country from Syria. The White House declined to confirm either newspaper report. “We are not going to get into details of our diplomatic discussions but the government of Iraq has made clear that they welcome our support” against the militants, Meehan said in a separate statement.

“We have expedited shipments of military equipment since the beginning of the year, ramped up training of Iraqi Security Forces, and worked intensively to help Iraq implement a holistic approach to counter this terrorist threat,” she added. “Our assistance has been comprehensive, is continuing and will increase.” The fall of Mosul, Iraq’s second-biggest city, is a blow to attempts to defeat the militants, who have seized territory in Iraq over the past year following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. A former U.S. official, who worked on Iraq issues, said the Obama administration viewed Iraq as a dispute that did not affect the United States directly and that Washington should steer clear of entangling itself in it directly.

Another U.S. official who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity questioned the utility of drones, saying it might not be possible to deploy them effectively in time to stem the current crisis in Iraq. “What does it require to have drones come to a country? It requires a very, very high level of intel capability and expertise. So you can’t just send drones on an airplane and have them land and have them work,” said this official. “They wouldn’t have, in this sort of period of time, the ability, given what is going on here, to field the drones (effectively),” he added. “I believe it would take longer than the current crisis (may require).” This official said that once militants had taken control of cities, it would require “incredibly intense fighting” on the ground to dislodge them.

NATO Secretary General says there’s no role for NATO in Iraq

Voice of Russia, 12.06.2014



NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said on Thursday he didn’t see a role for the organisation in Iraq after Islamist militants seized swathes of territory in the country and took 80 Turkish citizens hostage.

Rasmussen condemned the violence and called for immediate release of the hostages. “We urge the hostage takers to release the hostages immediately. Nothing can justify this criminal act ... I don’t see a role for NATO in Iraq, but of course we follow the situation closely and urge all parties involved to stop the violence,” Rasmussen said during a conference in Madrid.



Announcements & Reports

► *Worsening Violence in Iraq Threatens Regional Security*

Source : STRATFOR

Weblink : <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/worsening-violence-iraq-threatens-regional-security>

► *Turkey Mulls a Response to the Jihadist Crisis in Iraq*

Source : STRATFOR

Weblink : <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/geopolitical-diary/turkey-mulls-response-jihadist-crisis-iraq>

► *Iran Faces a Resurging Threat from Iraq*

Source : STRATFOR

Weblink : <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/iran-faces-resurging-threat-iraq>

► *Iraq in Crisis*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/iraq-crisis-1>

► *Decoding China's Emerging "Great Power" Strategy*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/decoding-chinas-emerging-great-power-strategy-asia>

► *Iraq Crisis*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : http://csis.org/files/publication/140326_new_perspectives_issue6.pdf

► *Crisis in Iraq and Military Options: "By, With and Through Who?"*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/crisis-iraq-and-military-options-and-through-who>

► *Middle East Daily Bulletin*

Source : ORSAM

Weblink : http://www.orsam.org.tr/trUploads/OrtadoguBulteni/2014327_27%20Mart%202014.pdf



Upcoming Events

► *4th International Conference on Management*

Date : 16 – 17 June 2014
Place : Bali - Indonesia
Website : <http://www.internationalconference.com.my>

► *International Conference on Trade, Business, Economics and Law*

Date : 16 – 19 June 2014
Place : Edinburgh – United Kingdom
Website : <http://www.filearning.co.uk/ictbel-2014/call-for-papers>

► *2014 4th International Conference on Financial Management and Economics - ICFME 2014*

Date : 3 - 4 July 2014
Place : Plymouth – United Kingdom
Website : <http://www.icfme.org/>

► *2014 4th International Conference on Strategy Management and Research - ICSMR 2014*

Date : 3 - 6 July 2014
Place : Plymouth – United Kingdom
Website : <http://www.icsmr.org/>

► *ECPEL 2014 - The European Conference on Politics, Economics and Law*

Date : 16 – 19 July 2014
Place : Brighton – United Kingdom
Website : <http://iafor.org/ecpel>

► *International Conference on “Management of Marketing, Banking, Business and Finance for Sustainable Economy” (MBFSE- 2014)*

Date : 5 - 6 July 2014
Place : New Delhi, Delhi, India
Website : http://krishisanskriti.org/mgt_conference.html



► *International Interdisciplinary Business-Economics Advancement Conference (IIBA 2014)*

Date : 16 – 19 July 2014
Place : Istanbul - Turkey
Website : <http://iibaconference.org>

► *Finance and Economics Conference 2014*

Date : 13 – 15 August 2014
Place : Munich, Bavaria, Germany
Website : <http://www.lcbr-fec.org/>

► *International Conference on Business Strategy and Social Sciences*

Date : 16 – 17 August 2014
Place : Kuala Lumpur - Malaysia
Website : <http://www.pakrdw.com/?ic=details&id=3>