The Battle for Iraq Is a Saudi War on Iran

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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Articles & Testimony

The ISIS invasion of Iraq reflects a wider war between Shiites and Sunnis for control of the Middle East.

"Be careful what you wish for" could have been, and perhaps should have been, Washington's advice to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states which have been supporting Sunni jihadists against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus. The warning is even more appropriate today as the bloodthirsty fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) sweep through northwest Iraq, prompting hundreds of thousands of their Sunni coreligionists to flee and creating panic in Iraq's Shiite heartland around Baghdad, whose population senses, correctly, that it will be shown no mercy if the ISIS motorcades are not stopped.

Such a setback for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has been the dream of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah for years. He has regarded Maliki as little more than an Iranian stooge, refusing to send an ambassador to Baghdad and instead encouraging his fellow rulers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman -- to take a similar standoff-ish approach. Although vulnerable to al Qaeda-types at home, these countries (particularly Kuwait and Qatar) have often turned a blind eye to their citizens funding radical groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most active Islamist groups opposed to Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Currently on vacation in Morocco, King Abdullah has so far been silent on these developments. At 90-plus years old, he has shown no wish to join the Twitter generation, but the developments on the ground could well prompt him to cut short his stay and return home. He has no doubt realized that -- with his policy of delivering a strategic setback to Iran by orchestrating the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus showing little sign of any imminent success -- events in Iraq offer a new opportunity.

This perspective may well confuse many observers. In recent weeks, there has been a flurry of reports of an emerging -- albeit reluctant -- diplomatic rapprochement between the Saudi-led GCC and Iran, bolstered by the apparently drunken visit to Tehran by the emir of Kuwait, and visits by trade delegations and commerce ministers in

one direction or the other. This is despite evidence supporting the contrary view, including Saudi Arabia's first public display of Chinese missiles capable of hitting Tehran and the UAE's announcement of the introduction of military conscription for the country's youth.

The merit, if such a word can be used, of the carnage in Iraq is that at least it offers clarity. There are tribal overlays and rival national identities at play, but the dominant tension is the religious difference between majority Sunni and minority Shiite Islam. This region-wide phenomenon is taken to extremes by the likes of ISIS, which also likely sees its action in Iraq as countering Maliki's support for Assad. ISIS is a ruthless killing machine, taking Sunni contempt for Shiites to its logical, and bloody, extreme. The Saudi monarch may be more careful to avoid direct religious insults than many other of his brethren, but contempt for Shiites no doubt underpinned his Wikileaked comment about "cutting off the head of the snake," meaning the clerical regime in Tehran. (Prejudice is an equal opportunity avocation in the Middle East: Iraqi government officials have been known to ask Iraqis whether they are Sunni or Shiite before deciding how to treat them.)

Despite the attempts of many, especially in Washington, to write him off, King Abdullah remains feisty, though helped occasionally by gasps of oxygen -- as when President Barack Obama met him in March and photos emerged of breathing tubes inserted in his nostrils. When Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi -- and, after his elder brother's recent stroke, the effective ruler of the UAE -- visited King Abdullah on June 4, the Saudi monarch was shown gesticulating with both hands. The subject under discussion was not revealed, but since Zayed was on his way to Cairo it was probably the election success of Egypt's new president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, considered a stabilizing force by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Of course, Sisi gets extra points for being anti-Muslim Brotherhood, a group whose Islamist credentials are at odds with the inherited privileges of Arab monarchies. For the moment, Abdullah, Zayed, and Sisi are the three main leaders of the Arab world. Indeed, the future path of the Arab countries could well depend on these men (and whomever succeeds King Abdullah).

For those confused by the divisions in the Arab world and who find the metric of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" to be of limited utility, it is important to note that the Sunni-Shiite divide coincides, at least approximately, with the division between the Arab and Persian worlds. In geopolitical terms, Iraq is at the nexus of these worlds -- majority Shiite but ethnically Arab. There is an additional and often confusing dimension, although one that's historically central to Saudi policy: a willingness to support radical Sunnis abroad while containing their activities at home. Hence Riyadh's arms-length support for Osama bin Laden when he was leading jihadists in Soviet-controlled Afghanistan, and tolerance for jihadists in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Syria.

When the revolt against Bashar al-Assad grew in 2011 -- and Riyadh's concern at Iran's nuclear program mounted -- Saudi intelligence re-opened its playbook and started supporting the Sunni opposition, particularly its more radical elements, a strategy guided by its intelligence chief, former ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. The operation's leadership changed in April, when Bandar resigned in apparent frustration over dealing with the cautious approach of the Obama administration, but Saudi support for jihadi fighters appears to be continuing. (The ISIS operation in Iraq almost seems the sort of tactical surprise that Bandar could have dreamt up, but there is no actual evidence.)

In the fast-moving battle that is now consuming northern Iraq, there are many variables. For Washington, the option of inaction has to be balanced by the fate of the estimated 20,000 American civilians still left in the country (even though the U.S. military is long-departed). Qatar, the region's opportunist, is likely balancing its options of irritating its regional rival, Saudi Arabia, while trying not to poke the Iranian bear. There are no overt Qatari fingerprints yet visible and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, just celebrating his first full year in power after his father's abdication in 2013, may be chastened by the public scolding he received from the rest of the GCC after he was accused of interference in the domestic affairs of his brother rulers. Additionally, Doha may be cautious in risking

Iran's ire by an adventure in Iraq. Having just given five Taliban leaders refuge as part of the Bowe Bergdahl swap, Qatar has effectively clearly stated where it lies in the Sunni-Shiite divide.

There is a potentially important historical precedent to Saudi Arabia's current dilemma of rooting for ISIS but not wanting its advances to threaten the kingdom. In the 1920s, the religious fanatic Ikhwan fighters who were helping Ibn Saud to conquer Arabia were also threatening the British protectorates of Iraq and Transjordan. Ibn Saud, the father of the current Saudi king, gave carte blanche to the British to massacre the Ikhwan with machine-gun equipped biplanes, personally leading his own forces to finish the job, when the Ikhwan threatened him at the battle of Sabilla in 1929.

It's hard to imagine such a neat ending to the chaos evolving in the Euphrates river valley. At this stage, a direct confrontation between Saudi and Iranian forces seems very unlikely, even though, as in Syria, the direct involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps cannot be ruled out. What is clear is that the Syrian civil war looks like it will be joined by an Iraqi civil war. ISIS already has a name for the territory, the al-Sham caliphate. Washington may need to find its own name for the new area, as well as a policy.

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