

Fighting to end an unfinished war



Behind The Headlines by **Bunn Nagara**

George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq is now reaping its latest fruits, as uncontrollable violence spills over the country's borders.

JUST over a decade after George W. Bush invaded Iraq, his White House successor Barack Obama has to start clearing up the violent mess.

Today's lethal carnage, the deadliest yet, has come courtesy of the ultra-extremist terror group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL's threat is regional, but its focus is on Iraq for now.

Earlier in the week, Iraq's second-largest city Mosul fell to the militants. ISIL took over government buildings in a brazen swoop, panicking officials and flushing out half a million people in the city who suddenly had to flee for their lives.

Then on Wednesday, ISIL militants conquered Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. The irony and symbolism of it cannot be lost on local residents – US-style “regime change” to topple Saddam was supposed to end terrorism but has instead spread it like wildfire.

ISIL fighters had already embedded themselves in the central Iraqi city of Ramadi after taking over Fallujah near Baghdad. They have since announced a march towards the Iraqi capital.

In city after city, government troops fled after abandoning vital military assets including US-supplied heavy weaponry. ISIL militants then move in to seize the territory, buildings, military vehicles and weapons-filled arsenals, robbing banks and freeing jailed militants to grow from strength to strength.

ISIL also controls parts of Aleppo in Syria and the lucrative Conoco oil field in that country. For added funding, it operates extortion networks in Mosul.

There is no question that ISIL grows stronger as it sweeps across Iraq. Analysts say official Iraqi and US calculations have underestimated its actual strength.

However, some Iraqis may also have overestimated its strength. In one recent case, two divisions of Iraqi troops comprising 30,000 soldiers just turned and ran when faced with 800 ISIL fighters.

The result is that ISIL's presumed strength becomes actual strength upon absorbing abandoned government assets. Never before has a government and its ally (the US) handed so many vital assets to an enemy force in so short a time.

No sooner had talk of Iraq retaining some US forces faded away inconclusively than even US diplomats suddenly felt they had to skip town, for good.

By Thursday, US diplomats were preparing plans to evacuate staff from their vast new embassy in Baghdad. Until recently the embassy stood as a proud testimony to post-Saddam Iraq, but now it may have to be handed over to a ruthless terror group.

UN staff are also preparing to evacuate. Iraq's minorities who feel particularly vulnerable have already rushed for the borders.

Initially, ISIL was described as an al-Qaeda-inspired group. Then they were "disowned" even by al-Qaeda, after being found to be too undisciplined and too brutal for even al-Qaeda to handle.

Meanwhile ISIL has been busy with various activities, from kidnapping Turkish diplomats and targeting Christians in Mosul, to fighting Shi'ites and Kurds, to attacking Anbar University in Ramadi, briefly taking staff and students hostage.

ISIL is said to be financed generously by the same foreign backers who had sponsored Osama's al-Qaeda. Then in Mosul it robbed a bank of nearly US\$500mil (RM1.6bil) in cash, adding to its liquidity and immediate "cash flow."

ISIL has had several name changes since its founding 10 years ago. It was led for a time by Abu Musab al-Zarkawi. Then it expanded operations to Syria in April last year when it also became known as ISIL and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/al-Sham (ISIS).

Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's current leadership, ISIL became the most ambitious and ruthless of the region's militant groups. Its ultra-extremism has unnerved al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri, who fears Abu Bakr's ambition to take over his group.

ISIL wants to establish an Islamist caliphate spanning several countries in the region. In the process it seeks to compel occupying US forces to withdraw, topple the Iraqi government, murder all its associates and collaborators, and empty Shi'ite-majority Iraq of Shi'ites.

Operationally, ISIL is a Sunni umbrella grouping of several hardline Islamist groups, so internal unity is crucial. Abu Bakr's leadership is safe so long as he can maintain organisational credibility.

By early Friday, reports emerged of the Iraqi government dispatching police and army special forces to battle the militants. Given recent events, it is doubtful what good if any they can do.

In Iraqi government circles, the thought of phasing out US forces has all but disappeared. There is a new mood to welcome and even embrace what remains of the US military.

But after more than a decade, Washington has contracted war fatigue. Iraq was never Obama's "war" anyway.

At the same time however, the US cannot be seen to be escaping through the back door, Baghdad embassy staff notwithstanding. Speaking at the White House on Thursday, Obama said he would not rule out any response needed against the militants.

On the ground in Iraq however, resistance alone is inadequate – it means ISIL can stage a return as soon as resistance fades or ends.

In 2009, Obama declared that al-Qaeda had to be "disrupted, dismantled and destroyed." Is he now prepared to go anywhere as far against a group that is even more deadly than al-Qaeda?

As usual, John McCain has weighed in with unhelpful partisan comments. He reportedly said that Obama's entire security team should be sacked and replaced by the Bush team.

It is highly unlikely that the Bush team will want to clean up its own mess. It is always easier to start a war than to end one satisfactorily.

That same Bush team had invaded Iraq on the false pretexts of seizing Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and stopping terrorist operations. But there were no WMDs or terrorist groups; now terrorists roam and govern Iraq practically nationwide.

Saddam Hussein, for all his ruthlessness, made sure that no terrorist or militant groups could emerge. Everything changed after his fall.

There is another lesson with no shortage of eager students, however: that harshness and cruelty pay. That lesson is now being taught in Iraq, with the likes of ISIL lapping it up and preaching it.

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